RESISTANCE TERRITORY:

THE PRODUCTION OF TERRITORY IN IRANIAN KURDISTAN THROUGH STREET

DEMONSTRATIONS AND MEDIA IN 2014 AND 2017

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Resistance Territory: The Production of Territory in Iranian Kurdistan through Street Demonstrations and Media in 2014 and 2017

This project examines the production of Kurdish territory in street demonstrations and media. Thousands of Iranian Kurds demonstrated, in October 2014 to express solidarity with the residents of Kobani in Syria who were besieged by the Islamic State (IS), and then in September 2017 to celebrate Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum. Closely related to the demonstrations were the Iranian Kurds' use of satellite television and social media to communicate the events in Syria and Iraq to Kurds in the region and in diaspora and non-Kurdish sympathizers. Far from merely expressing solidarity with Kurds in Syria and Iraq, such activities helped produce and strengthen the idea of Kurdistan as a geopolitically significant territorial construct. In both street demonstrations and mediated practices, however, the Iranian Kurds had to resist and negotiate the Iranian state's securitization policies that routinely suppress Kurdish activism.

This research explores the growing identification of Iranian Kurds with Kurdistan against the backdrop of Iran's securitization of space, asking how Iranian Kurds produced territory through demonstrations and media practices. The study draws on semi-structured interviews and qualitative media data and employs a mix of digital methods and Foucauldian discourse analysis. The results indicate that Iranian Kurds produced Kurdistan as a significant territorial imagination and resisted state securitization in three ways: first, by deploying symbolic, discursive,

embodied, and emplaced tactics in the demonstrations; second, by affective engagement with media and visual images; and third, by building multi-scalar social media solidarity networks. Although aimed to suppress Kurdish activism, Iran's securitization efforts effectively encouraged identification with Kurdistan on the part of Iranian Kurds through the development of new tactics of resistance.

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To the memory of my father, Abdollah Moradi

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CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

1.1. Street Demonstrations

Focusing on two rounds of demonstrations in 2014 and 2017 in Iranian Kurdistan, this dissertation investigates the role of street demonstrations and use of media in the production of territory. In October 2014, thousands took to the streets in different cities and towns across Iranian Kurdistan to express solidarity with the residents of Kobani in Syrian Kurdistan who were besieged by the so-called Islamic State (IS).[1] For Iranian Kurdish demonstrators, humanitarian concerns were paramount, as the fear of an impending massacre of Kobani's residents and defenders was looming. Earlier, in the summer of 2014, IS had unleashed a wave of terror, seizing many settlements across western Iraq and eastern Syria. Many watched in horror as IS launched its campaign of death, rape, and destruction against defenseless communities. With the images broadcasting on television screens and social media, many saw the brutal and gruesome tactics of the terror group, especially its attacks on the Kurdish-speaking Yezidi residents in and around Shingal (Sinjar), in northwestern Iraq. In every town and village, the IS terrorists left behind a trail of blood and ruins, marked by massacres, genocide, mass graves, and enslavement. By the first week of October, some outlying neighborhoods of Kobani had fallen to IS, but the Kurdish defenders of the town were resisting in a fierce street-battle. For the Kurdish demonstrators on the streets in Iranian Kurdistan, the defenders of Kobani were

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[1] The terror group has been known with multiple names, including *The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*, *The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL)*, and *Daesh*, which is the Arabic acronym for ISIL. For the sake of consistency, I use the name *Islamic State (IS)*, throughout this dissertation.

defending Kurdish life, identity, and land. The battle for Kobani was therefore a struggle for territory.

Similarly, in September 2017, thousands of Iranian Kurds poured into the streets to celebrate Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum. For many reasons, the referendum was significant for the Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan and elsewhere. With around 92 percent of the participants voting 'Yes,' and around 70 percent turnout, the referendum was seen as a clear Kurdish demand for self-determination, a cornerstone of the Kurdish movement. The referendum also came on the heel of the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces defeating IS, securing all Kurdish cities, towns, and villages, including Kirkuk.[2] The referendum had originally been planned for June 2014, but the surge of IS put a pause on the Kurds' plans for holding the referendum. Thus, in 2017 many Kurds saw the referendum as a logical outcome of their victory over IS. For the Kurds, the fight against IS was also a war of independence (Valentine, 2016), reenergizing their push to separate from the central Iraqi government, which many deemed as systematically corrupt, incompetent, and oppressive toward the Kurdish pursuit of autonomy, democracy, and prosperity.[3] The Kurds held the referendum despite the threats from regional powers, notably

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[2] See Chapter Two for an explanation of the significance of Kirkuk in the Kurdish movement, and why the city is considered as part of the 'disputed territories.'

[3] Kurds complained about the Iraqi government's repeated reluctance to implement the Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution. The article provisioned holding a referendum in the 'disputed territories,' including Kirkuk, to allow the inhabitants to decide whether they wanted their regions to officially join the Iraqi Kurdistan's autonomous region. While each time the Iraqi government postponed the referendum citing such issues as security concerns or lack of resources, the Kurdish Regional Government argued that the Iraqi central government was in fact suppressing the voices of the largely Kurdish population in the disputed territories, who would vote to join the Kurdistan Region in a free and fair referendum. The Kurds also maintained that the 'disputed territories' were historically and demographically part of Kurdistan and only became 'disputed' because the regime of Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi dictator, grabbed those territories by force and implemented demographic engineering policies that culminated in the *al-Anfal* genocidal campaign against the Kurds. The campaign aimed to eliminate the Kurdish population and ensure the central government's control over the region's natural resources, especially oil.

Iran and Turkey. Thus, for the thousands of demonstrators on the streets in Iranian Kurdistan, the referendum was the hallmark of the persistent Kurdish resistance against dominant states in the region that have tried for decades to subjugate Kurdish land, life, and identity. The independence referendum was primarily a struggle for territory.

Kurdish satellite television channels and social media allowed Iranian Kurds to follow and emotionally connect to the events during both the resistance in Kobani and the independence referendum in Iraq. It was for these reasons that thousands took to the streets, despite the risk of crackdown by the Iranian state, which has frequently resorted to the securitization[4] of space and —at times lethal—military measures to suppress Kurdish demonstrations.[5] The Kurds' peaceful demonstrations, indeed, met the Iranian state's militarization of Kurdish cities. The state deployed large numbers of security forces, including antiriot special guards, equipment, and even armored vehicles, tanks, and airplanes to the Kurdish cities and the larger region.

The Iranian state's security measures are rooted in its policies towards the Kurds and other minoritized populations in the country. As part of its overall 'security view' that considers Kurdish identity as a national security threat (Elling, 2013: p. 147; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a), the state frequently resorts to disproportionately high rates of violence, detention and execution (Shaheed, 2016; UNOHCHR, 2022) to eliminate and assimilate the

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[4] By 'securitization,' I refer to a range of practices and institutions, including the military and police, that seek to control the society, materially and discursively (Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009). In the Iranian Kurdish context, securitization not only curtails civic and lawful gatherings, and public celebrations, such as the Kurdish New Year (Newroz), but also restricts a wide range of activities, including grass-roots initiatives to protect the environment, artistic events and productions, and educational programs. Those engaged in such activities are routinely surveilled, intimidated, detained, and often charged with undermining national security (Elling, 2013; Hassaniyan, 2020; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a; UNOHCHR, 2022).

[5] Although Iranian Kurds had resorted to street demonstrations in the past, the scope and size of the demonstrations in 2014 and 2017 were unprecedented.

Kurdish difference, control Kurdish territory (Entessar, 2017; Grojean, 2017; Koohi-Kamali, 2003), and further its Persian-centric nation-state-building project (Asgharzadeh, 2007; Boroujerdi, 1998; Vali, 1998). Countering the state's colonial project (Shahvisi, 2021; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a), the Kurds' 'resistance identity' (Castells, 2010: p. 8) simultaneously draws on territory and reproduces it (Antonsich, 2009; Storey, 2012), creating what I, inspired by Zibechi (2012), describe as resistance territory.

With the Kurds frequently described as the 'largest stateless nation' (Dahlman & Moradi, 2018; Galip, 2015; Mojab, 2001; Romano, 2006; Short, 1993), the Kurdish movement has received considerable amount of scholarly attention, but the questions of territory have often been muted. Divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the Kurdish homeland, Kurdistan, is a constant 'geopolitical flashpoint' (Elden, 2013), where 'centralizing states' have sought to dominate 'rebellious margins' and territorialize space (Ó Tuathail, 1996a). This process has made territory integral to the Kurds' resistance against colonization, state domination, and homogenization (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Stansfield & Hassaniyan, 2021). According to Aziz Mahir (2011), territory, along with 'language and historical memory, and connected to that, shared myths about common origins,' constitute key characteristics distinguishing the Kurds from their neighboring ethnic groups (Bengio, 2017a: p. 11; McDowall, 2004).

Despite the consensus about the significance of territory for the Kurds and their political movement, however, the literature on the Kurds has largely overlooked the place of territory in the production of Kurdish identity and its resistance movement. Furthermore, the Iranian Kurds

have been mostly on the margins of Kurdish studies[6] (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010; Ahmedi, 2018; Gunter, 2020), even though Iranian Kurdistan is home to the second-largest Kurdish population in the region, and the Iranian Kurds' political movement is even older than the Kurds' collective consciousness.[7] Similarly, research exploring the intersections of territory and collective resistance has largely overlooked the Middle East (Swanson, 2016), compared to Latin America and Asia (Bryan, 2012; Clare et al., 2018; Escobar, 2008; Halvorsen, 2019; Routledge, 2015; Smith, 2012; Tynen, 2021; Zibechi, 2012). Thus, a deliberate investigation of the production of territory in the context of Iranian Kurdistan benefits both Kurdish studies, as well as the broader scholarship on territory and resistance. Focusing on the demonstrations in Iranian Kurdistan also offers an opportunity to provide a more balanced account of the Kurdish movement and a more nuanced understanding of its territory.

Even though the demonstrations in Iranian Kurdistan were notable in terms of the number of participants and the political message, they remained largely unknown beyond the Kurdish context. Instead, much of the attention to the Kurds fixated on sensational battlefield heroics against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq (Shahvisi, 2021; Şimşek & Jongerden, 2021). This spatially skewed attention to the Kurdish movement was also ontologically and epistemologically disorienting since it neglected the Kurds' own (alter)geopolitical practices, discourses, aspirations, and imaginations (Galip, 2015). To overcome these challenges, I

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[6] A full explanation of the causes is beyond the scope of this study. However, Western involvement in the conflicts in Iraq and—more recently—Syria, and Turkey's proximity and geostrategic importance to Europe partly explain the greater attention toward the Kurds in those countries.

[7] Kurdish identity in Iran, is highly influenced by the Kurdish movement, itself largely a response to the Iranian state's suppression of Kurdish difference (Vali, 2011). See Chapter Three of this dissertation for details about the history of the Kurdish movement, the place of Iranian Kurdistan and the role of territory in the movement.

foreground the Kurds' territorial imaginations, discourses, and practices of resistance as I examine the two rounds of street demonstrations that unfolded in Iranian Kurdistan in October 2014 and September 2017. Such an effort entails paying deliberate attention to not only the embodied tactics and discourses deployed by the demonstrators on the street, but also the connections, emotions, and solidarities built and produced by Kurdish media users. The Iranian Kurds' production of territorial imaginations, thus, is inextricably connected to the growing role of media and social media in the Kurds' social and political life.

1.2. Media and Visual Images

During the same period that the demonstrations took place (2014-2017), Iranian Kurdistan witnessed a massive increase of internet-connected smartphones and social media users. In 2017, around 68 percent of Iranians over 6 years old were using internet daily. At least 94 percent of the internet users were accessing the internet via their phones, with social media use taking up over 70 percent of all internet traffic in the country (amar.org.ir, 2017). For millions of Iranian Kurds, internet-connected cell phones, the growing popularity of social media applications, combined with popular use of satellite television receivers meant daily engagement with the developments of the Kurdish movement in Iran and across the borders in Syria and Iraq. The proliferation of social media also meant a growing network of interconnections that included users within Iranian Kurdistan, Kurds in neighboring countries, diaspora Kurds, and many non-Kurdish users[8] who were following the developments pertaining to the Kurdish struggles against IS in Syria and Iraq. Thus, when thousands took to the streets in 2014 and 2017, the demonstrations as much signaled the widespread use of social media and satellite television

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[8] The younger generations in Iranian Kurdistan, who are largely familiar with English and other foreign languages, are more likely to establish social media connections with non-Kurdish users.

channels as they indicated the Iranian Kurds' solidarity with Kurds in Syria and Iraq. Social media, satellite television, and their visual images were inextricably connected to the Iranian Kurds' street demonstrations and production of territorial imagination.

The Iranian Kurds' use of media is closely tied to the political context in Iran. Since Iranian media—controlled by the state (Sheyholislami, 2010: p. 293)—largely ignored the demonstrations and the Kurdish struggles in Syria and Iraq, Iranian Kurds turned to satellite television channels and social media to follow the events. However, the Iranian Kurds' use of media had to navigate the Iranian state's securitization policies. The Iranian state bans satellite television and international social media in an effort to silence political opposition (Akhavan, 2013; Barraclough, 2001; Rahimi, 2008), especially those voicing the issues of minoritized groups, whom the state deems as threats to its territorial integrity and dominant national identity (Elling, 2013; Hassanpour, 2003a; Saleh, 2013; Souleimanov et al., 2013). Despite restrictions, however, millions of Iranians access satellite televisions and social media regularly (Rahimi, 2011), as the state often lacks the technological means to impose a total ban (Tufekci, 2017: p. 238). Minoritized populations particularly utilize non-state media to connect with members of their national communities across state borders (Sheyholislami, 2011). Non-state media and their visual technologies allowed the Kurds to resist the state's territorially exclusionary and homogenizing media strategies, mobilize, and articulate counter-hegemonic imaginations of space (Adams, 1996: 419; Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012; McGarry et al., 2019).

Visual images and hashtags, functioning as 'shared artifacts of engagement' (Clark, 2016), were key in connecting users and creating shared experiences across different spatial and media configurations (Kallio & Häkli, 2017). Images are particularly effective as they circulate easily and repeatedly across the fluid boundaries of television and social media (Adams, 2015;

Doerr et al., 2014) and among various social media platforms (Hand, 2017: pp. 220-222). Images

convey meanings quickly (Rose, 2014: p. 28), are relatable and engaging (Hoelscher, 2014:

p.18), make intelligible otherwise complex events (Goffman, 1979: p. 27), render visible unequal

and unjust relations of power (MacDonald et al., 2010: pp. 10-11), and communicate subjective

experiences and emotions (Aitken & Craine, 2009; Banks, 2007; McGarry et al., 2019; Rose,

2014). Visual images help foster shared identities (Daphi et al., 2013: p. 76) and shape structures

of feelings (Anderson, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015) that deeply affect users (Adams, 2013; Rose,

2016b; Seo, 2014), ultimately mobilizing them online and into the streets, empowering them

against dominant state forces (Casas & Williams, 2019; Freelon et al., 2018). Images posted on

social media further serve as 'visual trails,' online archives to which users can repeatedly return,

share, comment, and draw inspiration (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Kharroub & Bas, 2016;

McGarry et al., 2019). Such characteristics allowed media images to function as geopolitical

actors (Adams, 2013: pp. 264-265; Müller, 2013: p. 50; Rose, 2016b: p. 21) in the Kurdish users'

construction of territory.

1.3. Multi-Scalar Networks

The Iranian Kurds' use of media and visual images was closely linked to the trans-border

and trans-state[9] connections between users in Iranian Kurdistan and forming multi-scalar

networks of users that included Kurds in neighboring countries, Kurds in diaspora, and non-

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[9] I use trans-border or trans-state, instead of the more common 'transnational,' to refer to the Iranian Kurds' connections across different state borders in west Asia and beyond. The term 'transnational' is inappropriate because, it often implies a physical distance between the people and their national homeland, which is not the case if one refers to the Kurds' connections across the borders of the current states in which they are divided. Thus, the terms 'cross-border' and 'trans-state' are more suitable. The two terms also have the capacity to accommodate the references to the Kurds' connections with Kurds and their sympathizers elsewhere beyond west Asia (See Sheyholislami, 2011 and van Bruinessen, 2000b).

Kurdish sympathizers. The connection between users in Iranian Kurdistan and those elsewhere was crucial in the production of territorial imagination because of the latter's larger numbers and relatively greater access to resources, including communication technologies and more active civil societies (Aghapouri, 2020; Routledge, 2009: p. 1890). Various social media platforms allowed users in Iranian Kurdistan to connect with each other and build networks of solidarity with Kurds throughout Kurdistan, in diaspora, and with non-Kurdish sympathizers (interview: Ferhad, Şilan, 2018; Kawa, 2019). As such, the territorial imaginations of Kurdistan, produced in 2014 and 2017, unfolded in the intersection of solidarity networks that constructed multiple interconnected scales. Creating 'spaces of convergence' (Routledge, 2009), social media have enabled the Kurds to meet, exchange experiences and ideas, and resist the state's bordering and media restrictions. Extended beyond the Kurdish homeland, such spaces of convergence bring together Kurds in the homeland with those in diaspora, and non-Kurdish allies (Bengio, 2017b: p. 79; Eliassi, 2013; Romano, 2002: p. 137; Sheyholislami, 2010; 2011). Despite their ephemeral qualities, such networked spaces, foster "imaginative geographies of connection, composed of sympathies and affinities" of various actors operating throughout multiple scalar formations that enable the Iranian Kurds' production of territory (Featherstone et al., 2007: p. 388; Routledge, 2009: p. 1896).

The multi-scalar connections and sympathies embedded and reproduced by the networked spaces play a major role in the Iranian Kurds' production of territorial imagination, making the mobilizing of material, emotional, and moral resources across various scales key components of struggles over territory (Adams, 2013: p. 265; Schejter & Tirosh, 2012). Epistemologically, trans-state imaginations of territory are related to Claude Raffestin's (1984; 2012) call for relational conceptualizations of territory that reflect media affordances and

networked human connections across space (Del Biaggio, 2015; Klauser, 2008; 2012; Murphy, 1991; 2012). Such relational conceptualizations of territory can serve to demonstrate the relevance of the realm of online connections to scholarship on the social processes of everyday life. Doing so can also offer further nuance on the production of territory and its co-construction with scale. Such an approach opens the door to a relational, multi-scalar analysis of territory in the Kurdish case that brings together users in Iranian Kurdistan with Kurds elsewhere and non-Kurdish allies.

Although multi-scalar networked relations have been integral to the Iranian Kurds' production of territorial imaginations, it would be misleading to project such territorial imaginations as purely abstract with no on-the-ground equivalence (Murphy et al., 2015). Pointing to the significance of material dimensions of territory, Murphy (2015) asserts: "As any member of a repressed ethnic minority movement can attest, the spatial chunks of Earth's surface that possess some kind of functional or perceptual significance (however fleeting) can have profound impacts on the evolving geography of the planet." The very fact that thousands took to the streets across certain cities—but not others—in 2014 and 2017 and deployed specific discursive and symbolic tactics, indicate that the territorial imagination of Kurdistan entails corresponding material manifestations on the ground. This is especially significant given that the Iranian state's securitization of space is far stricter in areas that are widely considered as 'Kurdistan' compared to other parts of Iran (Elling, 2013; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a). This points to the fact that even the state's securitization practices provide clues into the on-the-ground pertinence of Kurdistan as a territorial construct. Furthermore, an overemphasis on the networked connections throughout various scales risks ignoring the power inequalities that often

impact local struggles on the ground (Mitchell, 1997; cited in Featherstone et al., 2007).[10] The

task at hand, then, is to investigate how the networked, multi-scalar connections interact with and

produce the territorial imagination of Kurdistan—without losing sight of the on-the-ground

material resonance of territorial constructs.

1.4. Research Questions

The present effort to investigate the production of resistance territory is grounded in an

examination of the Iranian Kurds' discourses and practices in street demonstrations, their

engagement with media and visual images, and their mediated connections with social media

users in Iranian Kurdistan and beyond. This dissertation, therefore, seeks to answer one main

research question: How did the Iranian Kurds produce territory during the 2014 and 2017

demonstrations and their related media practices? This overarching question is elaborated upon

by the following questions:

1. How did the Iranian state's securitization of space affect the demonstrations and their production of territory?
2. How did media and visual images affect Kurdish users' production of territory?
3. How did interconnected networks of trans-state users enable the production of territory?

Addressing question 1, I argue that, despite and because of the Iranian state's securitization of

Kurdish space, Kurdish demonstrators articulated and constructed territory using indigenous

discourses and symbolic practices as embodied tactics of resisting state suppression. In other

words, to avoid provoking violent confrontation with state security forces, the demonstrators

resorted to subtle, embodied tactics that stopped short of antagonizing the security forces.

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[10] See Chapter Five for an elaboration of how such struggles unfolded, especially the discursive and symbolic
tactics that were deployed by the demonstrators.

In answering question 2, I contextualize the Kurdish users' engagement with media and images within the Iranian state's restrictive media strategies to argue that the affective and emotional capacities of media and visual images enabled Kurdish users to imagine and produce territory during the 2014 and 2017 demonstrations. Mediated-visual territorial imaginations of the Kurdish users, however, were fragmented as Kurdish users' engagement with media was filtered through the state's restrictive media strategies. Such a fragmentation amplified the more general fragmenting effects of the internet and digital media (Mancini, 2013; Rahimi, 2011; Sunstein, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), adding a new layer to an already fragmented Kurdish geopolitics (Vali, 1998). Therefore, the mediated Kurdish territory can be situated in the dynamic conceptual coordinate between fragmentation and affect.

Addressing question 3, I argue that engaging with interconnected networks of users enabled the production of multi-scalar territorial imaginations that brought together users in Iranian Kurdistan with those in the region, in diaspora, and non-Kurdish sympathetic allies. Such multi-scalar networks amplified the Iranian Kurdish users' capacity to produce territorial imagination by allowing the construction of interconnected scales and pooling material and emotional resources available across various scales.

In answering these questions, I draw on semi-structured interviews with demonstrators and qualitative data from multiple social media platforms, using the MAXQDA software to thematically categorize, interpolate, and analyze the data. In making the arguments, my methodology combines digital methods with Foucauldian discourse analysis, while drawing on semi-structured interviews to complement media's digital data (Leszczynski, 2019; Rogers, 2013; Rose, 2016a; 2016b). I adopt a 'polymedia' or multi-platform ontology to better reflect Kurdish users' engagement with multiple media and to provide a more inclusive range of

affordances[11] that different media offer (Dahlgren, 2005: p. 148; Rogers, 2018). Far from being treated as a set of discrete, isolate platforms (Miller et al., 2016), media should be approached as the dynamic outcome of users' efforts to negotiate multiple restrictions and affordances as they try to communicate with each other and express themselves (Madianou, 2015). This approach is particularly fruitful given the Iranian state's securitization of satellite television and social media, which prevented users' assembling on any singular platform.

1.5. Contributions to the Literature

In multiple ways, this dissertation contributes to bodies of literature studying the intersections of territory, media, and scale. Scholars increasingly study demonstrations and other forms of collective resistance as popular sites where stateless and minoritized peoples imagine, articulate, claim, contest and negotiate territory (Agnew & Oslender, 2013; Bryan, 2012; Halvorsen, 2019; Routledge, 2015; Zibechi, 2012). This research fills existing gaps in the literature by illustrating the multiplicity of ways in which discursive and symbolic practices co-operate as embodied tactics, articulating territories and resisting state securitization (Routledge, 1998). Drawing on feminist and critical scholars' emphasis on the co-construction of the discursive and the material (Gieseking, 2016; Massaro & Williams, 2013; McKinnon, 2016; Smith et al., 2016), I further highlight that the discursive and the material are inextricable—material-embodied practices have discursive import and discourses rely on material-embodied practices in their articulation. Deploying the discursive and the material-embodied together

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[11] In connection to communication technologies and social media 'affordance' refers to the type and range of activities that a device or application allows users to do. For example, Facebook has the affordance of forging mutual 'friendships,' while Twitter and Instagram afford 'following' other users (Adams, 2015).

enabled the demonstrators to blunt the violent effects of the state's oppressive power (Butler, 2011; 2015).

Responding to the entreaties to investigate territory in non-Western and non-Anglophone contexts (Del Biaggio, 2015; Elden, 2013; Halvorsen, 2019; Jackman et al., 2020; Mason, 2021), this dissertation underlines the Kurdish demonstrators' articulation of territory through deploying indigenous geopolitical knowledges. The term 'indigenous' in the context of this research refers to the range of vocabularies, discourses, knowledges, collective understandings, and practices that are rooted in the Iranian Kurds' centuries-long[12] collective life in the region. Such an approach to the term 'indigenous' is simultaneously related, but also distinct from the currently dominant understanding of the term, which mostly refers to the native populations in settler-colonial contexts of the Americas. Broadening the conceptual scope of 'indigenous' allows for the articulation of 'diverse epistemologies grounded in their historical-geographical context,' crucial to a more inclusive and closer-to-complete articulation of territory (Halvorsen, 2019). Highlighting the demonstrators' use of Kurdish lexicon as discursive resources of resistance, this dissertation especially elaborates on the territory-making capacities of the term 'Rojhelat,'[13] an indigenous, decolonial conceptualization of territory (Halvorsen, 2019), that challenges the state's (post)colonial (b)order, and rejects state domination, dispossession, and exploitation (Bauder & Mueller, 2021; Sharma & Wright, 2008).

This study also shows how the discursive and the embodied are co-constructed in the demonstrators' tactics of resistance. Such a co-construction enables the demonstrators to

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[12] It is important to point out that the term 'centuries-long' is not meant to imply a primordial collective ethnic consciousness. It is rather about the ecological and cultural life of the population and their connection to the land.

[13] See Chapter Five, the section on Indigenous Discursive Resources for more details.

articulate territory and simultaneously negate the state's corporeal violence. Situating the demonstrators' symbolic tactics within the trans-border Kurdish geopolitical discourse, this study highlights the capacity of locally grounded embodied practices to cross state borders and produce collective territorial imaginations. Following Sara Koopman (2011), therefore, I characterize the Iranian Kurds' struggles as alter-geopolitical because they go beyond simply resisting the state's territorial (b)order, to envision and produce an alternative territory that can become a weapon of the powerless as much as it is an apparatus of control at the disposal of the powerful (Pile, 1997: p. 30; Sisson, 2021).

Investigating the Kurdish users' production of territory, this dissertation also contributes to scholarly dialogues surrounding the entanglements of media, digital visual images, and affect in struggles over space, especially as such struggles are waged by marginalized, minoritized, and stateless peoples (Adams, 1996; Marino, 2015; McGarry et at., 2019; McMahon, 2014; San Cornelio & Gómez Cruz, 2019; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). In doing so, this research partly aims to respond to Gillian Rose's (2016a) entreaties calling on geographers to engage more seriously with the ways in which digital objects affect the 'creation of meaningful places, spaces, and landscapes' (p. 336). Paying deliberate attention to territory fills gaps in the literature on the affective and emotional construction of space in/through media, which so far, has only received passing attention (November, 2002: p. 17; cited in Elden, 2010: p. 811). This study expands the existing popular geopolitics literature on the geopolitical significance of the visual (Campbell, 2007; Dittmer & Bos, 2019; Dittmer & Dodds, 2013; Dittmer & Gray, 2010; Ó Tuathail, 2003; Sharp 2011) by examining the production of non-state, cross-border spaces of meaning. In doing so, it builds on the theoretical premise that media and their images frequently cross borders (Adams, 2015; Akhavan, 2013; Szostek, 2018: p. 308), challenging nation-state-centric notions

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of territory (Delaney, 2005: p. 27). Addressing the chronic academic marginality of Iranian Kurdistan (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010; Gunter, 2020; Smets, 2016: p. 740) and the Middle East (Ash et al., 2018) in Kurdish and media studies respectively, this research also contributes to a more inclusive literature on visual-digital media, and a more complete geographical knowledge from/about a marginalized part of the world. In this research I center the stories and voices of Iranian Kurds in an effort to counter Kurdish marginalization in academic research.

Expanding the discussions on the connections between territory and scale (Brenner, 1999; Painter, 2010; Halvorsen, 2019), this dissertation demonstrates how the interconnections among networks of Kurdish and non-Kurdish users led to the production of multi-scalar territorial imaginations. This research therefore seeks to respond to Claude Raffestin's (2012) call for more research on the intersection of territory and scale with an emphasis on the role of media and emotions (p. 130). It contributes to the literature on scale and territory by highlighting the interconnections between on-the-ground processes and their online manifestations across multiple scales (Clare et al., 2017; Murphy, 2015). Drawing on relational conceptualizations of territory, this dissertation also shows that territorial imaginations circulate through multi-scalar and multi-platform connections among not only Kurdish users, but also non-Kurdish allies who sympathize with and recognize the Kurdish struggle for territory.

Throughout this research, I broadly define territory as 'meaningful and contested space' (Delaney, 2009; Del Biaggio, 2015). This definition means that territory is a portion of the earth's surface that is simultaneously 'appropriated' for political purposes (Halvorsen, 2019) and is made meaningful through a range of discourses and practices (Del Biaggio, 2015). This approach also suggests that territory is constructed through various 'material and immaterial realities as well as their representations' (Raffestin, 2012). Conceived as such, territory involves

a range of active processes, constantly being made and unmade, rather than a passive backdrop to political practices (Elden, 2013). To highlight this active conceptualization of territory, I deploy the phrase 'production of territory' to denote grassroots discursive and embodied activities, on the ground and via media, that are involved in claiming of and assigning meaning to space. I characterize such activities as 'resistance' to emphasize that they emerge in the context of the Iranian Kurds' opposition to dominant territorial strategies of the Iranian state, most notably its securitization practices. Drawing on Paul Routledge (1997a), I define resistance as 'any action that attempts to challenge, change or retain particular circumstances relating to societal relations, processes and/or institutions." Such a definition is especially pertinent to this study as it accounts for the role of symbolic meanings, discourses, bodies, emotions, and communication networks in resistance practices (p. 361). Resistance incorporates struggles for territory that are both material-external and embodied-internal, meaning that resistance aims to produce territories in practice and in the imagination (Pile, 1997: p. 4).

The notion of territory conceptualized here is a relational one, entailing spatial connections that exceed on-the-ground relations to include spaces of media (Del Biaggio, 2015: p. 38-39; Raffestin, 2012). Such a relational conceptualization also allows analyzing the ways in which territory is produced through the interrelated operations of power, discourse, and imagination (Murphy, 2012: p. 164). The production of territory is generally thought of as unfolding within three categories: imaginative, practical, and institutional (Elden, 2010; 2013; Halvorsen, 2019; Painter, 2010). About the latter, this research has little to offer. However, of pertinence to this study are the imaginative and practical aspects of territory. The ways in which territories are imagined and practiced are closely connected (Gottman, 1975: p. 45; Knight, 1982:

p. 517; Murphy, 1991: p. 29), suggesting that territories are as much metaphysical as they are material (Delaney, 2005: p. 12).

Viewed from a relational approach, territory is not about stasis, domesticity, and boundedness. Rather territory is about circulation, connection, and movement (Del Biaggio, 2015; Raffestin, 1984; 2012). Such conceptions further suggest that territory is not simply space populated by those 'dwelling' in the localities on the ground but is also about spatial connections populated by those users 'dwelling' in the interconnected media networks that cross state borders (Klauser, 2012: p. 116). Media users have increasingly emerged as prominent agents in the production of identity and territory lending new meaning to the conventional notions of imagined community (Anderson, 2006; Castells, 2010).

In this study, 'user' refers to those who engage with media content through various forms and devices. Analytically, 'user' is more active than 'audience' since users seek out, 'like' and/or comment, modify, share, (re)interpret, and transform social media and—increasingly online—television (Bury, 2018; Ó Tuathail, 1996b: p. 406; Rose, 2016a; 2016b: p. 263). Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1973) insights on discourse and the subject, however, I do not argue that users voluntarily determine the process of ascribing meaning to space. Rather, users exert agency within discursive formations that simultaneously enable and constrain them (pp. 37-38; Lees, 2004: p. 103; Müller, 2011: p. 9; Phillips & Hardy, 2002: p. 2). Key components of such discursive formations are visual images, which far from 'mirrors' reflecting social realities, are 'inter-textual sites,' whose meanings are always partial and dependent on larger discourses and social contexts (Hand, 2017: p. 220; Müller, 2011; Rose, 2014).

Crucial to users' engagement with media and visual images are affect and emotion. Following Gökarıksel and Secor (2018; see also Simonsen, 2007; Thien, 2005), I use affect and

emotion interchangeably to highlight the media and images' wide range of impact on the Kurdish users' geopolitical imagination and construction of territory.[14] Parceling out affect and emotion is not within the scope of this research—conceptually or methodologically—and runs the risk of disembodiment and subtraction. Thus, I define affect and emotion as embodied, visceral, and reflective "political feelings" experienced, expressed, and collectively shared by Kurdish users engaging with media and visual images. Adopting such a conceptual approach allows incorporating a wide range of felt and emotional affective practices (Carter & McCormack, 2014: p. 319).

To be sure, Iranian Kurds have had persistent—although diverse (Sheyholislami, 2011)— territorial imaginations of Kurdistan. Nevertheless, the Kurdish struggles in Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, in diaspora, and connections with non-Kurdish allies worldwide revived and reshaped the Kurds' territorial imaginations. The task of this study is to detail the embodied, discursive, visual, affective, mediated, relational, and multi-scalar dimensions of producing this territorial imagination. This dissertation seeks to accomplish this task in eight chapters. Chapter Two takes up relevant theoretical considerations, examining the intersection of embodied practices and mediated, visual, and scalar constructions of territory. Chapter Three provides historical context, especially highlighting first the Kurdish movement's connections with territory, and then the Iranian state's securitization of space and the media, triggering Kurdish resistance. This is followed by the explanation of the methodology in Chapter Four. Chapter Five details the various discursive, embodied, and emplaced tactics used by Kurdish demonstrators to produce territorial imaginations. Chapter Six analyzes the ways in which users' affective engagement

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[14] For more discussions on affect and emotion and their distinctions see, among others: Curti et al. (2011), Pain (2009), Pile (2010), Thien (2005), Thrift (2004).

with media and visual images allowed them to produce collective territorial imaginations. Chapter Seven elaborates on the social media networks connecting users in Iranian Kurdistan with Kurdish users elsewhere and non-Kurdish sympathizers, shedding light on their production of multi-scalar imaginations of territory. Chapter Eight provides conclusions, summarizing the findings and offering further thoughts regarding the interconnections among the on-the-ground and mediated-affective-scalar production of territorial imaginations.

CHAPTER TWO:

Theoretical Considerations

2.1. Territory, Meaning, and Embodiment

Territory is a concept of perennial import in the studies of the modern state, national

identity, and self-determination (Knight, 1982; Murphy, 1996; 2002; 2013; Williams and Smith,

1983). Given the persistence of 'territory's continuing allure' (Murphy, 2013) as an influence on

the power-space nexus, there is a need for "more work and analysis" to better understand it,

"both as a concept and as a political reality" (Elden, 2010b: p. 759; see also Bryan, 2012).

Specifically, with territory's particular significance in liberation movements of minorities and

indigenous peoples (Bryan, 2012; Herb, 2018: p. 15; Murphy, 1991: pp. 29-30; Storey, 2020a;

Tynen, 2021; Zibechi, 2012), it is important to investigate non-state practices of territory as they

challenge fixed conceptualizations that depict territory as solely the prerogative of the state

(Antonsich, 2011; Elden, 2011: p. 267; Mayer, 2004; Murphy, 2010; Smith et al., 2016).

Embodied acts of protests and street demonstrations are among such practices.

There is a growing engagement with territory in spatial studies of collective resistance

(e.g., Agnew & Oslender, 2013; Clare et al., 2018; Routledge, 2015), despite the earlier neglect

of the concept (e.g., Leitner et al., 2008; Miller, 2000; Martin & Miller, 2003; Nicholls,

2009; Routledge, 1997; 2003). This neglect of territory was partly due to what Agnew (1994)

termed the "territorial trap"—the tendency to take the map of states for granted, use it to frame

thinking about the world (Murphy, 2010; 2020: p. 25), and thus treat territory as a concept

devoid of analytical potential for the study of contentious politics (Elden, 2010a: p. 801). The

general turn toward a consideration of territory in studies of contentious politics occurred as its

conceptualization shifted from passive, given and immutable to constructed, fluid and contested (Elden, 2010a: p. 812; Murphy, 2010; Storey, 2012). Dynamic conceptualizations of territory are rooted in the earlier emphasis on the distinct characteristics of territory as made through active social and political projects (Gottman, 1975; Murphy, 1988; Paasi, 1996; Sack, 1986; Soja, 1971). In its active conceptualization, territory forms an imaginary spatial mirror that reflects the ways in which communities imagine their own geographic space (Herb, 2018: pp. 15-16; Storey, 2012: p. 28; 2020a: p. 2), a 'symbolic resource' of national identity (Antonsich, 2009).

Citing Delaney (2009), Storey (2012) asserts that 'territories can be seen as fusions of meaning, power and space' (p. 28). Despite this assertion, Storey uses 'place' as a proxy concept to discuss the connection between territory and meaning. This approach is consistent with Anglophone geography's long-established state-centric conceptual association of territory with power and control, rather than meaning (Clare et al., 2018). Drawing on Francophone geographers, especially Claude Raffestin, Del Biaggio (2015) argues that we should conceptualize '*territoire*' as 'produced and transformed by people and groups of people in both concrete and/or symbolic ways' (p. 42; see also Halvorsen, 2019; Painter, 2010). Central to territoire is the production of meaning and the 'semiotization of space,' a process in which the material world is "translated and transformed into territory" (Del Biaggio, 2015: p. 42). Territoire is thus a theoretical, epistemological, and political intervention (Klauser, 2012: pp. 111-112)—the product of a conceptualization of territory that is sensitive to emotional relations, affective lived experiences, and the discursive practices of inhabitants. These characteristics are often examined within the everyday sociospatial relations (Clare et al., 2018; Murphy, 2012), and can be extended to street demonstrations as they exemplify people's 'gathering together' (Del Biaggio, 2015: p. 44), par excellence.

While Raffestin's conceptualization of territory makes valuable contributions to our understanding of territory, non-Anglophone approaches have in fact received very little attention—with the sole exception of some recent interest in the Latin American context (Halvorsen, 2019; Zibechi, 2012). Studying territory from geographical perspectives other than the hegemonic Anglophone tradition, deepens the theoretical understanding of the concept and extends the limits in which it is articulated and operationalized in various geopolitical entanglements (Halvorsen, 2019; Jackman et al., 2020). Furthermore, studying alternative conceptualizations of territory is critical (Elden, 2013), especially since territory is largely "derived from, and directed toward, western political thought" (Elden, 2010a: p. 811). Indeed, non-Anglophone theoretical approaches to territory also present potential methodological, ethical, and empirical merits, as they 'diversify approaches to territory,' particularly reflecting the voices of minorities (Jackman et al., 2020) in non-dominant and marginal(ized) contexts (Del Biaggio, 2015; Halvorsen, 2019). Reminding readers of the colonial legacies of modern understandings of territory, Halvorsen (2019) points to Latin American engagements with territory to expand its meaning and application, and Tynen (2021) explains the territorial practices of Uyghurs facing the Chinese state repression. Similarly, Jazeel (2016) advocates engagement with 'southern' knowledges to challenge the embedded colonial thinking in geography. These calls echo Pulido's (2002) earlier invocation to address problems of representation and lack of diversity within the discipline of geography, and ultimately, decolonize geographical knowledge (Radcliffe, 2017). Building on these insights, this study further contributes to the literature by detailing how territory is produced through myriad embodied and discursive tactics, emotional engagements with media and visual images, and cross-border networks of solidarity—all so crucial to the Kurdish resistance in Iran.

The significance of territory to the Kurdish movement cannot be exaggerated, as the Kurdish struggle is inevitably embedded in a global territorial system that makes territory central to ethnonational identities (Murphy, 2010; 2020). Moreover, the status of Kurdistan has large-scale implications for the political organization of space in a major world region (Storey, 2020a: p. 8). Thus, the foundational role of territory in the Kurdish movement reflects the power of territorial thinking in shaping geopolitical struggles, agendas, and confrontations (Murphy, 2010; 2013; 2020). The regional-level pertinence of territory is also closely linked to the individual, embodied tactics of producing territory. More recently, scholars have showed how street demonstrations represent embodied spatial-political practices in which bodies actively make territory (Jackman et al., 2020; Mayer, 2004; Smith, 2017: p. 350; Swanson, 2016), and alter geopolitics (Koopman, 2011). Such embodied makings of territory incorporate both discursive and material practices. Foregrounding the ways in which the material workings of bodies are entwined with discursive resources and symbolic practices of resistance helps to move the analysis beyond the literature's common emphasis on the material and corporeal (Routledge, 2015; Smith 2012; Smith et al., 2016: p. 259). The embodied, material, and discursive production of territory also extend into the realm of the media and visuality, which has increasingly dominated proportionately large chunks of our daily lives.

2.2. Territory, Media, and Visual Images

Claude Raffestin's (1984) conceptualization of territory maintains that media is foundational to the collective production of territory, both abstract (in the imagination) and concrete (on the ground). Adopting a relational-processual approach, Raffestin further suggests that decisive historical, social, and political incidents can disrupt the uneasy connection between abstract and concrete manifestations of territory as formalized contours of the latter collide with

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the dynamic edges of the former (pp. 141-142). Such defining events and processes increasingly connect spaces that are both offline and mediated/online, challenging the boundaries between the two spheres (Adams, 2015; Bennett & Segerberg 2012; Christensen, 2011; Koopman, 2015: p. 340). Raffestin's ideas are thus concerned with relations between 'territory and group identity by means of mediators,' rather than territory as the object and product of strategies of the state (Klauser, 2008; Murphy, 1991: p. 27).[15] Geographical investigations of the connections between media, meaning, and space are therefore of clear relevance to this study.

Media not only impact the formation of collective identities (Billig, 1995; Castells, 2010; Schlesinger, 1991), but are also inextricably implicated in the processes through which such identities are mapped onto various spatial configurations (Adams, 2013: p. 271; Paasi, 2003: p. 113). Television and social media have transformed the ways in which 'imagined communities' are formed and associated with spatial formations (Adams, 2013; Anderson, 2006; Sheyholislami, 2011). Providing a sound analysis of the media's involvement in the processes of spatial formation, however, requires due attention to the unequal power dynamics involved in the interconnections of media, identity, and space (Adams, 1992; Adams & Ghose, 2003; Morley & Robins, 1995).

Nation-states and powerful corporations have long deployed media, especially television, as crucial tools to shape and control popular geographic imaginations (Edensor, 2009) and propagate their dominant geopolitical discourses (Adams, 1992; Dodds, 2003; Harvey, 1989). Using television's power to construct meaning and shape reality, states have depicted their 'others' as unworthy, illegitimate, unruly, 'undesirable political subjects,' and less-than-human

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[15] For more general discussions of Raffestin, see Del Biaggio, 2015; Klauser, 2008; 2012; and Murphy, 2012.

'bodies' that threaten the state and its borders (Barbour & Jones, 2013; Dempsey & McDowell, 2019; Jones, 2014; Juris, 2005). In addition to the more established mass media, social media also offer the state and powerful corporations new instruments of manipulation and control (Adams, 2013; 2015: pp. 397-398; Golkar, 2011; Morozov, 2009; Warf, 2013: p. 47). These oppressive measures can include such practices as blocking access to certain sites, monitoring dissident conversations online, and spreading propaganda, disinformation, and confusion (Howard et al., 2011: pp. 3-7; Morozov, 2011; Tufekci, 2017: Ch. 9; Valenzuela, 2013: p. 926).

The oppressive potentials of the media, however, coinhabit with empowering potential that can enable resistance. Media and their digital visual images, therefore, have been recruited by a growing number of marginalized, minoritized, and stateless peoples in struggles for rights, visibility, and space (Adams, 1996; Anderson, 2019; Juris, 2005; McGarry et al., 2019; Routledge, 2000: p. 27). The Zapatista movement exemplifies one such movement—using media and digital communication technologies effectively to convey its message, challenge the state, and construct space (Castells, 2010: pp: 82-84; Routledge, 2003). Television and social media can inculcate individuals and communities with certain ideas and spatial imaginations about 'their position in the world' (Adams, 2017: p. 370; Routledge, 1997a; Schejter & Tirosh, 2012: p. 313), which may collide with the nation-state's conventional spatiality (Crameri, 2014: Ch. 5; San Cornelio and Gómez Cruz, 2019; Sheyholislami, 2011). Dochartaigh (2007) has explored the role of new technologies in reinforcing territorial boundaries in Northern Ireland. Anderson (2019) shows the incorporation of social media into the Catalan mobilization for independence. Young (2017) has examined the ways in which marginalized Inuit communities in Canada's Arctic region use the internet to produce their own geographical imaginations and thus impact perceptions about the region. Digital visual media have therefore increased the ability of

marginalized and stateless peoples to challenge the state-centric, hegemonic notions of space and produce collective geographical imaginations and territories as meaningful spaces.

As early as 1970s, Jean Gottman (1975) was attentive to the symbolic dimensions of territory, defining it as a 'psychosomatic device with both material and psychological components' (p. 45). Territories, as such, are tied to 'ideas about how the world is, or should be, organized,' ideas which can inform powerful discourses, encouraging certain geographical imaginations among certain populations (Murphy, 1991: p. 29; see also Thrift, 1983: p. 48). Such observations suggest that mediated discourses are among the ways in which ordinary individuals attempt to reproduce meaning, create geographies and 'live geopolitics' (Dittmer & Gray, 2010: p. 1671; see also Agnew, 2003). For stateless nations that lack official cultural and educational institutions and media, alternative communication technologies become crucial to the creation and dissemination of national identity discourses (Sheyholislami, 2011: p. 13). Such media technologies make space symbolically meaningful, i.e., they produce mediated territory. Thus, investigating Kurdish territorial imaginations is part of an ongoing scholarly project to challenge 'dominant imaginations and practices of territory' (Halvorsen, 2019: p. 804).

At least since the late 1990s, stateless and minority movements have utilized the internet to create territories online (Ginsburg, 2008). Despite such early advances in stateless and minoritized peoples' use of media to preserve and promote spatial imaginaries, the literature has not sufficiently connected such online 'awakening' movements (Alia, 2010) with their equivalent meaningful spaces. Investigating such connections is especially critical given the growing political role of digital visual technologies. The increasing use of social media, combined with the continued presence of—digitized—television (Rose, 2016b: p. 256), has given the current 'information age its own specific delineations of territory,' which 'is as much metaphysical as it

is material' (Delaney, 2005: pp. 10-12). Surprisingly, however, scholarly inquiry has largely sidestepped the dynamic intersection of territory and media/digital visuality. The late Kurdish scholar, Amir Hassanpour (1998), argued that using communication technologies allowed the Kurds to challenge the state's effective territorial sovereignty by reproducing Kurdish discourses on identity. Jaffer Sheyholislami (2011) highlights the significance of television in producing a collective Kurdish geographical imagination. Extending this line of argument, Costa and Alinejad (2020) examine the Kurdish diaspora's use of social media to produce the homeland as a mediated experience. Building on these arguments, I examine the role of media and images and their affective capacities to produce territorial imaginations that bring together social media with satellite television.

Visual images have become increasingly important in studies of geopolitical processes (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: p. 36). Visual technologies have long assisted resistance movements and street demonstrations to establish visibility in public spaces (Doerr et a., 2014; Rose, 2014: p. 33; Routledge, 1997a). Disseminated through social media, visual images have been effective in articulating grievances, building identities, and producing affect (Adams, 2015; Juris, 2008; Kallio and Häkli, 2017). McGarry et al. (2019), have explored the use of Twitter visual images for expressing protest activities during the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Similarly, media images have crucially affected protest movements during the Arab Spring (Kharroub and Bas, 2016), the Dakota Access Pipeline (Hinzo & Clark, 2019), and #BlackLivesMatter (Casas & Williams, 2019), and Catalonia's independence referendum (San Cornelio and Gómez Cruz, 2019).

While scholarly attention has moved toward exploring social media images, in most cases a combination of mass and social media work in tandem to disseminate images about certain events, groups, or political causes (see Adams, 2015: p. 400; San Cornelio and Gómez Cruz,

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2019: p. 291). These mediated-visual forms of activism invariably entail using, claiming, making, and imagining space. Thus, there seems to be more need for investigating the ways in which media, image, and affect/emotion come together in the collective imagination and production of territory. Such an approach is particularly pertinent to the Iranian Kurdish context, as affect and emotions were at the core of the Kurdish activism in 2014 and 2017, both online and on the streets. As one interviewee put it: "To participate in demonstrations one needs emotions" (interview: Jiyar, 2019). More broadly, I argue that there are unique capacities of media and affect/emotion at play in the Kurdish movement. This argument is not based on a claim that the Kurds are essentially, or any more, 'emotional' compared to others; instead it is rooted in the idea that the geopolitical underpinnings of the Kurdish movement—including state violence, displacement, separation, and resistance require paying due attention to the role of emotion and affect in the development of the Kurdish movement and its production of territory. This dynamic has recently been accompanied and intensified by the technological imperatives of media. Thus, the intersection of media, image, affect, and space presents itself as increasingly relevant in the scholarly work on the Kurdish struggle.

2.3. Territory, Networks, and Scale

Although territories are traditionally thought of as purportedly fixed spatial constructs, their production entails 'extra-local connections' (Halvorsen, 2019: p. 792). Similar to regions (Murphy, 1991), territories are produced through relational dynamisms that operate simultaneously across multiple emergent scales (Clare et al., 2017). Scale and territory are inextricably bound up with one another, making "the scale of [territorial] struggle and the [territorial] struggle over scale two sides of the same coin" (Koopman, 2015: p. 341; Martin 2013: p. 332; Smith 1992a: p. 74). The implication of such a statement is that scales are actively

constructed in the process of spatial struggles inherent to political resistance (Leitner et al., 2008: p. 159; Routledge, 1997b: p. 71-72). This relational approach also implies that the production of scales and territories associated with them are reflections of unequal power dynamics that produce, and are reproduced by, interconnected scalar-spatial processes (Marston, 2000: pp. 220-221; Staeheli, 1994; Swyngedouw, 1997: p. 169). To understand the Iranian Kurds' production of territorial imagination, therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to the power dynamics embedded in, animating, and produced by the affordances available to users constructing multiple scales of operation.

In such scalar-territorial processes, the role of media is crucial, acting like 'glue,' connecting individual and collective narratives and practices across different scales, and infusing certain spatial formations—territories—with particular symbolic meanings (Marino, 2015; Murphy et al., 2015; Paasi, 2003: p. 113). In the Kurdish case, new media has connected users across state borders, increasing their ability to imagine the homeland as a trans-border territorial construct. Connecting with Kurds in other countries and sympathetic allies, therefore, helped Iranian Kurdish users extend their struggle to construct and connect multiple scales to resist the state's territorialized media strategies (Adams, 1996: p. 419). New communication technologies have afforded the Kurds relatively safe trans-state 'spaces of convergence' (Routledge, 2009). These spaces of convergence have allowed marginalized communities and their allies to communicate. Similarly, Adams and Ghose (2003) have examined the ways in which members of the Indian diaspora in the United States use online tools to create 'bridgespaces' that allow them to maintain a sense of community and remain connected to South Asia. Veronis et al. (2018) have studied the ways in which social media enable Syrian refugees to 'build transcultural spaces' while trying to settle in the Canadian society.

Highlighting the significance of the multi-scalar networks of connection among users and the affective capacities of media and visual images, this research approaches territory as a site of alter-geopolitical and anti-colonial resistance, waged by the Kurds as they resist the state's territorial strategies. Foregrounding territory in the Kurdish movement, this study considers the role of media, visuality, affect, and multi-scalar networks—that include non-Kurdish users—in the Kurdish production of territory. To be sure, studies have engaged with Kurdish territory in relation to state policies and migration in Kurdistan (Dahlman, 2002); gendered development programs in Turkey's south-east (Clark, 2015); and limestone caves in the Upper Tigris Valley as mediums of territorialization for the Turkish state and the Kurdish resistance (Oguz, 2021). But a more explicit consideration of territory in the Kurdish movement is needed given territory's centrality to the exercise of power (Storey, 2020a)—its capacity to 'disempower, divide, conquer, and fragment' (Delaney, 2005: p. 19). Following Foucault's (1980) famous assertion, it has been well established that where there is power, there is resistance. As political domination is exerted through colonial control over territory, anti-colonial and alter-geopolitical resistance also occurs through territory (Clare et al., 2018; Gottmann, 1975: p. 34; Halvorsen, 2019: p. 795; Sharp et al., 2000; Sisson, 2021; Storey, 2012). As Raffestin (2012) points out, production of territory is always in a dialectic relation with limitations and borders, both material and symbolic. "Every limit is an opportunity for transgression and thus, in a certain sense, an occasion for creativity" (p. 128). This study investigates territory as a collectively imagined geographic construct reflecting and animated by the embodied struggles of its inhabitants, advocates, and sympathizers. The understanding of territory presented here, thus, accounts for the active agency of social actors that 'people' territory in ways that contest, unsettle and negotiate the nation-state ideal of territory (Antonsich, 2011: p. 424; Herb, 2018).

CHAPTER THREE:

Historical Background

The historical conditions impacting the events studied in this dissertation can be roughly organized into long-term and short-term categories. The former involves the processes pertaining to the Kurdish movement's decades-long resistance against state policies and territoriality. The latter focuses on the Iranian state's securitization of Kurdistan, which directly impacted the Kurds' demonstrations and use of media. In explaining the long-term processes impacting the development of the Kurdish movement, I do not claim linear continuity between these processes and the Kurdish movement today. Nor do I aim to suggest that the two rounds of street demonstrations and the mediated practices studied here are directly linked to such long-term processes. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the collective memories of the longer-term struggles have significant bearings on how contemporary acts of resistance unfold. Furthermore, providing such a historical background offers a clearer understanding of territory in the Kurdish movement, since "specific territories have histories" (Elden, 2013: p. 5). As such, I designate part of this chapter to a general summary of the Kurdish movement, emphasizing its oft-neglected territorial dimensions. To better understand the discursive and symbolic value of the specific events and practices discussed in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, I also provide an outline of the major elements of the Kurdish culture and narratives of origins. I demonstrate the ways in which the Kurdish movement in Iranian Kurdistan has been shaped by imperial geopolitical rivalries, nation-state-building projects, and the larger Kurdish struggle for political rights and self-determination in west Asia. The latter part of this chapter focuses on the more recent geopolitical events and the Islamic Republic's securitization policies of Kurdistan.

3.1. Kurdistan

Kurdistan, as a geo-historical entity in western Asia, in various territorial configurations, appeared centuries before the emergence of the region's modern state system (Schmidinger, 2018). Scholars often trace the first official reference to "Kurdistan" to the 12th century C.E., when the Seljuk[16] rulers established *Kurd-Ustan*[17] within their domains (McDowall, 2004: p. 6; Minorsky, 1993: pp. 1130-1132). However, the first reference to "the land of *Karda*" is even older, found on a Sumerian clay tablet from the third millennium B.C. (Driver, 1923: p. 393). The Kurdistan that Seljuk rulers established was centered around the city of Bahar on the eastern foothills of the Zagros Mountains, and included the *vilayets* of Sinjar, Shahrazur, Dinawar and Kermanshah (Kendal, 1996: p. 10; McDowall, 2004: p. 23). Throughout this period and before that, Kurdistan existed as a territorial entity known to its inhabitants and to 'outsiders' (Vali, 1998: n. 92). Even though there is a general consensus about the lexical origins of Kurdistan in the 12th century C.E., some have pointed to an even earlier use of the term, Kurdistan. The Kurdish scholar, Farhad Pirbal argues that Ali Kashari, a central Asian geographer, used the notion of 'the land of the Kurds' as early as 1076 and provided a cartographic definition of this land (O'Shea, p. 165). In 1597, the Kurdish poet, historian, and prince, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi[18] wrote his monumental book, *Sharafnameh*[19], *a history of the Kurdish nation*, in which he identified different regions and emirates within Kurdistan (Bengio, 2017; Hassanpour, 1994b).

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[16] A political dynasty with Turkic origins that hailed from central Asia and ruled over much of current-day Iran and west Asia during the 11th and 12th centuries C.E.

[17] Literally, the Kurdish state or province.

[18] Kurdish spelling: Şerefxanê Bedlîsî.

[19] Şerefname

Sharafnameh and the subsequent scholarly work on Kurdish history do not simply provide accounts of the Kurds as a people. Rather such historical writings 'impact how their subjects see their identity and territory' (Elden, 2013: p. 12).

Popular awareness of Kurdistan is a more recent phenomenon and a product of the age of nationalism, and the growing use of printing press and literacy during the 19th and 20th centuries (Dahlman, 2002: p. 278). In 1898, *Kurdistan* became the name for the first Kurdish newspaper, which was influential in disseminating Kurdish nationalist ideas (Elphinston, 1946: p. 94; Hassanpour, 1992: pp. 221-221). Kurdistan also figured regularly in the names given to many prominent Kurdish parties and organizations, such as the *Society for the Rise of Kurdistan*[20] that pursued Kurdish independence in 1918; the clandestine *Organization for the Liberation of Kurdistan*[21], established after 1938 in Iran; its successor, the independence-minded *Organization for the Revival of Kurdistan*[22] in 1942; and numerous other Kurdish parties that followed. The earliest Kurdish attempt at statehood was also called the Kurdistan Republic[23], founded in the wake of World War II (Bengio, 2017: pp. 78-79).

Kurdistan does not have defined borders, due to recurring demographic shifts, colonial domination and historical divisions. Similar to any other region or homeland, Kurdistan is territorially dynamic, constantly made, unmade, and remade by forces operating at various scales (Izady, 1992: Ch 1). The objective here is not to delineate any exact territorial limits for

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[20] *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti*

[21] Komeley Azadîxwazî Kurdistan

[22] Komeley Jiyanewey Kurdistan

[23] Komarî Kurdistan, Kurdistan Republic, has sometimes been translated as "Republic of Mahabad," referring to the name of the city where the republic was established. See the section on the Kurdistan Republic.

Kurdistan. However, providing a general outline of the region that the Kurds consider to be their homeland offers insight into the territorial underpinnings of the Kurdish movement. Kurdistan encompasses a stretch of contiguous, mostly mountainous, land in west Asia that includes parts of western and northwestern Iran, south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and northern Syria, along with smaller parts in Armenia. Kurdistan's area is roughly 517,998 square kilometers, which is roughly the size of France, or the two states of California and New York combined (Figure 3.1). Kurdistan has the shape of an inverted letter V, with the pointed part facing the Caucasus and the two arms stretched in the direction of the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf (Izady, 1992; Jwaideh, 2006).

3.2 Kurds

The Kurds are often described as 'the largest stateless nation' (Culcasi, 2006; Dahlman & Moradi, 2018; Galip, 2015; McDowall, 2004; Mojab, 2001; Romano, 2006; Short, 1993; Vali, 1998). At the end of the first World War, the Kurdish homeland, Kurdistan, was divided among the four emerging states of Turkey, Iran,[24] Iraq, and Syria. In all these states, the Kurds became ethnic minorities, largely with no national rights and exposed to political, economic, and cultural repression. This geopolitical division, triggered a persistent Kurdish national movement to resist repression, achieve national rights, and establish cross-border Kurdish unity (Gunter, 2015b).

Prior to their division by international boundaries, the Kurds had acquired considerable national awareness, partly due to their common ethnic roots. Nonetheless, there are multiple

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[24] Iran had existed as a multi-ethnic empire for centuries, encompassing parts of Kurdistan. Nevertheless, beginning in the early 20th century, both the nature of the central political authority in Iran (then Persia) and its relations with Kurdistan changed significantly (See the section on 'Kurds and Nation-States').
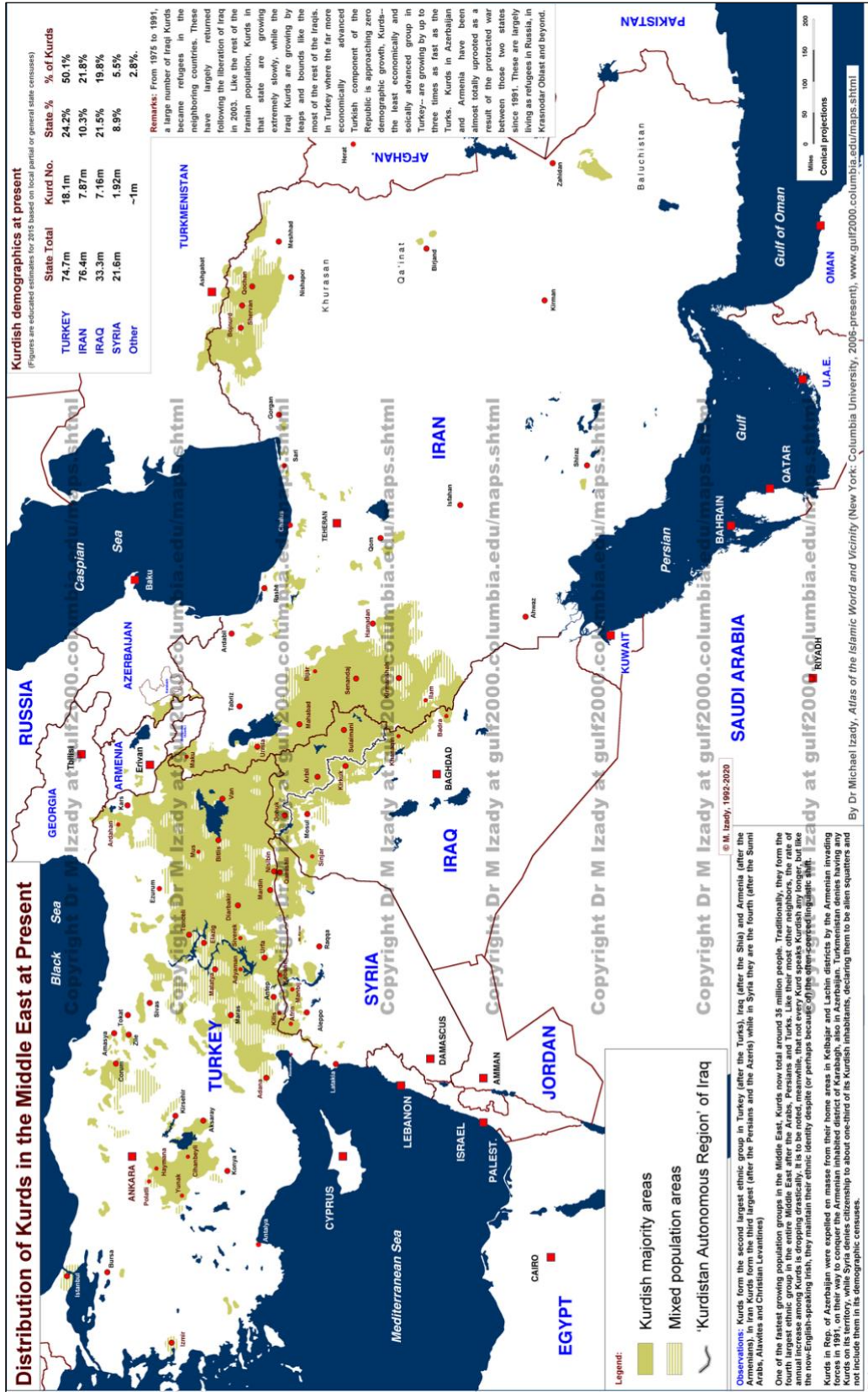
Figure 3. 2. Distribution of Kurds in southwest Asia at present. Source: Dr. M. Izady at gulf2000.columbia.edu

theories that seek to answer the question of the origins of a distinct Kurdish people. A dominant

theory, shared by many Kurds themselves, considers the Kurds as the descendants of the ancient

Medes who ruled between 678 and 549 B.C. over an area in west Asia that includes much of

contemporary Kurdistan (Jwaideh, 2006: p 290; MacKenzie, 1961: p. 69). Several ancient

scholars such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Polybius, Strabo, Livy, and Pliny, as well as Sumerian

and Assyrian inscriptions[25], have identified populations, invariably named Cyrtii, Guti, Kurtie,

Kardakes, Garduchi, and Cordueni, which appear to be the early progenitors of today's Kurds[26]

(Dahlman, 2002; Elphinston, 1946: p. 92). In his *Anabasis*, Xenophon, the Greek historian, and

military leader, offers one of the earliest accounts of what he calls the "Kardoukhoi" (Driver,

1923), describing them as largely "self-sufficient farmers without religious leaders, in the regions

which the Kurds still claim as their homelands today" (Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak, 1995: p.

349). The term Kurd, with its contemporary spelling and pronunciation,[27] first appeared in

Arabic sources of the 9th century C.E. (Elphinston, 1946: p. 92).

Regardless of their origins, clearly the Kurds today have a racially diverse makeup,

which is the result of centuries of migration and invasion (Gunter, 2015b). Nonetheless, the

general embrace among the Kurds of the idea that they are descendants of the Medes has been

influential in cultivating a shared sense of origin, facilitating the development of Kurdish

nationalism (Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 290-291). This contemporary sense of unity is manifested most

clearly in the Kurdish national anthem that reads: "*We are the progeny of Media and*

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[25] 2,000 to 1,000 B.C.

[26] See Driver (1923) for a detailed account of the philological origins of the name Kurd.

[27] It is worth mentioning that in the Kurdish writing that uses the Latin alphabet the word "Kurd" is written exactly as *Kurd*, similar to the English version, but the Kurds' own pronunciation of the word sounds more like "*Kourd*."

Cyaxares!"[28] Similar to the Persian, Turkish, and Arab nationalisms, Kurdish nationalism's concern with the Kurds' origins is driven by a political desire to legitimize claims to sovereignty. What makes Kurdish nationalist claims different, however, is the Kurds' resistance against the truth claims of the dominant nation-states' official narratives that have sought to absorb the Kurds as organic, yet ineffectual and passive ingredients within the Persian, Turkish, or Arab "nation-states" (Hassanpour, 2003b: pp.106-107).

3.3. Kurdish Population

There are no official data regarding the Kurdish population because the states that control Kurdistan have been invariably reluctant to count the Kurdish population residing within their borders. Nonetheless, Kurds are widely believed to be the fourth largest ethnic group in west Asia (Hassanpour et al., 2012: p. 2). Despite data limitations, most recent estimates put the number of Kurds between 30 to 40 million. The Institut Kurde of Paris estimates the Kurdish population to be around 36.4 million, including: 15 million in Turkey, 10 million in Iran, 8 million in Iraq, 3 million in Syria (Hassanpour and Mojab, 2005; institutkurde, 2020). In Turkey, 23 southeastern provinces and the districts of Sivas and Marash are considered to have Kurdish majorities (institutkurde, 2020). The Kurds in Iran reside largely in the country's west and northwest, in the four provinces of Ilam, Kermanshah,[29] Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan, with smaller numbers in northeastern Iran (Grojean, 2017: p. 320). The Kurds in Iraq reside in the three governorates that constitute the Kurdistan Region (Arbil,[30] Duhok, Sulaymaniya),[31] and in

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[28] The most powerful king of the Median Empire (r. 625–585 B.C.).

[29] Kurdish: *Kirmashan*

[30] Kurdish: *Hewlêr*

Kurdish territories that are not officially part of the Kurdistan Region. In Syria, Kurds live in the three cantons of Cizre,[32] Kobani, and Afrin, and in major Syrian cities (institutkurde, 2020; see Figure 3.2).[33] It is also estimated that between 1 to 2 million diaspora Kurds reside in Europe, North America, Australia, Israel, and former Soviet republics (Berman, 2013; Dahlman, 2002; 2008; institutkurde, 2020; Kara, 2019; McDowall, 2004: p. 456).[34]

3.3.1. Depopulation and Deterritorialization

The (un)counting of the Kurdish population—and even the Kurdish struggle for existence—is closely linked to questions of geopolitics and territory. As part of their geopolitical projects to territorialize the peripheral Kurdish space (Ó Tuathail, 1996a) and control the Kurdish population, the regional states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria have resorted to a wide range of strategies to depopulate and de-territorialize Kurdistan (Dahlman, 2002). Such policies have included undercounting the Kurds, assimilation, forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, and genocide (Gunter, 2015b; Yeğen, 1999). The regional states have regularly undercounted the Kurds, or have even denied their existence, in efforts to minimize or erase the 'Kurdish issue' (Gunter, 2015b: p. 481; Hassanpour et al., 1996; Izady, 1992: p. 111; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 9; Secor, 2004: p. 356). In other cases, states have cancelled census projects that purportedly aimed to count the Kurds (Chaliand, 1980: p. 14; Izady, 1992: p. 3). The states fear that providing the official number of the Kurdish population within their countries may indicate recognition of the

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[31] Kurdish: Slêmanî

[32] Jazirah

[33] It is believed that since 2011 the civil war has significantly altered Syria's demographic composition.

[34] This includes around 850,000 in Germany; 230,000 in France; 100,000 in the Netherland; 50,000 in the United States; 30,000 in Canada; and 200,000 in Israel (institutkurde, 2020).
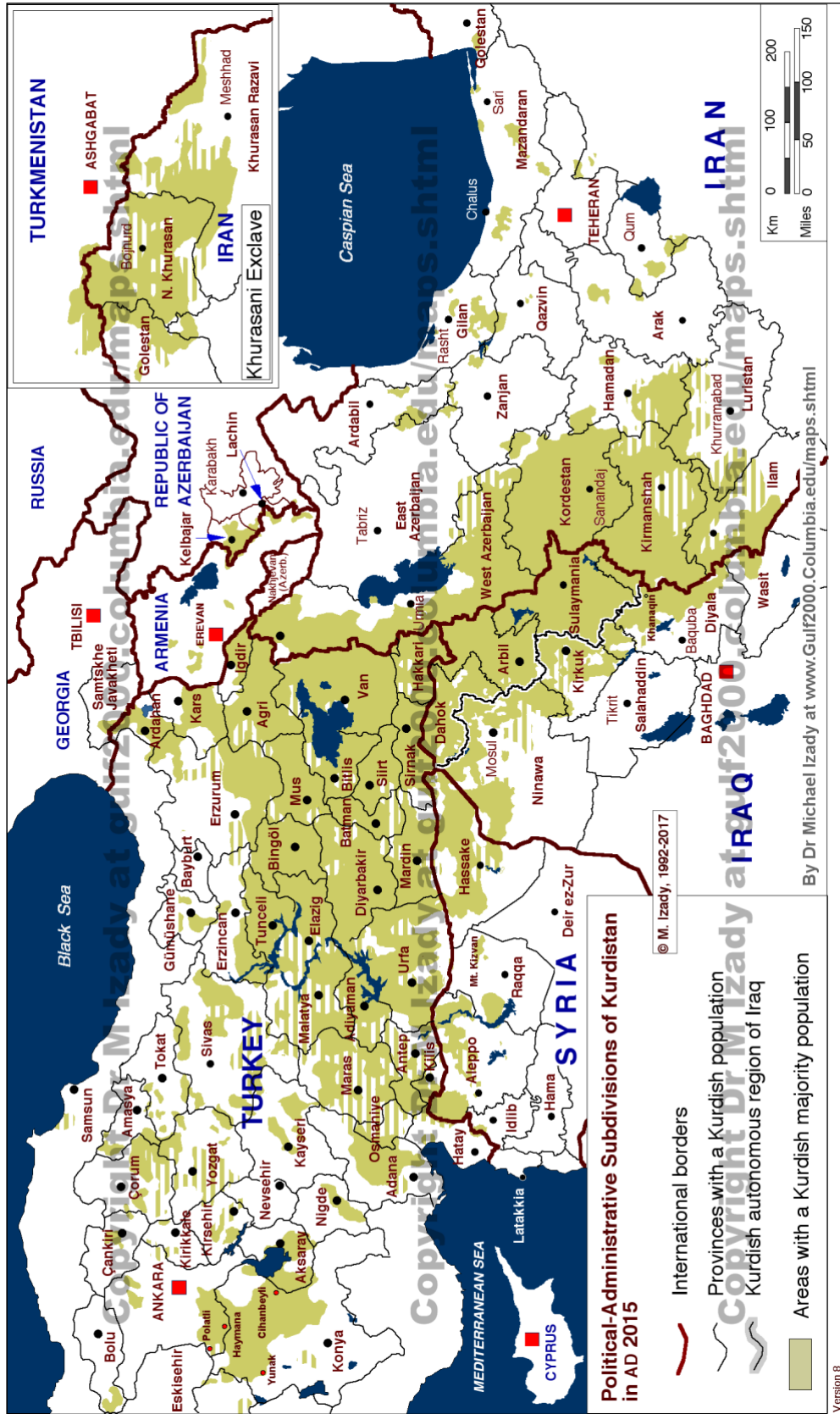
Figure 3.2. Political and Administrative Subdivisions of Kurdistan. Source: Dr. M. Izady at gulf2000.columbia.edu

Kurds as a distinct group, and by implication, the acknowledgment of the Kurds' political rights (Dahlman, 2002: p. 274).

Another major challenge in counting the Kurdish population is that the term 'Kurd' and its meaning has been historically politicized and contested (Gunter, 2015b: p. 481; Izady, 1992: p. 111). The state-backed dominant power-knowledge systems have promoted theories that portray the Kurds as 'sub-groups' of the dominant ethnic groups within each country where the Kurdish populations have been divided: Turks, Persians, and Arabs (Hassanpour, 2003b: pp.106-107; van Bruinessen, 1997). Combined with assimilationist, political and economic policies, such state-backed definitions have reduced the extent of the Kurdish population. For example, the Lurs in western and southwestern Iran are historically and ethnolinguistically very close to the Kurds. But over decades, many Lurs have either assimilated into the dominant Persian identity or have opted to identify as a separate Lur group rather than being Kurdish (Hassanpour, 1992: p. 20; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 9).

3.3.1.1. Mechanisms of Depopulation and Deterritorialization

Throughout decades the regional states have attempted to systematically depopulate and de-territorialize Kurdistan. To achieve these objectives, the states have resorted to such mechanisms as assimilation, mass expulsion and displacement, genocide, economic disinvestment, and migration (Abrahamian, 1982: pp. 124-125; 2008: p. 37; Hassanpour, 1994a: p. 100; Sheyholislami, 2010: p. 292; Vali, 2003; 2011: pp. 18-19). The Iranian state, for example, has persistently attempted to assimilate the Kurds by persecuting instructors and NGOs that teach Kurdish, putting Kurdish students, academics, journalists, and activists under surveillance, and by making school education in Kurdish practically impossible. These policies are part of the larger state official strategy to protect the "supremacy of Persian" and "expanding

the territory of the Persian language" (Moradi, 2020; Saleh, 2013: p. 63; Sheyholislami, 2012b: 42-43).

The state's systematic stigmatization of the Kurdish identity, language, and accent, combined with its denial of the very existence of the Kurds, have been key components of assimilation projects (Izady, 1992: p. 112; McDowall, 2004: p. 397; Yeğen, 1999). From the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 until 1970, the word "Kurd" was publicly mentioned only once, despite the Kurds forming more than 20 percent of the country's population. The very word "Kurd" was banned. In 1970, the Turkish Workers Party officially recognized the *existence* of the Kurds and the legitimacy of their democratic demands. The Turkish state swiftly banned the party (Chaliand, 1980: p. 13, emphasis original). Kurds could be sentenced up to 50 years in prison by admitting their Kurdish identity (Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak, 1995: p. 348), and many Kurds have faced prison time for speaking Kurdish (Bengio, 2016; Goodman, 2004; Rygiel, 1998: p. 110). Not surprisingly, millions of Kurds have assimilated into the dominant Turkish, Persian, and Arabic identities to escape state persecution and stigma, and to facilitate upward social mobility (Dahlman, 2002: p. 276; Gunter, 2015b: p. 481).[35]

Rising nationalism in conjunction with the formation of the region's modern states in the early 20th century accelerated forced expulsion and massacres of Kurds, as part of the depopulation and deterritorialization projects that had already started in the age of empires.[36] The establishment of modern states, made such projects more systematic and even elicited scientific

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[35] In Turkey, Kurds can even become president if they assimilate into the Turkish language and culture. The former Turkish president, Turgut Özal, is often reputed to be of Kurdish origin, and in the early 1990s, one-fifth of the Turkish MPs were unassimilated Kurds (Izady, 1992: p. 200).

[36] Following Dahlman (2008), I define deterritorialization as "a loosening of the connections between social practices and particular sociopolitical spaces" (p. 496).

support from the states' nationalist intelligentsia (Dahlman, 2002; Gunter, 2020; Hassanpour, 1994b; Izady, 1992: pp. 102-104; Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 127-128; Kendal, 1980: pp. 60-61; see Figure 3.1). Reza shah's expulsion of thousands of Kurds between World Wars I and II provides a telling example (Atabaki, 1993: p. 57; Ghassemlou, 1980: pp. 114-115; Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 42; McDowall, 2004: pp. 222-226). In Turkey, by the early 21st century, at least three million Kurds had been internally displaced (Secor, 2004: pp. 353-354; Skutnabb-Kangas & Fernandes, 2008). Close to an additional 1 million have continued to be displaced due to dismal economic prospects and the ongoing conflict in Kurdistan (Clark, 2013: p. 841; Hampton, 2014: p. 165; Romano, 2006: p. 42).

In Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, mass deportations and genocide resulted in depopulation of Kurdistan, especially the disputed districts[37] of Khanaqin, Kirkuk, Mandali, Shaykhan, Zakhu, and Shingal, between 1963 and 1991. Such policies peaked during the notorious *al-Anfal* genocidal campaign between 1987 and 1988. The most intense Arabization policies occurred around the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, where the Saddam Hussein regime expelled up to one million Kurds (McDowall, 2004: p. 339), incentivizing Arabs to move to Kirkuk (Chaliand, 1980: pp. 11-14; Gunter, 2011: p. 45; 2015b: p. 487; Hassanpour, 1992: p. 16; Human Rights Watch, 1993; Izady, 1992: p. 107; Romano, 2005; van Bruinessen, 1992: pp. 61-62). In Syria, the regime systematically pursued policies of depopulation and deterritorialization of Kurdistan, most notably implementing the "Arab Belt"[38] project in the 1960s that aimed to create an Arab-dominated "security zone" along the Turkish border to rupture the territorial contiguity between

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[37] Also referred to as "disputed territories," are those towns and districts that have historically been more vulnerable to government's Arabization policies due to their closer location to Iraq's interior.

[38] Hizam al-Arabi

Kurds in Syria and those in Turkey.[39] The Assad regime also denied thousands of Kurds citizenship, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, alleging they had infiltrated the country illegally (Izady, 1992: pp. 104-107; Knapp, 2019: p. 384; McDowall, 2004: p. 474).[40] Afrin in northwestern Syria is one of the latest regions to lose its Kurdish majority[41] under occupation and ethnic cleansing by the Turkish army and its Islamist militia allies since March 2018 (Schmidinger, 2019). Similarly, in October 2019, Turkish forces and allied militias occupied and ethnically cleansed a stretch of land between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain in northern Syria (van Wilgenburg, 2020: p. 155).

Systematic economic disinvestment and underdevelopment of Kurdistan has been another component of the states' depopulation and deterritorialization strategies. In all four countries of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, Kurdistan has historically been among the poorest regions (Dahlman, 2002: p. 284; Elling, 2013: p. 67; Koohi-Kamali, 2003, pp., 12 & 201). Economic grievances, combined with political repression and conflict has prompted disproportionately large number of Kurds to emigrate or join various clandestine leftist parties and organizations, giving the states further justification to securitize and militarize Kurdistan (Alinia, 2004; Romano, 2006: pp. 41-42; McDowall, 2004: p. 472; van Bruinessen, 1999). In Iran, Kurdistan has persistently been marginalized and underdeveloped according to various economic criteria (Amirahmadi & Atash, 1987, p. 172; Moradi, 2014; Noorbakhsh, 2002: p. 391). During both Pahlavi (1925-1979) and Islamic Republic (1980-) regimes, the chronic poverty in Kurdistan has

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[39] The other states have also established similar empty security zones in Kurdistan (Izady, 1992: pp. 104-107).

[40] In 2011, the al-Assad regime granted citizenship to many Kurds, hoping to win over Kurdish support.

[41] Afrin is where Kurds and mountains literally meet at the Kurd Dagh, the "Mountain of the Kurds" (Schmidinger, 2019).

resulted in depopulation (Abrahamian, 2008: p. 156; Aghajanian, 1983: pp. 220-221; Elling, 2013, p. 56; Matin, 2019: p. 125). In addition to decades of centralization, the government's "security view" on Kurdistan has also exacerbated the region's impoverishment by directing funds from employment to militarism (Elling, 2013, p. 147; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020a). Securitization and militarization have in turn rendered Kurdistan unlivable, inducing further out-migration, especially of educated youth in the border areas (Moradi et al., 2022; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020b). The states' de-development and disinvestment in Kurdistan are geopolitically-driven biopolitical projects aimed at subjugating the Kurds and de-territorializing Kurdistan (Clark, 2013; Moradi et al., 2022).

3.3.2. Migration and Diaspora

Throughout decades, millions of Kurds have been compelled to leave Kurdistan to escape persecution, conflict, and poverty (Dahlman, 2008; Hassanpour & Mojab, 2005). Significant numbers of Kurds reside in major cities of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Istanbul is famously known as the "largest Kurdish city in the world" with over 3 million Kurds[42] (Dahlman, 2002: p. 274). Kurdish diaspora has played an outsized role in the political life of the homeland (van Bruinessen, 1999; 2000a). In 1956, the Kurds in Europe established the Kurdish Studies Society, the first Kurdish diasporic organization in Europe, and demanded for self-rule in Kurdistan (Hassanpour & Mojab, 2005). By the 1960s and 70s, thousands of Kurds had migrated or fled to other countries, especially to western Europe (institutkurde, 2020; McDowall, 2004: p. 456).

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[42] This significant "internal diaspora" has manifested itself in high percentage of votes that pro-Kurdish parties have often gained in Istanbul since the 1990s (institutkurde, 2020).

Out-migration has exacerbated Kurdistan's de-territorialization. Nonetheless, diaspora Kurds have largely been able to contribute to the Kurdish movement by being able to resist the states' persecution more effectively and by raising the international profile of the Kurdish movement, especially since the 1990s (McDowall, 2004: p. 455; van Bruinessen, 2000a). Access to the host countries' resources, have allowed Kurdish diaspora communities to invigorate the political and cultural life in Kurdistan by promoting Kurdish language and culture, and establishing associations, publications, and parties (Aghapouri, 2020; Costa & Alinejad, 2020; Eliassi, 2013: p. 9). Technologies of communication have been central to the connections between the Kurdish diaspora and the homeland (Dahlman, 2008; Sheyholislami, 2010; 2012a). Using digital communication technologies, especially social media, diaspora Kurds play active roles in the political life in the homeland, and crucially reproduce notions of the Kurdish homeland. As such, the Kurds' production of territory becomes a form of reterritorialization, responding and resisting the states' deterritorialization policies (Ó Tuathail, 1998).

3.4. Language

Kurdish has the fourth largest number of speakers in west Asia, after Arabic, Persian, and Turkish (Hassanpour et al., 2012: p. 2). The major dialects of the Kurdish language include: Kurmanji (northern Kurdish), Sorani (central Kurdish), Kirmashani[43] (southern Kurdish, Kelhuri),[44] Hewrami (Gorani), and Dimilî (Zazaki, Sheyholislami, 2015). The first three speech variants are more sizeable and are distributed in an overall northwestern-southeastern continuum.

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[43] The name refers to the city of Kirmashan (Persianized as Kermanshah) and its surrounding region.

[44] Named after the Kelhur tribe, which has historically been the largest tribal confederation in Iranian Kurdistan (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p.n. 225).

Kurmanji is largely spoken in Turkey and Syria. Proportionately smaller number of Kurmanji speakers reside in northern parts of both Iraqi Kurdistan and northern parts of Iranian Kurdistan. Sorani is spoken by the majority of Kurds in Iraq and Iran. Kirmashani Kurdish is spoken in the southern parts of both Iranain and Iraqi Kurdistan. The two dialects of Hewrami and Dimilî are concentrated regionally in southern and northern Kurdistan, respectively (Figure 3.3).

The Kurdish language has been the target of the Iranian, Turkish, Iraqi, and Syrian states' policies of denial, non-education, and assimilation (Haig and Paul, 2001: p. 403; Hassanpour et al., 1996; Hassanpour et al., 2012: p. 3; Kreyenbroek, 1992: p. 68; Sheyholislami, 2011: pp. 58-60). Such policies include banning or restricting the use of Kurdish in public—even private—spaces; persecuting Kurdish teachers, artists, and activists; stigmatizing Kurdish and humiliating its speakers; intimidating parents, denying identification documents, or arbitrary arrest of those with Kurdish names; erasing Kurdish place-names; promoting state-backed theories that downgrade the status of the Kurdish language;[45] denying the Kurds material resources through poverty; obstructing Kurdish cultural productions; and de-populating Kurdistan through inducing out-migration, and physically eliminating Kurdish speakers (Blau, 2016; Dahlman, 2002: pp. 275-276; Gunter, 2015b: p. 483; Hassanpour et al., 2012; Secor, 2004: p. 359; Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak, 1995: pp. 351-352; Vali, 2011: pp. 18-19; van Bruinessen, 1984). These policies have often culminated in linguicidal projects aimed at eliminating the Kurdish language to create homogenized Persian, Turkish, and Arab nation-states (Hassanpour et al., 2012: p. 3; Skutnabb-Kangas & Fernandes, 2008). Even in the absence of outright linguicidal policies, state

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[45] van Bruinessen (1997: p. 1) refers to the long series of books published by the *Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü* [Turkish Culture Research Institute] as an example of increased efforts to promote theories that portray the Dimilî and Kurmanji variations of Kurdish as essentially belonging to the Turkish language.

Figure 3.3. Distribution of Kurdish language and its major dialects. Source: Dr. M. Izady at gulf2000.columbia.edu

intellectuals have "declared Kurdish as a non-language" to deny its ability to become the basis of a distinct Kurdish nation (Hassanpour, n.d., p. 6; cited in Romano, 2006: p. 103).

In Iran particularly, state intellectuals have frequently cast Kurdish as a dialect of Persian, to define the Kurds are a sub-group within the "Iranian nation" (Elling, 2013: pp. 152-153; McDowall, 2004: p. 3). In doing so, Persian nationalist intellectuals have drawn on the fact that, as a West Iranic, Indo-European language, Kurdish is closer to Persian,[46] and different from Turkish and Arabic (Izady, 1992: p. 167; Sheyholislami, 2015: p. 30). Portraying Kurdish as a dialect of Persian, however, ignores the facts that linguistic similarity—even mutual intelligibility—does not automatically translate into shared political identity (Crystal, 1989: pp. 284-285; Hassanpour, 1993: p. 573; Murphy, 1998; Murphy et al., 2008).[47] Contrary to the desires of state intellectuals, the majority of the Kurds identify as a distinct nation—despite internal linguistic differences (Hassanpour, 1992: p. 25; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 290).[48] Although assimilationist policies have gained some level of success, especially in Turkey, states' linguistic oppression has strengthened the Kurds' national consciousness, as the Kurdish identity has been shaped highly impacted by opposition to state oppression (Elphinston, 1946: p. 91; Hassanpour,

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[46] Persian speakers and others in the region refer to the language as *Farsi*.

[47] Often expansionist, imperialistic powers have denied the nationhood of their less powerful linguistic communities. Cases in point include the imperial Russia's rejection of Ukrainian, and even Polish, nationhood based on pan-Russian/pan-Slavic nationalism.

[48] Linguistic difference within a self-proclaimed 'nation' is not unique to the Kurds. However, the differences among Kurdish dialects have persisted throughout the 20th century, largely for political reasons. The lack of the apparatus of a state, combined with the geopolitical divisions of the Kurds, has even exacerbated the intra-Kurdish linguistic differences. Furthermore, Kurdistan's elongated and mountainous terrain and the inefficacy and underdevelopment of transportation and communication networks within Kurdistan have separated the Kurds even more (Gunter, 2015b: p. 481; Izady, 1992: p. 188; Sheyholislami, 2010: p. 292).

1992; Vali, 1998). Linguistically, this growing national consciousness has heightened the Kurds'

efforts to gain a level of linguistic cohesion—even standardization.

The decades-long ban on education in Kurdish has rendered millions of Kurds unable to

read or write in their own mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak, 1995: pp. 352). Yet,

language has been a key instrument in the Kurds' expression of difference (Sheyholislami, 2010:

p. 291), a major component of the Kurdish national identity (Sheyholislami, 2011: p. 58; Vali,

2003), and a critical field and instrument of Kurdish resistance (Moradi, 2020).

3..5 Religion

Kurds are religiously diverse. A mild majority of the Kurds has traditionally been Sunni

Muslims of the Shafi'i school, distinguishing them from the region's non-Kurdish Sunnis, who

mostly follow the Hanafi school (Dahlman, 2002; Gunter, 2015b; Kereyenbroek, 1996: p. 93).

The rest of the Kurdish population include Shi'a Muslims; adherents of Sufi orders, Yezidis,[49]

Yarsanis, Alevis, Jews, and Christians. Shi'a Muslims constitute the second largest religious

group in Kurdistan and live mostly in southern and southeastern Kurdistan (Izady, 1992: pp. 131-

137; King, 2015: p. 22; Kereyenbroek, 1996: p. 102). Since the states that control Kurdistan

often share the same religion with the Kurds, religion has not played a major role in the Kurdish

movement, compared to secular ethnicity and language (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: pp. 140 & 184;

Sheyholislami, 2011: p. 58). Even the 'sheykhs' who led most of the Kurdish uprisings in the

late 19th and early 20th centuries, embraced Kurdish nationalism rather than revivalist Sunni

Islam (Izady, 1992: p. 158). All major Kurdish political parties are secular. In the Kurdistan

Regional Government (KRG) parliament, Islamist parties hold only 10.8 percent of the 111 seats

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[49] Also called Yazidi, Yazdani, Izadi and Dasnai.

(parliament.krd). Since its establishment in 1992, the KRG has made laws to protect religious freedom, grant representation to religious minorities, and shelter religious minorities fleeing the Iraqi and Syria conflicts (King, 2015: p. 28). Similarly, the Kurdish-led administration of Rojava and Northern Syria has provided legal and practical measures to protect minorities (Goldberg, 2015).

3.5.1. Yezidis

As a non-Muslim Kurdish minority, Yezidis have endured double persecution due to ethno-linguistic and religious difference from those in power (Murad, 2017). In August 2014, Yezidis were targeted by the Islamic State's murderous rampage across northern Mesopotamia. The attacks triggered the latest episode of genocide against Yezidis, forcing thousands to seek refuge on top of Mount Shingal[50] (King, 2015: pp. 24-25). For centuries, zealot Muslim Ottomans rulers targeted Yezidis with multiple acts of genocide, known as *ferman*s by Yezidis.[51] Between 1640 and 1910 alone, Yezidis suffered 20 major massacres (Izady, 1992: pp. 104 & 157). The dispersal of Yezidi communities across Kurdistan and beyond testifies to their historic persecution (Gunter, 2011: p. 258). In Kurdistan, Yezidis are mostly scattered across northern Syria; around Mount Shingal in Iraq; and in Lalish, east of Mosul, where their most sacred shrine, the tomb of Sheykh Adi is located. Throughout centuries, smaller Yezidi communities have also escaped to northern Kurdistan (eastern Turkey), the Caucasus, and Europe (Kereyenbroek, 1996: pp. 96-97). The 2014 attacks ushered in a new wave of Yezidi refugees,

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[50] Arabic: Sinjar

[51] Yezidis themselves have counted exactly 72 *fermans*. It is not clear, however, how many of these atrocities exactly meet the criteria for the international legal definitions of genocide.

but also generated significant intra-Kurdish solidarity and drew international sympathy (Gourlay, 2018).

The Yezidis constitute around five percent of the Kurdish population,[52] and speak Kurmanji, a dialect they also use for reciting, and more recently writing, their religious Hymns, known as *Qewl* (Kreyenbroek, 1996). The Yezidis sacralize all angels, including the Peacock Angel, whom they consider as an archangel, operating beneath the level of the Universal Spirit (Izady, 1992: p. 153). The Yezidis' veneration of the Peacock Angel[53] has made some outsiders label them as "devil worshipers," an ignorant[54] claim with tragic consequences for the Yezidis (Schmidinger, 2019: p. 11). The Yezidis also venerate the sun, which is a reminder of both the old roots of their beliefs and their place within the Kurdish national symbology, as the Kurdish flag is emblazoned with the Yezidi sun (Jwaideh, 2006: p. 11).

The double-minority status has encouraged many Yezidis to join the Kurdish movement. The integration of the Yezidis into the Kurdish movement, however, has been complicated due to bias and prejudice by some Kurds (Gunter, 2011: pp. 258-259; Izady, 1992: p. 155). Nonetheless, the majority of Yezidis have historically identified themselves "very closely with the Kurdish national idea." One Yezidi prayer implores "Oh Lord, raise thou the Throne of Kurdistan high unto the heavens." According to Yezidi teachings, God speaks Kurdish (Jwaideh, 2006: p. 291), a belief that provides further religious basis for the Yezidis' close identification

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[52] Recent genocides have probably reduced this number.

[53] Melek Tawus, Lucifer

[54] There is no such a thing as "personified evil" in Yezidi beliefs (Schmidinger, 2019: p. 11).

with the Kurdish identity. This sense of identification has been especially reinforced by the oppression that the Yezidis have experienced.

3.6. Empires and Kurdish Principalities (1514-1876)

On August 23, 1514, in the battle of Chaldiran in northern Kurdistan, the Ottoman Sultan Salim defeated Shah Ismail Safavid of Persia. Subsequently, Kurdistan was officially divided, with its larger part coming under Ottoman control (Dahlman, 2002: p. 273). Chaldiran's geopolitical legacy continues to impact the Kurdish national movement. Chaldiran and subsequent wars weakened the Kurdish movement by leaving a lasting geopolitical-territorial division and hampering the development of a unified Kurdish society (McDowall, 2004). Ironically though, the very geopolitical division, combined with numerous episodes of systematic state oppression imposed on the Kurds, fueled the Kurdish collective consciousness and sense of territory (Vali, 1998). The Kurdish movement and the broader Kurdish cultural and political life co-evolved in dialectical relations with the Kurds' geopolitical division.

Between the late 16th and the mid 19th centuries multiple Kurdish principalities emerged that at times exercised significant autonomy within the Ottoman and Persian empires' decentralized systems (Dahlman, 2002; Elling, 2013: p. 173; McDowall, 2004: p. 28). Territorially, the most powerful principalities, such as Botan in the 1830s, effectively incorporated large parts of Kurdistan (Elphinston, 1946: p. 94; Kendal, 1980). The most prosperous principalities also promoted education and arts, leading to the emergence of a small but influential class of literati that gradually laid the material and intellectual foundations for the development of Kurdish national and territorial consciousness. More generally, the principalities provided the foundations for the Kurdish society's introduction to new ideas and technologies,

publishing books and newspapers, and establishing cultural institutions and political parties (Izady, 1992: p. 56-57; Soleimani, 2016).

In 1597, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi (1543-1603) wrote his monumental Sharafnameh, the first piece of early modern Kurdish scholarship, articulating the Kurds as a people with a history and homeland. In the introduction, Bidlisi asserts that his purpose in writing his book was "to save the story of the lives of great princes from oblivion." This statement speaks to Bidlisi's awareness of the need to preserve Kurdish history, when Ottoman and Persian authorities was not interested in doing so. Remarkably, Bidlisi also demonstrates a political-geographic consciousness in writing his book, since he organized the book's chapters according to various principalities' level of political power, prioritizing principalities that had independent or semi-independent status (Hassanpour, 1992: p. 56). Nearly a century later, in 1694-95, Ahmed Khani[55] (1651-1706) re-wrote the popular Kurdish ballad, *Mem u Zîn*, with a pronounced nationalist undertone. Khani's book is known as the first modern pronouncement of the Kurds as a "nation[56]" on equal footing with Arabs, Persians, and Turks (Hassanpour, 1994b; McDowall, 1992: p. 5; van Bruinessen, 2003: p. 56). Khani also contributed to the Kurds' territorial consciousness of their homeland by portraying an alarming geopolitical landscape of the Kurdish homeland's division between the Ottoman and Persian empires. Khani writes: "*Behold! From Arabia to Georgia is the Kurdish home. But when the Persian ocean and the Turkish seas get rough, only the Kurdish country is spattered with blood*" (Izady, 1992: p. 52).

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[55] Kurdish: Ehmed Xanî

[56] millat

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Haji Qadir Koiy (1815-1892) further advanced the Kurdish national consciousness through his progressive advocacy for the unity of the common people against the oppressive forces of traditional Kurdish leaders and landed aristocracy (Izady, 1992: p. 56; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 24). Following Koiy's footsteps, *Cigerxwên*,[57] a poet, narrated the mythical story of the Kurdish blacksmith, *Kawe*, who rebelled against *Zuhak*[58] and liberated the Kurdish people on March 21. Kurds still celebrate this event in their New Year, *Newroz* (Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak, 1995: p. 350). A pioneer in women's literacy and governance, Mastoureh Ardalan[59] (1805-1848), further contributed to the Kurds' national consciousness by writing a history of the princely House of Ardalan. The Ardalans ruled between 1168 and 1867, from Sinne,[60] their historic capital, before they were toppled by Persian authorities in 1867 (Bengio, 2016: p. 32; Gunter, 2011; Izady, 1992: p. 56). Such literary-scholarly figures imbued generations of Kurds with the earliest ideas of a common history and territory.

During the same period, between 1839 to 1876, Ottoman authorities began the *Tanzimat* reform program, increasingly centralizing the Ottoman Empire and eliminating the Kurdish principalities. The Tanzimat generated Kurdish discontent and ignited numerous uprisings, which gradually turned nationalistic, reproducing the ethnic differences between the Kurds and Turkic Ottoman authorities (Elphinston, 1946: p. 93; Hassanpour, 1992: p. 53; Kendal, 1980: pp. 25-26). Sheykh Ubaydullah Nehri's uprising (1879-81) is particularly remarkable since it

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[57] Bleeding heart, pseudonym for Hassan Sheykmous

[58] Also known as Ejdehak.

[59] Mesture Erdelan

[60] Persianizde as: Sanandaj

directly challenged both Ottoman and Persian authorities, promoted the territorial idea of Kurdistan, and believed the Kurds to be a distinct nation that had been divided by imperial powers and deserved establishing their own state (Dahlman, 2002: pp. 277-278; Eppel, 2016: pp. 68-74; Hassanpour, 1994b; Olson, 1989: p. 2). Nehri's sheykhli position also meant that he had influence over the material and spiritual lives of a population that extended far beyond the boundaries of the previous principalities. This in turn functioned as a powerful unifying force, countering the Kurds' territorial divisions by Ottoman and Persian forces. Thus, Nehri's uprising marked the first time that Ottoman and Persian forces collaborated to suppress a major Kurdish movement. The uprising also, for the first time, drew considerable international attention to the Kurdish cause, and exposed the world powers' disinclination to risk their geopolitical interests to support the Kurds (Eppel, 2016: pp. 70-72; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 292; Olson, 1989: p. 6).[61]

Therefore, although the principalities and their literati figures laid the foundations for the Kurdish national consciousness (Izady, 1992: p. 53), popular ethno-national awareness among ordinary Kurds[62] mostly occurred in the late 19th and early-to-mid 20th century (Hassanpour, 1992: p. 56; 1994b; Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 290-292; Kendal, 1980: p. 101; van Bruinessen, 2003). Kurdish nationalism, and thus Kurdish nationhood, occurred at the same time as, and is largely a reaction to, the Persian, Turkish, and Arabic nation-state-building projects that began in the leadup to World War I and continued thereafter (Sheyholislami, 2011: p. 53; Vali, 1998; 2003; 2011; van Bruinessen, 2000b; 2003).

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[61] This is important, since the idea that Kurdish movement is often left with 'no friends but the mountains' is ingrained in the collective Kurdish psyche. See Chapter Seven for more contemporary elaboration.

[62] And among Turks, Persians, and Arabs, for that matter.

3.7. Kurds and Nation-States (Early 20ᵗʰ C.)

In the early 20ᵗʰ century, both Ottoman and Persian empires had lost significant amount of their power and territorial possessions due to a combination of incompetence and rivalry with more powerful European empires. In both Istanbul and Tehran, the reactions to these defeats were similar: hastened drive for modernization, and revolutions fueled by nationalism. A new generation of nationalist intellectuals[63] blamed the corruption and ignorance of the royal courts for political disfunction and economic backwardness. Persia's Constitutional Revolution in 1906 and the Ottomans' Young Turks Revolution in 1908 aimed to establish modernized and ethnically-homogenized nation-states modeled after European powers (Abrahamian, 2008: pp. 34-36; Amanat, 2017: pp. 411-413; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 102-103; Keddie, 2006: p. 68; Kendal, 1980; Matin, 2013: p. 68). In Persia, the concept of 'nation'[64] was particularly new, as Persian dictionaries had only started to include the term in the 1890s. After the Constitutional Revolution, 'nation' became "a phrase with new political connotations," that was unitarian and Persian-centric (Kashani-Sabet, 2014: p. 102). Such an interpretation of 'nation' marked the beginning of the discursive and political marginalization of non-Persian minorities, including Kurds, for whom the constitution provided no national rights (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 10; Vali, 2011).

As the multi-ethnic empires moved to transform themselves into nation-states, national minorities were marginalized. Influenced by political marginalization and inspired by the rise of

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[63] *Rowshan-fekr*, a Persian literal translation of the Arabic term, *monvar al-fekran*, meaning "enlightened thinkers" (Abrahamian, 2008: p. 35).

[64] *mellat*

nationalism in the Balkans and west Asia, the Kurds increasingly coalesced around their own nationalist organizations, notably the Kurdish National Committee.[65] This in turn exacerbated the suspicion and ire of the central governments that sought to control Kurdish aspirations for national self-determination. In 1909, for example, the Young Turks government shut down the Kurdish National Committee and issued death sentences for two of its prominent leaders, Amin Ali Bedir Khan and General Sharif Pasha, who escaped to Europe (Jwaideh, 2006: p. 104; Olson, 1989: p. 15). This was the begging of a decades-long pattern of government suppression of the Kurdish movement, marked by eliminating Kurdish schools, and closing down newspapers,[66] publications, associations, and religious orders (Elphinston, 1946: p. 94; Izady, 1992: p. 59). The central government authorities went even further by banning the Kurdish language, denying the very existence of the Kurds, and equating Kurdishness with backwardness, tribalism, and banditry (Romano, 2006: p. 32; Secor, 2004: pp. 355-356). Such oppressive policies led to the securitization of Kurdistan and rule through military might (Clark, 2013: pp. 840-841; Dahlman, 2002: p. 280), further alienating the Kurds and fueling numerous Kurdish uprisings (Kendal, 1980: p. 61).

The revolutions failed to bring about constitutional democracy and the rule of law not only because of their exclusionary policies, but more importantly because the state apparatus and infrastructures were either lacking or insufficient (Abrahamian, 2008: pp. 35-36). Instead, the revolutions led to the emergence of military strongmen. In Persia, Col. Reza Khan Sawad-Koohi, from the Cossack Brigade, personified the "strongman on a horseback" who, in the eyes of

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[65] Officially, Kurdistan Teali ve Terraki Cemiyeti, the Society for the Rise and Progress of Kurdistan.

[66] *Kurdistan* relocated to Cairo after the government banned the newspaper in 1920 (Izady, 1992: p. 59).

nationalist elites, could stabilize and centralize the remnants of the Persian Empire into a homogenized nation-state (Abrahamian, 2008: p. 35). In 1921, Reza Khan led a British-backed coup, officially crowning himself as Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925, abolishing the Qajar Dynasty (Keddie, 2006: p. 80; Matin, 2013: p. 69).[67] Backed by nationalist intellectuals, Reza Shah embodied top-down, authoritarian policies that curtailed basic freedoms, alienated non-Persian communities[68] (Abrahamian, 1970; 1982: pp. 124-125; 2008: p. 35; Hassanpour, 1992: p. 125; Keddie, 2006: p. 81; Matin, 2013: p. 70), and entrenched dictatorship, militarism, and nationalism for decades (Kashani-Sabet, 2014: p. 183).

3.7.1. Kurdistan and WWI (1914-1918)

World War I and its subsequent partition of Kurdistan among four states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, left a lasting impact on the Kurdish movement (Gunter, 2015b: p. 481; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 292). Despite all their differences, these four states have ever since agreed on one policy: thwarting the Kurdish movement's push for self-determination (Eliassi, 2013: p. 21; Gunter, 2010: p. 226). After the war, Britain and France partitioned former Ottoman territories according to their clandestine, war-time Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, which divided Kurdistan into British and French spheres of influence (Dahlman, 2002). The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) briefly stipulated the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in the eastern territories of the Ottoman empire. This was partly the result of the Kurds' nationalist mobilization, and partly a response to the 12th point of President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points for World Peace, stipulating:

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[67] Britain supported Reza Khan primarily to block potential Soviet Union's expansion (Kashani-Sabet, 2014: p. 183).

[68] At the time, making up 50 to 55 percent of the population (Hassanpour, 1992: p. 125).

The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development (McDowall, 2004: p. 115).

The stipulation of "autonomous development" for the non-Turkish parts of the Ottoman Empire reaffirmed the Kurds as a separate nation deserving independence. Nonetheless, colonial powers ultimately ignored both the self-determination principle and the wishes of Kurdish public opinion, and instead drew the region's boundaries according to their own geostrategic interests (Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 203-204; McDowall, 2004: pp. 117-118). In the meantime, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk,[69] emerged victorious from the war of independence (1919-23), established a nationalist Turkish republic out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, and claimed that the new Turkish republic was not abiding by the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres (Chaliand, 1980: p. 12). Fearing that Turkey might join the Soviet camp, the Allied powers accommodated Ataturk's demands, and on June 24, 1923, signed the Treaty of Lausanne that established the current boundaries of Turkey (Izady, 1992: pp. 60-61; Kendal, 1980).

On June 5, 1926, the British annexed the former Ottoman *wilayet*[70] of Mosul to Iraq, a country they had assembled under their own mandate. In annexing Mosul to Iraq, the British ignored the Kurdish population's demands for establishing an independent Kurdish state (Kendal, 1980). At the time, Kurds constituted a 4/5 majority of the inhabitants of Mosul province, including the district of Kirkuk. This Kurdish population, however, became a minority in the newly formed, majority-Arab Iraq. In annexing Mosul to Iraq, the British were motivated by securing the newly discovered oil fields of Kirkuk. The annexation of the Kurdish regions of

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[69] "Father of the Turks"

[70] Province

Cizre and Kurd Dagh[71] to Syria under the French mandate cemented the partition of Kurdistan (Izady, 1992: pp. 60-61; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 125; Kendal, 1980). Despite its disastrous outcome for the Kurds, the war raised the Kurds' national and territorial consciousness, reminding them of their division and subordination. The Treaty of Sèvres became an inspiration for the Kurds, attesting to the international recognition of their right to self-determination (Dahlman, 2002: p. 278; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 292). After the war, the territorial idea of Kurdistan was solidified, giving subsequent Kurdish uprisings distinct cross-border ethos and characters (Bengio, 2017: 81; Vali, 1998).

3.7.2. Post-War Kurdish Uprisings (1918-1940)

The partition of Kurdistan among four states and the rising of oppressive dictatorships triggered numerous Kurdish uprisings after World War I (Hassanpour, 1994b; Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 292-293; Vali, 1998). In March 1925, Sheykh Said Piran led a major uprising against the partition of Kurdistan, the Turkish rule in Kurdistan, and the state's anti-Kurdish policies, including its ban on the Kurdish language. The uprising was particularly significant since it quickly spread to large parts of Kurdistan between Lake Van and the Euphrates. Resorting to its newly-acquired air force, the Turkish army brutally quashed the uprising by June 1925, hanging fifty-three of its leaders, including Sheykh Said, massacring and deporting civilians, and devastating villages. The uprising further inspired multiple revolts shortly after (Dahlman, 2002: p. 279; Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 204-210).

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[71] Literally meaning 'Kurdish Mountain,' the region includes Afrin, and is a historic Kurdish demographic stronghold. Afrin and its surrounding region have been occupied by the Turkish army and allied Sunni militias since March 2018. Ever since, the region has lost a significant part of its Kurdish population (Schmidinger, 2019).

In the fall of 1918, at the end of World War I, Kurds gained control over most of south (Iraqi) Kurdistan (Izady, 1992: p. 64). The leader of the movement, Sheykh Mahmoud Barzinji tried and failed to gain British support for establishing an independent Kurdish state (Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 161-168). The British, however, deemed an independent Kurdistan conflicting with their imperial designs for the region, which was chiefly concerned with preventing Russian influence; preserving the British control over the oil in Kirkuk and the Persian Gulf; and making Iraq a viable state, by annexing the water and oil resources of Kurdistan (Eppel, 2016: pp. 116-121; Izady, 1992: p. 64). Defying the British opposition to any unified Kurdish state across the frontiers, Sheykh Mahmoud announced an independent Kurdistan in 1922 (Eppel, 2016: p. 118). Barzinji's forces defeated the newly founded Iraqi army, but were subdued by the British forces, twice, in 1924 and in 1930 (Jwaideh, 2006: p. 168).

In the early 1920s, Ismail Agha Simko, led a major uprising in eastern Kurdistan, Iran,[72] in part reacting to the Persian forces' killing of prominent Kurdish leaders, including Simko's older brother, Jaffer Agha.[73] Reaching the peak of its influence by the early 1922, Simko defeated the government forces and established an autonomous administration west and south of Lake Urmia (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: pp. 74-80; Romano, 2006: p. 222). In August 1922, however, Simko was defeated by Reza Khan's[74] modernized Persian army (Romano, 2006: p. 223). Taking advantage of the largely ungoverned spaces across the frontiers into Turkey and Iraq, Simko staged subsequent unsuccessful campaigns in 1926 and 1929 (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 81). After

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[72] Then Persia

[73] The government officials ordered the mutilation of Jaffer's body and hung its different pieces from the gates of the army garrisons. Such cruelty deeply enraged the young Simko (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 82).

[74] Soon to be Shah of Persia/Iran

each defeat, Simko again fled to Iraq and Turkey, where the authorities viewed him as a "menace." Ultimately, Turkish and Persian forces collaborated to defeat Simko (Jwaideh, 2006: pp. 141-143). On June 21, 1930, Persian forces assassinated Simko in Oshnavieh,[75] while he had been invited for negotiations (Ghassemlou, 1980: p. 117). Decades later, Persian authorities would again resort to assassination-disguised-as-negotiation to kill Kurdish leader, Abdul-Rahman Qasimlu (Grojean, 2017: p. 322). Similar to Sheykh Mahmoud Barzinji, Simko also sought British assistance, famously proclaiming "only a fool" could not recognize the importance of British support. Supporting the Kurdish movement, however, was not on the British agenda (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: 78; Romano, 2006: p. 223).

In 1930, *Khoybun*,[76] a Kurdish nationalist party led the Agri[77] uprising that swept across Turkey's Kurdistan, swiftly securing Bitlis, Van, and most of the region around Lake Van to Mount Agri (Ararat). Strategically positioned on top and around Agri, largely inaccessible to the Turkish army, the Kurdish forces resisted for nearly a decade. Mount Agri's position at the Turkish-Iranian border gave the Kurdish forces the geostrategic advantage of launching operations and retreating across the border (Gunter, 2015b: p. 483; Izady, 1992: p. 62). Once again, Turkish and Iranian forces collaborated to suppress the Kurdish movement. In addition to Iran, the Turks also received support from the Soviets. After the war, Ataturk and Reza Shah reached an agreement to modify the borderline so that the Turkish border would encircle the entirety of Mount Agri and surrounding uplifted areas (Romano, 2006: p. n. 38). In 1938, the

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[75] Kurdish: Shino

[76] Independence

[77] Ararat

Turkish army gained control only after committing numerous massacres and obliterating numerous villages, especially in Alevi Kurdish Dersim. The devastation of Dersim was so ruthless that the Turkish press noted "Dersim is no more"[78] (Izady, 1992: p. 62). The brutality of the Turkish suppression tarnished the Kurdish public's view of the Turkish state almost irredeemably. The Turkish state considered Kurdish identity to be an existential threat that had to be stamped out (Dahlman, 2002; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 203).

3.7.3. Territoriality of Post-War Kurdish Uprisings

Territory was at the core of all three Barzinji, Simko, and Agri uprisings, all invariably disregarding the international frontiers and attempting to establish a Kurdish state. For these movements, the idea of Kurdistan transcended the imposed frontiers of the Ottoman and Persian empires. After announcing the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in 1922 in Sulaymaniya, Sheykh Mahmoud Barzinji published a newspaper, *Roji Kurdistan* [79] (Eppel, 2016: p. 118), notably including the name Kurdistan in the newspaper to underscore the territorial character of his movement. Many leaders in eastern Kurdistan, hitherto controlled by Persia, were also willing to join Barzinji's project, allowing him to extend his influence on either side of the Ottoman-Persian frontier. Barzinji even entertained joining forces with Simko's movement further to the north in eastern Kurdistan, but the attempts at unity were poorly coordinated (Jwaideh, 2006: p. 168).

Similarly, Ismail Agha Simko clearly sought to establish an independent Kurdish state, despite his tribal affiliations. After founding his government on the western and southern shores

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[78] "Delenda est Dersim"

[79] Kurdistan Daily

of Lake Urmia between 1918 and 1922, Simko vowed to continue his campaign to liberate all of Kurdistan (Romano, 2006: pp. 222-223). Simko gradually extended his control further to the north and south, incorporating Khoy, Qotur, and Baneh (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 80). The territorial framework of Simko's uprising is also clear in *Independent Kurdistan*, the official newspaper of his administration (Jwaideh, 2006: p. 141). Simko was friendly to the concurrent Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iraq, but he did not build alliances (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 80). In January 1923, Simko visited Sheykh Mahmoud Barzinji in Sulaymaniya, but the meeting did not yield any alliance despite public optimism (Ghassemlou, 1980: p. 117; Romano, 2006: p. 222).

Led by the pro-independence *Khoybun* party, the Agri uprising, also aimed to establish an independent Kurdistan. Resisting between 1930 and 1938, Agri expanded to a large part of Kurdistan in Turkey and drew the support of Kurds in both Iraq and Iran. Under pressure from the Turkish state, both the British and French forces prevented Kurds in Iraq from reinforcing the uprising, however (Gunter, 2015b: p. 483; Izady, 1992: p. 62). Many men and women from Iranian Kurdistan participated in the uprising, before it was brutally quashed by the Turkish army with collaboration from Iran's Reza shah (Bengio, 2017: p. 81; Romano, 2006: p. n. 38). Despite the military defeat, the memory of Agri and the cross-border collaborations remained with the Kurds.

3.8. Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad (1946)

In September 1941, Soviet and British forces occupied the northern and southern parts of Iran, forcing Reza Shah to abdicate. As the Soviet forces advanced, the Kurds seized the ammunitions abandoned by the fleeing Iranian army to defend their communities. In the geopolitical vacuum that ensued, the Kurds established the Kurdistan Republic to run their own

affairs after decades of suppression by Reza Shah (Jwaideh, 2006: p. 243). In September 1942,

Kurds formed a political party, the Organization for the Revival of Kurdistan,[80] better known as

Komeley J.K. The party membership grew rapidly, since to many it represented the will for

Kurdish sovereignty (Hassanpour, 1994a: p. 88). On August 15, 1945, party members

transformed the Komeley J.K. into a new party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI).

Both parties signaled a historic shift in Kurdish politics from relying on tribal forces to educated

urbanites (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 123). Shortly thereafter, the KDPI published a declaration

demanding the Iranian government to grant Kurdistan autonomy and to recognize the Kurds'

national rights within Iran's constitution (Vali, 2011: p. 25).

On January 22, 1946, Qazi[81] Mohammad, the KDPI's leader, and a reputable intellectual

from Mahabad, officially declared the Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad, during a public gathering

(Hassanpour, 1994a: p. 93). Even though the founders did not declare independence, the short-

lived republic had most of the elements of an independent state, including a president, cabinet,

army, flag, national anthem,[82] and popular support (Hassanpour, 1994b). The Kurdistan Republic

reflected the Kurdish people's genuine political will, even though it could emerge only after the

Iranian army's retreat and the presence of the Soviet Union. The public support for the republic

also stemmed from its ability to provide education, healthcare, security, women's and minorities'

rights, and end state corruption and violence. In December 1946, Iran's imperial army moved

into Mahabad to quash the Kurdistan Republic. To save the city and its residents from pillage

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[80] Komeley Jiyanewey Kurdistan

[81] Meaning judge

[82] Known as Ey Reqîb

and killing, the KDPI decided to avoid military confrontation, even though it had a viable armed force (Vali, 2011: p. 22-23). The government declared the KDPI illegal, captured President Qazi Mohammad, and hanged him publicly in the same *Chiwar Chira*[83] Square, where he had declared the republic. The republic only lasted from January to December 1946, but it continued to live on in the Kurds' collective memory, inspiring the Kurdish movement for decades (Hassanpour, 1994a: p. 82; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 243; Romano, 2006: p. 245).

3.8.1. Territoriality of the Kurdistan Republic

The Kurdistan Republic in 1946 was simultaneously founded on, and further disseminated, the territorial idea of Kurdistan. This territorial idea manifested itself in the names of *Nîshtiman*[84] and *Kurdistan*, the official publications of Komeley J.K. and the KDPI, respectively (Hassanpour, 1994a: p. 88; Vali, 2011: p. 22). The idea of Kurdistan also underpinned the Komeley J.K.'s efforts to incorporate all of Kurdistan in its political movement. In April 1943, as soon as the party had sufficient members, it deployed emissaries to the north, as far as the Soviet border, and to the south, to Sanandaj (McDowall, 2004: p. 237). After its establishment, however, the republic could not incorporate the territories south of Saqqez, because Sanandaj and Kermanshah were within the British sphere of influence (Ghassemlou, 1980: 120). The British were weary that the expansion of Kurdish control could expand the Soviets' sphere of influence. The British were preserving the geopolitical status quo, by checking Kurdish national aspirations (McDowall, 2004: pp. 231-237).

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[83] Meaning 'Four Lights'

[84] Homeland

The movement also attempted to include Kurds in Turkey and Iraq. Captain Mir Hajj, from the clandestine Iraqi Kurdish Hîwa[85] Party was present at the inaugural meeting of the Komeley J.K. (McDowall, 2004: p. 237). In 1944, Komeley J.K. organized a gathering of Kurds from Iran, Turkey, and Iraq on Mount Dalanper[86] and pledged to wage a common struggle for Kurdish independence and share resources (Bengio, 2017: p. 78). Barzani Kurds crossed the border into Iran to support the republic as fighters, but also as teachers and publishers. News of cooperation between Kurds from Iraq and Iran also reached Turkey and Syria, inspiring the Kurds in those countries, while worrying authorities (Hassanpour, 1994a; McDowall, 2004). Kurdish delegates from Turkey and Syria were welcomed in Mahabad, raising Kurdish hopes for greater unity (Ghassemlou, 1980: 120). While in Mahabad, Iraqi Kurds formed the Kurdistan Democratic Party[87] of Iraq, modelled after its counterpart in Iranian Kurdistan. Inspired by the Kurdistan Republic's experience, in the following decades, Kurds established Kurdistan democratic parties in Syria[88] and in Turkey[89] (Bengio, 2017: pp. 81-82; Marcus, 2007: p. 20). As such, Kurdistan Republic played a major role in further solidifying the Kurds' collective territorial imagination.

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[85] Hope

[86] Where the borders of Iran, Turkey, and Iraq meet.

[87] KDP

[88] KDPS

[89] KDPT

3.9. Kurdish Movements in Iraq and Turkey (1950-2000)

In 1958, the new Iraqi government recognized the Kurds as one of the "nations" in Iraq. The Arab-Kurdish peace was short-lived, however, as in 1961 full-scale conflict resumed (Gunter, 2010: p. 59; Jwaideh, 2006: p. 281). In 1970, fighting escalated, since the two sides had diverging views on the political and territorial extent of Kurdish autonomy (McDowall, 2004; Romano, 2005).[90] Motivated by the Cold War geopolitics and regional rivalry, Iran's shah supported the Kurds, but later abandoned them, fearing a decisive Kurdish victory in Iraq could rekindle the Iranian Kurds' demands for autonomy. In exchange, Iran gained border concessions from Saddam Hussein of Iraq, according to the Algiers Agreement signed on March 6, 1975 (Izady, 1992: pp. 67-68). During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the Iraqi Kurds continued fighting for autonomy. Frustrated by its failures and the persistent Kurdish resistance, the Iraqi army conducted the *al-Anfal*, genocidal operation, killing around 182,000 Kurds. In 1988, Saddam Hussein dropped chemical bombs on the Kurdish town of Halabja, killing 5,000 civilians (Gunter, 2015b: p. 487). The images of the corpses of Halabja continue to haunt the Kurdish collective psyche.

Officially founded in November 1978, by Abdullah Ocalan, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)[91] has mounted a sustained challenge against the Turkish state. As a student and leftist political activist, Ocalan was influenced by the 1971 coup in Turkey and the Algiers Agreement in 1975. Reminding him of oppressive dictatorship in Turkey and the precarious Kurdish

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[90] Disagreements over the status of Kirkuk was a major reason. The Kurds consider Kirkuk as their capital in Iraq (Romano, 2005).

[91] Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan

regional geopolitics, such events turned Ocalan—and the party that he established—further toward Kurdish nationalism and socialism (Dahlman, 2002: p. 280; Marcus, 2007: pp. 17-19; Romano, 2006: pp. 39-42). On August 15, 1984, the PKK officially started its armed resistance against the Turkish army. On February 16, 1999, Turkish special forces kidnapped the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in Kenya and deported him to Turkey, where he was sentenced to death. Under pressure from widespread protests and the European Union, Ocalan's death sentence was put on hold in December 1999, and was commuted to life in prison in 2002. Imprisoned, Ocalan read Kurdish and Middle Eastern histories, and political theories, including the social-ecological thoughts of Murray Bookchin, a libertarian socialist from New York. The influence of these ideas appeared later in the PKK's paradigm shift to democratic confederalism, manifested in Rojava's self-administration. With its bases on the strategic Qandil Mountains, on the northern edges of Iraqi Kurdistan at the borders with Turkey and Iran, the PKK has actively recruited Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan, while also strongly influencing the Kurdish movement in Rojava, Syria (Knapp et al., 2016: pp. 37-38; Marcus, 2007: p. 296; Romano, 2006: pp. 57-58).

Beginning in 1990, Kurds in Turkey have also established multiple legal parties, the most successful of which being the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).[92] In the 2015 elections, the HDP remarkably passed the ten percent threshold to enter the parliament with a full list.[93] The Turkish government—led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP)[94]—courts, and security

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[92] Turkish: Halkların Demokratik Partisi; Kurdish: Partiya Demokratîka Gelan

[93] Until then, Kurdish candidates had to enter the parliament as independent MPs (Yegen et al., 2020).

[94] The *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* is a conservative, Islamist party that has been in power since 2002. Under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the party has turned increasingly authoritarian at home and interventionist abroad.

forces have repeatedly suppressed the Kurdish parties, arresting, and imprisoning Kurdish MPs and Mayors (O'Connor & Baser, 2018; Uca & Özsoy, 2020; Yeğen, 2011).

3.10. Kurdistan Regional Government (1992)

On August 2, 1990, Iraq quickly occupied its small, oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait. Soon an international coalition, led by the United States, expelled the Iraqi army, restored Kuwaiti sovereignty and oilfields (Ó Tuathail, 1993). As a war strategy, President George H. W. Bush called on the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam.[95] On March 4, 1991, the Kurdish popular uprising[96] started, liberating the entire Iraqi Kurdistan by March 19 (Dahlman, 2002: p. 289). The Kurdish victory was as short-lived as it was resounding, however. On March 28, the Ba'ath army launched a brutal retaliatory operation, reoccupying Kurdish cities, killing thousands and capturing even more. The Ba'ath army's brutality caused mass panic and horror across Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi helicopters chased fleeing civilians, dropping phosphorous bombs, and burning fleeing refugees in their own cars. In the Kurdish psyche, these events were horridly reminiscent of the chemical attack on Halabja in March 1988 (McDowall, 2004: pp. 370-373).

By May 1991, some 1.5 million[97] refugees had gathered at the borders of Turkey and Iran (Human Right Watch, 1993). Around 500 to 1,000 lives per day, succumbed to cold, hunger, and disease (Dahlman, 2002: p. 289). The Iraqi army's repression was so severe that, in the words of

[95] Just before starting his ground operation against Iraqi forces, Bush had said: "There's another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside." The Voice of America and the radio Voice of Free Iraq had repeatedly broadcast this message in both Arabic and Kurdish, which many interpreted as a call to uprising (McDowall, 2004: p. 372).

[96] Raperîn

[97] Nearly half of the Iraqi Kurdistan's 3.5 million population

Zubaida (1992), the "face of Iraqi Kurdistan [was] dramatically transformed, making the very territorial identity of the Kurds precarious" (p. 1). The media broadcast of the humanitarian catastrophe triggered public outrage and sympathy in the West (McDowall, 2004: p. 373).

On April 5, the United Nation's Security Council passed Resolution 688 to restrain Iraq. The resolution expressed grave concern about "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population in many parts of Iraq, including most recently in Kurdish-populated areas, which led to a massive flow of refugees toward and across international frontiers …" (Resolution 688, UNSC, 1991).[98] Crucially, the resolution mentioned the Kurds by name for the first time in a statement emanating from the United Nation. It also signaled a multilateral consensus that interfering in the 'domestic affairs' of a member state was justified in the face of human rights concerns (McDowall, 2004: p. 375). Thus, the resolution ruptured the international relations' hitherto sacrosanct principle of alignment between the state sovereignty and the state territoriality (Dodds, 2013: p. 160). Based on the Resolution 688, in mid-April 1991, the UNSC established an internationally protected no-fly zone, north of the 36th parallel as a safe haven to protect the Kurds from Saddam's air force (Dahlman, 2002: pp. 289-290).[99] In 1992, the Kurds used the safety of the no-fly zone to form an autonomous administration called the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 enabled the Kurds to further consolidate the KRG within a federal Iraq (Hassanpour, 1994b; Hassanpour et al., 2012: p. 14).

In the wake of defeating the Islamic State (IS), on September 25, 2017, Iraqi Kurds held a long-anticipated, independence referendum. Over 70 percent of the electorate voted, with 92

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[98] See Klaus Dodds (2013: Ch 7) for a critical assessment of humanitarian intervention.

[99] Notably, the larger portion of the Kurdish population in Iraq lived to the south of the 36th parallel. Nonetheless, aware of the international sensitivities, the Ba'ath regime refrained from mounting further attacks on the Kurds.

percent supporting independence. The Kurdish bid for independence, however, received no international support,[100] and triggered hostility from Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. In October, Iraqi forces and Iran-backed Shi'a militias attacked the peshmerga and seized the majority-Kurdish territories, including Kirkuk, that the Kurdish forces had liberated or protected from IS (Owtram, 2019).

3.11. Rojava in Syria (2012)

For decades, the 2-3 million Kurds in Syria were perceived as politically silent[101]. This relatively small population has historically resided in a non-contiguous, mostly flat, elongated territory in northern Syria, bordering Turkey. These factors made it less conducive to wage a robust Kurdish struggle against the Syrian government. The PKK's use of the Syrian territory for political organization and training up to 1998 further enabled the Syrian government to silence the Syrian Kurds (Gunter, 2014; Knapp et al., 2016: p. 36). After expelling the PKK in 1998 under Turkish military threat, Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian dictator, started a heavy crackdown on Kurdish activists. The crackdown reached its peak during the Kurdish protests in 2004. Despite the repression, the PKK had already recruited thousands of members and sympathizers among the Kurds in Syria. In the early 2000s, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), was covertly established by a group of Kurdish activists with ideological ties to the PKK (Knapp et al., 2016: p. 48).[102]

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[100] Except Israel

[101] McDowall (2004) traced the first official expression of Kurdish national consciousness in Syria to 1928, when the Kurds demanded the use of the Kurdish language in education in the Kurdish regions and as one of the official languages in Syria as well as appointing Kurdish governors in the Kurdish regions (p. 468; see also Tejel, 2008).

[102] Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat

As Syria's "Arab Spring" protests gradually turned into a full-blown civil war in 2012, Assad withdrew his forces from the Kurdish areas in the north to concentrate on controlling major Syrian cities. The geopolitical vacuum was largely filled by the PYD, which soon established the democratic self-administration region of Rojava (Gunter, 2014).[103] The Kurds particularly drew widespread global attention during their resistance in the town of Kobani against IS in late 2014 and early 2015 (Dirik, 2018: p. 222). The PYD's armed forces, the YPG[104] and YPJ,[105] were highly effective in fighting IS. Today, the YPG and YPJ form the backbone of the SDF,[106] which is the Rojava's main security force. Rojava's democratic self-administration, inspired by Ocalan's ideas, presented a new political and social program that could potentially be applied to other parts of Syria as a remedy to the civil war. The core foundations of democratic autonomy include empowering the lower strata of the society through direct democracy in neighborhood and village councils; enacting gender equality in all levels of governance; promoting ethnic and religious inclusivity; and reaching local-level agricultural self-sufficiency (Dirik, 2018: p. 228; Knapp et al., 2016: p. 37; Paasche, 2015). Rojava's agenda and accomplishments have drawn solidarity from Kurds and non-Kurdish sympathizers.

Opposing any Kurdish progress in Syria, Turkey has posed the most potent threat to Rojava, especially that the Assad government is largely incapable to reestablish its control over the region, which would entail challenging the United States forces stationed in the region.

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[103] West, i.e., Western Kurdistan

[104] Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)

[105] Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units)

[106] Syrian Democratic Forces (Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk)

Between September 2014 and January 2015, many Kurds were outraged by the Turkish blockade

of Kobani in northern Syria that effectively helped the Islamic State besiege the Kurdish town,

threatening to massacre its remaining population. Many observers believe that the AKP

government supported IS, by allowing thousands of transnational jihadists to pour into Syria

(Gunter, 2015a: p. 103). Turkey has also conducted three military operations into northern Syria

in 2016, 2018, and 2019, primarily targeting the Kurds and the Rojava region. The Turkish

operations have damaged Rojava's projects but have also triggered widespread backlash from the

Kurds and their allies.

3.11.1 Territoriality of the KRG and Rojava

The establishment of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992,

and its further consolidation as a deferral region of Iraq in 2003, proved to be critical for the

Kurdish movement and its territoriality. The KRG transformed the Kurdish movement by both

becoming a symbol of Kurdish aspiration in the region and a center for increasing

interconnections among different parts of Kurdistan (Bengio, 2017: pp. 84-85). Iranian Kurds

were particularly inspired by the success and validation of Kurdish identity in Iraq (Elling, 2013:

p. 68). Kurdish political parties banned in Iran, Turkey, and Syria have operated in the KRG's

territory, despite threats, interference, and assassinations by such states (Stansfield, 2003: pp. 3-

6), putting the KRG in the uncomfortable position of facing constant pressure (Grojean, 2017: p.

325). Defeating IS in 2017 enabled the Iraqi Kurds to bring the Kurdish territories outside of the

KRG under control and drawing the hopes of many Kurds in the region. Despite the consequent

calamitous geopolitical setback that Iraqi Kurds suffered, the 2017 independence referendum

captured the imagination of millions of Kurds, signaling that perhaps someday the dream of an

independent Kurdish state will materialize. The parallel successful Kurdish campaign against IS in Syria further bolstered Kurdish hopes.

The Kurds' resistance against IS in both Syria and Iraq altered the geostrategic map of the Kurdish resistance, allowing the Kurds to move more freely across the borders and form their own 'sub-system largely functioning under the radar' of the states (Bengio, 2017: pp. 77-86). When the Yezidis were trapped on Mount Shingal (Sinjar) by IS in 2014, the YPG and YPJ rushed to support them. Similarly, the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga moved to bolster the resistance in Kobani. Kurdish activists and volunteers from Iran and Turkey crossed supported the Kurdish resistance in Iraq and Syria. The war against IS functioned as a catalyst that transformed the Kurdish movement's discourse territoriality (Gunter, 2015a). The Kurdish public also expressed solidarity with the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds' resistance against IS, both online and offline. These developments immensely impacted the Kurdish movement's territoriality. Especially with the growing use of social media and satellite television, a large segment of the Kurdish population engaged in producing the territorial imagination of Kurdistan in 2014 and 2017.

3.12. Kurdish Movement in Iran (1950-2000)

Iranian Kurdistan (also known as Rojhelat)[107] is home to the second largest Kurdish population,[108] and is the birthplace of the first Kurdish state[109] in the 20th century (Ahmedi, 2018: p. 201). Crucial to understanding the Kurdish movement in Iran, however, is the Pahlavi monarchy's "authoritarian modernization" policies between 1925 and 1979, which sought to

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[107] See Chapter Five for more details.

[108] After Turkish Kurdistan (Bakur)

[109] See the section on the Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad

transform the defunct Persian Empire into a homogenous, centralized Persian nation-state, according to the idea of "one country, one nation" (Entessar, 2017: p. 307; Grojean, 2017: p. 320). The Kurdish national movement begins with the Kurds' resistance to the state's assimilatory policies (Vali, 2011). In turn, the Pahlavi shahs distrusted the Kurds due to their resistance to the state's policies, their demands for autonomy, and their support for Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossaddeq's efforts to limit the shah's power in the early 1950s (Romano, 2006: p. 230).[110] The Iranian state's distrust of the Kurds continued after the fall of the shah, manifested in the securitization of Kurdistan before and after the 1979 revolution (Moradi et al., 2022). Kurds predictably participated in the anti-shah demonstrations in 1978 and 1979, as part of a broad coalition that included leftists, Islamists, liberals, and other ethno-national minorities (Entessar, 2017: p. 307).[111] Kurdish revolutionaries articulated their movement within the wider revolutionary grievances against the shah's authoritarianism, militarism, violation of civil liberties, and unfulfilled promises of development (Romano, 2006: pp. 233-234).

3.12.1 Kurds and the Islamic Republic

After the fall of the shah's regime in January 1979, Kurdish parties left their hideouts to organize openly. The Kurds articulated their demands through two major political parties, The Kurdistan Democratic Party–Iran (KDPI) and The Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (known as Komele),[112] which represented the ideological, geographic, and

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[110] Mossaddeq's nationalist party, *National Front*, had no plan to support Kurdish aspirations, but still the majority of the Kurds supported Mossaddeq's platform for a democratic Iran (Romano, 2006: p. 230).

[111] See Bashiriyeh (2011, Ch 6) and Keddie (2003, Ch 10) for accounts of the various revolutionary forces and their post-revolutionary elimination by the Islamic Republic.

[112] Komeley Shorishgerî Zehmetkêshanî Kurdistanî Iran. Invariably translated as "organization," "society," or "committee," Komele is a different party from the *Komeley J.K.* that was formed in 1942. (See the section on the

socioeconomic diversity within the Kurdish society. Both the KDPI and Komele had a common goal: establishing an autonomous Kurdistan within a democratic Iran (Grojean, 2017: p. 322; Koohi-Kamali, 2003: pp. 165-182; Romano, 2006: p. 234). On August 3, 1979, Kurds elected Abdul-Rahman Qasimlu to the Assembly of Experts that was to draft a new constitution[113] (Grojean, 2017; MacDonald, 1988: p. 241). Widespread popularity also allowed the Kurdish parties to recruit and mobilize dedicated members and score major victories in the first post-revolutionary elections, in March 1980.

3.12.1.1. Demands for Autonomy

In April 1979, the KDPI presented its platform to Ayatollah Khomeini, the ideological leader of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP).[114] The platform stipulated:

1. The boundaries of Kurdistan would be determined by the Kurdish people and would take into consideration historical, economic, and geographic conditions.

2. On matters of defense, foreign affairs, and long-term economic planning, Kurdistan would abide by the central government's decisions. The Central Bank of Iran would control the currency.

3. There would be a Kurdish parliament, whose members would be popularly elected. It would be the highest legislative power in the province.

4. All government departments in the province would be run locally rather than from the capital.

5. There would be a people's army, and the police and gendarmerie would be abolished and replaced by a national guard.

6. The Kurdish language would be the official language of the provincial government and would be taught in all schools. Persian would also continue to be an official language.

Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad). Komele was established in 1969 by a group of young urban Kurdish intellectuals (Romano, 2006: p.232).

[113] The government revoked Qasimlu's credentials before he could even attend the assembly.

[114] The IRP gradually eliminated all other revolutionary forces to establish a one-party rule. In 1988, the IRP dissolved itself, due to internal discord and lack of competition (Keddie, 2006: Ch 10).

7. All ethnic minorities in Kurdistan would enjoy equal rights and would be allowed to use their own language and have their own traditions respected.

8. Freedom of speech and of the press, rights of association, and trade-union activities would be guaranteed. The Kurdish people would have the right to travel freely and choose their own occupation (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 172).

Khomeini rejected the Kurdish demands for ethno-national rights, arguing that Islam describes Muslims as "brothers," labels "such as Kurds, Lurs, Turks, Persians, Baluchis, and such" were divisive, and in an egalitarian Islamic society there was no room for ethnic difference, privilege or discrimination (MacDonald, 1988: p. 245). By denouncing "nationalism as un-Islamic," Khomeini effectively consolidated Persian chauvinism (Hassanpour, 1994a: p. 80).[115]

In response to Khomeini's argument, Sheykh Izzaddin, the Kurdish movement's leading religious figure, a leftist, and the Head of the Council of Kurdish People,[116] pointed to the parts of the Quran that acknowledge distinctions among Muslims based on tribe and creed, arguing:

> Islam does not require that all Muslims should be governed by a single group of people. It recognizes that people are divided into different groups, nations and tribes. There is no reason within Islam why these groups should not order their own affairs (McDowall, 2004: p. 272).

Sheykh Izzaddin further elaborated:

> We fought in the revolution not out of religious convictions but for political goals. We want autonomy—our own parliament, our own language, and our own culture. The revolution has destroyed despotism, but it has not ended the discrimination against minorit[ies] (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 184).

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[115] Chauvinism is taken as extreme devotion to one's national or political allegiance, at the expense of other groups' equal rights. According to Hannah Arendt (1945), chauvinism bridges nationalism with imperialism, legitimizing one nation's domination over others (p. 457).

[116] An umbrella organization of different Kurdish parties, groups, and individuals representing the Kurds in negotiations with the central government (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: pp. 183-184).

The differences between the positions of the Kurds and Khomeini is best summarized in the encounter between Sheykh Izzaddin and Khomeini in April 1979. As Sheykh Izzaddin was leaving the room at the end of a meeting, Khomeini took him by the hem of his cloak and said to him: "What I am asking from you is the security of Kurdistan." So, he also took Khomeini's hem and said: "What I ask from you is autonomy for Kurdistan" (Husseini & Halliday, 1983). In November 1979, the Kurds rejected the idea of 'regional councils,' raised by the Assembly of Experts in its new Islamic Constitution. Kurds argued that the Kurdish issue was about nationality, not administration, and regional councils sought to undermine genuine autonomy (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: pp. 187-188).

3.12.1.2. Armed Conflict

As the Kurds lost faith in negotiations with the increasingly "Islamic" government, the conflict exacerbated in late 1979 and early 1980 (Qassemlu & Halliday, 1981), Government attacks culminated in the bombardment of the Kurdish cities of Mahabad and Baneh in September 1979, and Sanandaj, on March 21, 1980, on the eve of *Newroz*, the Kurdish New Year.[117] The government used indiscriminate bombing of these cities to inflict civilian casualty and panic, depopulate the cities, and ultimately break the ground resistance of the Kurdish peshmerga, who controlled the cities with significant popular support (Koohi-Kamali, 2003: p. 186). In response to government atrocities, eighty-five to ninety percent of Kurds boycotted the referendum in April 1980 that meant to legitimize "Islamic Republic" as the official form of the post-revolutionary government (Abrahamian, 2008: p. 163; Romano, 2006: p. 236).

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[117] Persians and other Iranic peoples also celebrate Newroz. Mythologically, however, there are major differences. For the Persians, 'Norouz' is a celebration of a mythical king's crowning, while for the Kurds, Newroz commemorates the successful uprising against a tyrant king.

Fighting escalated over the summer. On August 17, 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini "called for a holy war (jihad) against the Kurds" (Grojean, 2017: p. 322; Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 185).[118] Labeling the Kurdish leaders as "corrupts on earth," and "enemies of God and its emissaries," Khomeini commanded the IRGC,[119] army and the Basij paramilitary volunteers to "deal with the situation in Kurdistan severely" (Ibrahim, 1979; Khomeini, 1980). Khomeini further "banned all Kurdish political organizations, canceled the membership of Qasimlu in the Assembly of Experts,[120] denounced Qasimlu and Sheykh Izzaddin as the enemies of the Islamic Republic, and condemned the KDPI as 'the party of Satan'" (Koohi-Kamali, 2003, p. 185). By the summer of 1984, Khomeini's technologically-superior forces gradually forced the peshmerga to take refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, where they continued their struggle for years (Grojean, 2017: p. 322; MacDonald, 1988: p. 246).

3.12.1.3. Assassination of Kurdish Leaders

Despite Iran's military suppression of the Kurdish movement, Abdulrahman Qasimlu, the KDPI's secretary general, hoped and pushed for a political solution for the Kurdish issue in Iran. Qasimlu assumed that the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and the demise of Khomeini would ameliorate the Islamic Republic's position vis-à-vis the Kurds (McDowall, 2004: pp. 276-278; Qassemlu & Halliday, 1981). The Iranian officials had other plans. On July 13, 1989, in Vienna, Iranian assassins, disguised as 'diplomats,' assassinated Qasimlu and his two associates during

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[118] Notably, Khomeini issued a call for jihad only when the balance of forces on the battlefield had shifted in favor of the central government. Perhaps in delaying his call for jihad, Khomeini wanted to make sure that his jihad, and thus, 'the will of God,' would succeed.

[119] The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is the ideological army of the Islamic Republic of Iran that functions parallel to the conventional army (Golkar 2016).

[120] Fearing for his own life, Qasimlu had already avoided traveling to Tehran to participate in the assembly.

the negotiations (Grojean, 2017: p. 322). Qasimlu's assassination was followed by over a decade of terrorist operations, in which the Islamic Republic physically eliminated Kurdish leaders and activists in the region and in Europe. In the most high-profile of such operations Iranian agents gunned down Qasimlu's successor, Sadiq Sharafkandi, along with six other activists in September 1992, at the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin (McDowall, 2004: p. 277). The Mykonos trials convicted several top Iranian officials, including the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, former president Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the Minister of Intelligence, Ali Falahian, for plotting and ordering the assassination (Entessar, 2017: p. 314). Despite its apparent military defeat, the post-revolutionary Kurdish movement left its mark in the collective memory of millions of Kurds (Romano, 2006: p. 245).[121]

3.12.2. Territoriality of the Kurdish Movement in Iran

The question of territory was prominent in the Kurds' demands for autonomy after the 1979 revolution. The very first article of the Kurdish platform stated: "The boundaries of Kurdistan would be determined by the Kurdish people and would take into consideration historical, economic, and geographic conditions." In demanding such a territorial basis for Kurdish autonomy, the Kurds sought to reverse Reza shah's provincial boundaries, which partitioned Iranian Kurdistan into four different provinces of Ilam, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan (MacDonald, 1988: p. 241; Qassemlu & Halliday, 1981). The Kurds' territorial articulation of Kurdistan as a unified province within a decentralized Iran was evoking the enduring multi-regional composition of Iran and the constitutionally enshrined Provincial and

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[121] The Kurdish nationalist discourse in Iranian Kurdistan includes numerous references to the Kurdish uprising after the 1979 revolution. For example, it is very common to hear the youth referring to Kurdish cities and towns by revolutionary nicknames, which harken back to the post-revolutionary resistance against the Islamic Republic.

District Councils (Abrahamian, 1970: p. 296; Aghajanian, 1983: p. 220; Vali, 2011: pp. 91 & n. 140).[122]

The primary objection of the Khomeini government was also territorial, as it rejected the Kurds' demands for establishing a unified Kurdistan province as the basis for autonomy and democratic decentralization. Instead, the government offered a limited "cultural autonomy" within two separate local administrations, in Mahabad and Sanandaj, thereby excluding Ilam and Kermanshah altogether (McDowall, 2004: pp. 263 & n. 281; Menashri, 1988: p. 219). In doing so, Khomeini showed that he approved of Reza shah's division of Iranian Kurdistan.[123] The government's use of military means to suppress the Kurdish demands further exacerbated the existing security view on Kurdistan, ushering a series of securitization and militarization measures that have continued for decades.

3.13. Iranian State's Securitization of Kurdistan

Preventing collective acts of Kurdish resistance has been a foundational part of the Iranian state's militaristic territorialization, and securitization of Kurdistan. Decades after the end of the conflict, the Islamic Republic has continued a heavy military presence in Kurdistan, stationing over 200,000 military personnel and effectively controlling Kurdistan from the military bases (Elling, 2013; Koohi-Kamali, 2003; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a). In Iraqi Kurdistan, Iranian Kurdish parties have remained active, broadcasting, publishing, recruiting, organizing, and maintaining connections with Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan (Romano,

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[122] Anjomanhay-e Welayati va Iyalati

[123] This is noteworthy because, at least in rhetoric, Khomeini's Islamic Republic regime represented Reza Shah and everything that he stood for, as the ultimate manifestation of tyranny (*taghout*).

2006: pp. 246-247). The Islamic Republic, however, uses the presence of the Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan as a pretext to further securitize and militarize Kurdistan. Although the Iranian Kurdish parties are largely in defensive position, the IRGC occasionally launches attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan, claiming to target bases of the Iranian Kurdish parties. In effect, however, Iranian attacks often inflict damages and casualties on border villages, leading to insecurity and deterritorialization of border villages (McDowall, 2004: p. 277). Within Iranian Kurdistan, the Islamic Republic's securitization has led to oppressive and discriminatory policies, low economic opportunities, dispossession of resources, and degradation of the environment (Moradi et al., 2022; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a; 2020b). As a result, Iranian Kurds have experienced "systemic discrimination, legal and otherwise" and "repeated episodes of repression" (Entessar, 2017: p. 315), without being allowed to openly express their collective grievances and demands. The state's policies have created a situation in which, the Islamic Republic effectively continues the Pahlavi monarchy's repressive policies vis-à-vis the Kurds (Grojean, 2017: p. 320; Romano, 2006: p. 235).

Despite the state's militarization and surveillance, the Kurdish resistance has occasionally manifested itself in street demonstrations and online. However, Iranian security forces have repeatedly suppressed Kurdish demonstrations, detaining, injuring, or killing hundreds (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010; Gunter, 2020), most notably in 1999, 2004, 2005 and 2007 (Elling, 2013). Invariably, these demonstrations have been peaceful at the outset. Nonetheless, the state's militarization of space has often provided the conditions for targeting the civilian population. To prevent reliving such traumatic experiences, many participants in this research emphasized that during the 2014 and 2017 demonstrations, they consciously avoided direct

confrontations with the security forces (interviews: Awat,[124] Azad, Jina, Jiyar, Soma, Zagros,

2019). Despite these efforts, security forces arrested and detained scores of demonstrators.[125]

3.13.1. Securitization of Media

Banning satellite television channels and filtering social media applications, the state's

securitization also extends to the spaces of media. To understand the Iranian Kurds' use of the

media during the 2014 and 2017 demonstrations, it is therefore important to explain the general

historical context of the Iranian state's media restrictions and the Kurds struggles to use

alternative, non-state media. The Iranian state strictly controls the media within the country,

using multiple institutions that operate simultaneously. Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic

Guidance certifies and oversees, or alternatively bans, media and cultural productions and

activities in the country. Iran's most powerful cultural institution, however, is the *Supreme

Council for Cultural Revolution* (SCCR). Although the Council works with presidents and

ministers, it functions independent of them, and therefore its existence is not affected by the

change in the presidency and cabinet. The Council is tasked with ensuring the compliance of

media and the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) with the Islamic Republic's ideology (Rahimi,

2008; sccr.ir; Sohrabi-Haghighat & Mansouri, 2010). Furthermore, the head of the Islamic

Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), is appointed directly by the Supreme Leader, the most

powerful position in the Islamic Republic. This means only those who are the most

ideologically-committed are appointed, and the head of the IRIB is impervious to the popular

vote—as the Supreme Leader himself is unelected and rules for life (Semati, 2008).

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[124] All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

[125] See Chapter Five for more details.

The state's ideological grip on the media has generated growing public discontent, especially among youth, women, and minorities, many of whom have increasingly turned to alternative media, including satellite televisions and social media, that can speak to their concerns and challenge the state's normative narratives about society, culture, and identity (Alikhah, 2008; Shahi & Saleh, 2015). The authorities, however, obstruct access to international media as part of the state's broader efforts to 'Islamize' the country, and preserve the legitimacy and longevity of the Islamic Republic (Shahi & Saleh, 2015). Beginning in the mid-1990s, in Iranian Kurdistan and elsewhere in the country, it was remarkable to witness security forces climbing on rooftops to collect satellite dishes, often loading them onto pick-up trucks, transferring them to 'annihilation stations,' at times organized as public spectacles, showcasing the state's fight against Western 'cultural invasion' (see Akhavan, 2013; Eliassi, 2013; Semati, 2008).[126] These episodes of mass confiscation were frequently accompanied by verbal warnings to the households and occasionally coupled with court summons and fines. Usually residents resisted the confiscations, re-mounting their satellite dishes as soon as the authorities turned their attention to another neighborhood. This 'game of whack a mole' was particularly intense in my hometown, Sanandaj, and other cities in Iranian Kurdistan, where the state's securitization discourse defines the Kurdish media, including satellite televisions, as threats to national security and territorial integrity of the country (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010; Posch, 2017: p. 345).

3.13.1.1. Kurdish Television

The state suppression and territorial exclusion of Kurdish media date back to decades before the emergence of satellite television and the internet. The first Kurdish newspaper,

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[126] The Turkish state has resorted to similar oppressive practices against the Kurdish population's use of Kurdish satellite television (Hassanpour, 1998).

Kurdistan, was exiled to Geneva in 1898, under the threat from Turkish authorities (McDowall, 2004: p. 455). Nearly a century later, in 1994, in London, a group of Kurdish activists launched the first Kurdish television, MED-TV (Hassanpour, 2003a; Hassanpour et al., 2012: pp. 14-15), making the Kurds 'the first stateless "television nation"' (Hassanpour, 1995; Romano, 2002; Ryan, 1997). Despite shutdowns and pressure campaigns from regional states (Fernandes, 2019; Hassanpour, 1998), MED-TV and many subsequent Kurdish satellite television stations substantially increased the collective sense of Kurdishness (Secor, 2004: p. 356), further connected the Kurds across borders, and crystalized the territorial imagination of Kurdistan as a shared homeland (Eliassi, 2013; Sheyholislami, 2011). Today, there are around 50 Kurdish satellite television channels, mostly broadcasting from Europe or Iraqi Kurdistan Region (karwan.tv; satexpat.com).

Shortly after its launch, MED-TV gained the status of a sort of national television for Kurds, becoming very popular in all parts of Kurdistan (see Romano, 2006: pp. 154-155). MED-TV's effectiveness was in part due to television's ability to reach the largest possible segment of the population, across age, gender, literacy, class, and urban/rural backgrounds (Hassanpour, 1998). With many Kurdish television programs recorded on VCR, and later VCD, the programs also reached those who did not have satellite receivers. Starting in the mid-1990s, gathering in relatives' homes to watch Kurdish satellite television programs became a clandestine social ritual. As late as 2017, this form of collective use of mass media was still ongoing (interview: Kawa, 2019), increasing satellite television channels' ability to challenge the regional states' monopoly on information, while facilitating the Kurds' mobilization around common causes (Ayata, 2011; Hassanpour, 2003a). Watching the same televisions across state borders has directly impacted the Kurds' collective on-the-ground practices. One of the earliest cases of such

cross-border collective practices unfolded in February 1999. Disturbed by the televised images of the Turkish security forces' kidnapping of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan, and elsewhere in the region and in Europe took to the streets to condemn the Turkish state.

To counter the popularity and influence of exiled Kurdish television broadcasts, the Iranian state launched programs in the Kurdish language. The Kurdish population, however, largely distrusts state television, viewing it as the state's tool to reinforce its official discourse on the Kurds as an apolitical 'sub-culture,' while simultaneously justifying its regional geopolitical agenda, notably stifling the Kurdish movement (Eliassi, 2019; Hassanpour et al., 1996). Furthermore, many Kurds believe that Iranian state media misrepresent and vilify them, pointing to many instances where the media stereotype and misrepresent the Kurds and other minorities— casting them as violent primitives (Saleh, 2013: pp. 126-128). The Kurds' distrust and dislike of the state media is also related to the larger trend among Iranians, many of whom distrust the country's national broadcasting (Seyed-Emami, 2008).

By the early 2000s, certain factions within the Iranian state gradually realized that it was impossible to stop the satellite televisions' influence by collecting the dishes form the rooftops, especially given that new technology dishes became smaller and thus easier to conceal (Alikhah, 2008: pp. 96-97; Barraclough, 2001). The authorities, therefore, resorted to jamming satellite signals, especially in major Kurdish cities (Eliassi, 2013), despite credible concerns about the health risks of signal jamming, especially its potential to increase cancer rates in communities where jamming towers were installed (Shahabi et al., 2015). Nevertheless, many Kurdish households, including nearly all participants in this research, continue to access Kurdish satellite

television channels. While the struggle over satellite televisions continues, social media have increasingly emerged as the latest spaces of contention (Rahimi, 2011).

3.13.1.2. Social Media

Iranians' internet use since the early 2000s has increased exponentially (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008; Golkar, 2011), while the introduction of phone-based internet since the early 2010s has further accelerated internet access. According to Iran's Statistics Center, in 2017 around 94 percent of internet users[127] accessed the internet via their phones, with social media accounting for over 70 percent of all internet traffic (amar.org.ir, 2017). As of March 2021, the country had over 78 million internet users, an impressive number for a population of 85 million (internetworldstats.com). The internet and social media have opened relatively safe alternative spaces to which Iranians turn to resist the state's restrictions on public spaces (Khiabani & Sreberny, 2007; Rahbari, 2019: p. 593; Rahimi, 2003; 2008: p. 41). Iranian Kurds use the new communication technologies' affordances of online information, expression, connection, and assembly to challenge the state's monopoly on communication and its normative discourse on identity, overcome spatial divisions, and create alternative spaces (Eliassi, 2013; Romano, 2002; Sheyholislami, 2011).

As part of its securitization policies, the Iranian state has deployed a wide range of online and offline instruments, including filtering, blocking, disinformation, harassment, trolling, arrests, and detentions (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008; Kargar & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Rahimi, 2008), to monitor and punish citizens who use the internet and social media. Persistently listed as one of the major enemies of the internet (OpenNet Initiative, 2009), the Islamic Republic has one of the

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[127] Constituting close to 68 percent of Iranians over 6 years old (amar.org.ir, 2017).

world's most restricted internet policies (Golkar, 2011). Nevertheless, the state has not imposed a total ban on all websites and social media applications (Tufekci, 2017), instead tending to exercise different levels of control over different social media, 'depending on medium, users, place, and time' (Adams, 2013: p. 273). The Iranian state's restrictions have largely reflected the level of popularity of each application, their specific affordances and technical features, and users' deployment of those applications for protest (see Akhavan, 2013: p. 86). Alongside state repression, there are significant infrastructural and economic inequalities that prevents many from accessing new technologies of communication (Adams, 2009: p. 61; Golkar, 2011; Ó Tuathail, 1996b), meaning that such technologies tend to amplify the voices of the powerful at the expense of the marginalized (Burgess et al., 2018: p. 4; van Haperen et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2015).

The Iranian state's crackdown on social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, intensified after the 'Green Movement' in 2009, during which Iranians protested alleged fraud in the presidential elections (Carrieri et al., 2013; Golkar, 2011). Shortly after its violent removal of protesters from street spaces, the state sought to deprive protesters of online spaces (Rahimi, 2011). Furthermore, the state viewed social media platforms as instruments of Western 'cultural invasion' and political subversion (Rahbari, 2019; Rahimi, 2011). In addition to expressing discontent and connecting with fellow dissidents, social media users used the platforms to broadcast their messages, especially using visual images, to draw international support for their struggles and resist the state's efforts to contain the protests. For example, the agonizing [video](#) that captured the death of Neda Aghasoltan, a young woman killed by the security forces in 2009 in Tehran, garnered millions of views on social media, drawing significant support for the protests (Adams, 2015; Jahani, 2009).

3.13.1.2.1. Multiplicity of Applications

Considering the state's filtering of Facebook and Twitter, Iranian users searched for alternative social media applications. Beginning in the early 2010s, different applications gained popularity in Iran before being targeted by the state. In 2014, Iranian authorities banned *Viber*, alleging that the messaging application had turned into a hub for anti-establishment sentiments (Karami, 2014). The application allowed users to exchange messages, phone calls, images, and create closed groups. After Viber, *Telegram* quickly became the most used application in the country, offering all of Viber's affordances, while also providing end-to-end encryption for one-to-one messages and one-to-many chatrooms (Krona, 2020: p. 1889). Other features that added to Telegram's broad appeal include its practical and user-friendly interface and straightforward registration, requiring only a phone number—which users could even discard once they created their accounts (Krona, 2020; Shehabat et al., 2017; Yayla & Speckhard, 2017). Furthermore, Telegram's 'channel' feature allowed users to broadcast contents, including text, images, and videos. The most popular channels gained between hundreds of thousands and over a million subscribers, effectively functioning as mass broadcasting tools, like YouTube (Rogers, 2020; Tufekci, 2017: p. 230). The app also allows for the use of pseudonyms and gives users more control over their privacy and the amount of personal information they share about themselves (Rogers, 2020). These features are highly useful in contexts where users worry about state crackdown.

Telegram soon became a reliable space for political opposition. The app especially played a major role during the anti-government protests in December 2017-January 2018, allowing its users to connect, express opinions, and share textual, audio, and visual content. After Telegram's founders rejected the Iranian state's request to access users' information (Rogers,

2020: p. 216), the state filtered the application, forcing many Iranian users to migrate to Instagram.[128] With the number of its users in Iran growing exponentially, Instagram has become the most popular, and highly contested, social media application in the country (Kargar & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Although Instagram allows sharing social and political content, especially visual images, its relatively open interface has enabled the increasingly authoritarian Islamic Republic to identify, harass, and suppress users (Kargar & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Michaelsen, 2017; Rahbari, 2019). Instagram's visibility is central to the fears about the state's ability to crack down on users (Miller et al., 2016: Ch. 11). Unlike Telegram, Instagram does not offer closed groups and channels. Despite its limitations, Instagram is still an effective tool for sharing information and users can utilize its comment function to engage in public discussions (Adams, 2015: pp. 396-397; Rahbari, 2019). Thus, the Iranian state has resorted to blocking the application in times of popular protest.

An overall analysis of the Iranian state's securitization of social media indicates that the state has adopted a selective approach, often banning most applications while leaving one application available. The state's restrictions have led to a fragmentation of users' experiences across time and space, with users on the move from one application to another. As a tactic of resistance, users have resorted to different anti-filtering software and VPNs to thwart the state's restrictions (Tufekci, 2017: p. 238). While many users have been able to remain active on banned platforms, the majority tend to populate one application that is not filtered. In such an environment, Instagram has become the epicenter of political expression for users, even though

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[128] In recent years, the Iranian state has attempted to create 'national social media' applications and a so-called 'National Information Network' (NIN), something akin to China's domestic internet (Yalcintas & Alizadeh, 2020). Most users, nevertheless, avoid those applications for the fear of state oppression.

some have deemed the application to be trivial and frivolous due to its emphasis on visual images (Rogers, 2018). Nevertheless, images have proved to be politically effective, as they convey powerful meanings about identity and space (Adams, 2013; Rose, 2016b). Furthermore, images have enabled users to connect across applications, space, and time to create shared experiences (Rose, 2014: p. 33).[129]

Given the growing significance of digital visual technologies, studies of the Kurdish movement should pay more attention to the media (Sheyholislami, 2011: p. 16), especially how a combination of satellite television channels and social media has enabled the circulation of a high volume of ideas and meanings across borders, enabling the Kurds to create what Eliassi (2013) has called a 'virtual Kurdistan' (p. 4). In this research, I analyze the Iranian Kurds' production of Kurdistan as a significant territorial imaginary using media and digital visual images.

This chapter aimed to show that the nature, scope, and significance of the demonstrations that took place in Iranian Kurdistan, in October 2014 and in September 2017 can only be understood against the backdrop of the Kurdish movement's longer history and the Iranian (and other regional) state's securitized approach to the Kurdish movement and its territoriality. Thus, to Kurdish activists, the resistance in Kobani, the larger campaign against the Islamic State, and the independence referendum constitute the latest episodes of the Kurdish movement's struggle for political rights and self-determination. The practices of the Kurdish demonstrators and media users, and the state's reactions to them comprise the more recent historical background of this study. They show the ways in which the Iranian state's securitization of space and media

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[129] See Chapter Four for the methodological implications of the users' fragmentation across multiple platforms.

impacted the Iranian Kurds' production of territory. Despite the efforts of the central governments to prevent and suppress cross-border connections, Kurdish uprisings have long enlisted the support of Kurds across boundaries. The growing cross-border interconnections have created a dynamic in which Kurdish movements in different parts of Kurdistan have affected each other, while each part has been engaged in its own unique struggles (Bengio, 2017: pp. 90-91). The empirical chapters of this dissertation (Chapters Five, Six, and Seven) examine the Iranian Kurds' production of territory through on-the-ground and mediated practices in 2014 and 2017, and the ways in which such practices are connected to the broader Kurdish movement. But before that, Chapter Four explains the methodology.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Methodology

The political, cultural, and technological specificities of the Iranian Kurdish context required adopting a methodological approach that could capture the dynamic processes, practices, and discourses that unfolded both in the demonstrations and in the users' engagement with media. Furthermore, such a methodological approach should acknowledge and accommodate my positionality as a Kurdish scholar 'outside' of Iran, and without direct access to the 'field.'[130] To understand the role of street demonstrations and media, including digital visual images, in the Iranian Kurds' production of territory, I utilize 'a broad methodological toolkit' (Hand, 2017: p. 223) that combines thematic analysis of remotely conducted semi-structured interviews with digital methods and discourse analysis. Semi-structured interviews offer insight into the demonstrators' embodied experiences and discursive tactics, digital methods help explain Kurdish users' engagement with media and the affordances and imagery that enable the production of collective territorial ideas (Rogers, 2018; Rose, 2016b: p. 254), while Foucauldian discourse analysis elucidates the intertextual webs of meaning, including media images, within and through which users affectively produce territorial imaginations (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017; Rose, 2016b: p. 297). This approach is especially productive since social media function as sites where discourses on politics and space meet users' affective engagement, influencing (geo)political practice (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: p. 189).

Gillian Rose encourages researchers to use digital methods alongside other methods,

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[130] See Katz (1994) for a critical reading of field and fieldwork; and Luh Sin (2015) for using social media as a 'field.'

arguing that digital methods alone may not be sufficient, even when researchers work with digital images. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis is thus meant to allow a deeper understanding of the intertextual network within which digital images are located and made meaningful (2016a: p. 345; 2016b: pp. 290-291). While shedding light onto the demonstrators' practices and discourses, data from semi-structured interviews also allow selecting and contextualizing the visual images (Hand, 2017) that 'particularly affected' Kurdish users emotionally (interview: Ferhad, Şilan, 2018; Kardo, Lidiya, 2019). Such capacities make interviews suitable for offering insight into how research participants experience broader geopolitical processes (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: p. 56), both offline and online. Furthermore, interviews help complement and triangulate social media comments (Bakogianni, 2021: p. 14; Leszczynski, 2018), and alleviate concerns about the analytical limitations of visual images as only one constituent of resistance discourses and practices (McGary et al., 2019: p. 286). In assembling the different components of my methodological toolbox, I was driven by the methods' unique, combined, and complementary 'interpretative possibilities' (Rose, 2016b: p. 51), as well as practices and practicalities of conducting research, including my collection methods, ethical considerations, and inevitable limitations (Glesne, 2016: Ch. 7; Jackson, 2001: p. 211). It is to these practices and practicalities that I turn first, before explaining digital methods and discourse analysis.

4.1. Data Collection

The data collection process for this research unfolded in two major phases: conducting semi-structured remote interviews and gathering social media data. Although I adopted different techniques in each phase, the two complemented each other, offering a considerable level of

depth into the complex offline and online practices and discourses that were involved in the Kurdish production of territory in 2014 and 2017.

4.1.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews provide the main source of data for analyzing the discourses and practices that unfolded during the demonstrations, while supplementing the data on users' engagement with media and visual images. Since I could not be physically in Iranian Kurdistan, I used the technological affordances (Adams, 2015) of encrypted messaging applications (Shehabat et al., 2017) to access research participants.[131] Using snowballing method (Valentine, 1997), I conducted 17 in-depth interviews between October 2018 and June 2019 with demonstrators from various gender, age, and class backgrounds across Iranian Kurdistan. To recruit research participants, I mobilized a trusted network of contacts in Iranian Kurdistan, each connecting me to their own trusted contacts. Although my 'insider' position and my linguistic and cultural competence facilitated the 'snowballing' process, the securitized context of Iranian Kurdistan made it challenging to connect with potential research participants.

This challenge was also shared by my primary contacts because they had to follow certain criteria to be able to connect me to their own contacts. First, they needed to know whether that contact had participated in the demonstrations—a topic that most would not openly discuss in the Iranian context. Then, my primary contacts had to make sure that they could trust the secondary contacts. Furthermore, the secondary contact had to not only agree to talk to me, but to be comfortable doing so. Given its ethical imperatives, I especially took this last point very seriously. I exercised significant precautions to safeguard research participants as their minority

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[131] For more details, see the sections on Limitations, and Reflexivity and Positionality.

position makes them more vulnerable to the state violence (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017), realized or potential (Butler, 2003). To make sure that the research participants both were informed and consented to the interviews, I explained the interview process twice for each interview: once for my primary contact, then for the secondary contact, just before starting the interview. At the beginning of each interview, I also asked the research participant to use a pseudonym rather than their real name. This recruiting process proved to be painstakingly cumbersome, requiring many contacts, not all of which led to an interview. Nonetheless, it gradually proved successful. Most of my interviews are with secondary contacts, partly because most of my primary contacts themselves had not participated in the demonstrations.

With the research participants' consent, I recorded the interviews. I manually translated the interview from Kurdish into English, while simultaneously transcribing them. Although this process demanded a significant amount of time, manually translating/transcribing the interviews allowed a more embodied engagement with research participants, an advantage which proved crucial in the absence of face-to-face meeting. I used the MAXQDA software to code and organize the data, identifying recurring themes and key concepts. Re-reading the interviews and revising the codes, I divided and merged the codes to give a better order to the data. At the same time, MAXQDA's affordances of writing memos and 'commenting' allowed me to annotate different codes, write brief, initial analyses and chart a better conceptual map that connected the major themes and concepts in the interviews with the research questions.

4.1.2. Social Media Data

The timeframe of this research runs primarily from August 1 to October 30, 2014, and July 1 to September 30, 2017. I chose this temporal range because, during this timeframe, Kobani's resistance against the Islamic State (IS) and the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence

referendum were at their peaks, both on the ground and in the media. This timeframe is not

defined rigidly, however. While the majority of the data collected fall within this period, I also

occasionally included data that may deviate slightly from the timeframe. I adopted a multi-

platform approach to data collection, including satellite television and social media, to better

reflect the Iranian Kurds' use of multiple media and to further highlight the importance of using

visual images that circulate across different media (Adams, 2015; Doerr et al., 2014; Hand,

2017). Taking a multi-platform approach also allowed access to significant 'convergence spaces'

(Routledge, 2009) that connected users in Iranian Kurdistan with Kurdish users in neighboring

countries, in diaspora, as well as non-Kurdish sympathizers. Furthermore, using social media

alongside television enabled a more inclusive account of the multi-faceted characteristics of

users' engagement with media (Milner, 2012: p.61; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Thus, similar to

my methodological approach, my data collection aimed at capturing this multi-platform use of

social media (Rose, 2016b: p. 290).

To collect social media data from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, I used three

complementary techniques. First, I started by searching major hashtags and words related to the

2014 and 2017 events within the platforms' search engines (Highfield & Leaver, 2014). The

most prominent hashtags that I used were #KobaniIsNotAlone, #ShowYourV4YPG,

#KurdistanIndependence, #KurdistanReferendum, and #SaveKobani. Deploying a multi-lingual

approach (Mayr & Weller, 2017: p. 108), I also searched for relevant hashtags and key words in

Kurdish and Persian.[132] This approach made it possible to find and compare similar content

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[132] In Chapter Seven, which examines the connections between Kurdish and non-Kurdish social media users, I use my knowledge of French and Arabic, and utilize online translation tools to get a sense of the banners and posts in German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Turkish, and other languages that diaspora Kurds and their allies used.

across multiple platforms (Rogers, 2018). Second, using online snowballing technique (Davies et al., 2017: p. 515), I found my way from one account to another, by using such application affordances as 'sharing,' 'commenting,' or 'liking.' For example, after finding posts, I tracked them on the pages of users who had shared the post. Repeating this technique allowed me to collect a significant amount of data. I often chose these 'secondary' accounts and profiles based on their level of activity. Third, I used certain pages and profiles that I was following during the demonstrations, as well as before I began this research. This fact is significant, because 'friending' or 'following' users only for extracting research data from their activities can raise significant ethical questions (Morena et al., 2013). My approach also conveys a point about my 'organic' connection to my research and my positionality, demonstrating that I was already following these developments regularly. To collect data from *Rudaw TV*, I used the material on the channel's YouTube pages, in addition to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.[133]

Using screenshots, I compiled a total of 515 images containing posts, and their associated images, texts, and other forms of 'currency' or 'digital objects,' including comments, likes, and shares (Rogers, 2013; Rose, 2016b: pp. 291-294). Out of this total, I used 351 screenshot images for answering my research question in Chapter Six, since the remaining 164 images were exclusively related to non-Kurdish users'[134] social media activities, which I discuss in Chapter Seven. That also means that I used all 515 images in my analysis in Chapter Seven, since the chapter examines the social media activities of both Kurdish and non-Kurdish users.

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[133] I used YouTube only to access the longer videos. Otherwise, YouTube had comparatively minimal user engagement.

[134] To distinguish between Kurdish and non-Kurdish users, I used multiple clues, including language, location, and the content of the posts. The boundaries between 'Kurdish' and 'non-Kurdish' are of course blurry. Nonetheless, I categorized users in either group only when they clearly belonged to one rather than the other.

Additionally, I drew on data from the interviews in both chapters. Although I drew on all the 351 images to answer the research question in Chapter Six, I also analyzed 12 images in more detail, especially situating them within the Kurdish geopolitical discourses of resistance, identity, and territory. I chose the 12 images based on a combination of multiple interrelated criteria, including their direct connection to the interview data, their depiction of key developments during the geopolitical events in 2014 and 2017,[135] the level of social media users' 'reactions' to them, their iconic power and the symbolic meanings embedded within them,[136] and the frequency that they recurred during data collection.[137]

Where it was impossible to capture the entirety of posts in one frame, I used multiple screenshots with a minimal level of overlap to enable further identification, categorization, and coding. For conducting the analysis in Chapter Six, I categorized the images based on time, event, and theme, which led to the creation of two major groups, corresponding to the 2014 and 2017 events and two major groups corresponding to the main themes that I identified in the posts and images: bodies and resistance to borders. I took a holistic approach to analyzing the images, since breaking them down into their different components can lead to analytical fragmentation, detracting from the totality of meanings the images convey (Rose, 2016b: p. 103). Using

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[135] For example, when the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces crossed the border support the defenders of Kobani against IS in Syria.

[136] For example, the Kurdish refugee child carrying a heavy load while crossing the border from Syria into Turkey.

[137] This factor is a benefit of manual data collection (Rogers, 2018), allowing me to keep a tally of the most recurring posts and images. The frequency of an image/post's recurrence, of course, is impacted by the algorithms, over which users (including myself) have no control. But generally, the impact of algorithms is much less significant with 'small data' since user-researcher is actively engaged in collecting the data, rather than relying on mass-collection applications and programs (Ash et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the impact of the algorithms, the more popular images are more likely to appear more frequently, a reflection of the users' agency that are more likely to form an online 'public' around certain content (Papacharissi, 2015).

Foucauldian discourse analysis, I further situated the posts, visual images, and their themes within the larger political context rather than simply extracting their meanings in isolation (Hand, 2017: pp. 217-220). This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the affective power of the posts and images and the role they played in constructing the very discourses within which they are embedded and made meaningful (Rose, 2016b: pp. 22-33). I also examined 15 videos in detail. Although I was more concerned with users' reactions to the videos, watching the videos offered insight into the range of practices that produced the users' affective and emotional responses.

To answer the research question in Chapter Seven, I drew on all 515 image screenshots, since they are all connected to one or more of the categories of users that I created. To organize my analysis, I categorized the social-media users that are the focus of this chapter into four interrelated groups: users in Iranian Kurdistan, Kurdish users in the region, Kurdish users in diaspora, and non-Kurdish allies. The lines separating these categories of users are, of course, blurry, and users constantly interact with each other. Nonetheless, my criteria for classifying each social media post under a specific group is based on the location of the user creating the post. I draw on the users' online bios available in their profile as well as linguistic and visual clues to classify them in one of the four categories. In the same section where I discuss a specific group, I also discuss those commenting or reacting to the posts regardless of their location. This approach makes it possible to provide a detailed account of the interactions among users across various locations and groups. The major hashtags mentioned above, as well as territorial concepts such as 'Rojava' and 'Kurdistan' were crucial in bringing users within and across groups together. Thematically analyzing the general trends, connections, similarities, and

differences in users' practices and discourses offers insight into the various ways in which users produce multi-scalar territorial imaginations.

Although my manual data collection method may seem time-consuming, that allowed me to obtain a more detailed, case-by-case familiarity with the data segments and the connections among them (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017: pp. 204 & 210). This approach helped nuance my understanding of the context in which users engaged with and produced data (Rose, 2016b: p. 294). These advantages of manual data collection, combined with my long-term immersion in the field and my familiarity with the research context, deepened my analytical insights (Glesne, 2016: p. 21), a subject to which I return in the following sections.

4.2. Ethical Considerations

Abiding by the protocols of human subject protection, I exercised maximum precaution in recruiting interviewees and while conducting the interviews. Using pseudonyms for all interviewees serves as a major strategy to protect the privacy of research participants. Before starting each interview, I also explained the interview process clearly and obtained the interviewees' informed consent. Ethical considerations are paramount in conducting this research, given the securitized approach of the Iranian state to Kurdistan and the vulnerable position of research participants as members of a minoritized and marginalized population (Elling, 2013; Menga, 2019; Moradi et al., 2022; Rezai-Rashti, 2013; von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017).

Collecting and using digital visual social media data also raised recurring questions of ethics and consent (Hand, 2017: p. 228). Generally, there is no easy or singular ethical approach to dealing with social media materials that are produced by many users, however. One strand of argument maintains that since the material is already publicly online, researchers do not need to

obtain users' consent, especially when there is no personal interaction between the researcher and research subjects. Another strand contends that researchers' use of available social media material is ontologically different from regular users on social media applications. The latter argument, therefore, calls for methods and commitment by researchers to protect users' safety and privacy (Moreno et al., 2013; Rogers, 2018; Rose, 2016b: p. 302). Following this line of thinking, I have anonymized and aggregated the data in all my results and analysis (Highfield & Leaver, 2014; van Haperen et al., 2018: p. 412). I have also avoided quoting comments that may expose users' identity (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Moreno et al., 2013). Furthermore, the comments and posts created in Kurdish, Persian, or other non-English languages benefit from another layer of privacy since I have had to translate their content into English, rather than using the users' words.

Ethical considerations of user safety and privacy also should be understood and practiced within the specific context of the research project. The political, social, and cultural specificities of research can tell researchers, for example, whether showing users' faces would endanger or empower them (Highfield & Leaver, 2014; Rose, 2016b: p. 302). Due to the risks associated with political expression in an authoritarian context (Adams, 2013: p. 273; Juris, 2008), some users had already anonymized their social media activities by using pseudonyms and avatars instead of their real names and photos. Nevertheless, it was obvious that there were 'real' individuals 'behind' the profiles. As van Haperen et al. (2022) contend, those who engage in oppositional activism are less likely to be bots, although bots cannot be entirely avoided in studies of social media (p. 8). Furthermore, the qualitative character of the data collection and analysis reduced the possibility of including inauthentic accounts.

4.3. Limitations

By far the most significant obstacle in conducting my research was the restriction on my mobility. An as international student from Iran, I have been legally unable to leave the United States and return to Iran during my studies. Even if I had been able to freely exit and re-enter the United States, I could not have safely entered Iran and conducted fieldwork for this research in Iranian Kurdistan. The Iranian state's securitization policies curtail conducting research on topics that the state deems to be 'sensitive' topics. Such securitization policies are even more strict for researchers who are from minority backgrounds and/or are affiliated with western institutions (Elling, 2013; Moradi et al., 2022; Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Rivetti, 2017). These limitations had profound epistemological and methodological implications for my research.[138] By strictly controlling research in Iranian Kurdistan, the Iranian state is in fact silencing the Kurdish population, suppressing, and controlling Kurdish knowledge and territory. Many scholars have indeed pointed to the interconnections between struggles for knowledge and territory (Daigle, 2018; Halvorsen, 2019; Jazeel, 2016; Radcliffe, 2017).

Travel and mobility limitations aside, this study does not cl/aim to have exhausted the wide range of practices, discourses, meanings, and emotions produced by Kurdish demonstrators and users, as well as their allies, offline and online, during the timeframe of this research. Similar to any research project, conducting this study involved accommodating inevitable limitations (Glesne, 2016: p. 214), as critical social sciences and humanities have long forfeited claims to exhaustivity in favor of more partial, situated, and subjective understandings of social practices

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[138] See the sub-section on Semi-Structured Interviews for an explanation of the techniques that I used facing this challenge. See the sub-section on Reflexivity and Positionality for how securitization has shaped my research.

and processes (Haraway, 1988; Jackson, 2001; Rose, 1997). The social sciences' recent forfeiture of exhaustiveness is also reassuring in studying digital social media data, as the sheer amount and speed of their production, circulation, and use can be overwhelming (Hand, 2017: p. 216). To avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of potential research material, I have used what is commonly described as 'small data,' that is the type of data that does not aim to be statistically 'representative' of the entire data theoretically available and can be collected and analyzed by a single researcher alone (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017: p. 202).

I have come to accept that there are social media posts and images to which I simply could not gain access. In addition to the inherent time and scope limitations of this project, limitations in the quantity of data collected is impacted by the technical protocols of the applications. For example, Facebook users might share posts and images only with their 'friends' or in closed 'private' groups. More generally, hashtags and keywords may be missing, making the posts impossible to find (Kitchin, 2014: p. 105). My online snowballing method (Davies et al., 2017: p. 515) partly aimed to alleviate this limitation because, in finding many posts and images, I went directly to the users' pages, rather than relying on hashtags and keywords. This allowed accessing valuable posts that did not contain any of the key hashtags. Another technique that I deployed to alleviate the limitations caused by lack of hashtags was to increase my number of searches. In this 'search as research' process (Rogers, 2018), I spent hours collecting new data. Although time-consuming, this effort proved productive. After a while, I noticed that the 'new' material that I was collecting had already been gathered in my previous searches. I had reached a level of saturation (Glesne, 2016).

I also encountered a range of limitations that impacted the way I conducted this study. I could not access online activities that unfolded over Telegram—as previously noted, one of the

leading social media applications in Iran and Kurdistan. The information shared by Telegram users can only be accessed through researcher's online-ethnographic embeddedness within the specific groups and channels in which the object materials of the study unfold (Krona, 2020). By the time I started this research most of the groups and channels that were active during the research timeframe were either abandoned or closed. Nevertheless, my interviews and my own observations on Telegram and other social media platforms, revealed that almost all posts and images shared on Telegram also appeared on other applications, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This fact indicates that posts and images easily traverse different media platforms (Hand, 2017: pp. 220-222); more generally, social media platforms should be viewed as an integrated ecology, rather than isolated environments (Miller et al., 2016). Thus, I draw on data gathered from other social media platforms to offset the lack of access to Telegram data, even though I acknowledge that different social media platforms have different affordances (Adams, 2015).

Another limitation is that my data overwhelmingly draws from those who had access to the internet and satellite television. Nonetheless, as my interviews and official statistics indicate, that limitation is largely offset by the sheer growth in the number of those who have access to digital technologies.[139] The limitations in data and partiality of the analysis may also leave room for more future research into the media-visual processes that unfolded in October 2014 and September 2017 in Iranian Kurdistan.

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[139] According to Iran's Statistics Center, in 2017, around 94 percent of internet users—constituting close to 68 percent of Iranians over 6 years old—accessed the internet via their phones, with social media accounting for over 70 percent of all internet traffic (amar.org.ir, 2017). As of March 2021, the country had over 78 million internet users, an impressive number for a population of 85 million (internetworldstats.com).

4.4. Digital Methods

Digital methods refers to a strand of research methods in the social sciences and humanities that examines how online technologies and digital devices impact social and political practices (Leszczynski, 2019; Rogers, 2014: p. 74). As such, digital methods encompass research practices that seek to understand social and political processes through utilizing the internet and online data (Rogers, 2013: p. 1). Digital methods increasingly draw on social media, especially visual images and the written texts and comments associated with them (Rose, 2016b: p. 297; Rasmussen Pennington, 2017: p. 234), which are abundantly available through the recent proliferation of networked cell phones and other personalized digital technologies (Burgess et al., 2018: p. 4; Leszczynski, 2019; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The growing popularity of digital methods and devices in geography and beyond has contributed to a 'digital turn' (Ash et al., 2018), while also raising significant methodological and epistemological questions (Rogers, 2013; Leszczynski, 2018).

What makes the methods 'digital' is the incorporation of 'digital objects' such as likes, comments, and tags in the analysis, and an emphasis on how affordances of digital media impact social processes (Rogers, 2013: p. 15). With online-offline dualities and oppositional conceptualizations increasingly challenged, digital methods become crucial to understanding how networked devices are entangled with embodied activities, and how social and spatial processes are 'reworked, mediated, mobilized, materialized, and intensified' (Rogers, 2013: pp. 19-23; Rose, 2016b: p. 290; Ruppert et al., 2013: p. 24). Thus, crucial to deploying digital methods is 'online groundedness,' the investigation of on-the-ground social and political processes using affordances and data provided by online devices (Rogers, 2013). Geographic research, therefore, increasingly draws on digital methods because digital media and devices are

inextricably entwined with many social-spatial processes (Leszczynski, 2018; 2019). As a

configuration and imagination of geographic space, territory is no exception in this entanglement

of devices, bodies, and practices. In deploying digital methods, I follow Gillian Rose's (2016b)

advice, first examining the metadata associated with posts and images, followed by assessing

their 'digital objects,' and determining which parts of the data can help answer the research

question (pp. 294-297).

Combined, 'digital objects' constitute the social media posts' online context (Rogers,

2013: p. 1; Rose, 2016b: p. 292), providing further detail and depth in analyzing visual images

(Highfield & Leaver, 2016). The online context of the Kurdish users' practices can offer insights

into the Kurds' broader geopolitical context. For instance, even though many Facebook videos

frequently show thousands of 'views,' the posts contain proportionately small numbers of likes

and comments. The Kurdish users' apparent 'Facebook inactivity' can be partly associated with

the Iranian state's securitization of Kurdistan and filtering of Facebook.[140] The Kurdish users'

contextually sensitive engagement with social media posts provides further evidence that 'liking'

or 'posting' social media content can in fact constitute political statements (Adams, 2015;

Christensen, 2011; Rogers, 2018). Nevertheless, even the sheer viewing of content can count as

user engagement (Rogers, 2014: p. 79), especially given that users can establish affective

connections with images and other users when encountering content (Papacharissi, 2015; Rose,

2016b: p. 19).

This observation is consistent with the interview data in which research participants put a

lot more emphasis on how social media posts and images made them *feel* or triggered bodily

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[140] See Miller et al. (2016) for a similar observation about Kurds in Turkey.

reactions in them, compared to simply prompting them to engage in conventional online activities, such as 'liking' or 'commenting' on the posts (interview: Awat, Lidiya, Mardin, Rojin, Sirwan, Zagros, 2019; Ferhad, Şilan, 2018). The political limitations of online expression, combined with the affective power of images, point to the significance of paying attention to the role of affect as decisive in the Kurdish users' imagination and construction of territory. To fully appreciate the users' affective and emotional engagement with social media posts and images, however, it is imperative to understand the discursive network within which users made sense of the social media content and of themselves. Foucauldian discourse analysis is well suited to accomplish that tsk since it lends itself well to digital methods (Leszczynski, 2019: p. 1144).

4.5. Discourse Analysis

Discourses are groups of statements as well as the relations between them that construct one's understanding of objects, subjects, the self, and the world (Foucault, 1973: pp. 37-38; Phillips & Hardy, 2002: p. 3; Rose, 2016b: p. 187).[141] Discourses define what is considered as true, regulate boundaries of thought and practice, delimit internalities and externalities (Lees, 2004; Legg, 2007), and lend legitimacy to certain depictions of the world (Foucault 1973, 1991; Müller, 2008). Such depictions of the world, however, hold unequal levels of legitimacy due to power imbalances embedded in discourses (Boyle & Rogerson, 2001: p. 409; Waitt, 2005). Discourses, as such, are inseparable from power/knowledge questions (Foucault, 1980; Rose, 2016b: p. 190). Indeed, it is through discourse that power and knowledge are joined together (Foucault, 1978: p. 100). Thus, rather than just being a method, discourse analysis is a

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[141] My approach to discourse analysis differs from the Gramscian formulation, in which political actors consciously use language to justify and materialize their domination. In my Foucauldian approach, language shapes various actors' practices and identities—while it is deployed by them (see Lees, 2004).

methodology, as it is concerned with the epistemology that informs ways of knowing the world and the tools deployed to accomplish such a task (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: p. 3). Digital visual images are among the tools that have gained increasing scholarly attention, especially as phone-based social media rapidly transform political processes (Miller et al., 2016: p. 156; Rose, 2016b)—challenging the social sciences' traditional text-centrism (Highfield and Leaver, 2016; Müller, 2013; Thrift, 2000).

Discourse analysis helps explain how visual images acquire their meanings within intertextual networks (Hand, 2017: p. 220; Rose, 2014; 2016b: p. 188) that include 'cultural and political discourses both within and beyond social media' (Faulkner et al., 2018: p. 164). Paying attention to these networks allows understanding visual images' 'symbolic and communicative' characteristics, which extend beyond simply describing what is visible in images (Rose, 2014) to include other images and texts that imbue images with meaning (Hand, 2017: p. 217; Rasmussen Pennington, 2017: p. 244; Rose, 2016b: pp. 188-195). Many such images and texts, however, are not immediately available in the corpus of data that is analyzed. Thus, discourse analysts have commonly emphasized the significance of being attentive to the nuances that are left out of the text but can be interpreted from the context. To understand the power hierarchies and struggles embodied within images, therefore, it is crucial to account for their context (Hannam, 2002: p. 194).

The geopolitical context of the Kurdish movement in Iran is primarily shaped by the Kurds' disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the Iranian state, as well as connection to the Kurdish movement across the borders. Given such a context, the media images are bound up with enduring themes of the Kurdish movement, including intra-Kurdish solidarity (and division), struggles against the state and borders, and striving to preserve Kurdish life, land, and identity.

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Even though the Kurdish movement has been increasingly photographed, there is no scholarly investigation into their geopolitical significance. Discourse analysis can offer valuable insights into how visual images produce subjects and identities, and help explain geopolitical practices (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: p. 36; Rose, 2016b: pp. 188, 192 & 217)—including imagining and producing space and territory (Leszczynski, 2015: p. 734).

Visual images' capacities to construct identity and space are closely intertwined with users' affects and emotions (Rose, 2014: p. 30; 2016b: p. 34). This factor makes users' subjective experiences and agency indispensable to Foucauldian discourse analysis (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: p. 55; Rose, 2016b: p. 254), even though discourse analysts have traditionally ignored how users interact with images (Rose, 2014: p. 6). Users' emotions are especially important given that their engagements with images are already discursive, rather than occurring in isolation. Discourse analysis, therefore, has the capacity to explain both geopolitical processes and the ways in which certain populations consider constituents of such processes as their 'geopolitical truths,' and imagination (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: pp. 31-41; McDonald et al., 2010: p. 4). Accounting for research participants' emotions also promotes more ethical research practices and provides richer analyses by connecting personal experiences to larger structural forces (Ley & Mountz, 2001: p. 244; Mountz et al., 2015).

To allow for deeper analyses while keeping research and writing within reasonable bounds, I applied Foucauldian discourse analysis only to 12 of the 351 images that I collected.[142] The smaller quantity also allowed me to focus on the quality of the analysis rather than being

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[142] Drawing on digital methods, I chose the 10 images based on their level of online impact, measured by two interrelated factors: the amount of users' engagement, and the frequency of their recurrence during data collection. The interviews also provided supplementary information that helped identify impactful images. Almost all the other 341 images also share major discursive themes with the 10 selected images.

concerned with the quantity of the sources (Rose, 2016b: p. 196). Adopting a two-stage process, I first undertook a thorough analysis of the images. Then I contextualized the images and my findings within the larger geopolitical environment to facilitate consideration of questions of power, identity, and space (Dittmer, 2009: pp. 280-282; Müller, 2011) in the Iranian Kurds' production of territorial imaginations. In practical terms, the first stage was concerned with the images, their structure, and contents, including symbolism and text. The second stage accounted for the images' context, both in terms of the immediate spatial and temporal situations within which the images appeared (short-term), and the broader geopolitical conditions within which the images acquire meaning (long-term) (Lees, 2004). These stages were followed by identifying major themes that can tell us about the most recurring, consequential, or central key words and concepts embedded within the material under investigation. The identification of these themes came from my familiarity with the material, repetition, and immersion (Rose, 2016b: pp. 205-206). It is important to keep in mind though that the images do not necessarily correspond to neatly defined pre-given geopolitical processes (see Foucault, 1972: pp. 23-28). Rather, they contain what I call 'references' or reiterations of the collective Kurdish geopolitical memory—that is events that Kurds collectively consider as significant to their national struggle for rights and territory. Discourse analysis, therefore, must inevitably account for 'dispersal and fragmentation' (Legg, 2007: p. 270), to lend itself to analyzing decentralized social media images.

The main complaint raised about discourse analysis is its vagueness, partly resulting from its theoretical underpinnings, which treat subjects as constructed through an all-encompassing power that comes from everywhere (Lees, 2004: p. 103; Müller, 2011). Foucault was often imprecise about his methodology and never fully laid out how to do discourse analysis. This

methodological quandary endured in discourse-analysis scholarship after Foucault (Rose, 2016b; Waitt, 2005). Nonetheless, the general vagueness of discourse analysis can be productive. The lack of institutionalization of discourse analysis as a well-defined method prevents it from becoming what Phillips & Hardy (2002) describe as a 'research machine where researchers are reduced to technicians who simply turn a methodological handle and produce "truth"' (p. 2). With no prescribed approach to doing discourse analysis, researchers can become creative (Dittmer, 2009: 279), and think reflexively about how they relate to their research (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

4.5.1. Reflexivity and Positionality

To be reflexive, researchers should think critically about their position within their study. From a discursive-analytic perspective, reflexivity entails an awareness of the researcher's position that is inextricable from a myriad of perspectives about the world, situated within various fields of power/knowledge (Boyle & Rogerson, 2001: p. 411; Ley & Mountz, 2001: p. 235). The legitimacy of the knowledge produced thus closely corresponds with its underlying relations of power. As such, this study too is inseparable from the multiple and opposing discursive formations that form the basis of its claims (Müller, 2011; Said, 2002: p. 204). This is a major reason why I find discourse analysis to be a suitable methodology for discussing positionality, even though many scholars deploying discourse analysis—including Foucault—are rather circumspect about their view of it (Rose, 2016b). Discussing positionality, nevertheless, can bring greater levels of clarity to research (Glesne, 2016: p. 19) and sharpen its critical edges (Hyndman, 2004), while making sure that researchers present a more equitable account of the events (Ley & Mountz, 2001).

My specific positionality is therefore significant, not from an ego-centric perspective

(Ley & Mountz, 2001: pp. 244-245), but rather due to epistemological imperatives for writing

with/for/about the marginalized (Harraway, 1988; Naylor et al., 2018) Iranian Kurds.[143] Drawing

on a body of critical-feminist-political geographic literature concerned with marginality,

domination, and resistance in knowledge production (see Hyndman, 2004; Jackman et al., 2020

Ley & Mountz, 2001; Müller, 2021; Rose, 1997), I acknowledge that the claims I have made

cannot provide definitive conclusions about the Kurdish production of territory. Rather, my

writing aims to give voice to a population that has been marginalized, even within Kurdish

studies (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010; Gunter, 2020; Smets, 2016: p. 740). Far from claiming

to have presented pure truths, I have provided specific interpretations that are situated in the

intersubjective connections that include myself, research participants, and technologies/objects

(Haraway, 1988; Hyndman, 2004). These components and the discourses they constitute merit

further analysis, especially since they are marginal within the fields of 'true' or 'legitimate'

knowledge (Ó Tuathail, 1999: p. 108).

Crucial to my analysis is therefore my discursive position and intersubjective connections

with research participants. Such personal dimensions of my positionality, however, should be

situated within the social and political context (Butler, 2005), to offer insight into the research

process. This context includes the Iranian state's tight control over the production of knowledge

and its suppression of the Kurdish difference and Kurdish claims to identity and territory (Elling,

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[143] It is necessary to note that Iranian Kurds are not a monolith. Kurdish politics is divided along a wide political-ideological spectrum (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010). Thus, I do not (cl)aim for my research to be representative of the entire Kurdish population in Iran, or those who participated in the demonstrations. Rather, my objective is to reflect the subjective experiences of research participants, and the collective meanings created through their discourses and practices (Jackson, 2001).

2013: pp. 12 & 147; Moradi et al., 2022; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019). Aware of the Iranian Kurds' general voicelessness within the power/knowledge fields in Iran and beyond, almost all my research participants asked me to reflect their voices. My intersubjective connections with my research participants are situated within a field characterized by unequal relations of power that are intrinsic to discourses (Müller, 2011) and to any geopolitical writing and analysis (Ó Tuathail, 1999: p. 108). My objective has been to gather, analyze and share the Kurdish difference and empower its discourse through such resistance practices in a manner that recognizes the unequal relations of power between people and the state, as well as the importance of physical repositioning, efforts to build solidarities across boundaries, and the value of writing in opposition to the dominant state discourse (Naylor et al., 2018; Routledge, 1997: p. 361).

Against this backdrop, I have also adopted a reflexive approach to writing by drawing as much as possible on the statements of my interviewees in an effort not only to give voice to my research participants, but also to make the text more pluralist (Rose, 2016b: p. 216). In adopting this technique, I also aimed to make sure that my arguments were closely informed by my research participants' statements about the events rather than solely reflecting my own interpretations (Ley & Mountz, 2001: p. 235). Another reflexive writing technique that I adopted involved providing counter-narratives that focus attention on different or opposing angles of the practices and situations I have analyzed (Boyle & Rogerson, 2001). My reflections therefore aim to demonstrate that events and processes lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Because the 'realities and lived experiences' of minoritized populations—including the Iranian Kurds—are often marginalized (Rogers, 2009), in this intervention I aim to highlight the fact that academic knowledge about territory is closely tied to questions of power, access, and positionality, which

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disadvantage certain voices in favor of others (Halvorsen, 2019: p. 791; Jackman et al., 2020; Routledge & Derickson, 2015: p. 397). Understanding discourse, and its inherently unequal power/knowledge relations, is crucial to making any affective intervention.

Finally, by writing about the Iranian Kurds' disadvantaged position in questions of territory—and in academia in general—I seek to produce ethically informed and committed scholarship, while also drawing a sense of purpose about life (Pulido, 2013). Writing about/for my research participants comes with a deep sense of commitment and care (Kobayashi, 2001), not only to appreciate the time and risks they took to participate in my research, but also because I sense a deep ethical responsibility to say/write what my research participants have repeatedly described as 'their voice.' Some aspects of these voices have surely been lost in translation, despite my efforts (Clark, 2019; Müller, 2021; Smith, 2016). Yet, within my limitations and capacities, I have been committed to reflecting these voices. My lived experiences, and those of my research participants, make it clear that the insistence on reflecting voices testifies to the Iranian Kurds' geopolitical suffocation under the Islamic Republic's dictatorship. Today, Iranian Kurdistan is not only a land characterized by systematic material and cultural dispossession (Moradi et al., 2022); it is also a place that exists under a securitized regime of oppression, designed and executed by the Islamic Republic and its security apparatus (Soleimani and Mohammadpour, 2020a). The state's securitization efforts aim to create geopolitical contexts that restrict the production of marginalized forms of territory and knowledge. Where bodies on the street are more exposed to violence, it is costlier, potentially lethal, to assemble as bodies on the street (Butler, 2011; 2015; Swanson, 2016; Tynen, 2021). Connecting the voices and precarities of bodies on the streets is a central concern in this writing.

Given such limitations, my Kurdish positionality was crucial in conducting this research. It provided a shared intersubjective language with my research participants that allowed us to trust and understand one another (Valentine, 1997) and think together (Escobar, 2010) to give voice (Pulido, 2002; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019) to/from our marginalized positions (hooks, 1989) and produce situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) that have the potential to contribute to scholarly debates on territory and collective resistance. In fact, the state's securitization policies are closely tied to power/knowledge relations that it upholds or obstructs. Oppressive and hostile geopolitical contexts also frequently silence the voices and territorial imaginations of marginalized communities. Indeed, questions of territory are never separate from the political, methodological, intellectual, and ethical questions of having the privilege of being (internationally) mobile producers of knowledge (Routledge & Derickson, 2015: p. 397). Taking advantage of this (rare) international mobility and geopolitical repositioning, this research seeks to produce a territorial knowledge that is otherwise silenced. In doing so, it ironically draws part of its driving force from the very oppressive state securitization policies that aimed to suppress it.

The current effort affirms the fact that it is imperative to simultaneously resist and disrupt colonial political geographies, as researchers produce indigenous knowledges from positions of the marginalized (Daigle, 2018). Otherwise, such communities' visions of territory would be subsumed within the more powerful geopolitical projects of the state and capital (Jackman et al., 2020; Routledge, 2015: p. 446; Tynen, 2021). To put marginalized voices front and center in political geography, researchers need to 'think with' and from 'inside' communities for whom territory holds a significant stake in struggles for rights and recognition (Bryan, 2012: p. 223; England, 1994: p. 243; Grosfoguel, 2011; Koopman, 2011). As Escobar (2010) argues, "the questions of where one thinks from, with whom, and for what purpose become important

elements of the investigation" (p. 3). The effort to speak for, thus, implies that—contrary to

Foucault's frequent reluctance to recognize the author's role—authors and their identities do

matter, even if they inescapably operate within the confines of discourse (Legg, 2007: p. 271).

CHAPTER FIVE:

Territory on the Streets

This chapter is concerned with the Iranian Kurds' production of territory during two rounds of peaceful demonstrations in 2014 and 2017. In October 2014 thousands of Iranian Kurds took to the streets to express their support for the residents of Kobani who were under siege by the Islamic State (IS). Similarly, in September 2017 thousands poured into the streets across Iranian Kurdistan to celebrate Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum. Beyond expressing solidarity with the Kurdish movements in Syria and Iraq, the demonstrations became public events during which collective territorial notions of Kurdistan were produced. Although largely peaceful, the demonstrations took place amidst the Iranian state's pervasive security measures (Figure 5.1). To avoid clashing with security forces, however, demonstrators had to negotiate the Iranian state's heavy militarization of Kurdish space and its broader securitization of Kurdistan.[144] Detailing the range and quality of the tactics that demonstrators used to accomplish such objectives is the subject of this chapter. In other words, this chapter explains what the demonstrators did to simultaneously produce territory, while at the same time resisting the state's securitization efforts. In doing so, I emphasize the significance of indigenous discursive resources, embodied use of Kurdish clothes and dance, and emplaced tactics, in allowing demonstrators to produce collective imaginations of territory and resisting the state's securitization. Before detailing the demonstrators' discursive, embodied, and emplaced tactics, however, I explain the Iranian states' use of security measures to suppress the demonstrations.

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[144] See the section Territoriality of the Post-Revolutionary Movement, in Chapter Three, for a detailed account of the Iranian state's securitization of Kurdistan, including the stationing of 200,000 of military force in the region (Elling, 2013; Koohi-Kamali, 2003).

Figure 5.1. Iranian security forces surround the Azadi (Eqbal) Square in Sanandaj,(Sinne) during the pro-Kobani demonstrations on October 9, 2014. Source: Facebook.

5.1. Securitization Measures

The state's security measures occurred before, during, and after the demonstrations, resulting in arrest, detention, and imprisonment of scores of demonstrators. Both on the streets and in detention, demonstrators experienced violence at the hands of security forces. Thus, if demonstrations exemplify a clear manifestation of bodies 'gathering together' to make territory through semiotizing space (Del Biaggio, 2015), for the Kurds in Iran this process of semiotization of space was strongly affected by the Iranian state's securitization policies.

5.1.1. Before the Demonstrations

In both 2014 and 2017, the Iranian state's securitization had already impacted the demonstrations before they had started. The general securitized atmosphere in Kurdish cities had already reduced the number of potential demonstrators drastically (interview: Arez, Awat, Azad,

Jiyar, Lidiya, 2019; Ferhad, 2018). Nevertheless, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, despite the Iranian state's tight security measures and its effective militarization of Kurdish cities and towns (Table 5.1). Crucial to the demonstrators' decision to go to the streets were the emotional reverberations of Kobani's resistance against the Islamic State (IS),[145] and Iraqi Kurdistan's historic vote for independence[146] (interview: Awat, Azad, Jiyar, Rojin, 2019). As one interviewee put it: "There was no way people could hide their happiness" (interview: Zagros, 2019). The demonstrators' eagerness to go to the streets, despite the security risks, however, should also be analyzed considering the Iranian state's strict policies that crack down on any manifestation of Kurdish identity.

There is no clear data on the number of participants, but demonstrations and gatherings were reported in almost every city and town across Iranian Kurdistan, including Ilam, Kermanshah, Paveh, Dehgolan, Sanandaj, Meriwan, Seqiz, Mahabad and Urmia, and across the Kurdish regions and in diaspora. The interviews suggest that anywhere between under one thousand, in smaller towns such as Dehgolan,[147] and three to five thousand, in a city such as Sanandaj,[148] participated in the demonstrations (interview: Kardo, Sirwan, 2019). Such numbers are significant, given the cities' securitized atmosphere, and the general spontaneity of the demonstrations. The demonstrations attracted a wide range of participants across age, gender,

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[145] Witnessing that IS had recently massacred Yezidi Kurds in Shingal (Sinjar) and other communities elsewhere, many Kurds saw the terror group as an existential threat. Thus, to the Kurds, the siege of Kobani signaled another impending genocide.

[146] Even thought there was no guarantee that the referendum results were going to be implemented, Kurds were thrilled to see that Iraqi Kurds had the opportunity to express their demands peacefully in an open referendum.

[147] Population in 2020: 45,000

[148] Population in 2020: 414,000

Event	City	Time & Place
Demonstrations in Solidarity with Kobani's Resistance against the Islamic State (2014)	Baneh	October 9 & 10, 2014
	Bijar	October 10 – Shahrdari Crossroad
	Bukan	October 8 & 9 – Farmandari Square
	Dehgolan	October 9 & 10 – Sa'at Square
	Ilam	October 12 – Koudak Park
	Javanroud	October 8 & 14 – Mohammad Ali Beyg Square
	Kamyaran	October 10
	Kermanshah	October 9, 10, & 13 – Razi University & Keshvari Boulvard
	Mahabad	October 7 & 8 – Chiwar Chira (Shahrdari) Square
	Mariwan	October 8, 9 & 10 The Main Crossroad
	Paveh	October 9
	Piranshahr	October 8 – Jomhouri Islami Square
	Rabat	October 7 & 8
	Rawansar	October 9 & 10 – Sarab Park
	Sanandaj	October 8, 9 & 10 – Eqbal (Azadi) Square
	Saqqez	October 8, 9 & 10 – Mawlawi Kurd Park
	Sardasht	October 8 – Sarchawi Square
	Sarpolzahab	October 14
	Urmia	October 9 & 12
Demonstrations Celebrating Iraqi Kurdistan's Independence Referendum (2017)	Baneh	September 25, 2017
	Bukan	September 22 & 25 – Sheli Park
	Javanroud	September 25
	Kamyaran	September 25
	Mahabad	September 25 – Chiwar Chira (Shahrdari) Square
	Mariwan	September 24 & 25
	Piranshahr	September 25
	Rawansar	September 25
	Sanandaj	September 25 – Eqbal (Azadi) Square
	Saqqez	September 25 – Mawlawi Kurd Park
	Sardasht	September 25

Table 5.2. Time and place of the demonstrations in Iranian Kurdistan in 2014 & 2017.

class, and political orientation. The demonstrators, however, were more likely to be young and middle-aged, male and (college) educated. The demonstrations also took place despite the fact that Kurdish political parties are banned in Iran and their members and supporters are unable to organize openly. The Kurdish parties, nonetheless, are active clandestinely.[149]

Fear of state retaliation particularly affected students, government employees, and women. Many students feared that participation in the demonstrations could hurt their future employment prospects (interview: Awat, 2019; Ferhad, 2018).[150] Most government employees did not participate in the demonstrations out of fear of losing their jobs. The state's ideological surveillance office[151] monitors government employees and punishes them in case any form of overt Kurdish activism is detected (interview: Arez, Rojin, 2019). Women's disempowered position in Iranian law and society made them particularly vulnerable to state violence. One female interviewee emphasized: "The costs that people would have to pay [for their activism] are high, which makes people, especially women, think twice before going to the streets" (interview: Jina, 2019).

Fear of government retaliation extends beyond students, government employees and women to include the larger Kurdish population. One interviewee asserted: "I know people who do not have anyone in their family working for the government, but they still don't participate in demonstrations fearing that the government may cut their monthly subsidies" (interview: Arez,

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[149] None of the interviewees expressed affiliation with any parties.

[150] Employment opportunities in Kurdistan are already quite low, due to the Iranian government's discriminatory practices (see Moradi et al., 2022).

[151] *Gozinesh*, literally meaning "selection," is an office within Iran's Ministry of Intelligence whose job is to ensure that candidates to government offices are ideologically committed to the Islamic Republic and its "divine" leadership. The bureau continues to monitor the employees' loyalty after their employment.

2019). Such fears have been aggravated by the chronic economic precarity that has persisted in Kurdistan for decades, forcing many to rely on meager food rations and subsidies.[152] Despite fear and intimidations, thousands, including many women and students, participated in the demonstrations (interview: Soma, Zagros, 2019).

Pervasive state securitization in Kurdistan also obstructed or minimized organizing before the demonstrations, further lowering the number of participants. Organizing mostly took place on social media, especially encrypted applications such as the Telegram, especially in September 2017. Facebook played a less significant role and was mostly used by diaspora users since its more 'open' interface made it less safe for users in Iranian Kurdistan to openly call for demonstrations. Many did not know that the demonstrations were happening. One interviewee said that she just happened to be on the streets and simply joined the demonstrations there (interview: Rojin, 2019). Elsewhere, many found out about the demonstrations through face-to-face interactions and word of mouth (interview: Arez, 2019). Furthermore, 'the spontaneous form of the demonstrations reduced people's sense of security, as many were concerned that, with no organization in charge of organizing, the demonstrations could go any direction and turn violent' (interview: Jiyar, 2019). Such concerns were exacerbated by the fact that security forces had repeatedly resorted to violence, including live ammunitions, to suppress Kurdish demonstration in previous years (interview: Awat, Azad, Lidiya, Zagros, 2019).

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[152] For a general overview of Kurdistan's economic marginalization, see Aghajanian (1983), Amirahmadi & Atash (1987), and Noorbakhsh (2002).

5.1.2. During the Demonstrations

During the demonstrations, the Iranian state's securitization was conspicuous. The state effectively militarized Kurdish cities by deploying rows of armed IRGC, anti-riot 'Special Guards,' police, and military vehicles (interview: Arez, Awat, Azad, Jiyar, Rojin, 2019; Şilan, 2018; Sharafedin, 2017). By flexing its oppressive arm and occupying strategic streets, the Iranian state aimed to intimidate, suppress, and control the demonstrations. An interviewee recounted: "Security forces had established themselves in various parts of the town with full security gear, anti-riot vehicles, equipment, and weapons. The regime had amassed the terrifying black-clothes special forces that were patrolling the town, street by street" (interview: Arez, 2019). At times, securitization was so pervasive that the security forces were even proportionately larger than the crowds, rendering the demonstrators largely subdued and muted (interview: Azad, 2019). From a certain point, however, the crowds became too large for the security forces to control by force and the security forces decided to step back (interview: Rojin, Azad, 2019), fearing that cracking down on demonstrations could produce the opposite effect of intensifying the protests (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001). This was especially the case in larger cities. One interviewee from Sanandaj said:

> There were many police forces. At the beginning, there were not a lot of demonstrators, so the police presence was felt very strongly. Heavy police presence made it difficult for people to express their mind. At the beginning, the police stayed far from us. Then, when the crowd grew, the police became fierce and tense. Then the crowd grew even more, and the police were vastly outnumbered. As the security forces saw that they could no longer control us, they were looking at us with disdain (interview: Rojin, 2019).

The large crowds overwhelmed the security forces, compelling them to keep some distance from the crowds and avoid taking drastic measures. The demonstrators also cautiously avoided provoking security forces, keeping the demonstrations generally peaceful (interview: Arez, Awat, Azad, Hemin, Jiyar, Lidiya, Rojin, 2019; Şilan, 2018).

Even though the demonstrations were generally peaceful, in many cases demonstrators were beaten, dispersed and detained (Sharafedin, 2017). In Meriwan, for example, "the security forces suppressed the demonstrations and used tear gas to scatter the crowd" (interview: Jiyar, 2019). There were also IRGC forces throughout the town, beating, scattering, and arresting the crowd that had gathered on Wednesday, October 8, 2014, on the first day of demonstrations in solidarity with Kobani (kurdpa, 2014). Similarly, several people were injured, and a few others were detained for interrogation during the referendum demonstrations (interview: Arez, 2019). According to many social media users, security forces arrested at least 13 demonstrators in the town of Javanroud (Jiwanro) on the evening of September 25, 2017. The security forces particularly reacted strongly when demonstrators during the referendum demonstrations in Mahabad, Meriwan, and Sanandaj (interview: Jina, 2019; Sharafedin, 2017) raised the Kurdish flag, a symbol of Kurdish identity that is banned in Iran. In Mahabad, Runak Aghaey, a Kurdish demonstrator (Figure 5. 2), was arrested and sentenced to six months in prison for raising the Kurdish flag during the demonstrations on September 25, 2017 (kurdistanhumanrights, 2018). In some cases, "Security forces were suppressing anyone showing [even] a slight sign of happiness with the referendum. They were even intimidating those honking in their cars" (interview: Arez, 2019). Another interviewee recalled his narrow escape during the referendum demonstrations in Seqiz: 'I remember two security vehicles fired warning shots in the air. People dispersed, but I got stuck. One of the soldiers, who was speaking in Kurdish, let me go. He could have arrested me and turned me over, instead' (interview: Awat, 2019).

To resist arrests, demonstrators resorted to the effective use of central places. One interviewee from Meriwan said: "if security forces were cracking down at *Shebreng Intersection*, for example, people were moving to *Bawereshi Intersection*. People were constantly moving

from one street to the other until 4 am" (interview: Arez, 2019). Demonstrators also used time to their advantage by gathering in larger numbers during the late hours in the evening. The natural cover of the darkness enabled participants to express themselves more openly, with crowds reaching their peak around 7 to 8 pm (interview: Mardin, 2019).

5.1.3. After the Demonstrations

In the days and weeks following the demonstrations, the Iranian state's securitization measures continued by arresting demonstrators, and harassing their families. 'Security forces used a network of "plainclothes" informants to infiltrate into the crowds and identify activists to arrest them later. According to the United Nation's human rights report, "cheering for the results of the referendum held in neighbouring Iraqi Kurdistan in September 2017" was among principal causes of arrest for 1,828 Kurds that were held in Iranian prisons in October 2017 (UNHRC Annual Report, 2018: p. 11). In Seqiz, security forces arrested around 100 people, keeping most of them for days without any charges against them' (interview: Awat, Azad, 2019). Kidnapping

and forced disappearance are also common. A demonstrator from Meriwan explained how security forces kidnapped him on the street days after the independence referendum:

> The time that I was abducted on the street, I was with my aunt when a civilian car stopped in front of me. One stepped out of the car and asked me: Mr. ------? As soon as I shook hands with him, he pulled me into the car with force. I just had that much time to tell my aunt that I had been detained. The man just said, "you are arrested." He did not even say that he was an intelligent agent or anything. Others in the car all had masks on. I was about to go to Tehran in about an hour. My aunt has MS, which gets worse with stress and shock. The interrogator, who had gone to my home and had come back to see me, told me: "Something bad has happened to your aunt." They told me that my aunt had a stroke, and they were going to release me soon to go and see her if I was going to fill out and sign a form that they gave me. They do anything to scare you. They even threatened me with terminating my education. They had gone to the door of my university's president at 12 am, urging him to dismiss me. They had wanted to give other students a warning by making a 'lesson' out of my case. They were threatening me "we will not let you finish your studies," even though it was my last semester. They were also telling me that even after graduation, they would not let me do anything (interview: Arez, 2019).

Similarly, in Sanandaj, security forces cracked down on the demonstrators. Within a week after the Kobani demonstrations, more than fifty demonstrators, including two prominent female poets, were summoned and interrogated by the city's branch of the Ministry of Intelligence (kurdpa, 2014). One interviewee recalled:

> A week after the Kobani demonstrations, we heard that the house of a relative of ours had been raided, and their son was arrested and sent to jail on charges of cooperating with Kurdish parties. An 18-years old woman had also been captured. The security forces had given no reason for her arrest. Allegedly, she was part of a gathering that had read an announcement in support of Kobani at the *Eqbal Sqaure*. I was angry and sad. She was innocent (interview: Rojin, 2019).

Government officials banned funerals for the Kurdish volunteers who had been killed by the Islamic State in Syria intimidated and arrested the families of the fallen volunteers. In at least two cases, security forces arrested the mothers of the volunteers who had died defending Kobani (interview: Rojin, 2019).

5.1.4. Variations Across Space and Time

Despite the heavy securitization of Kurdistan, before, during, and after the demonstrations in 2014 and 2017, the security response to the Kurdish demonstrations showed considerable variation across time and space. In general, security forces were more concentrated in major cities (interview: Arez, Kardo, Rojin, Azad, 2019). The type of demonstrations also directly affected relations between the Iranian security forces and the Kurdish crowds. 'The Iranian government showed considerable tolerance toward the pro-Kobani demonstrations. It seemed that the authorities were content with protests extremist, Wahhabi Sunni Islam' (interview: Awat, 2019). By comparison, security forces were much more likely to react aggressively to the 2017 referendum demonstrations (interview: Arez, 2019). The Iranian state saw the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum as a serious threat to its own legitimacy in Kurdistan.

In addition to deploying harsh, oppressive measures, the Iranian state's securitization also manifested itself in the form of 'soft' strategies of crowd management. Most notably, state security officials adopted a more lenient approach on the third day of the demonstrations for Kobani.[153] In places such as Meriwan, Sanandaj, and Dehgolan, the government even tried to take the initiative, announcing demonstrations after the Friday prayers (interview: Sirwan, 2019). These government-approved gatherings were attended by governors, mayors, city council members, members of the parliament, and other state officials (asriran, 2014). The more relaxed security situation for the Kobani demonstrations, especially in smaller towns such as Dehgolan,

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[153] The demonstrations occurred on October 8, 9, and 10, 2014.

allowed more diverse crowds to participate in the demonstrations, including seniors, families and children. One interviewee said:

> There were all sorts of people, teachers, shopkeepers, even members of the City Council, who were actually leading the crowd. Seeing those officials, people could say, "so it is safe to participate." And students seeing their teachers, they were joining them. Even the traffic police were helping manage the traffic, telling drivers to use other routes, and preventing demonstrators from blocking the streets (interview: Kardo, 2019).

In adopting these measures, state officials partly sought to control the crowds (see Storey, 2020b: p. 163), but also remedy their strict crackdown on the first two days of the demonstrations. Sensing the symbolic and emotional power of Kobani's resistance, security officials also aimed to prevent the further spread of the demonstrations. Moreover, state officials were attempting to build legitimacy among the Kurdish population by presenting the state as sympathetic to the Kurdish resistance in Syria. Despite the state's efforts, most people boycotted the state-staged gatherings, except for a small group of regime affiliates' (interview: Arez, Jiyar, 2019). Even in smaller towns, the state's tolerance for the Kobani demonstrations had clear limits. As one interviewee from the town of Dehgolan said, "Toward the end of the demonstrations, some of the teachers wanted to tell the crowd about Rojava, but the security forces prevented them from doing so" (interview: Kardo, 2019). This shows that the officials were only interested in showing a superficial sympathy with the Kurdish resistance against IS in Syria, while preventing the events to increase the general public's awareness of the struggle.

Despite the limited tolerance for the Kobani demonstrations, the state's pervasive security measures affected every aspect of the demonstrations. As one interviewee put it:

> Everything here has a security dimension, which aims to restrict activism. There is a security atmosphere in people's unconscious that constantly causes them to be afraid. The goal of this security system is to make sure that people control themselves, even when there is no actual surveillance mechanism to watch them (interview: Arez, 2019).

Indeed, the Iranian state's decades-long securitization has arguably produced a sense of suffocation in the collective Kurdish psyche. As my interviewees made clear, the desire to counter this securitization provided a powerful psychological impetus, encouraging many to participate in the demonstrations, despite the heavy presence of security forces and intimidation. The demonstrations provided an opportunity to protest, even indirectly, against years of 'repeated suppression and decades of discontent that has afflicted the Kurdish nation' (interview: Lidiya, 2019). Interviewees often expressed the joy of breaking this sense of suppression and suffocation with expressions like: "I felt liberated" or "I felt that I was not alone; I belonged to a larger family" (interview: Rojin, 2019; Şilan, 2018). Thus, occupying the streets, even though momentarily, was crucial to the demonstrators' expression of identity and production of territory. Nevertheless, the state's securitization meant that demonstrators had to resort to certain symbolic tactics to protect themselves while expressing their identity—an identity that is inextricably territorial, with Kurdistan as the central focus of attention. In the following section, I elaborate on how the demonstrators' use of innovative, symbolic, and embodied tactics played into this process.

5.2. Territory: Indigenous Discursive Resources

Kurdish demonstrators frequently drew on indigenous discursive resources to construct territory by articulating a collectively imagined space (Delaney, 2005: pp. 17-18). Embedded in the demonstrators' slogans, such discursive resources grounded Kurdish identity within the contours of an imagined Kurdish territory (interviews: Arez, Awat, Azad, Jina, Soma, 2019; Ferhad, Şilan, 2018), whose imprecise (Sheyholislami, 2011) contours challenge the Iranian state's normative territoriality (Jongerden, 2017). Crucially, the Kurds' indigenous discursive resources operated simultaneously with their embodied practices, helping negotiate the state's

securitization strategies by avoiding explicit demands for territorial autonomy and self-determination.

The two keywords of 'Rojhelat' and 'Kurdistan,' along with indigenous Kurdish place names and language, emerged as key discursive resources that demonstrators deployed in their slogans. On its face, Rojhelat means 'east.' Situated within the Kurdish geopolitical imagination, however, it refers to Iranian Kurdistan, that is the eastern part of the divided Kurdish homeland. Rojhelat is an indigenous territorial construct that voices the Kurds' opposition to the (post)colonial states' partition and domination of Kurdistan.[154] In other words, Kurds use Rojhelat as a discursive tactic to avoid enunciating 'Iranian Kurdistan,' and by implication, refuse recognizing the Iranian control over Kurdistan (reference removed for review). Similarly, Kurds use the terms Bakur (north), Başur (south), and Rojava (west) to refer to parts of Kurdistan under the control of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, respectively (see Hoffman & Matin, 2021; Jongerden, 2017). Since 2012 the latter has gained near-universal recognition (Bengio, 2017: 79).

Kurds have also used Rojhelat, Bakur, Başur, and Rojava to counter essentialist narratives of divisiveness: the general belief that the Kurds have failed to unite due to their internal divisions. This discourse of "Kurdish disunity" deems Kurds as essentially and exceptionally divided, while it fails to recognize that almost all "nations" have experienced disunity (Bengio, 2017). The divisiveness narrative thus tends to normalize the Kurds' geopolitical subjugation by concealing the effects of international boundaries and the normative territorial force of the state system that have inhibited the development of a unified Kurdish

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[154] See below for how demonstrators used the term in their slogans.

national homeland (Vali, 1998). Despite these limitations, the majority of the Kurds and most outside observers concur that the Kurds' linguistic and religious diversity has not undermined their collective consciousness as a people (van Bruinessen, 1992: p. 34).

'Rojhelat' and 'Kurdistan' are not banned by Iranian law, nor could the security forces suppress the crowds simply for using such words in their slogans. Unlike its Turkish counterpart, the Iranian state has not explicitly banned the word 'Kurdistan.' Nevertheless, the Iranian state's official cartography truncates Kurdistan to the province of the same name, Persianized as 'Kordestan,' which covers only one of the four provinces that Kurds consider as Kurdistan (Hassanpour, 1992: p. 8; MacDonald, 2007: p. 182; see Figure 3.2). As a discursive resource and tactic, Rojhelat enabled Kurdish demonstrators to reclaim 'eastern Kurdistan,' resisting the state-sanctioned colonial identity of 'Kordestan' and its political-administrative (b)ordering (Mignolo, 2005). Pronouncing Rojhelat also allowed the demonstrators to establish semantic, emotional, cross-border Kurdish connections to create a larger 'imaginary space' (Jansen, 2001; McNeill, 2004), a decolonial 'space of struggle, a counter-geography' (Zaragocin, 2018), an alternative geopolitical imagination (Casier, 2011).

The indigenous terms also allowed demonstrators to counter the state's securitization policies. Since Iranian security agencies explicitly warned demonstrators against using "anti-revolutionary"[155] and "nationalistic" slogans (kurdpa, 2014), the Kurds' indigenous slogans served as discursive proxies that averted crackdown by avoiding direct criticism of the state. As such, the indigenous discourses were crucial in the demonstrators' embodied practices. Below, I

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[155] Since the Islamic Republic considers itself the rightful heir of the 1979 revolution, it labels the opposition as "anti-revolutionary."

dissect, contextualize, and analyze the territorial connotations of some of the most repeated slogans, which I have organized under two major categories: slogans that emphasize Rojhelat and Kurdistan, and those that deploy indigenous place names and language.

5.2.1. Geographic Lexicon: Rojhelat & Kurdistan

"*Bakur, Başur, Rojhelat; One struggle, one country.*" Specifically referring to Turkish Kurdistan (Bakur), Iraqi Kurdistan (Başur), and Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat), this slogan affirms the bonds among different parts of Kurdistan. Demonstrators further affirm this connection by proclaiming, in the second part of the slogan, that the Kurdish movement is about one struggle, waged to liberate one country, Kurdistan. According to the interviews and online data, this slogan found concrete, embodied manifestations when in 2014 Kurdish civilians from Turkey dismantled border fences with bare hands to cross into Syrian Kurdistan and help the civilians besieged in Kobani (interview: Ferhad, 2018); the *peshmerga* forces from Iraqi Kurdistan crossed Turkish Kurdistan to support Kobani (interview: Awat, 2019); many Kurdish volunteers from Iran and Turkey smuggled themselves across borders to reach the frontlines against IS in Syria and Iraq (interview: Awat, Rojin, 2019); columns of Kurdish fighters from Turkey and Syria marched toward Shingal (Sinjar) to help the Yezidis against IS; and when thousands took to the streets in Iranian Kurdistan to react to the events in Syria and Iraq. In all these occasions, the territorial idea of Kurdistan was animated through the Kurds' deployment of Bakur, Başur, Rojhelat, and Rojava as indigenous discursive resources.

"*Kobani is Rojhelat; Kurdistan is one country.*" This slogan and its embedded indigenous lexicon articulate the demonstrators' territorial imagination. Rojhelat, and its counterparts, function as discursive resources and tactics, enabling the Kurds to resist and reject the legitimacy of the states that control their homeland (reference removed for review). This slogan also signals

solidarity in the sense that it proclaims Kobani to be part of Rojhelat, while in fact Kobani is in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). Demonstrators used solidarity as a discursive tactic and a geographical strategy to connect west (Rojava) and east (Rojhelat) of Kurdistan, voicing a Kurdish territorial imagination. This yearning for transcending borders is made clear in the second part of the slogan that says: 'Kurdistan is one country'—expressing collective territorial imagination, constructing a cross-border space and challenging (post)colonial state (b)order (Jongerden, 2017).

"Kobani is part of Kurdistan; We do not let outsiders take it." Resisting IS's takeover of Kobani is this slogan's primary meaning. In the collective Kurdish psyche, however, the slogan connotes broader references to resisting the (post)colonial states that have divided and dominated Kurdistan. Here, Kobani is transformed into a discursive resource and battleground in which Kurdish demonstrators contest the occupying states' territorial borders.

"Long live referendum; Long live Kurdistan." This slogan ties the success of the referendum to the destiny of Kurdistan, suggesting that demonstrators view the outcome of the referendum as crucial to the Kurdish anti-colonial struggle. The following slogans, "*Freedom*" and "*Congratulations*," should also be analyzed within the context of the Kurdish movement's territorial underpinning. As such, 'Freedom' expresses a vision for a Kurdish territory that is free from state domination. 'Congratulations' indicates the Iranian Kurds' aspiration to practice self-determination, a right that has been swallowed within the Westphalian territorial logic (Bauder & Mueller, 2021) of the Iranian state. In the collective Kurdish mind, there is no ambiguity that 'Kurdistan' in this context refers to the Kurdish territory in west Asia. Nevertheless, the demonstrators could justify the slogan by claiming that 'Kurdistan' referred to Iraqi Kurdistan,

where the referendum was held. After all, the Iranian state authorities do not officially recognize 'Kurdistan' as a distinct national territory.

5.2.2. Place Names & Language

In addition to geographic lexicon, demonstrators drew on indigenous place names and language to construct territory. The slogan "*Kobani is not alone, Sinne supports it*" is a prominent example, in which demonstrators pledge solidarity and support for Kobani's resistance. In pledging their support for Kobani, the residents of Sanandaj use the indigenous Kurdish name of their city, Sinne(dij). In doing so, they deploy Sinne as a discursive resource to reclaim the city's identity, position it within Kurdish territory, and destabilize the Iranian state's colonial geopolitical narrative (Ó Tuathail, 1996a), reflected in the city's Persianized name, Sanandaj. Symbolically, reclaiming 'Sinne' mirrors that of reclaiming 'Kobani.' Today's near-universal use of 'Kobani' is the result of the Kurds' resistance to the Syrian state's systematic efforts to rename the town as 'Ain al-Arab.' This slogan also further materializes territory by utilizing the rhetorical tactic of 'attributing a human feature to an abstract entity' (Wodak et al., 2009: p. 43). Connecting Sanandaj with Kobani, the slogan voices the Kurdish resistance to the state (b)orders that separate the Kurdish people. The slogan was also widely used in other cities across Iranian Kurdistan, including Kirmashan (Kermanshah).

Demonstrators also used chants in the *Kurmanji* variation of Kurdish as discursive resources.[156] The Kurmanji words were simple enough that Iranian Kurds, largely non-Kurmanji speakers, could understand. Signaling solidarity with the Kurmanji-speaking Kobani, the slogans aimed to build affinity with geographical imaginations (Jansen, 2001). Furthermore,

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[156] e.g., Bijî *berxwedana YPG/YPJ*, meaning 'Long-live the resistance of YPG/YPJ.'

demonstrators creatively utilized 'Kurdish colors'—red, yellow, and green—in writing banners. The significance of using Kurdish colors as a discursive tactic becomes clear given that states have imprisoned Kurdish activists for using Kurdish colors (Goodman, 2004).

Indigenous discursive resources, embedded in slogans, lexicon such as 'Rojhelat' and 'Sinne,' along with Kurdish words and colors crucially co-produced the demonstrators' embodied practices, enabling them to construct anti-colonial and alter-geopolitical territory. Such discursive resources articulated alternative power/knowledge formations (Klak & Myers, 1997), that challenged the Iranian state's normative territorial discourse and its naturalized claims to space (Jansen, 2001). Through using indigenous discursive resources, demonstrators made intelligible and mobilized a sense of belonging (Routledge, 1996), while speaking indirectly to power (Scott, 2008) by avoiding direct confrontation with security forces (interview: Rojin, 2019).

5.3. Territory: Embodied and Emplaced

Kurdish demonstrators in Iranian Kurdistan constructed alter-geopolitical and anti-colonial territory through symbolic tactics performed in embodied practices and in iconic places. Kurdish clothes and dancing emerged as prominent embodied performances through which the demonstrators constructed territory (Del Biaggio, 2015) by ascribing identity to space (Rovisco, 2017). Kurdish cities' strategic, iconic places became sites of constructing territory and resisting state suppression. Such embodied and emplaced practices animated Kurdish territorial imagination as cultural and symbolic repertoires associated with them transcend the immediate localities of their performance to bond demonstrators to a larger Kurdish homeland. The demonstrators' symbolic tactics also enabled them to avoid direct confrontation with security forces, thus turning the state's suppressive power productive.

5.3.1. Embodied Territory: Kurdish Clothes

Putting on Kurdish clothes served as a prominent embodied tactic, enabling

demonstrators to construct territory, and resist the state's securitization of space. Such embodied

and symbolic tactics were subtle enough to avoid direct confrontations with security forces, but

visible enough to imbue space with collective meanings and signal solidarity among participants.

One interviewee recounted how they dressed in Kurdish clothing to convey symbolic meanings,

while also resisting the state's securitization in downtown Mariwan:

> As we were anticipating the [Iraqi Kurdistan's independence] referendum, my friends and
> I discussed ways in which we could express our happiness. We could not just go on the
> streets and shout, cry out. We didn't want to be arrested. But we were so happy that we
> couldn't stay home either. So, we decided to use symbols to express our collective
> happiness. We decided to put on Kurdish dress in public for four consecutive days, even
> though it was during the *Moharam*.[157] Putting on Kurdish clothes in public was especially
> meaningful and palpable for women, because as you know, in our society women do not
> go to public spaces in Kurdish clothes, except for special days like *Newroz*. We also
> decided to carry red roses with us as we were going to downtown together. Since our
> enemies were in front of us with guns, we resorted to symbols to express our emotions,
> happiness, confidence, power, and authority, our Kurdishness (interview: Lidiya, 2019).

Rojin from Sanandaj pointed to the significance of many women dressed in Kurdish

clothing celebrating the referendum (interview: Rojin, 2019). Even for men, wearing Kurdish

clothes became a symbolic statement of identity. Şilan said that on a normal day in Sanandaj, her

brother never put on Kurdish clothes, "but he went and borrowed from his friend, saying that he

definitely wanted to go to the demonstrations in Kurdish clothes" (interview: Şilan, 2018).

Emphasizing the symbolic significance of Kurdish clothes, Azad said: "There were many more

people with Kurdish clothes on than usual. On a regular day, not many people in Saqqez put on

Kurdish clothes. But many, women, and men, put on Kurdish clothing specifically for the

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[157] The annual Shi'a mourning ritual that commemorates the 'martyrdom' of Shi'a Imams. The Islamic Republic
uses the commemoration to impose sadness on the society and prohibit expressions of happiness.

demonstrations" (interview: Azad, 2019). Similarly, in Mahabad, 'many young men, and especially women, wore Kurdish clothes to show their support for the referendum' (interview: Hêmin, 2019). Kurdish clothes thus became symbolic performances of belonging (Evans, 2020: p. 181), in the repertoire of embodied practices (Alexander, 2011) deployed by demonstrators to enact solidarity and resist the state's violence (Butler, 2015), 'manifesting emotions that were otherwise impossible to express openly' (interview: Jiyar, 2019).

Similar to the demonstrations' cross-border ethos, Kurdish clothes symbolically connected the Iranian Kurds to the larger Kurdish cultural repertoire in the partitioned Kurdistan, challenging the state's (post)colonial borders and resisting its homogenization of space. In putting on Kurdish clothes, Kurdish women were doubly motivated. First, they were resisting the state's masculine power (Brown, 1992), which has particularly targeted Kurdish women's dress to impose the uniformity of the state-sanctioned, dark, and drab cloaks, known as 'chador.' As such, brightly colored Kurdish dress embodied Kurdish women's symbolic resistance to the state's strategies of spatial homogenization and its symbology. Second, Kurdish women were asserting themselves within and against a male-dominated national movement in which women have frequently been relegated to the position of passive observers or victims (Mayer, 2004; interviews: Jina, Lidiya, Soma, 2019). Against the state's securitization of space, Kurdish clothes offered demonstrators relatively safe means of 'appearing in bodily form' in public as 'people' (Butler, 2015), physically reclaim space, and symbolically demarcate territory.

5.3.2. Embodied Territory: Kurdish Dance

Dancing was another embodied tactic through which demonstrators symbolically constructed territory and challenged the state's securitization. 'In Mahabad, many demonstrators resorted to dancing to avoid using direct slogans and possible clashes with security forces.

Through dancing, people both conveyed their happiness with the referendum and affirmed their *kurdayeti*' (interview: Hêmin, 2019). A keyword in the Kurdish resistance, 'kurdayeti' refers to the Kurds' consciousness of their identity and their engagement in practices that uphold their identity, seek to liberate Kurdish land, resist state oppression, and promote Kurdish culture and life (see Gourlay, 2018). Kurdayeti is distinctly embodied and territorial, since at its core it aims to decolonize Kurdistan. Similarly, in Mariwan, Sanandaj, Kermanshah, Baneh, Saqqez, and Dehgolan, demonstrators performed kurdayeti through dancing and singing (interview: Jina, Şilan, Azad, Kardo, 2018; 2019).

The embodied symbolism and emotions embedded in dancing and singing constructed territory by giving meaning to space (Jansen, 2001: p. 40), helped boost the demonstrators' morale and solidarity against security forces' threats (Aminzade & McAdam, 2001: p. 43), and disrupted the normative power of the state's control over space (Koopman, 2015: p. 344). Specific qualities of Kurdish dance enable clear territory-making powers, as it involves participants holding hands or locking arms, as large as a circle formed by all the participants' bodies linked arm to arm to form a moving organism. In addition to its historic significance in the Kurdish national mythology of war and peace, Kurdish dance signifies and promotes community and solidarity, bringing together bodies that may otherwise never connect.

Where security forces cracked down on demonstrations, Kurds resorted to symbolic, embodied tactics. In Saqqez, Paveh, and Javanroud, residents distributed sweets and chocolates to celebrate the referendum (interview: Azad, 2019). An interviewee from Mariwan said:

> Where we live [in downtown], we couldn't demonstrate. But we expressed our happiness by honking in our cars, distributing sweets in the streets, and congratulating one another. Even some school children were chanting '*Long live referendum*' as they were leaving their classes. These expressions of happiness showed that people in Rojhelat react to the events in any of the regions that are considered as Kurdistan (interview: Jiyar, 2019).

Despite resorting to symbolic tactics, demonstrators were still harassed by security forces. Recalling how security forces could not tolerate their symbolic activism, Lidiya from Mariwan said:

> Even though we were only walking down the street in Kurdish clothing, the security forces still stopped us. An officer grabbed the hand of one of the men among us. I went forward and asked the officer why he was stopping him. The officer said, "What's going on that you are walking down the street like this?" I asked: "*What is wrong with walking down the street? Isn't that what streets are for? Don't we have the right to walk down the street?!*" I did not allow the officer to take our friend (interview: Lidiya, 2019).

The symbolic form of activism thus made it difficult for the officers to make a case against the Kurdish 'walker-activists' (Jansen, 2001), as "authority prefers a type of resistance that opposes it directly, because it is the type of resistance that is easy for authority to see, suppress, and demonstrate its failure" (Pile, 1997: p. 3). The officers, however, could not simply arrest the activists for wearing Kurdish clothes and walking down the street, even though the Kurdish walker-activists were visibly celebrating the referendum. In this context, even walking became a political act (Jansen, 2001), an alternative way of making territory (Mason, 2021) through using bodies as 'intimate spaces of identity expression' (Mountz, 2018: p. 762) and '*doing* geopolitics' (Koopman, 2011, emphasis original). Thus, dressing in Kurdish clothing became a cornerstone in the Iranian Kurds' anti-colonial, alter-geopolitical construction of territory.

5.3.3. Emplaced Territory: Strategic Iconic Places

The demonstrators' embodied tactics of constructing territory assembled around specific places in each city, using such places' unique attributes, including their iconic landmarks, historical importance, and central location (Agnew, 1987; Cresswell, 1996). Such places' symbolic power turned them into prime sites for demonstrators to occupy, articulate their collective territorial imagination, and challenge the state's control (Rovisco, 2017). Eqbal

Square[158] in Sanandaj, Chiwar-Chira Square in Mahabad, and Hallo Square in Saqqez are notable examples (interview: Arêz, Azad, Hêmin, Rojin, 2019; Şilan, 2018).

5.3.3.1. Eqbal Square in Sinne

As the main urban site in Sinne (Sanandaj), Eqbal (Azadi) Square affected the demonstrations in both concrete and symbolic ways. The square's plaza-like ground, combined with the seven adjoining streets, accommodated thousands of demonstrators that effectively disrupted car traffic for a large part of the city. The square's central location allowed the spontaneous demonstrations to quickly attract a sizable crowd, enabling demonstrators to occupy space with 'their bodies, their voices, and their banners' (Jansen, 2001: p. 40), territorializing it through forming swarms (Routledge, 1997). The growing size of the crowd gave them safety in numbers, enabling them to overpower the police (Butler, 2011; interview: Azad, 2019). An interviewee from Sanandaj said:

> At the beginning, heavy police presence made it difficult for people to express themselves. Then the crowd grew, and the police became tense and fierce. Then the crowd grew even more, and the police were vastly outnumbered. As the security forces saw that they could no longer control us, they were looking at us with disdain (interview: Rojin, 2019).

Symbolically, occupying Eqbal Square enabled the demonstrators to assert and produce their collective territorial imagination. The square's iconic statue, made by Hadi Ziyauddini, a prolific local artist, symbolizes freedom. The statue's body position, kneeling on one knee with its open arms pointing toward the sky, represents an unambiguous yearning for freedom. Most of the city's residents interpret the statue as a symbolic embodiment of their desire for freedom. Ziyauddini, nonetheless, has been able to astutely sell this statue to the authorities as a symbol of

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[158] The square is officially known as '*Azadi Square*' but almost everyone refers to the square with its local, historic name.

prayer, as the statue's open arms toward the sky could just as well be interpreted as a plea towards a divinity. Nonetheless, the statue can still represent a plea for free the city from the occupying and oppressive power of the Iranian state. It is with this symbolism in mind that one should interpret the scores of demonstrators that flocked to the statue's foot, with some climbing onto its base to hold their banners (Figure 5.3). Thus, 'the occupied square' became a powerful statement of demonstrators' resistance, a site of inscribing embodied meaning and power in place (Agnew, 1987; Cresswell, 1996) to a larger territory (Rovisco, 2017), and the symbolic epicenter of (alter-geo)political action (Butler, 2015: p. 126).

Figure 5.3. Kurdish demonstrators symbolically occupy Azadi (Eqbal) Square in Sanandaj, during the pro-Kobani demonstrations on October 9, 2014. Source: Facebook.

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Occupying *Eqbal Square* symbolized, the demonstrators' control of the city of Sanandaj, and by extension, Kurdistan. Historically, Sanandaj is the seat of *The Ardalans*, the last semi-independent Kurdish administration that ruled much of Iranian (and Iraqi) Kurdistan from 1168 until 1867, before it was toppled and replaced by central government's emissary (McDowall, 2004). For many Kurds, controlling the square, even briefly, was symbolically powerful, allowing them to express their identity in the city's most iconic place. The demonstrators' embodied tactics were emplaced, relying on the strategic and symbolic power embedded in certain places, enabling them to articulate and construct territory.

The embodied and symbolic tactics of the demonstrators were inseparably connected to their use of media and visual images, which were often enmeshed with affect and emotion. In the following chapter I investigate the ways in which affective and emotional use of media and visual images enabled users to produce collective imaginations of territory.

CHAPTER SIX:

Affective Territory

In Chapter Five I explained the Iranian Kurds' production of territory during two rounds of demonstrations in October 2014 supporting Kobani's resistance against the Islamic State (IS), and in September 2017 celebrating Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum. The analysis illustrated that the demonstrators deployed indigenous discourses and symbolic meanings embedded in Kurdish clothes and dance as embodied tactics that allowed them to produce collective imaginations of territory. Contextualizing the Kurdish demonstrations within the Iranian state's militarization of the Kurdish space and its securitization of Kurdistan, I further explained how the demonstrators' embodied tactics enabled them to avoid confrontation with the security forces. This chapter details the production of territory through the use of media and visual images during the 2014 and 2017 demonstrations.

6.1. Moving Images

The affective capacities of media and digital images were crucial to the production of Kurdish territorial (re)imaginations in 2014 and 2017. Images of the Kurdish resistance against the Islamic State (IS) and the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum effectively *moved* Iranian Kurdish users, both figuratively/viscerally and literally/physically (Figure 6.1). Following Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998), who have used the term 'move' to denote the power of visual images to prompt political action (p. 5), I use 'move' to signal the capacity of media and visual images to elicit affective and emotional responses among users.[159] Data from social media

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[159] See Pain (2009), for a similar use of the term 'move' in emotional and affective geographies.

posts, images, and comments, combined with interviews, help capture users' affective

movements. Then I draw on Foucauldian discourse analysis to explain the territory-making

capacities of such affective movements and the posts and visual images, contextualizing them

within the broader Kurdish geopolitics.

Figure 6.1. Kurdish demonstrators at Azadi (Eqbal) Square in Sanandaj flash the light from their cell phones, symbolically showing the significance of cell phone and social media in their movement on the street on September 25, 2017. Source: Facebook.

Functioning as conduits connecting users to the events' intensity (Carter & McCormack,

2010: p. 319), the media and digital images triggered numerous affective and emotional

experiences among Iranian Kurdish users (interview: Awat, Azad, Jiyar, Lidiya, Mardin, Rojin,

2019; Şilan, 2018). Citing their intense anticipation of the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence

referendum, many Kurdish users stated how their daily lives (eating, working, sleeping) were

affected by the events. An interviewee said: 'People felt *really close* to the independence

referendum. Although they had seen it in the media, but that closeness was at a level that you

could even see its bodily reactions in them' (interview: Mardin, 2019, emphasis original).

Discussing the general public mood in Iranian Kurdistan during the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum, another interviewee asserted: 'You could 'see'[160] the emotions in people's eyes, in their faces, lit with enthusiasm' (interview: Şilan, 2018). There was a strong connection between media imagery, affective bodily responses, and the imagination of Kurdistan as constructed through a series of events that felt 'very close' to the users in Iranian Kurdistan. The idea of 'closeness' here evokes Massey's relational conceptualization of space (2005), while also giving it a pronounced emotional/affective tone (Thien, 2005: pp. 452-453). In other words, affective capacities of visual images produce emotional imaginations of space that users felt and thought of as 'very close,' even though they were far, in cartesian terms. This emotional, relational understanding of space is foundational to the users' imagination of territory, as examined in this study.

The media visual images of Kobani's resistance (2014) and the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum (2017) incorporated a wide range of meanings.[161] In so far as the question of this research is concerned, however, I discuss in detail the significance of two recurring interrelated themes that emerged from the data (see Rose, 2016b: pp. 205-206), namely *bodies* and *resistance against borders*. Signifying sites and practices of territorial resistance, these two sets of themes constitute discursive formations (Foucault, 1973: pp. 37-38), which help explain the ways in which media and images informed the Kurdish users' emotional imagination of territory. To understand the symbolic and affective territory-making capacities of bodies and

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[160] Here, I wanted to be more loyal to the interviewee's description. But a less literal, but more accurate translation of 'see' would be 'perceive' or 'sense.' By making this statement, the interviewee was referring to the type of affective, intersubjective connection that does not involve exchanging words, but conveys meanings and emotions, nonetheless.

[161] Enumerating or explaining such a diversity of meanings is largely beyond the scope of this study.

resistance against borders, however, it is imperative to situate them within the intertextual

discursive networks that constitute the Iranian Kurdish geopolitics. This means that I analyze

images not simply for what 'is in them,' but rather for what they symbolize within the larger

discursive networks of meaning (Rose, 2016b). Applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to

media images is crucial to understanding their affective capacities to construct territory, i.e., their

geopolitical agency (Adams, 2013; Dittmer & Gray, 2010: p. 1673). Below, I first explain the

affective power of bodies that symbolized the Kurdish territorial struggle and animated its

imagination. Then I turn to acts of resistance against borders, examining their affective

constitution as embodied enactments of the wider Kurdish struggle against territorial partition

and occupation, embedded in the Kurdish geopolitical discourse.

6.2. Bodies as Sites of Resistance

Bodies, their capacities, limitations, circulations, relations, and associations are at the

center of much of the media images and textual commentary about the Kurdish movements in

2014 and 2017. Images of bodies—alive, injured, inanimate—were not only involved in evoking

sympathy and empathy, but they also crucially produced emotional connections among Kurds

separated by borders. Cross-border emotional connections animated Kurdistan as a collective

territorial imagination, a geopolitically dynamic territorial construct. Foundational to the bodies'

geopolitical agency and affective territoriality was the media affordances enabling bodies to be

fluid across space and time, being in multiple places at a single moment (Dittmer & Bos, 2019:

p. 167). The bodily struggles of the Kurdish civilians and fighters against the Islamic State (IS)

were reflected prominently in the users' engagement with visual images (interview: Soma,

Mardin, 2019). Recounting the affective connection with social media depictions of the fallen

Kurdish fighters from Kobani, one interviewee asserted:

I exactly remember that they were bringing back the bodies of a few Kurdish fighters to Kobani … Their families had come to receive them. At that moment, they were celebrating and dancing with joy, despite grief.[162] I watched the video many times. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I cried 10 times (interview: Ferhad, 2018).

Referring to the traumatic effects of seeing the Yezidi women who were taken as sex slaves by IS in 2014, another interviewee said: 'The screams of Kurdish women in Shingal (Sinjar) are still echoing in my ears' (interview: Lidyia, 2019). Lidiya continues by connecting the Shingal tragedy to the subsequent struggle in Kobani, the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the attacks against the Kurdish peshmerga by Iraqi forces. She argues that the trauma of these incidents has taken emotional tolls on Kurds in Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan), but they have also made them more resolute in their struggle for Kurdish liberation. Lidiya notes that many share the same thoughts and emotions about the events. In Lidiya's statement, the Kurdish women in Shingal and their tragedy are emblematic of the precarity of Kurdish geopolitics. The territorial imagination of Kurdistan simultaneously underpins and is reproduced by such traumatic incidents, the Kurdish resistance to them, and their mediated visual images. Pointing to the epistemological dimensions of the Kurdish solidarity movement in Rojhelat, Lidiya says: "It is true that in solidarity with other parts of Kurdistan, Rojhelat is in fact strategically making a case for its own identity and movement. But that is not all. There is also a genuinely emotional sense that moves everyone as Kurds (interview: Lidiya, 2019).

The images of the Kurdish fighters who died fighting IS were also shared on social media frequently, eliciting emotional responses from users. Recalling the affective impact of the media images, a research participant noted:

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[162] In doing so, the Kurds in Syria celebrate the life and accomplishments of their martyrs who died defending the people—hence the name of the main Kurdish fighting force, 'People's Protection Units,' knows as the YPG.

I got goosebumps when I saw a picture of Musa Antar,[163] or every time that I saw a picture of the female commander, Rojda Felat. Their level of spirit, morale, and convictions[164] really amazed me (interview: Sirwan, 2019).

Another interviewee discussed the emotional experience of seeing the image of a YPJ[165] fighter, saying: 'The photo of the fighter made me very emotional. It gave me goosebumps. She had held her old weapon firm while covered in mud' (interview: Kardo, 2019). The image elicited similar emotional responses from many Facebook users, who connected the fighter's struggle to the larger Kurdish struggle. In this and many similar instances, affect circulated and amplified across time and space, creating collective geopolitical imaginations (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: p. 121). The affective capacities of bodies enabled Iranian Kurdish users to create notions of territorial connection across international state borders. To reiterate the interviewee cited earlier, bodies resisting in faraway places 'felt very close.' Affect and emotion, thus, operate in the fluid spaces between bodies, including objects such as screens and visual images. This understanding defies any limited notion of ontological fixity or oppositional duality (Curti et al., 2011), suggesting that both affect-emotion and space-territory should be approached as relational.

An iconic image of the Kurdish resistance against IS that appeared repeatedly and triggered significant emotional response shows two YPJ fighters holding their rifles, one of them looking deeply and determinedly at the camera—and the viewer (Figure 6.2). To many users, the

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[163] A well-known Kurdish sniper defending Kobani. Musa is one of the most known heroes of Kobani, as many stories circulate on social media claiming that he had killed tens of IS fighters.

[164] Kurdish: *bîr u birwa*

[165] Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units), the all-female militia units fighting IS in Syria.

image symbolizes determination, resolve, and resistance, key words that recur frequently both in the written components of the posts, and in the interviewees' reflections. In one Facebook post

Figure 6.2. Two YPJ fighters holding their rifles. Source: PUKmedia

the image is accompanied by a piece of poetry by a young Kurdish poet. Inspired by the image, the poet vows to never allow the Kurdish homeland to fall to the 'forces of dark narrow ideology' (i.e., the Islamic State). Significantly, the poem invokes the Kurdish territorial imagination by referring to the partition of the homeland among four states. Similarly, a research participant highlighted the affective power of the image of Arin Mirkan, a YPJ fighter (interview: Ferhad, 2018). Arin became a hero, a symbol of the Kurdish resistance, in the fight to defend Kobani, when on October 5, 2014, she detonated herself to avoid being captured by IS, killing several IS combatants in the process (Shahvisi, 2021). Crucial to these images and their affective capacity was their circulation time in the early October 2014, when the besieged

Kobani faced an imminent threat of falling to IS. Thus, to understand the images and their production of affect, meaning, and space, it is crucial to account for the discursive context, including the spatial and temporal milieu, within which the images and users are situated.

6.2.1. Making Discursive Connections: Iranian Kurdish Female Peshmerga

The written texts and comments associated with Arin's image, the image of the two female fighters, and many similar images also contain many references that discursively connect the combat and determination of the YPJ fighters to the larger Kurdish liberation movement. Specifically, social media posts juxtaposed the resistance in Kobani in 2014 with the resistance in Iranian Kurdistan during the Iranian revolution and its following years (1979-1984).[166] Frequently users made discursive connections between the Kurdish women's resistance against IS to those of female peshmerga who fought (and continue to fight) the Islamic Republic. Such social media posts often use split-frame techniques to relate the struggles together. The discursive keyword here is '*jine pêshmerge*,' meaning female peshmerga, symbolizing a woman that simultaneously resists the state's oppression and occupation while also championing women's liberation and progressive social revolution. Many of such posts are shared by female users, often containing images of female peshmerga in Iranian Kurdistan, especially those who joined the Kurdish resistance against the Islamic Republic after the 1979 revolution. What is notable about these posts is that social media enables mixing together the digital images taken from the trenches in Syria and Iraq with older images from Iranian Kurdistan. Social media and digitization have given new lives to these historic images and the heroes that they embody.

The affective and emotional power of such images increased significantly as users added

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[166] See Chapter Three for the lasting impact of these struggles in the geopolitical discourse in Iranian Kurdistan.

a new layer of discursive meaning by combining them with art and digital technologies, such as

Kurdish resistance poetry and music. The written comments frequently incorporate resistance

poetry that have either been drawn from prominent Kurdish poets, or have been written by less-

known poets or ordinary users inspired by the Kurdish resistance against IS. One interviewee

asserted that the images of Arin Mirkan embedded in a resistance music video had gained over a

hundred retweets and many likes (interview: Ferhad, 2018). The point here, of course, is not

counting the number of 'retweets' or 'likes'—even though such digital metrics are important.

Instead, the key point is that images of the 'martyrs,' combined with resistance music, generate

immense affective power that connects bodies across state borders and creates collective

imaginations of territory. Social media also enabled the mutilated body of Arin and those of

many Kurdish heroes and 'martyrs' to connect to users in Iranian Kurdistan, to have a face, a

memory, and a profound geopolitical impact, long after their death (Adams, 2015 p. 399; Dittmer

& Bos, 2019: pp. 18-19; Tufekci, 2013: p. 862).

In drawing on resistance poetry and music, Kurdish users discursively connected the

Kurdish struggle in Syria and Iraq with both the larger Kurdish movement and with national

liberation and revolutionary movements, such as the concurrent resistance in Catalonia. One

post, for example, depicts the image of a Kurdish fighter clinching her AK-47, while the caption

provides a line from one of the most famous Kurdish resistance anthems that can be loosely

translated as: '*I give my life to support and protect your hand and weapon … my peshmerga

comrade*.' The same anthem, famously known as *My Peshmerga Comrade*,[167] was frequently

made as resistance music videos, montaging together frames of the struggle in Kobani (and

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[167] Kurdish: Ey Hevalî Pêshmerge

Rojava, in general) with those in other parts of Kurdistan, especially Iranian Kurdistan

(Rojhelat). Since '*Ey Hevalî Pêshmerge*' is gender neutral in Kurdish, such images equally

included male and female peshmerga fighters—with frequent emphasis on the latter to

acknowledge and encourage the resurging ideas of resistance among Kurdish women. Notably,

the lead singer of the original '*Ey Hevalî Pêshmerge*' is Merze Ferêqî, the late Kurdish singer, a

peshmerga herself and a prominent feminist artist. The resistance anthem encapsulates

revolutionary calls for the liberation of women—a pillar of the contemporary struggles in Kobani

and Rojava. Furthermore, to many Kurds in Iran the song is reminiscent of the Kurdish

resistance during the war that Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Republic, waged

against the Kurdish people in the early 1980s.

6.2.1.1. The Peshmerga Outfit and Kurdish Female Ethos

Discursively related to the images depicting the female peshmerga and YPJ fighters, is an

entire genre of images, showing civilian Iranian Kurdish women in male-style, peshmerga outfit.

The Kurdish New Year (*Newroz*) celebrations,[168] especially since 2014, constitute prominent

venues for women to wear the peshmerga outfit. As modes of dress can function as embodied

manifestations and productions of discourse (Müller, 2011), the Kurdish women wearing

peshmerga outfit is a performance of Kurdish identity situated within the broader Kurdish

geopolitical discourse. Specifically, by wearing peshmerga outfit, Kurdish women in Iranian

Kurdistan make symbolic discursive connections with both the ongoing Kurdish struggles in

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[168] The Newroz celebrations, and other examples that I have provided here, are complex events that include multiple practices, many of which are neither discursive nor involve affect and emotion. About those aspects this study has nothing to say. Instead, in analyzing the events and practices, I am interested in the intersection of discourse with affect and emotion in so far as they are mediated and produced through media and visual images and are incorporated in the production of territorial imaginations.

Syria and Iraq, as well as the enduring Kurdish women's resistance against the Islamic Republic. Discursively, Kurdish women putting on peshmerga outfits also signals their struggles to fully participate in the social and political life, pushing against the gendered boundaries of space.

This last point is discursively related to a recurring image of the rural Kurdish women who put on Kurdish male clothes as a more convenient outfit allowing them to perform various daily tasks at home and on farms. The largely young and educated urban Kurdish women wearing male-style outfit for celebrations also make symbolic statements about (re)living the life and ethos generally associated with Kurdish women in rural areas. These rural women are often known as hard-working mothers protecting their families' lives/livelihoods and nurturing the new generations, while also embodying Kurdish lifestyle and values. Notably, the lived experiences and direct observations/participation of most young urban Kurdish women in this type of gendered rural lifestyle is sparse or non-existent.[169] Nonetheless, the persona of the hard-working rural Kurdish woman continues to live in media and cultural productions, including several music videos. Such imagery of bucolic rural landscapes and harmonious lifestyle might at times be overtly romanticized, 'unrealistic,' and even oppressive, serving to normalize unequal gendered norms that condemn rural women to unfair divisions of labor at home and on farms. Nevertheless, such media imageries continue to be crucial components of the larger discursive formations that help (re)produce Kurdish identity and territorial imagination by emotionally (re)connecting bodies across time and space and establishing the Kurdish population's ecological and cultural connections to the ancestral land that has been occupied and dispossessed by the state. The interconnected images of Kurdish women in male-style peshmerga outfit and the rural

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[169] Largely due to successive waves of rural-urban migration that accelerated in the mid to late twentieth century (see Javan, 2001).

Kurdish women's ethos constitute key discursive components that connect the Kurdish struggles in Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat) with those in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava), Turkish Kurdistan (Bakur), and Iraqi Kurdistan (Başur). The discursive connection among these images, combined with the affective-emotional intensity of the Kurdish resistance (re)produced the Kurdish territorial imagination.

The image of the resolute Kurdish woman/mother was particularly emphasized by a female interviewee. Proud of being a Kurdish woman—which in her view entailed mounting various parallel struggles against state suppression, cultural dispossession, and traditional patriarchic relations—Soma asserted:

> I was emotionally affected by the image of a civilian Kurdish woman in Rojava, probably not even a YPJ member, but she was carrying a rifle on her shoulder, while holding her child in her arm. When I put myself in her shoes, I think that I would have done the same thing, that is defending my nation and my land. I would protect my family, but I do not allow my love for my family to stop me from protecting my nation, especially faced with such a vicious enemy as IS (interview: Soma, 2019).

The discursive theme of female agency, vulnerability, and resistance also emerged in multiple other images and comments. An Instagram image shows a remix of an iconic photo from the chemical attacks on the town of Halabja that was carried out by Saddam Hussain[170] in March 1988. The image depicts a Kurdish girl, running and crying, carrying her younger sister to safety, as a column of yellow smoke from the chemical bombs is seen in the background. In a horizontal triple-split format, the remix image has juxtaposed the Kurdish girls from Halabja in the bottom, with a frame showing civilians fleeing Kobani in the middle, and a large-font 'SAVE KOBANI' written in red at the top. Making an urgent call to support Kobani, the remix

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[170] The former Iraqi dictator (r. 1979-2003).

emotionally produces Kurdish territorial imagination by visually and discursively connecting Kurdish users with both the Kobani struggle in 2014 and the massacre in Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1988. The image was especially discursively powerful at the time when IS had captured more than half of Kobani, had repeatedly resorted to low-grade chemical weapons (Graham-Harrison, 2014), and the fear of an impending massacre of civilians was looming.

Elaborating on the active role of women in producing territory also offers an antithesis to the geopolitical discourse that all too frequently establishes ontological similarity between passive female bodies and territory—suggesting that both need to be protected and controlled by resorting to violence (Smith, 2017). Emphasizing the agency of Kurdish women as makers of territory through using symbology and engagement in armed resistance further allows for nuanced and empowering analyses of the Kurdish production of territory that go beyond merely reacting to the acts and aggressions of more powerful state and non-state (e.g., the Islamic State) adversarial forces (Mitchell, 1997). Giving voice to the Kurdish women's agency in the Iranian Kurds' production of territory also acknowledges the gendered dimensions of struggles over territory on the part of marginalized people. Although the literature on territory reflects a surge in scholarship on the territorial struggles of the marginalized, minoritized, and indigenous populations, such studies have often tended to ignore the role of women in such struggles (Minca et al., 2015; Radcliffe, 2017).

6.2.2. The Demonstrations

In discussing the affective capacities of media and visual images that 'moved' Iranian Kurdish users, so far, I have mostly focused on the figurative-visceral sense of the term. In this section though, I also point to literal-physical sense of the 'move'—that is movement on the streets and subsequently on the screens. Not only did the media and visual images of the Kurdish

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resistance in Syria and Iraq move Iranian Kurds to the streets, but also the images of the

demonstrations generated further affective capacity, producing Kurdish territorial imaginations.

The affective capacity of such images drew simultaneously on their embedded symbolism (e.g.,

Kurdish clothes, colors, slogans, and music), and bodies' capacity to affect and connect Kurdish

users across Iranian Kurdistan, and other parts of Kurdistan. A recurring theme in the comments

associated with visual images of the demonstrations were the articulations of the territorial

imagination of Kurdistan. Emerging in a multiplicity of framings and statements, therefore, the

common denominator of nearly all these images was their capacity to affect users and produce

territorial imaginations.

Many commenters praised the Iranian Kurds for resisting the state's suppression by going

to the streets in such massive numbers. These acts of collective resistance, as commenters and

interviewees emphasized, gave the demonstrators the courage to express their jubilation for the

liberation of Iraqi Kurdistan (interview: Azad, Lidiya, Soma, Zagros, 2019). The comments also

allowed users to share updates about the state's securitization of Kurdistan, the presence of

military forces in the cities, and civilian arrests. Such comments were overwhelmingly made by

Kurds living abroad[171] or by anonymous users. Furthermore, the comments highlighted the

shared territorial struggle between Iranian Kurdistan with Syrian Kurdistan (2014) and Iraqi

Kurdistan (2017). An often-repeated comment, for example, expressed 'hope for the liberation of

Iranian Kurdistan.' The written components of these images frequently entailed, coded, and

symbolic references to the decades-long Iranian Kurdish resistance. For example, many

commenters enthusiastically welcomed the demonstrations in the city of Sanandaj (Sinne), by

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[171] The following chapter discusses the significance of the connections with Kurds and their sympathizers abroad.

writing comments containing '*Bloody Sinne*,' invoking the fierce resistance of Sinne's residents

against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the early 1980s, especially the

regime's bombardment of the city, on March 21, 1980,[172] during which many Kurdish civilians

were massacred (Eskandari, 2021). Users also frequently referred to Mahabad as '*the city of the*

flag,' harkening back to the establishment of the first Kurdistan Republic in that city in 1945,

during which the founders and residents raised the Kurdistan flag. Another major affective and

territorial dimension of the images came from posts about demonstrations in nearly all cities and

towns across Iranian Kurdistan, thereby putting them on the Kurds' mental map. This was

particularly notable for southern and eastern cities in Iranian Kurdistan, including Ilam,

Kermanshah, and Bijar. Images and comments from these regions particularly generated

significant affective response, as users signaled resistance to the Iranian state's assimilationist

policies targeting these regions.[173]

The comments also repeatedly referred to the many historical instances of the Iranian

Kurdish support for the struggles in other parts of Kurdistan, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan. These

comments have commonly been acknowledged, reiterated, and appreciated by Iraqi Kurdish

users.[174] These conversations have created what Zizi Papacharissi (2015) describes as 'affective

publics,' that is groups that are connected to and identify with one another through 'expressions

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[172] On the eve of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year.

[173] In the southern and eastern parts of Iranian Kurdistan, the Iranian state has long attempted to use intra-Kurdish religious difference to sow division and cut off these areas from the Kurdish movement. While the larger part of the inhabitants in Iranian Kurdistan adhere to Sunni Islam, the Kurds in southern and eastern parts adhere to Shi'a Islam and a variety of traditional beliefs, such as Yarsan. See Chapter Three for more details.

[174] Drawing on digital methods, I used such affordances as the profile information of those making the comments to determine whether they were in Iraqi Kurdistan. The specific language used in the comments also helped identify Iraqi Kurds, since some of the words are more frequently used in Iraqi Kurdistan than in Iranian Kurdistan. Last names also provided another clue, as Iraqi Kurds follow 'Arabic style' of first-last name identification.

of sentiments.' To understand these affective networks and, by extension, the media images'

affective power, one must account for the broader discourses that produce and sustain such

networks (Papacharissi, 2015: p. 2). Here, I extend Papacharissi's argument to suggest that such

affective publics have undeniable spatial manifestations, especially in that they allow publics to

express themselves, 'liberate imaginations,' and (re)produce in-group and out-group ties

(Papacharissi, 2015: p. 4). Such spatial implications are felt both within Iranian Kurdistan

(further solidifying the idea of 'Rojhelat,' eastern Kurdistan), and across the borders

(contributing to the idea of a greater Kurdish homeland). Discursive analysis helps to fully grasp

the affective capacity of such images in the Kurdish construction of territory, situating them in

the larger trajectory of the Kurdish movement.

The affective capacities of media and visual images, therefore, were foundational

components of geopolitical agency (Dittmer & Gray, 2010: p. 1673), enabling Kurdish users to

resist the state's restrictions on media and its geopolitical discourse (McDonald et al., 2010).

Affect and emotion, the capacity of bodies to act (Curti et al., 2011; Simpson, 2014) and

imagine, are crucial to marginalized populations' resistance to dominant narratives of those in

power (Clark, 2016; Murrey, 2016; Pain, 2009; Papacharissi, 2015). Thus, visual images of the

Kurdish resistance in Syria and Iraq not only heightened an awareness of the Kurdish struggles;

they also affectively (re)produced territorial imaginations of Kurdistan.

6.3. Resisting Borders

Images depicting Kurdish resistance against international borders that separate them

generated significant levels of affective response among the Iranian Kurdish users, thus

contributing to the (re)production of territorial imaginations. Whether depicting Kurdish refugees

escaping the Islamic State (IS) or Kurdish peshmerga and YPG[175]/YPJ fighters crossing borders

to support one another, such media images invariably show the Kurdish embodied resistance

against borders and bordering practices of the state. The affective capacities of such images

effectively produce the Kurdish territorial imagination by establishing emotional connections

among Kurdish users and various Kurdish struggles against borders. One such image depicts a

Kurdish child refugee, carrying a heavy load of belongings across the border between Syria and

Turkey, while an armed Turkish border guard stands watching (Figure 6.3). Further in the

background, another Turkish border guard is seen with his arms folded across his chest,

seemingly looking at the refugee child's struggle with the heavy load. Two military vehicles, the

border fence and barbed wire, as well as (what appears to be) an overhead electric cable are also

seen in the image. The post's written section on Facebook refers to the territorial partition of the

Kurdish homeland that has turned generations of Kurds into refugees. During the time when the

post was created, IS had captured many of the Kurdish villages and towns surrounding Kobani,

triggering a humanitarian crisis that was only worsening as the terror group advanced.

Referring to a similar image of Kurdish civilians' struggle against the border (Figure 6.4),

one interviewee said:

> The image that showed the ordinary people from Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan) with empty
> hands dismantled the border fences and barbed wires [between Syria and Turkey] to help
> Kobani deeply affected me. It was the time when Kobani was nearly falling and no one
> was going to help (interview: Ferhad, 2018).

The same image also garnered considerable attention on social media, producing the

emotional imagination of territory by depicting Kurdish civilians combatting the state-sanctioned

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[175] Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units). See Chapter Three for more details.

Figure 6.3. Kurdish child refugee carrying a heavy load of belongings across the border between Syria and Turkey. Source: hdnux

partition. Discursively, the images are connected to the iconic images of Iraqi Kurds seeking refuge

at the borders with Turkey and Iran, during Saddam Hussain's onslaught 1991. The images helped

the Kurdish refugee crisis to become one of the most mediatized and photographed humanitarian

Figure 6.4. Kurdish civilians dismantling the Turkish-Syrian border north of Kobani. Source: [Daily Mail](#)

crisis at the time, garnering significant emotional response.[176] The images also harken back to

many other cases of Kurdish displacement across international borders, including the Iranian

Kurds' escape from the Iranian state's military invasion of Kurdistan in the 1980s. Kurdish users

on social media repeatedly analogized such cases of Kurdish displacement to the Kurds'

displacement that has been triggered by state violence associated with territorial partition of the

Kurdish homeland.

These and many similar images are situated in and evoke a geopolitical condition in

which Kurdish civilians have repeatedly packed meager belongings as they escape military and

political aggression to take refuge in neighboring countries. The Kurdish civilians' bare hands

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[176] See Chapter Three for more details.

dismantling the border fence symbolize the Kurds' disadvantaged material, technological, and political position vis-à-vis the Turkish and Syrian states. The armed border guard, military vehicles, and metal-and-concrete fences, topped with barbed-wires, on the other hand, represent the states' power and their territorial technologies and strategies of control and division.

In September 2014, when IS's siege of Kobani was becoming tighter, thousands of Kurdish civilians from Turkey formed a human chain along the border to protect Kobani (Figure 6.5). Locking arms together and flashing V-signs with their hands, participants in the human chain protested the Turkish state's bordering policies that allowed IS militias and volunteers to pour into Syria, while adopting strict measures against civilians fleeing Kobani and rejecting Kurdish and international requests to support Kobani's defenders (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2018).

Figure 6.5. Kurdish civilians in southeast Turkey form human chain to protect Kobani against IS. Source: Facebook

The use of V-signs was particularly prominent (Figures 6.4, 6.5 & 6.6), functioning as both a key symbol of the Kurdish movement and a sign indicating the power of peaceful resistance. Turkish border guards and military resorted to tear gas, water cannons, and other anti-riot measures to disperse Kurdish civilians, preventing them from reaching the border. The civilians' bodies symbolized the Kurds' solidarity and resistance against the state and its bordering practices. Visual images transferred the affective power of the resistance to users on social media, further reinforcing the territorial imagination of Kurdistan.

Another set of media images showed the peshmerga convoy from Iraqi Kurdistan crossing the Iraqi-Turkish and then Turkish-Syrian borders to support the Kurdish fighters in Kobani (Figure 6.6). In the towns along the route, large Kurdish crowds greeted the peshmerga. In many instances, Kurdish civilians in Turkey even slowed down the peshmergas' convoy, hugging and saluting them. For many, the peshmerga travelling more than 600 kilometers (400 mi) across the borders marked the apex of Kurdish solidarity (interview: Awat, 2019; Kocher, 2018). Media images and updates also enabled millions of Kurds to follow the movement of the convoy, generating emotional responses among users that transcended state borders. Media images and users effectively tied the fate of the nation to the successful passage of the convoy and its arrival in Kobani. A similar image shows the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga and the Syrian YPG/YPJ forces side-by-side, fighting on the same frontlines against IS. In another image, the peshmerga and YPG/YPJ fighters are seen celebrating a victory over IS. The posts' time stamp is from late 2014 - early 2015, a time when the Kurds started making significant progress against IS. The Kurdish unity on the battlefields boosted solidarity on social media; and the emotional power of the images produced the idea of Kurdistan as a shared homeland that was being defended by the Kurds regardless of their country of residence.

Figure 6.6. Kurdish residents in southeast Turkey greet Kurdish peshmerga on their way to defend Kobani Source: Twitter

Much of the images' power to stimulate a collective territorial imagination should be situated within the context of the IS war against the Kurds in Kobani and Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), and the Turkish state's policies in the Syrian war. Simultaneously preventing many Kurdish refugees from entering Turkey, while trying to stifle the Kurdish movement in Syria— and in Turkey (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2018), the Turkish state effectively put Rojava under a political, military, and economic blockade. As the Turkish state allowed IS fighters and financial support to pour into Syria, Kurds in Kobani were essentially sandwiched between IS and the Turkish army (Köstem, 2021). It took months of Kurdish protest in Turkey and international pressure for the Turkish officials, especially President Erdogan, to relent and allow support for Kobani to pass through their territory. When the peshmerga finally crossed the border to boost the ground forces in Kobani, many in Kurdistan (and elsewhere) saw it as a victory in and of

itself against the Turkish state. In the Kurdish geopolitical discourse, the peshmerga crossing the

border to boost the Kurdish forces in Rojava evoked many instances of cross-border

collaboration in the decades of Kurdish struggle (Gourlay, 2018; Hassaniyan, 2019). For

example, the peshmerga forces from Iraqi Kurdistan played a major role in boosting the

Kurdistan Republic that was established in Iranian Kurdistan after World War II.[177]

Referring to the Kurdish movement's cross-border solidarity, users also evoke Kurdish

resistance poetry, including a piece by the Kurdish poet and writer, Hemin, which protests the

border. Notably, however, collaboration has not always been the dominant form of relations

between different Kurdish parties and groups vying for autonomy within their respective

countries.[178] Nonetheless, this episode of Kurds crossing borders to fight in the same trenches

against a common enemy further contributed to the discourse of Kurdish solidarity across the

borders. Depicting these practices of resistance, satellite television and social media generated

unprecedented levels of affective power, bringing bodies (images and users) together to form

affective and emotional spaces of solidarity and imagination (Moreno, 2007).

In the context of fighting IS, Kurds in fact made numerous cross-border movements to

support one another. As mentioned earlier, the YPG/YPJ forces crossed into Iraqi Kurdistan in

the early August of 2014 to open a rescue corridor, saving thousands of Yezidis who had taken

refuge on top of Mount Sinjar. Similarly, when IS threatened Kirkuk, fighters from Turkish and

Iranian Kurdistan rushed to boost the Kurdish resistance in the city and elsewhere in Iraqi

Kurdistan. In addition to the peshmerga, it is estimated that at least hundreds of volunteers from

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[177] See Chapter Three for more details.

[178] For example, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of Turkey engaged in a 'fratricidal war' during the 1990s.

Iranian and Turkish Kurdistan joined the defense forces in Kobani and the Rojava region. Immediately after the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum, entire units of Iranian Kurdish peshmerga, joined the fight to protect Kurdish towns and villages against the advancing, Iran-backed Shia militias. Visual images of the Kurdish joint resistance operations generated immense cross-border solidarity, further animating affective territorial imagination.

6.3.1. Visual Arts and Borders

As mentioned in the case of the image remix merging the struggle in Kobani with the chemical attacks on Halabja, visual images formed recurring components of the Kurdish users' visual discursive resources. Visual arts constitute a major discursive field where users resisted borders to emotionally produce Kurdish territorial imaginations. Often combined with poetry and music, the symbolic power of digital visual arts generated significant affective and emotional responses. One image, for example, depicted a traditional Kurdish turban against the background of birds flying in the sky, symbolizing the thought of freedom, while the mountains in the horizon stood for Kurdistan, and the blurry lines separating the mountains symbolized the borders partitioning the Kurdish homeland. The caption cites a very popular Kurdish resistance song: '*You cannot prevent us from being Kurdish …*' Many users commented by repeating other parts of the lyrics, including references to the occupation of Kurdish territory, and reclaiming it, in different parts of Kurdistan. Notably, a following line in the song vows to continue the Kurdish '*struggle for rights and land.*'

Similarly, during the referendum, a piece of abstract artistic design depicted a window-like, four-paneled quadrangle, showing two of the panels with small openings, while the other two were sealed with solid lines. To Kurdish users, the abstract design was a symbolic depiction of Kurdistan, its separation by international borders, and struggle against borders. The two panels

with openings symbolized Iraqi and Syrian parts of Kurdistan, where Kurds had achieved a

degree of autonomy, while the other two panels that were sealed off with solid lines represented

parts of Kurdistan controlled by Iran and Turkey. Discursively, this symbolic representation of

Kurdistan is connected to a statement by a research participant who said: 'When IS occupied

Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) it felt like someone had taken over and destroyed one floor of the

building where you live' (interview: Hemin, 2019). The statement bespeaks the territorial

imagination of Kurdistan as one building with different floors, and the affective connected

attached to the building as the place where one lives, one's home. The notion of 'room' or a part

of a house, artificially or momentarily partitioned by a wall from the other parts of the house, is a

recurring theme within the Kurdish geopolitical discourse. Many Iranian Kurds colloquially use

the term '*ew dîw*,' meaning 'the other side,' the other room, to refer to the other parts of

Kurdistan across the borders (Moradi et al., 2022). Discursively, the idea of 'the other side' was

also tied to the idea of 'this side'—that is within Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat). Thus, discourses

define internalities as they delimit and resist externalities (Müller, 2011).

As the paragraph above, and this chapter in general, indicate, Iranian Kurdish users'

engagement with media and visual images are closely linked to their connections with users in

the region and beyond, Kurdish, and non-Kurdish. The following chapter explains how

interconnected networks of users produced and reshaped collective imaginations of territory.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Multi-Scalar Territory

In Chapter Six I explained how the Iranian Kurdish users produced notions of territory by engaging with media during two rounds of demonstrations in October 2014 and September 2017. The analysis detailed the ways in which media and visual images *moved* the Kurdish users. This moving unfolded in two ways: both in the sense of compelling them to take to the streets in solidarity with the residents of Kobani (2014) and in support of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum (2017), and in the sense of emotionally affecting users. To understand the affective capacities of the media and images, and their power to produce collective territorial imaginations, I illustrated that the media use and visual images should be situated within the broader geopolitical context of the Kurdish movement. Such a contextualization allowed going beyond the surface of the media images and interpret their significance within the Kurdish collective discourse. Understanding the discursive meaning of visual images helped explain how they contributed to the Kurdish users' production of territorial imagination.

In this chapter, my goal is to explain the role of cross-border, multi-platform social media networks in the multi-scalar production of territory. Connecting Iranian Kurds with Kurds in neighboring countries, Kurds in diaspora, and non-Kurdish sympathizers, such networks enabled users to form multi-scalar territorial imaginations through promoting awareness about the Kurdish movement and mobilizing solidarity. Before explaining that, however, I briefly elaborate on the process and significance of the Kurdish resistance in Syria and Iraq that mobilized Kurdish and global solidarity in 2014 and 2017. I especially highlight the role of the struggles in prompting the Kurds to rethink the notions of solidarity and 'alliance,' so critical to the Kurdish movement.

7.1. 'No Friends but The Mountains:' Kurds and Allies

With the Kurdish population and homeland divided among four nation-states, the Kurds are entangled in a regional geopolitical quandary that has historically functioned to stifle their national liberation movements. In an international political system dominated by 'nation-states,' the foreign policies of stakeholders in the region often see little value in tying their lot to the Kurds. With international powers wary of alienating four major states in the region, the Kurds have regularly been left with no (reliable) allies. This geopolitical dynamic is the root cause of the famous Kurdish mantra: '*No friends but the mountains*,' suggesting that the mountains of the Kurdish homeland are the Kurds' only allies, protecting Kurdish culture and lives from annihilation campaigns launched by the adversarial states seeking to control the Kurds' lands and destinies. The 'No-friends-but-the-mountains' mantra commonly invokes multiple episodes of 'betrayal,' whereby Kurds have been abandoned to be quashed by their well-equipped oppressors (Boochani, 2018; Galip, 2020; Glavin, 2015). The Kurds' abandonment in the realm of 'real-politik' has also been accompanied by an equivalent marginalization in the popular press in powerful Western countries. This has been partly due to pressure from the Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian states, aiming to restrict the activities of diaspora Kurds and their sympathizers (Hassanpour, 1998; 2003; Mügge, 2010: p. 196; Romano, 2002; 2006). The under/misrepresentations of the Kurds and their homeland in major popular press platforms has further contributed to their marginalization (Culcasi, 2006). As a result, throughout much of the twentieth century, the Kurds remained largely obscure outside their region, despite their

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relatively large population, the strategic significance of their homeland, and their persistent efforts to promote national liberation.[179]

The wave of terror onslaught that began to sweep through Syria and Iraq in 2013, however, became a catalyst that significantly altered Kurdish geopolitical dynamics and impacted their relations with extra-regional actors. As the so-called Islamic State (IS) launched a campaign of terror and genocide, the stateless Kurds ironically emerged as a highly effective force fighting them. With the world witnessing the horrors of the IS attacks in the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere, Kurds started to see a growing shift in the international discourse on their struggle. Fierce Kurdish resistance brought them widespread sympathy and recognition. It seemed that finally Kurds changed from being the frequent victims of the international state system to become the 'heroes'—even momentarily—in the fight against the nefarious forces of death and destruction (Gunter, 2014). Growing international solidarity with the Kurds and recognition of their cause began to cautiously convince many Kurds that perhaps they did have 'friends' and allies other than the mountains.

In the context of fighting IS, the word 'allies' generally invokes the International Coalition of state military forces, which supported the Kurds' campaigns against IS. In this study, however, I use the term 'allies' in its popular sense to refer to the grassroots and civilian acts of solidarity that used social media platforms to support the Kurdish resistance. In addition to the Kurdish resistance against IS—especially in the decisive battle for Kobani between September 2014 and February 2015—the growing transnational solidarity with the Kurdish

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[179] By comparison, national liberation movements in Tibet, Basque Country, and Palestine, among others, have received far more press, recognition, and support.

movement in recent years is also the result of the Kurds' declaration of a radical-democratic, feminist, pluralist, and ecological autonomy project in the Rojava region (Costa & Alinejad, 2020; Dirik, 2018; Knapp et al., 2016). The subsequent creation of multiple solidarity networks around the world led to a significant outpouring of material and moral support for the Kurdish resistance. With a parallel Kurdish struggle against IS going on in neighboring Iraq, international attention included Iraqi Kurdistan as well, despite considerable ideological differences between the Kurdish autonomy project in Syria and that in Iraq.

The solidarity movements of international allies, including journalists, activists, and volunteers, used social media to support the Kurds (Uluğ et al., 2021).[180] These campaigns also generated greater levels of awareness about the Kurdish issue and the Kurds' longer history of resistance against the states that control their homeland (Uluğ et al., 2021). Such online solidarities are crucial to the formation and maintenance of meaningful trans-state spaces (Marino, 2015) that connected multiple actors and scales. Although Iranian Kurds were generally thought to be on the margins of these developments (Gunter, 2020), the networked affordances of social media enabled them to make multi-scalar connections with Kurds and non-Kurdish allies and produce notions of territorial imagination.[181] The multi-scalar connections also transformed the territorial imagination of Kurdistan to include diaspora Kurds and non-Kurdish allies. The result is an extended territorial imagination that extend beyond the Kurdish homeland, while simultaneously producing it.

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[180] Many even travelled to Syria and Iraq to support the Kurdish fighters against IS (Uluğ et al., 2021).

[181] Such networked affordances, of course, functioned in the context of Iranian Kurdistan, where a robust Kurdish movement already existed. See Chapters Three for more background information.

As some have pointed out, not everything about the Kurds being in the international spotlight was unproblematic, however. Most notably, scholars have critiqued the sensationalized and romanticized media representations of the Kurdish struggle in Rojava and elsewhere (Dirik, 2018; Santoire, 2022; Shahvisi, 2021; Şimşek & Jongerden, 2021). Nonetheless, here the focus is on grassroots solidarities rather than official mass media representations of the Kurdish struggle. Although no clear and solid line separates mass and social media, users always bring their own understanding to their engagements with material from 'mainstream' media that appear on social media (Rose, 2016b). Particularly impacting non-Kurdish users was the shocking character of many media posts and imagery which helped convey the suffering on the ground and transform otherwise apathetic outsiders into sympathetic allies,[182] enlisting their moral outrage to build new global scales of solidarity linked to local struggles (Adams 1996; 2013: p. 265; Routledge, 2009). The nodes connecting Kurdish and non-Kurdish users formed 'topological spaces,' imbued with meaning (i.e., territorialized) through incorporating users' values, emotions, fears, likes, and dislikes (Adams, 2009: p. 70). Crucially, circulating with social media posts and images that formed these topological spaces were the territorial imaginations underpinning the Kurdish movement—most notably manifested in terms and hashtags such as Rojava and Kurdistan. In the process, such territorial terms grew in popularity to the point where they became established components of the hitherto largely state-centric geopolitical discourse on the region.

For example, searching the term "Rojava" in Google Scholar turns out around 6,260 results.[183] A cursory examination of these results also demonstrates that many of the entries also

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[182] See Chapter Six for more detail on the affective capacities of such visual images.

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include such terms as "Syrian Kurdistan" or "Western Kurdistan," further highlighting the embeddedness of territorial thinking in such studies. An overwhelming majority of these studies, however, do not use a 'spatial lens' in their investigations of Rojava. Authors also take many different, even diverging, epistemological and theoretical positions on Rojava and its 'revolution.' Nonetheless, it is undeniable that such studies have contributed to an emerging discourse on the spatiality of politics and knowledge in the region that differs from the spatiality of state-centric norms. A similar search on Google leads to around 3,870,000 results. A quick look at the results indicates that 'Rojava,' and its affiliated spatial terminologies, have become part of the geopolitical discourse in almost every major news outlet in the Anglophone world and beyond. These search results are part of the larger public discourse that also manifests itself in various forms of commentary, including those provided by readers and viewers of major news sources, and social media users.

Acknowledging the growing significance of mediated connections across spaces, this study argues for an understanding of scale that is amenable to accounting for the import of territory as a kind of geopolitical imagination with symbolic meaning for marginalized communities. As such, in discussing scale, this study implies neither a hierarchical notion nor a 'flat ontology' (Leitner & Miller, 2007; Marston et al., 2005). Instead, it suggests a conceptualization of scale that accounts for the ontological importance of the connections across space, while at the same time being sensitive to agency at the local scale (Routledge, 2009). This second point is especially important given that challenges to geographers' invocation of the

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[183] Search conducted on May 21, 2022.

concept of scale have drawn attention to the problematic tendency to subsume the local under the more powerful global (Marston et al., 2005; MacKinnon, 2010; Mitchell, 1997).

To avoid such pitfalls, in this chapter I examine the relations among various scales in the production of territory, "without losing focus of the situated character of practices—grounded through particular sites, networks and flows" (Featherstone et al., 2007: p. 383). Rather than framing spatial processes in terms of rigid scales, the emphasis is on the ways in which various scales are connected and impact one another in their formation of spatial constructs such as territory (Leitner et al. 2008: p. 159). This approach problematizes the casual distinctions between local and global to highlight the fact that the production of territories involves transcending and connecting multiple scalar formations (Storey, 2012: p. 10). Such a conceptualization of scale allows me to underscore the significance of relational, multi-scalar connection among Kurdish and non-Kurdish allies while also accounting for the specificities of different contexts, including Iranian Kurdistan, the larger Kurdish homeland, and diaspora spaces.

7.2. Multi-Scalar Mediated Connections and Territory

Using multiple social media platforms, Iranian Kurdish users produced multi-scalar territorial imaginations that connected them to Kurds in neighboring countries, Kurds in diaspora, and non-Kurdish allies. Such social media networks not only facilitated the exchange of information, ideas, and experiences among users, but also allowed them to build solidarity, and foster common imagination despite physical distance (Juris, 2012: p. 267). Data from social media and semi-structured interviews indicate that Kurdish users and sympathetic allies formed cross-border communities of care and sympathy (Marina, 2015) that challenged nation-state borders and territoriality to produce territorial imaginations that connected multiple scales of

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struggle around the Kurdish cause. As one interviewee suggested, the social media connections and exchange of information among users in Iranian Kurdistan with Kurds in Kobani, those in diaspora, and non-Kurds were happening every day in real-time, making the tweets and posts inseparable from one another (interview: Ferhad, 2018). Underpinning and produced by the connections among these groups of users were their shared engagement with and construction of Kurdistan as a distinctive political-geographic construct.

The multi-scalar connections among Kurdish users and non-Kurdish allies took many forms, incorporating multiple platforms and countless users, connected in their shared concern with the fate of the town of Kobani's resistance against IS (2014) and the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum (2017). To organize my analysis, I categorize the users into four interrelated groups: users in Iranian Kurdistan, Kurdish users in the region, Kurdish users in diaspora, and non-Kurdish allies. The lines separating these categories of users, of course, are blurry and users constantly interact with each other. Nonetheless, my criteria for classifying each social media post under a specific group is based on the location of the user creating the post. I draw on the users' bios as well as linguistic and visual clues to determine in which of the four categories they can be classified. In the same section where I discuss a specific group, I also discuss those commenting or reacting to the posts regardless of their location. This approach allows for a detailed account of the interactions among users across various locations and groups. Thematically analyzing the general trends, similarities, and differences in users' practices offers insight into the various ways in which users produce multi-scalar territorial imaginations. I

primarily limit my analysis to the material posted in English, Kurdish, and Persian.[184] Although

users in all categories contribute to the interconnected online discourses, diaspora Kurds played a

prominent role. Due to their linguistic and cultural competence, diaspora users bridged—

although loosely—between users in Kurdistan and non-Kurdish allies (Costa & Alinejad, 2020).

7.2.1. Users in Iranian Kurdistan

The intensification of social media connections in 2014 and 2017 enabled Iranian

Kurdish users to connect their struggles with other groups of users and produce territorial

imaginations across various scales. The multi-scalar construction of territory among users in

Iranian Kurdistan primarily operated in two ways. First, drawing on social media posts of the

demonstrations across Iranian Kurdistan, users constructed a distinctly 'regional' notion of

territory. In this construction of territorial imagination, the demonstrations unfolding in various

localities were articulated together as part of the 'uprising in Rojhelat' (Iranian Kurdistan), as

many users put it. The term 'Rojhelat' offered users a discursive resource to simultaneously

construct the idea of a 'resistant territory' against the Iranian state's homogenizing geopolitical

project, while also conveying connections with other parts of Kurdistan across the borders.[185]

One interviewee said: 'Using social media, we were all following the news of the referendum

and the demonstrations in other cities [across Iranian Kurdistan]. Seeing the simultaneous

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[184] Where necessary, I use my knowledge of French and Arabic, and utilize online translation tools to get a sense of the banners and posts in German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, and other languages that diaspora Kurds and their allies used.

[185] See Chapter Five for more details on the role of 'Rojhelat' as a discursive resource and the various tactics used by the demonstrators to avoid direct confrontation with the security forces, even though the 'uprising in Rojhelat' was unambiguously opposing the Islamic Republic.

demonstrations in all cities proved that we are all together, we are part of Kurdistan' (interview: Şilan, 2018).[186]

Second, users in Iranian Kurdistan tied the local and regional scales of their demonstrations with the events taking place across borders and in the Kurdish diaspora. These events included the Kurdish regional struggles in Syria and Iraq, as well as the solidarity demonstrations elsewhere in Kurdistan and around the world. Users in Iranian Kurdistan were further mobilized by seeing the solidarity demonstrations in other cities (interview: Kawa, Rojin, 2019). At the same time, the updates, images, and videos of the demonstrations across Iranian Kurdistan were picked up by Kurdish users in diaspora, who (re)posted them on their social media, further amplifying the scalar reach of the demonstrations. Connecting the demonstrations in Iranian Kurdistan with those elsewhere allowed Kurdish users to consider their struggle as connected to a larger struggle in which they had found new allies and new articulation of territorial imagination. Social media platforms connected Iranian Kurdish users with users in other parts of Kurdistan, enabling them to exchange information, promote solidarity, and experience the events concerning the homeland at the same time (interview: Kawa, 2019).

The Iranian Kurdish users' practices of making scale and territory, however, were embedded within the social and political specificities of the Iranian Kurdish context. Since the material symbology of the Kurdish movement—such as flags, insignia, and banners—either did not exist or were banned, Kurdish users in Iranian Kurdistan often used photoshopped images, emojis, and other visual technologies to express themselves in their social media posts. For example, during the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum, users in Iranian Kurdistan

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[186] Here, Kurdistan meant both Iranian Kurdistan and the Greater Kurdistan.

frequently used photoshopped images, cartoons, and other visual artifacts to respond to the posts

created by diaspora Kurds supporting the referendum. One of such images is a cartoon showing a

'Kurdish hand' casting a ballot in a box. The hand's sleeve depicts the Kurdish flag, the vote has

a green 'checkmark' on it—signaling a 'Yes' vote—and the word 'referendum' in Kurdish is

written on the box. At the top of the image, the date of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence

referendum, 9/25/2017 is written in the colors of the Kurdish flag (Figure 7.1). This and many

similar examples demonstrate that Kurdish users in Iranian Kurdistan use visual artifacts and

emojis as a replacement to fill the gaps of not been allowed to wave the Kurdish flag or pose for

selfies and photos with the flag. As discussed in Chapter Five, the Iranian government sentenced

the Kurdish demonstrator, Runak Aghaey, to 6 months in prison for waving the Kurdish flag

during the demonstrations in Mahabad celebrating Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum

(see Figure 5.2). Using hashtags in Kurdish, Persian, and English, Kurdish users demanded the

release of Runak and many others who had been arrested by the state's security forces.

Figure 7.1. Symbolic depiction of the 'Kurdish hand' voting 'Yes' to independence. Source: Facebook

7.2.2. Users in the Region

Social media connections among Kurds in the region played a major role in producing multi-scalar territorial imaginations of Kurdistan. As one interviewee emphasized, social media made *instant* connection among different parts of Kurdistan possible (interview: Hemin, 2019, emphasis original). In such connections, the role of Kurdish users in the region was crucial as there were more of them, compared to users in Iranian Kurdistan. Kurdish users in Syria and Iraq were especially influential since they were closer to the on-the-ground developments in 2014 and 2017 (interview: Ferhad, 2018). In October 2014, for example, when Kurdish forces in Kobani began to make significant progress against the Islamic State (IS), users in Iraqi Kurdistan posted updates on social media celebrating the Kurdish victories in Syria. A highly popular Facebook post depicts a photoshopped image of an unknown Kurdish fighter carrying both flags of Rojava and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, while a sunrise is seen in the background (Figure 7.2). The fighter's head is covered in what appears to be a red-yellow-and-green scarf, used across Kurdistan as a national symbol. The background is covered with hazy and cloudy dark hues, symbolizing the battlefields. Thousands, mostly Iraqi Kurdish users, reacted to the post, commonly praising the victory as a crucial step in 'liberating Kurdistan.'

In a similar way, Iraqi Kurdish users reacted with enthusiasm when the peshmerga forces crossed the Iraqi-Turkish border to boost Kobani's resistance against IS in Syria. On October 28, 2014, thousands of residents in Zakho, a town in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, near the Turkish border, gathered to support the peshmerga on their way to Kobani. Similar scenes of jubilation and Kurdish unity were repeated across the border in Turkey, where Kurdish residents lined the roads and streets to greet and thank the peshmerga (Gourlay, 2018). Many users posted on social media, expressing not only support for the peshmerga and solidarity with the resistance in Kobani, but

Figure 7.2. Unknown Kurdish fighter carrying both flags of Rojava and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Source: Facebook.

crucially articulating notions of Kurdish 'territorial unity,' as one user put it. Such posts frequently

made use of various emojis and signs to convey symbols of the Kurdish movement. For example,

many users commonly used a combination of 'heart' emojis in red, yellow, and green, the colors

of the Kurdish flag. Since there is no built-in Kurdish flag emoji, many users creatively made

Kurdish flag emojis by assembling various symbols, including colored squares and the sun emoji

to convey the Kurdish movement's symbology.

In another example, many Iraqi Kurdish users criticized a social media post by a

'partisan' media outlet in Iraqi Kurdistan whom the users deemed as downplaying the Kurdish

resistance in Kobani. Charging the media outlet with ideologically motivated bias against the Kurdish forces in Kobani, users challenged the post's veracity by providing links and screenshots in the comments section. Contradicting the post, users provided 'evidence' that Kurdish fighters in Kobani were still resisting in the neighborhoods that the Iraqi Kurdish news outlet declared to have 'fallen' to the IS. The Iraqi Kurdish users' reactions demonstrate Kurdish solidarity, rooted in and producing collective territorial imaginations. It is beside the point whether that Kobani neighborhood had in fact fallen to the IS or not, or whether the Iraqi Kurdish media outlet was intentionally understating the resistance in Kobani. Similarly, when in 2017 Iraqi Kurds held an independence referendum, users in Syrian and Turkish parts of Kurdistan used social media to connect with the struggle in 'southern Kurdistan,' that is Iraqi Kurdistan.

Through engaging in such forms of social media activism, Kurdish users in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey effectively constructed multi-scalar notions of territory. Users produced territorial notions of Kurdistan that transcended the borders, connecting spatially separate and otherwise local struggles as a common struggle for liberating a shared homeland. During the resistance and demonstrations in October 2014 and September 2017, Kurdish users in the region experienced new possibilities to connect and draw inspiration from one another. Directly involved in the struggles on the ground, users in the Syrian and Iraqi parts of Kurdistan played decisive roles in the online production of this multi-scalar territorial imagination. A common theme emerging from the social media posts created by Kurdish users in the region was the need for the unity in the face of the IS attacks in Syria and Iraq. This tendency to highlight the unity of the struggle is a response to a myriad of interrelated geopolitical factors impacting the Kurdish movement, including the collective sense of siege and marginalization, discord among the Kurdish parties and leadership, and the powerful structural forces that hinder Kurdish unity, most notably the

regional states operating within an international state system that subsumes the rights of minoritized populations to the sovereignty of the nation-states in their 'internal affairs' (Paasche, 2015; Vali, 1998).

The intensification of the Kurds' cross-border solidarity in times of geopolitical turmoil in 2014 and 2017 (Bengio, 2017b; Gourlay, 2018) marked a major shift compared to the previous episodes of cross-border Kurdish resistance, when connections were taking place at a slower pace. The Kurds' experiences of 'time-space compression,' enabled them to expand and connect their scales of struggle and find new ways and resources to articulate their notions of territory (Adams, 1995; Harvey, 1989; Thrift, 1983). Such struggles, whether on the frontlines, on the streets, or on social media, were by no means limited to the scale of the locality or the region. Kurdish users in diaspora and non-Kurdish allies were inseparable ingredients of the mediated struggles over scale and territory.

7.2.3. Users in Diaspora

Social media enabled Kurdish users in diaspora to connect with the Kurdish resistance in the homeland and actively take part in the production and diffusion of the Kurdistan territorial imaginary.[187] In doing so, diaspora users strengthened the resistance in the homeland simultaneously by mobilizing resources, openly deploying the symbology associated with the Kurdish movement, and by building alliances with non-Kurdish sympathizers. A recurring genre of posts commonly shared by diaspora users incorporates images taken during solidarity

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[187] It is crucial though to bear in mind that Kurdish diaspora is highly diverse. Spanning a large swath of the globe, from Australia to Canada, members of the Kurdish diaspora are differentiated by such factors as their country of origin, time of migration, occupation and level of education, potential affiliation with political parties and organizations, and their level of (in)access to material and moral resources in their 'host' countries (see Baser, 2016; Van Bruinessen, 1998; 2000).

marches. In these posts, diaspora users often share pictures and selfies of themselves draped in the Kurdish flag or carrying other forms of symbology and banners supporting the Kurdish movement. These posts indicate that, in general members of the Kurdish diaspora have relatively higher access to material and civic-legal resources than Kurds in Kurdistan—and they use that access to mobilize support for the Kurdish movement in the homeland (Dahlman, 2008; Eliassi, 2013; Gourlay, 2018; van Bruinessen, 2000a). Social media has become an important part of such resources, simultaneously increasing the connections among diaspora Kurdish users and those in the homeland and raising awareness about the Kurdish struggle (Aghapouri, 2020). A series of Facebook posts, for example, show members of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany organizing a rally in support of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum. The posts demonstrate how the Kurdish diaspora organized the rally, obtained, and prepared relevant materials, popularized the event, and participated in the rally. In doing so, diaspora users not only raised the profile of the Kurdish movement, but also inspired Kurds in the homeland, tying them to the same struggle taking place across interstate borders.

Social media posts from the early October 2014 show the gatherings of 'Kurds and their friends'—as one Kurdish user wrote on Facebook—in front of the White House in Washington D.C., calling for support for the Kurdish resistance in Kobani. Showing images of Kurdish refugees and casualties caused by the IS attacks, those gathered make urgent pleas for humanitarian and military assistance for Rojava. Large banners showing the hashtag #SAVE KOBANI indicate the marchers' awareness of the significance of social media in pointing to their 'need to be heard'—as another Kurdish user wrote on a Facebook post. The posts also show the prominent role of women in the events, frequently seen in the front row of the marchers, leading the crowd. Women's prominent role is simultaneously a nod to the feminist ethos of the

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Kurdish movement in Rojava (Knapp et al., 2016; Shahvisi, 2021) and a reflection of the

persistent and growing discourse on the political engagement of women in the Kurdish

movement (Bengio, 2016). The posts also show a mix of Kurdish and American flags held by the

participants to symbolize the Kurdish diaspora's hybrid identity (Alinia, 2004). Here though the

Kurdish and American flags are more than simply material-symbolic manifestations of the

Kurdish diaspora's hybrid identities. In the social media posts—and the on-the-ground events—

Kurdish activists draw on the material and symbolic resources embedded in the American flag to

garner support for the dire humanitarian condition of the Kurdish civilians and the disempowered

geopolitics of the Kurdish movement, both symbolized by the sun-emblazoned Kurdish flag.

Bearing the hashtag #KobaniIsNotAlone, a Facebook post contains an image depicting a

close-up of the Kurdish flag in the foreground, while the White House is seen in the distance

(Figure 7.3). In the space between the flag and the White House, marchers are seen carrying the

Kurdish flag. The post functions to symbolically construct and connect multiple scales operating

concurrently in the Kurdish struggle. These scales include the Kurdish diaspora's activism, the

ongoing Kurdish resistance in Kobani and Rojava, and the power of the United States —which

many Kurds thought and hoped would be behind them in their fight against IS. Crucially, none of

these practices and processes fit neatly into 'local' or 'global' scales. Instead, they crisscross and

produce multiple scales at the same time (Leitner & Miller, 2007; MacKinnon, 2011; Marston,

2000). The post functions as a point of convergence for various scalar processes within Kurdish

geopolitics. The post also produces a space of convergence (Routledge, 2009), bringing Kurds

together across space: The post's creator is originally from Iranian Kurdistan, while those

reacting to the post were diaspora Kurds from various origins, as well as Kurds living in different

countries in the region. Underpinning and produced by these various interconnected scales was

the territorial imagination of Kurdistan. Notably, one of the commenters, a Turkish Kurd, expressed the hope for a free Kurdistan. Furthermore, the symbolic presence of the White House in the post serves as a reminder of the Kurds' geopolitical vulnerability. Facing a well-equipped violent enemy such as IS, and surrounded by hostile states, many users thought of American support as the Kurds' only viable option. Thus, a social media post depicting a Kurdish flag in front of the White House inevitably invokes a larger and longer Kurdish geopolitics in the region that goes beyond the Kurdish resistance against IS in Kobani in October 2014.

Figure 7.3. Kurdish activists symbolically photograph the Kurdish flag in front of the White House in October 2014. Source: Facebook.

The posts created by the Kurdish diaspora also frequently show the solidarity of non-Kurdish allies marching through the streets in support of the Kurdish movement. One post depicts a large rally in Paris in support of the Kurdish resistance in Kobani in 2014. The rally includes a diverse group of residents carrying signs and banners in Kurdish and French calling for support for the Kurdish resistance in Rojava and Kurdistan. One of the banners in particular reads 'solidarity with the resistance in Kurdistan.' In addition to the events directly seeking support for the Kurdish struggle in the homeland, diaspora Kurds also participated in rallies and events organized for various causes, thereby extending their networks of solidarity. An example is the social media posts showing the Kurdish diaspora participating in the demonstrations that unfolded during the G-20 meeting in July 2017 in Hamburg, Germany. Social media posts show participants carrying large flags of Rojava, while seizing the opportunity to condemn the anti-Kurdish policies of the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was attending the G-20 meeting. The demonstrators particularly protested the Turkish state's blockade on Rojava that prevented humanitarian support from reaching the region. Crucial to enabling diaspora Kurds to build alliances with non-Kurdish allies was the discursive power of the Rojava revolution's core principles, including direct democracy, social ecology, and women's liberation (Knapp et al., 2016). Materially, such values are visibly manifested in various insignia associated with the Rojava revolution, such as the yellow and green flags of the YPG/YPJ, the Kurdish resistance fighters in Rojava, Syria.

By building alliances with similar causes and using the symbology of the Kurdish movement that have universal appeal, members of the Kurdish diaspora use social media to connect their local and global dimensions of their struggles with those of various causes within which they operate. In doing so, members of Kurdish diaspora also build solidarity for the

Kurdish movement. Furthermore, diaspora Kurds' use of multiple languages, other than/in addition to Kurdish, helped to traverse linguistic and cultural barriers, connecting social media networks that brought together Kurds in the homeland and their allies (Costa & Alinejad, 2020). The diaspora Kurds' use of social media has thus been crucial to building multi-scalar territorial imaginations by creating common grounds between Kurds in the homeland and non-Kurdish allies. Through their more open social media presence, diaspora users extend their engagement with Kurds in the homeland, connecting the regional dimensions of the Kurdish struggle with the local and global scales of the diaspora. Central to such interconnected multi-scalar struggles are the shared territorial imaginations manifested in key hashtags including #Rojava and #Kurdistan. The role of Kurdish users in diaspora is thus particularly significant in the production of multi-scalar territorial imaginations.

Regardless of their country of origin, and internal political and linguistic differences, diaspora Kurds were generally highly effective in connecting the Kurdish struggles in the homeland and reaching non-Kurdish sympathetic allies (Alinia et al., 2014). Kurdish diaspora users, thus, hold the "discursive potential" for developing an inclusive Kurdish identity in diaspora that transcends state and partisan differences (Dahlman, 2008: p. 496). The emotional power of the resistance against IS and the historic independence referendum, combined with the growing intensification of mediated connections, seem to have offered greater levels of solidarity among the Kurds in diaspora. Sustained via social media, such increased levels of solidarity across multiple scales can have significant implications for the Kurdish struggle to build identity and produce territory. The Kurdish diaspora's activities and the solidarity that it was able to mobilize were also directly affected by the often-oppressive geopolitical conditions in the homeland that were taking significant tolls on many Kurdish communities (Mügge, 2010: pp.

196-197). One diaspora Kurdish user commented on Facebook: 'The moment I said I was Kurdish, the elderly Madame sitting next to me in the metro said: 'You Kurds really deserve independence, given the atrocities that have been committed against you for decades.'' As this exchange makes clear, the Kurdish diaspora users' capacity to garner the solidarity of non-Kurdish allies is rooted in earlier episodes of anti-Kurdish geopolitical violence that have increased sympathy for the Kurds (van Bruinessen, 1998).

7.2.4. Non-Kurdish Allies

The Kurdish struggle between 2014 and 2017 gained unprecedented levels of attention and solidarity from non-Kurdish sympathizers around the world, from Australia and Afghanistan to Canada and Argentina. That attention and solidarity were grounded in what was seen as the Kurdish forces' legitimate resistance against the existential threat posed by IS and the Kurds' establishment of inclusive, democratic administrations (Costa & Alinejad, 2020). The transnational solidarity also served to draw attention to the hitherto unknown Kurdish population in Syria and the decades-long systematic oppression that they experienced at the hands of the Syrian state (Enzinna, 2015; Gunter, 2014). More broadly, worldwide solidarity with the Kurdish resistance also increased global awareness of the Kurdish plight and augmented the recognition of their right for autonomy and self-determination (Gourlay, 2018: p. 36). As users worldwide took to social media to support the Kurds, the interconnected network concerned with the Kurdish resistance expanded to include a growing number of non-Kurdish sympathizers and allies. In the process, common terms referring to the Kurdish homeland, including #Rojava and #Kurdistan, were no longer confined exclusively to Kurdish users. Instead, the multi-scalar network producing Kurdish territorial discourses and imaginations increasingly developed a new

dimension. #Rojava and #Kurdistan became indispensable components of the global discourse

on the Kurds, further underscoring the place of territory in the Kurdish movement.

Non-Kurdish allies on social media often deployed #Rojava and #Kurdistan in

combination with other major hashtags, calling for support for the Kurdish resistance and the

recognition of their cause. For example, one user, among many others, used #Kobani and

#Kurdistan to assert that the resistance against IS made them very sympathetic to the Kurdish

people's struggle. Using #Rojava and #Kurdistan, another user points to the establishment of the

Kurdish radical-democratic system, which deserved support. Such well-known hashtags as

#KobaniIsNotAlone, #SaveKobani, and #ShowYourV4YPG even grew to become 'campaigns'

of their own within the larger solidarity campaign with the Kurds. The latter hashtag is especially

noteworthy as it formed a remarkable campaign, enlisting users from all corners of the world.

According to the American activist who initiated the hashtag, #ShowYourV4YPG grew out of a

spontaneous effort to show solidarity with the Kurdish resistance forces in Kobani. Crucial to the

launching of the hashtag in November 2014 was witnessing the fierce resistance and sacrifice

mounted by the Kurdish defenders of Kobani that 'moved' those witnessing the struggle from

afar to contribute to the resistance (Uluğ et al., 2021).

Interestingly, the affective desire to express and build solidarity with the Kurdish

resistance itself was influenced by social media and the visual images disseminated by various

platforms.[188] The campaign around the hashtag is also reflected in the large number of posts,

tweets, and images, including selfies, which users shared in solidarity with the YPG/YPJ forces.

The hashtag also became a space for expressing and sharing ideas and information about

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[188] See Chapter Six for a detailed account of the affective and emotional power of social media and visual images.

Kurdistan. Thus, non-Kurdish allies' solidarity practices played significant roles in the production of Kurdish territorial imagination. In social media posts, hashtags, and on signs and banners, words such as Rojava and Kurdistan were widely used and understood to draw attention to the Kurds' territorial struggle.

In addition to directly posting about the Kurdish resistance in the region, non-Kurdish users also posted on social media the images and material related to their collective acts of solidarity. Such hashtags as #WorldKobaniDay and #GlobalDay4Kobane[189] became rallying points—similar to Kobani itself (Gourlay, 2018)—that brought together social media users and activists. Posting on Instagram, one user shows images of a rally that was held in London's Trafalgar Square on November 1, 2014, the #GlobalDay4Kobani (Figure 7.4). The rally brought together a crowd of Kurds and their allied activists and called for international support for the resistance in Kobani. A similar post shows a demonstration on the streets of Paris, where participants use Kurdish musical instruments, in addition to banners and signs, to demonstrate their solidarity with Kobani.

Another user posts an image of a solidarity rally in Brussels, in which demonstrators carry a large YPG flag and signs in the Flemish language, saying '*Steun het Verzet*,' which translates as '*Support the Resistance*.' An Instagram post shows a group of allies and diaspora Kurds in Adelaide carrying both flags of Kurdistan and Australia and displaying the names of 'KOBANI' and 'SHINGAL,' to call attention to the Kurdish struggles in both Syria and Iraq in the fight against IS. The group has lit candles, using them to write the word 'PEACE' on the

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[189] Kobani is also spelled as 'Kobane,' and 'Kobanê' to better reflect the Kurdish pronunciation. I have searched different spellings while collecting data.

Figure 7.4. Kurds and allies gathering in London's Trafalgar Square on November 1, 2014. Source: Instagram.

ground as a member of the group seems to be giving a speech to the audience. Using the hashtag,

#GlobalDay4Kobani, the post is part of a series of demonstrations that brought together diaspora

Kurds and allies on November 1, 2014, to raise awareness about the Kurdish resistance against

IS. The post also uses the hashtags #Kurdistan, #Kobani, and #Shingal, constructing and

connecting the local and regional scales of the Kurdish struggle as well as the local and global scale of the solidarity movement by the allies.

Such social media posts and corresponding on-the-ground activism form nodes in multi-scalar networks that produce and mobilize the territorial imagination of Kurdistan. In the geopolitical context of the region, non-Kurdish allies' use of #Rojava, #Kurdistan, and #Kobani is significant given that the region's four 'nation-states' that control the Kurdish homeland have long been unwilling to acknowledge the existence of 'Kurdistan.' In fact, the regional states have the track record of even denying the existence of Kurdistan—or Kurds, for that matter—within their own borders. As a case in point, the Assad regime in Syria tried for decades to erase the very name 'Kobani,' replacing it with 'Ain al-Arab' as part of a broader toponymical and demographic Arabization policy in the 1970s. The objective was to erase the Kurdish history and absorb the Kurdish spaces within the larger Syrian Arab Republic (Gambill, 2004; Tejel, 2008: p. 65). Through hashtags and growing solidarity with the Kurdish resistance, non-Kurdish users entered the multi-scalar network of connections that produced and expanded the Kurdish territorial imagination. Commonly using #Rojava and #Kurdistan, among others, non-Kurdish allies gave a distinctly territorial dimension to their multi-platform, multi-scalar acts of solidarity. Such configurations of networked territories further demonstrate that networks should not be defined as ontologically opposed to territories, but rather as producers of territories (Painter, 2006; 2010). As I have demonstrated, these networked productions of territory deploy symbolism, affect, and solidarities of Kurds as well as their non-Kurdish allies.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Conclusion

The Kurdish homeland's (post)colonial division—among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—placed territory at the core of the Kurds' entangled geopolitics (Elden 2013; van Bruinessen, 2000a). The scholarly literature, however, has largely overlooked territory in the Kurdish movement—even in recent years, as the significance of territory for the Kurds has increased sharply. In 2014, as the Kurds in Syria and Iraq found themselves on the 500-miles-long frontline against the Islamic State (IS), the Kurdish movement started drawing increasing international attention and sympathy (Shahvisi 2021; Şimşek and Jongerden 2021). The resulting economy of attention has been highly unequal, however, leading to the further marginalization of Iranian Kurds (Gunter 2020), who were already relatively unknown compared to Kurds in other countries (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010; Smets, 2016). Nonetheless, Iranian Kurds have been closely involved in, and affected by, the Kurdish movements in Syria and Iraq (Gourlay, 2018; Uluğ et al., 2021), further animating their already active movement in Iran. The unprecedented degree of Kurdish mobilization affected the Iranian Kurds' collective notions of territory, a point that has largely remained unacknowledged. Street demonstrations and engagement with media, specifically social media, were central in the Kurdish production of territory.

This study examined two rounds of demonstrations in Iranian Kurdistan. In October 2014, thousands of Iranian Kurds took to the streets in solidarity with the Syrian Kurds in Kobani resisting IS; and in September 2017, thousands across Iranian Kurdistan demonstrated to celebrate the Iraqi Kurds' independence referendum. The Iranian Kurds' collective movement on the streets also indicated a corresponding 'connective movement' (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012) via a multifaceted 'media ecology' (Miller et al., 2016) that was comprised of social media and

satellite television, connecting Iranian Kurds, as well as Kurds in the region, those in the Kurdish

diaspora, and their non-Kurdish allies. The Iranian Kurds' on-the-ground and mediated

movement, as such, unfolded in a geopolitical context that negotiated the Iranian state's

securitization policies and practices, while also being connected to the Kurdish resistance in

Syria and Iraq, as well as Kurdish and pro-Kurdish solidarity movements beyond the region.

In the past, the Iranian state suppressed street demonstrations in Kurdistan, even resorting

to live ammunition, killing, and injuring hundreds in the process. Although in 2014 and 2017 the

demonstrations were largely peaceful, the state's overall securitization policies in Kurdistan had

not changed. The state still militarized Kurdish cities and towns, resorted to violence in multiple

occasions, and arrested scores of demonstrators. Rather, what had changed compared to previous

demonstrations was the demonstrators' tactics and the larger geopolitical dynamics that shaped

how the events unfolded. These included the growing role of media and visual images, which not

only motivated the demonstrators and connected them to each other but also enabled the Iranian

Kurds to draw solidarity and support from Kurdish and non-Kurdish users in a growing multi-

scalar network of users.

Following the events on social media in 2014 and 2017, I was struck by the

demonstrations' size and prevalence. The high levels of participation suggested the significant

amount of solidarity expressed by the Iranian Kurds toward Kurds in Syria and Iraq. Upon

studying the demonstrations in more detail and drawing on my familiarity with the context,

however, I started noticing that the demonstrations were far more than expressions of solidarity.

The demonstrations had as much to do with the Kurdish situation in Iran as they had with the

Kurdish movements in Syria and Iraq. These demonstrations thus served to produce and

reproduce notions of identity and territory, for decades suppressed by the Iranian state—and

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other regional states that control the Kurdish homeland. One of the most shared images across social media platforms shows thousands of Iranian Kurdish demonstrators gathered in the main square of Sanandaj (Sinne), in the evening of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum (see Figure 6.1). The demonstrators flash the lights from their cell phones, symbolically testifying to the crucial role of internet-connected cell phones in the demonstrations.

Another image on Facebook shows an elderly man who appears to be filming the demonstrations with his rather 'old style' cell phone. Statistically-speaking, he is unlikely to be connected to the internet. Yet his action illustrates the growing significance of media, images, and cell phone connectivity for the ways in which events and processes unfold, 'offline' and 'online.' Related to this image is the Instagram image of an elderly Kurdish woman, who is using a four-wheeled walker, carrying a banner that demands support for Kobani. Similarly, one of my research participants talked about how his neighbor, an illiterate small-town Kurdish man in his sixties, discussed in some detail the Kurdish movement in Syria and Iraq, while also commenting on the significance of the United States' Congress' support for Kurdish forces. My interviewee pointed out that the man, who had not even heard the name 'Kobani' before 2014, was reveling in the Kurdish fighters' defense of their homeland (interview: Ferhad, 2018). These and many similar examples point to the extent to which the demonstrations, media, and images created shared experiences across social backgrounds, including age and gender. As I have explained, however, shared experiences do not mean that such experiences were exactly similar. Rather the point is that the events in 2014 and 2017 promoted notions of identity and territory among the Iranian Kurds, while also connecting them to Kurds in other countries and non-Kurdish allies.

At its core, this project aimed to elucidate the practices and discourses deployed by the Iranian Kurds during the demonstrations to produce notions of Kurdish territory; evaluate the

role of media, especially visual images, in the Iranian Kurds' production of territory; and explain the production of territory through interconnected networks of Kurdish and non-Kurdish users interconnecting multiple scales. Ultimately, the objective was to provide an analysis of the ways in which Iranian Kurds produced territory in the dialectic space between on-the-ground and mediated practices and discourses. Understanding the Iranian Kurds' production of territory offers insight into similar struggles waged by stateless and minoritized populations. Combining semi-structured interviews and social media data, this dissertation showed how territory and territorial imaginations are produced through street demonstrations and the use of media and visual images. In doing so, it highlighted the role of symbolic, discursive, and embodied tactics in resisting the state's securitization; the use of media and affective engagement with visual images; and the importance of multi-scalar social media networks in the Iranian Kurds' production of territory. What follows is a brief summary of the main points.

8.1. Producing Territory through Symbolic, Discursive, and Embodied Tactics

Analyzing the Kurdish demonstrations of the mid-2010s, Chapter Five showed how demonstrators challenged the Iranian state's securitization policies and produced anti-colonial territory. Using symbolic, discursive, and embodied tactics of resistance simultaneously accomplished two objectives: They effectively prevented the state's use of coercive power, while at the same time disrupted the state's normative territoriality and produced alter-geopolitical territory (Koopman, 2011). Those tactics enabled Kurdish demonstrators to resist forms of state violence that so frequently mark struggles over territory (Smith et al., 2016). Kurdish demonstrators' symbolic tactics, including the indigenous discursive resources embedded in their slogans and their embodied and emplaced practices, enabled them to construct Kurdistan as a site of alter-geopolitical resistance whose outlines—although imprecise (Sheyholislami, 2011)—

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challenge the imposed (b)orders of (post)colonial states (Jongerden, 2017). In keeping with constructivist conceptualizations of power (Foucault, 1980), this study shows that the security measures of the Iranian state had the ironically enabling effect by promoting the construction of territory through embodied, symbolic, and innovative tactics of resistance to state power and its militarized, dominant territorial strategies. Foregrounding territory in the alter-geopolitical and anti-colonial struggles of marginalized, minoritized, indigenous communities reminds us of the multiplicity of ways in which the operation of power, identity and politics defy the rigid logic of the nation-state (Allen, 2003).

The emphasis here on the simultaneous operation of the discursive-semantic and material-embodied dimensions in anti-colonial and alter-geopolitical territory-making struggles has implications for the more general literature on territory. The recent experience of the Kurds in Iran shows that embodied constructions of territory transcend the immediate physical realm to incorporate the discursive domain, facilitating demonstrators' efforts to evoke cross-border territorial imagery. Street demonstrations served as important 'coming together' moments (Del Biaggio, 2015; Klauser, 2012; Murphy, 2012), enabling the demonstrators to ascribe collective meanings to space that transcended the state borders.

As for Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat) itself, the demonstrations disclose as much about the character of the Iranian-Kurdish relations as they do about the cross-border ethos of the Kurdish movement. The Iranian Kurds' resistance took place within a minimal space whose immediate temporal and spatial contours were delineated by the crowds' brief collective presence on the street. Despite their spatial and temporal limitations (Leitner et al., 2008: pp. 167-169; Swanson, 2016: p. 306), the demonstrations have left a lasting mark on the Kurdish movement in Iran and its territorial ethos. As Zeynep Oguz (2021) reminds us, "Territorial formations are never final,

as politics of space operate along a dialectic of territorialization-derritorialization-reterritorializaiton" (p. 11). Despite its momentary instantiation, the symbolic and discursive-embodied production of territory in the streets represents an increasingly popular alternative way for dominated populations to 'decolonize their geographical imagination to make other worlds possible' (Ó Tuathail, 1996a: p. 256)—a 'doing' of alternative geopolitics that Sara Koopman (2011) describes as alter-geopolitics. Such alter-geopolitical episodes may well play more (important) roles in the future of anti-colonial struggles of stateless, minoritized, and indigenous communities.

8.2. Producing Territory through Using Media and Affective Engagement with Images

The examples cited in Chapter Six demonstrate that media affordances, especially visual images, (re)produced 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015) and served to stimulate territorial imaginations in 2014 and 2017. Despite their ephemeral characteristic and limited intensity, such affective and emotional imaginations cannot be written off as simply trivial (Simpson, 2014) or unthinking (Curti et al., 2011). Conversely, media and visual images have had a lasting impact on users' collective territorial imagination. The visual images not only moved the bodies of the Iranian Kurds, both to the streets and viscerally, but also expanded their understanding of themselves and the homeland. As interviewees remarked, the engagement with a combination of satellite television channels and social media imagery during the resistance in Kobani and the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan left lasting marks on their collective imagination of the self and space. Media and visual images generated an immense amount of affective capacity, which led to Kurds pouring into the streets when the massacre of Kobani's residents was seen as imminent, and just when the referendum was held (interview: Mardin, Zagros, 2019). The

excerpt from the interview with Ferhad is helpful here as well, illustrating the immense capacity of media and images to affect:

> We have neighbors who did not think of Kurds beyond their immediate small town. After the events in Kobani and the referendum, the same person would discuss, in significant detail, Barzani's decision for the referendum or the events in the Kurdish town of Afrin in northwestern Syria that was invaded and occupied by Turkey and its allied rebels (interview: Ferhad, 2018).

This statement, along with many similar examples, should be understood against the backdrop of the geopolitical context in Iranian Kurdistan, which is simultaneously connected to the Kurdish movements in Syria and Iraq, but also impacted by the Iranian state's policies, most notably a securitization of Kurdistan that denies the Kurdish movement the space to organize or openly exist. It is therefore fair to say that had it not been for the forceful affective capacity of media and visual images of the Kurdish struggles across the border, the Iranian Kurds' collective action and the concomitant fueling of a collective territorial imagination would have been impossible. The Iranian state's securitization policies in Kurdistan have in fact intensified since the demonstrations in 2014 and 2017. The most telling evidence is the security forces' swift crackdown on the Kurdish residents who gathered in 2018 and 2019 to protest the Turkish assaults on Syrian Kurdistan, Rojava. In both instances, scores were arrested, and the demonstrations were suppressed as soon as they started. Nevertheless, the role of media and visual images continue to increase in significance while the state's securitization continues to intensify.

The affective and emotional capacities of media and visual images have distinct and influential spatial components. The affordances of media technologies to transfer content across borders are crucial to inspiring users' affective practices (Adams, 2015: p. 400). Such cross-border media circulations connected the Kurdish struggles in Syria and Iraq with those of Iranian

Kurds. Whether evoking agony, grief, euphoria, pride, or hope, such imagery, their affective capacities, and the emotional responses they generate depend heavily on satellite television and social media as their source—in the process constituting crucial components of the Kurds' collective imagination of territory. Such territorial imaginations are fragmented in part due to the disjointed characteristics of media and the fragmented context of Kurdish geopolitics. Crucially, however, such fragmentation was amplified by the Iranian state's exclusionary media strategies, notably its ban on satellite television, filtering of social media, and political suppression, which prevented Kurdish users from focusing on specific media platforms. Kurdish users thus became dispersed across the 'mediascape' as they resorted to diverse tactics and technologies to circumvent the state's restrictive media strategies (Appadurai, 1990).

From a discursive-analytic perspective, the dispersal and fragmentation of Kurdish social media users reflects their disadvantaged position in relations of power with the state (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: p. 55; Müller, 2011). Nonetheless, the affective and emotional capacities of media and visual images assisted Kurdish users in resisting the Iranian state's restrictive media strategies, while also producing and strengthening their collective territorial imaginations. Similar to everyday on-the-ground stories, the visual stories of media are *spatial stories*, enabling Kurdish users' resistance to and disruption of the state's hegemonic stories to produce alternative spaces and territories (de Certeau, 1984: p. 115; cited in Secor, 2004: pp. 359-360, emphasis original; Müller, 2011).

It is important to note that the (re)production of the Kurdish territorial imagination involved much more than the technological affordances of media; it included "powerful and emotionally charged symbols and linguistic constructions" such as 'the Kurdish flag, maps of Kurdistan' (Sheyholislami, 2010: p. 307), as well as the larger processes and collective memories

that gave meaning and served to connect the acts of embodied Kurdish agency and resistance that I have detailed in this study. As such, the bodies of the Kurdish users and the images they viewed came to be interconnected with a larger discourse that included many other bodies and stories. As Papacharissi (2015) asserts, "technologies network us, but it is our stories that connect us." Understanding these stories, these discourses, is crucial to any analysis of the role of media and visual images in the (re)production of Kurdish identity and territory.

8.3. Producing Territory through Creating Multi-Scalar Networks

To explain the trans-state and cross-border dynamics at play in the production of the Iranian Kurds' territorial imagination, Chapter Seven foregrounded the multi-scalar connections that developed among the Iranian Kurdish users with users elsewhere in the Kurdish homeland, Kurds in diaspora, and non-Kurdish allies. The networks of connections among Iranian Kurdish users and those 'outside' Iranian Kurdistan went beyond expressions of solidarity during the Kurdish struggles in 2014 and 2017; they served to forge notions of Kurdistan as a multi-scalar territorial construct. These findings demonstrate that social media introduce new dynamics that affect the interconnections between territory and scale. They also show that the mediated production of territorial imaginations extends beyond the homeland to include those in diaspora and 'outside' sympathizers. In the Iranian Kurdish case, these dynamic, multi-scalar relationships facilitated the production of territorial imaginations in the wake of the cross-border events in Syria (2014) and Iraq (2017), and they brought together trans-state allies, Kurdish or otherwise. The implication is that to account for members of the 'nation,' both 'here' and 'there,' one also must include 'outsiders' who sympathize with the struggles of marginalized national groups.

Although some have argued that the growing cross-border circulation of bodies, ideas, and objects in the Kurdish movement have led to a form of 'deterritorialized solidarity' (Keles

2014; cited in Gourlay, 2018: p. 33; Wahlbeck, 1999), this study demonstrates that such cross-border movements can lead to the growing pertinence of territory under circumstances of oppression. The Iranian state's oppressive policies created an adversarial condition in which Iranian Kurds increasingly turned their attentions and sympathies to the Kurdish resistance across the borders in Iraq and Syria. The connective affordances of social media not only solidified the existing intra-Kurdish solidarities, but also enabled the Iranian Kurds to further expand their networks of solidarity to include a significant number of Kurds in the region and in diaspora as well as non-Kurdish sympathizers. Such cross-border interconnections were not spatially value-free. The cross-border mobilization of the Kurds and their sympathizers further produced, deepened, even intensified, the Kurdish territorial imagination, most notably manifested in such terms as #Rojava and #Kurdistan.

Of note is that the Kurdish resistance against the Islamic State (IS) in Kobani in 2014 and the succeeding triumphant campaign against the terror group had repercussions far beyond Kobani and Rojava, Syria (Gourlay, 2018). The Kurdish resistance electrified an extensive network of solidarity campaigns that included millions of Kurds in the region and in diaspora, as well as a growing number of non-Kurdish sympathizers. The independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan did not lead to independence or even its official recognition by formal governmental or international institutions. Quite the contrary, a coordinated military and political operation by Iraq, Iran, and Turkey inflicted severe defeats on the Kurds—reminding them once again that in times of necessity, their oppressor states are willing to unite against them. Nevertheless, the referendum, even in defeat, led to a resurrection and reformulation of a geographically grounded sense of Kurdish identity, *kurdayeti*, reminding the Kurds that their movement has repeatedly resurged across Kurdish territory after hopeless defeats (Bezci, 2018). As kurdayeti and the

Kurdish production of territorial imagination increasingly become intertwined with trans-state networks of solidarity, 'the geographies of the Kurdish movement is rearranged' (Dahlman, 2008). The changing geopolitical configuration of the Kurdish movement and its production of territory increasingly includes new technologies of communication as well as Kurds and non-Kurds operating in political-geographically different and physically distant spaces.

In evaluating the extent and impact of the production of Kurdish territory, one should nonetheless be cautious. There are limits to the capacity of street demonstrations and social media connections to produce territory's functional significance. In the oppressive conditions of Iranian Kurdistan, demonstrations continue to be suppressed, often before they begin to gather much steam. In 2018 and 2019, as mentioned, Iranian security forces moved swiftly to disperse and arrest Kurdish residents in Sanandaj who had gathered to condemn the Turkish army's assaults against Rojava. A number of detainees continue to serve prison time. In other cases, the state quickly fields a ready supply of anti-riot security forces. In recent years, Iranian Kurdistan has further witnessed a drastic increase in arbitrary arrests and detentions of residents perpetrated by the Iranian state. According to Javaid Rehman, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, "Between January and October 2021, close to 500 Kurdish individuals, including teachers, border couriers, artists, human rights and environmental rights defenders, journalists, artists, and lawyers, were arrested or detained. At least 140 of these were charged with national security-related crimes" (UNOHCHR, 2022). Moreover, the state's crackdown has extended into the social media realm, as pointed out by many interviewees.

Beyond security constraints, social media are encumbered by significant technological limitations, especially combined with the state's filtering measures. Language can also function as a potential barrier to communication when it comes to connecting users living in different

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spatial contexts. The role of the Kurdish language, however, is complex. Social media has increased Kurdish users' interactions and exchange of ideas and information across dialects. They have also provided the Kurds with alternative spaces to express their identity, in which language plays a pivotal role (Aghapouri & Ahmadi, 2021; Sheyholislami, 2010; 2012b). Social media posts created by diaspora Kurds have been particularly central to bringing Kurds together (Aghapouri, 2020). Nonetheless, dialectic divisions within the Kurdish language continue to persist, especially between Sorani and Kurmanji-speaking social media users, creating challenges for users to communicate (Sheyholislami, 2010). It appears though that such challenges have been alleviated to some extent by the Kurds' continued mutual acculturation across dialect spaces (Aghapouri, 2020), and their growing use of English. Furthermore, the oft-short and abbreviated language of social media has the potential to assist Kurdish users to become closer to each other, and even develop a new, hybrid Kurdish language to communicate. My own years-long observations suggest that social media posts facilitate understanding across dialects.

There is no doubt that the Kurdish resistance against IS in Kobani (2014), and the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum (2017) functioned as catalysts animating Kurdish identity (kurdayeti), which in turn served to mobilize Kurds across interstate borders (Gourlay, 2018). Frequently overlooked, however, is the fact that the reproduction of kurdayeti and the crossing of state borders—in thought and in practice, online and offline—also led to the production of the Kurds' territorial imagination. In fact, the Kurdish movement has long had distinct territorial components (van Bruinessen, 1998; 2000b), even though such territorial components have not received much scholarly attention. The territory-making events and processes in 2014 and 2017 were by no means the first instance of widespread production of the Kurds' territorial imagination. Nevertheless, what helped to make these episodes so significant was the intensive

and extensive merging of online-offline processes, the ubiquitous use of social media and visual images, and the engagement of diaspora Kurds, as well as non-Kurdish allies in the events. Working together, such multi-scalar and multi-platform processes fostered and deepened the Kurdish territorial imagination that transcend the conventional notions of 'us' and 'them' (Dell'Agnesse, 2013: p. 122; cited in Murphy, 2012: p. 167).

The increasing interconnections between on-the-ground and mediated-online spaces in the production of territory are not limited to the Kurdish case, of course. As witnessed in various movements and resistance campaigns, new dynamics have emerged that produce imagined and material configurations of territory concurrently. Blurring the boundaries of online-mediated and offline-embodied spaces, such new dynamics offer new ways of producing territory, resisting oppressive state securitization, and establishing networks of solidarity. Divided schematically into stages, the following general outline seeks to explain how such intertwined dynamics unfold as marginalized groups find themselves in a position of resisting dominant-state power:

In the first stage, the increasing use of social media, combined with catalyst events (e.g., Kobani's resistance against IS), generate episodes of collective resistance, most notably street demonstrations. What is noteworthy about such demonstrations is that first, their participants already hold specific collective conceptions of space, which are part of their territorial imagination. Second, they invariably take place in a political context that frequently involves a level of suppression and securitization by the state or other dominant authorities, in opposition to which the demonstrators define their objectives, discourses, and practices.

The second stage involves the further production, consolidation, and expansion of the movement's territorial imagination, achieved by deploying embodied practices and discourses. The state's securitization, however, significantly impacts the form and content of such practices

and discourses. To avoid harm, demonstrators may resort to symbolic forms of resistance that do not provoke violent crackdown by security forces. In such cases, the coercive power of the state effectively leads to nuanced and symbolic forms of resistance that cannot be easily suppressed. As explained in this study, embodied and discursive practices, such as using clothing and dance, can serve as effective tactics of resistance. In this stage, deploying social media also enables those engaged in the movement to create networks of solidarity with 'outside' sympathizers, many of whom may already share the political values and spatial imaginaries of the demonstrators.

Stage three sees the persistence of the networks of connections that have been established. The result is networks of allied users that endure after the demonstrations have ended, as have the catalyst events that triggered them. In the online spaces that connect these networks, the resistance movement's territorial imaginations are reinforced and expanded. The exchange of information and affective solidarities practiced in the spaces of such networks also further engage those who previously had more 'distance' from the movement and its territorial imagination. Moreover, the archival affordances of social media and their imagery function as discursive resources to which those engaged in the movement and their allies can return for further inspiration. This general schematic framework, combined with the empirical evidence described in this study, challenge the long-held notion that 'relational flows' reduce the pertinence of territorial conceptions of space (Nicholls, 2009: p. 78).

In the Kurdish movement, the impacts of social media networks and visual images have only increased since the events of Kurdish resistance that unfolded in 2014 and 2017. The aggression by IS, regional states, and non-state militia forces continue to threaten Kurdish communities, generating emotional attachment toward the Kurdish movement. Events such as

the fall of Kirkuk to the Iran-backed Iraqi militia and the coordinated assault on Kurdish

peshmerga in the weeks following the 2017 independence referendum; the occupation of Afrin in

the western part of Rojava (northwestern Syria) by the Turkish military and its allied militia

groups in 2018; the subsequent Turkish assaults on Rojava in October 2019; the Turkish state's

mass arrest and imprisonment of the democratically elected Kurdish MPs and Mayors; and the

Iranian state's attacks on the Kurdish parties of Iranian Kurdistan in Iraqi Kurdistan, and its

executions and assassinations of Kurdish activists, all function as signal events that continue to

play out on social media—reminding the Kurds (and their sympathetic allies) of the precarious

state of Kurdish life, identity, and territory.

Citing Iranian Kurdish activists, David Romano (2006) notes that in the aftermath of the

Islamic Republic's invasion of Kurdistan after Iran's 1979 revolution, Kurdish forces were

militarily defeated and had to escape to Iraq, Europe, and elsewhere. Ever since, the Iranian state

has militarized and securitized Kurdistan, stationing more than 200,000 military forces in

Kurdistan (Elling, 2013; Koohi-Kamali, 2003). Nevertheless, even though the Islamic Republic

has managed to occupy and control Kurdistan by ruling from its military bases (Soleimani &

Mohammadpour, 2020a), it has not been able to win over the hearts and minds of its resident

population. This fact points to the significance of the ways in which marginalized populations

view themselves and their place in the world. Understanding that view requires paying due

attention to their geopolitical and territorial imaginations.

In December 2017, the Kurdish MP, Osman Beydemir pointed to his heart to show the

place of Kurdistan, when the Deputy Speaker of the Turkish Parliament asked him with a

mixture of incredulity and irony: '*Where is Kurdistan?*' (Khalidi, 2017).[190] Almost immediately,

the image of Baydemir putting his hand on his chest to indicate the location of Kurdistan started

making the rounds on social media. Today Kurdistan continues to be in the minds and hearts of

millions of Kurds and non-Kurdish sympathizers who decry the collective oppression that the

Kurds have experienced for decades and believe that Kurds, in all their diversity, deserve an

unmolested and dignified life. Kurdistan, as such, is a form of 'inner space' that is enmeshed

with thoughts and emotions of millions and functions as a first step in resistance (Pile, 1997: p.

16). The Kurdish struggle, and especially the events of 2014 and 2017, tell us that territory is

more than border fences, barbed wires, cannons, and official technologies of control. Territory is

also about thoughts, emotions, discourses, and embodied practices, carried out by 'ordinary

people.' These discourses and practices of territory are especially pertinent to marginalized

populations who do not feel at ease with the structural forces that seek to dictate the spatiality of

their thoughts, belonging, and social relations. Social media, with its ability to convey visual

images and emotions, and construct multi-scalar networks, provide spaces conducive to the

production of such marginalized territorial imaginations.

Beyond the Kurdish case, stateless and minoritized populations have increasingly used a

combination of offline and online collective actions to produce notions of territory. Street

demonstrations and other forms of resistance have gained growing significance in the ways in

which hegemonic spatialities of the state and capital are challenged by marginalized and

minoritized populations (Routledge, 2015; Tynen, 2021). Territory has become an inseparable

component of such struggles and is an inseparable component of the stateless, minoritized, and

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[190] In the official policy doctrine of the Turkish state, 'Kurdistan' does not exist.

indigenous populations' claim to rights and a place in history (Bryan, 2012: p. 216; Escobar, 2010: p. 11). The surge of authoritarian, extreme-right populism, the deepening of neoliberalism and austerity measures, the growing environmental degradation and the encroachment on indigenous lands and peoples, and the increasing influence of social media, all point to the fact that struggles over territory will only increase and diversify in terms of their on-the-ground and mediated scope, practices, and discourses. Straddling offline and online spaces, such struggles continue to bring together embodied and discursive tactics and connecting multi-scalar processes. Understanding such developments and the political-spatial dynamics that shape and are shaped by them will be an important research agenda in human geography and beyond in the years to come.

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