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The Kurds in Movement:

Migrations, mobilisations, communications and the globalisation of the Kurdish question

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The Kurdish question today is a very different matter from what it was twenty-five years ago. Today's Kurdish movement is a very different movement from that of the 1970s — or rather, it consists of a number of movements each of which is very different from its predecessors. Kurdish society itself is perhaps even more drastically transformed than the terms in which we see the movement. In large areas of the region known as Kurdistan, especially in the Iraqi and Turkish parts, traditional Kurdish society has been destroyed in the course of war, rebellion and counter-insurgency.

In 1979, a Kurdish friend of mine published a new edition of a 19th-century text on Kurdish custom and tradition, and on the cover he placed a photograph of a peasant working on a stony plot of land with a buffalo-drawn plough.^[1] This was a recognisable icon for living tradition; the man's baggy pants and the shape of his cap also made immediately clear that he was from the Turkish part of Kurdistan. Such traditional peasants could then only be found on marginal lands that were unfit for machine cultivation; the more accessible parts of Kurdistan had experienced mechanisation in the 1950s through 1970s. It will be hard today to photograph a similar scene. The man in the picture, if still alive, is more likely to live in a place like Van, Istanbul or Berlin than in his old mountain village. Quite possibly, his village, like thousands of others, has been burnt by security forces or by guerrillas of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party).

Millions of Kurds have been on the move, from one part of Kurdistan to another, from Kurdistan to other parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria or Turkey, and from the Middle East to Western Europe, North America, Australia and other parts of the globe. Voluntary population movement of various sorts, notably labour migration, is not a recent phenomenon only. In the early 20th century there were already numerous Kurds living in Istanbul; most of them were of peasant origin and worked as porters (*hammal*), but there were also Kurdish students and other members of Kurdish elite families living in the capital.^[2] The mechanisation of

agriculture and the spread of general education resulted in a steadily increasing migration from the Kurdish countryside to Istanbul, Ankara, Baghdad, Tabriz, Tehran and the other large cities of the region, and this in turn gave rise to the emergence of informal Kurdish associations and organisations in those cities. In the 1980s and 1990s, the migration process was not only further speeded up but changed in nature; much of it no longer was voluntary. Villagers fled from warfare or were expelled from their villages by security forces in the context of counter-insurgency operations. Thousands of villages were destroyed, and the resources that had made traditional life possible along with them.

Three major political upheavals in the wider region, all taking place in or around 1980, have contributed to the dramatic transformation of Kurdish society and of the Kurdish question. None of them is causally related with the end of the Cold War, but in all three cases the course of the events was no longer shaped by the polarisation that had been typical of the Cold War period. Alliances and oppositions no longer corresponded with a simple bipolar model. These upheavals were:

— the Iranian revolution (culminating in the fall of the *ancien régime* in February 1979 and followed by a prolonged civil war, fought out largely in Kurdistan)

— the military coup in Turkey of September 12, 1980 (followed by draconic law-and-order measures that virtually annihilated the left and Kurdish movements and led to the militarisation of the Kurdish problem)

- the Iraq-Iran war, which broke out in September 1980 and dragged on for almost 8 years (and which was partially fought out in Kurdistan and by using Kurdish proxies).

The first major post-Cold War international conflict, the second Gulf War that followed Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait, initially did not appear to have anything to do with the Kurdish question. One of its unforeseen consequences was, however, a large Kurdish uprising in the wake of Iraq's defeat, followed by mass flight towards the Turkish and Iranian borders when Iraqi elite troops turned to the north in an extremely violent offensive. Well over a million, perhaps almost as many as two million Kurds fled from their home towns and villages in those weeks in April 1991. These events placed the Iraqi Kurds on the international agenda (leading to an international relief effort and the creation of a "safe haven" under international protection) but they also had an impact on the Kurdish question in Turkey.

The destruction of the traditional Kurdish economy and the mass migration of Kurds from their traditional habitat has resulted in the *internationalisation* and the *deterritorialisation* of the Kurdish question. There is now a large Kurdish diaspora — in western Turkey, throughout Europe and the Middle East, in North America and Australia — and it is increasingly well-organised. On the one hand, the Kurdish communities of western Turkey have so far stayed aloof from radical politics, and many Turkish officials appear to believe that the dispersal of the Kurds over all of Turkey will by itself bring an end to Kurdish separatism. On the other hand, however, the Kurdish diaspora abroad has begun to play an increasingly significant role in internationalising the Kurdish question and in placing it on European and American government agendas. The problem will not be solved more easily, but the very terms of the problem are different now — and they are of greater direct concern for the rest of the world.

Three events that occurred in September 1998, in the weeks immediately preceding this lecture, illustrate the increased international relevance of the Kurdish question. The leaders of the two major rival Kurdish parties in northern Iraq, Jalal Talabani and Mas`ud Barzani, were invited to Washington to negotiate a peace agreement to end their four-year old conflict under American auspices. Secretary of state Albright personally met both leaders, thereby giving the Iraqi Kurdish leaders an unprecedented degree of recognition. A week later, Turkey threatened to go to war with Syria because of that neighbour's continued support for the PKK. It demanded, among other things, the extradition of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan (who had been leading his movement from Damascus and the Bekaa valley in Lebanon for the better part of the past two decades). Around the same time, the Kurdish Parliament in Exile, a diaspora organisation sympathetic to the PKK, convened for a three-day session in Italy's parliament buildings and was addressed there by representatives of most Italian political parties, who expressed their solidarity. Although Turkey exerted much pressure on Italy to ban this convention, the Italian government did not yield.^[3] It will be increasingly difficult for Europa and North America to stay aloof from the Kurdish question in the years to come, if only because the Kurdish diaspora will succeed in forcing them to get involved.

The destruction of traditional village life

As said above, it was the destruction of traditional village life that greatly speeded up both the deterritorialisation and the internationalisation of the Kurdish question. This process began well

before the 1980s but it acquired massive dimensions during and immediately after the Iraq-Iran war. In 1970 the Iraqi regime had reached a peace agreement with the Kurdish movement, which included autonomy for the region where the majority of the population was Kurdish. Not wishing to lose control of strategic area, it quickly set upon a policy of "arabising" the oil-rich districts of Kirkuk and Khaniqin as well as the Sinjar district along the Syrian border, by expelling Kurdish residents and replacing them with Arabs. This, incidentally, was one of a number of reasons that made the Kurds go to war against the central government again in 1974 — aided by Iran, the USA and Israel. This war lasted a year and was ended when the shah withdrew his support from the Kurds. Fifty thousand Iraqi Kurds, including most of the Kurdish leadership, took refuge in Iran.

In this context, Iraq initiated a new policy to prevent a re-emergence of a Kurdish guerrilla movement: a *scorched earth policy*. In order to seal off Iraqi Kurdistan from the Turkish and Iranian parts of Kurdistan and thus prevent the infiltration of guerrilla fighters and supplies, a wide zone along the borders was declared forbidden territory; all villages in this zone were destroyed, and their inhabitants deported to other parts of the country, ending up in resettlement camps. Initially this forbidden zone was 10 to 15 kilometres wide; during the Iraq-Iran war, it was gradually extended, and as more villages were destroyed the resettlement camps became more and more dreary. The deportees were not compensated for their loss of land and animals, and because there was no employment in or near the resettlement camps, they became dependent on government handouts.

The Kurdish parties that recommenced the guerrilla struggle in the late 1970s operated precisely from these forbidden zones. Until the Iraq-Iran war, their operations were very limited in scope, but once the Iraqi army was tied up in large frontal confrontations with the Iranians, the Kurdish parties brought people back to the once destroyed villages and extended their control over some regions where the villages had not yet been destroyed.

In 1987 and 1988, Iraqi troops carried out a series of large operations code-named *Anfal* against the areas that had come under the control of the Kurdish parties. Against many villages poison gas was used; then they were raided and the inhabitants put in army trucks. The villages were destroyed, fruit trees burnt, wells poisoned or filled with concrete to prevent people from returning. The inhabitants were sent to collection points, where they were screened. The men were separated from the women, and more than a hundred thousand of them disappeared. The women were dropped in rudimentary resettlement camps without even the most basic amenities. Most of the men appear to

have been executed and buried in mass graves in southern Iraq.[\[4\]](#)

Altogether some 4000 villages (out of a total not much higher than 5000) were evacuated and bulldozed during the period from 1970 to 1990, most of them during the *Anfal* offensives. An economy, a culture, a way of life, a society, a moral order have been brutally destroyed. In spite of much international assistance since 1991, efforts to reconstruct the traditional agricultural order have had only partial success.

Perhaps we can understand these developments better if we see them in the context of Iraq's policies of authoritarian modernisation. There was a phase, in the late 1970s, when the resettlement camps were designed not only for security but also to provide the population with adequate facilities such as running water, electricity, schools and basic health centres. Saddam's Iraq was an obscene sort of welfare state, providing its citizens with food and shelter — on condition that they remained loyal. For those who did not behave as loyal subjects, there was to be no pardon.

From this perspective, there is an uncanny similarity between the Kurdish policies of Turkey during the 1990s (especially 1993-96) and those of Iraq in the 1970s. The idea of modernising the countryside by moving villagers from marginal mountain villages to "central villages" or "village-towns" with modern facilities had in the past been adopted by politicians of the moderate left as well as the extreme right in Turkey but never implemented. When the PKK, which had launched a serious guerrilla war in 1984, succeeded in gaining growing support among the rural population, several leading politicians thought that the "central village" project might offer a solution (thus, for instance, the late President Özal in a letter published after his death). In practice, however, only the evacuation from small and peripheral villages was carried out; for the construction of new settlements there never was money.

In order to deny the PKK support from the village population, the Turkish authorities decided to physically remove the village population from areas where they could not easily keep it under surveillance. In some cases, villagers were given the choice between joining pro-government militias and actually fighting the PKK or leaving their villages. In other cases, the military just came and ordered people to leave the village, which then was burned. There were also cases where PKK guerrilla fighters forced the evacuation of pro-government villages. Some 3,500 villages and hamlets were thus forcibly evacuated.[\[5\]](#) This is only the tip of the iceberg; many more villages were "voluntarily" evacuated because the inhabitants could no longer survive under the conditions of guerrilla war, in which both sides

put pressure on them. In large areas of Turkish Kurdistan, especially the mountainous districts, hardly any agriculture or animal husbandry is still possible. Apart from those who joined the pro-government militias (named "village guards"), no other civilians remain.

Population movements in the region

Turkey's vigorous campaign against Kurdish nationalists immediately following the military coup of 1980 caused many politicised Kurds to flee to neighbouring countries (only for a relatively small number western Europe represented the first choice). Iranian Kurdistan initially was perhaps the most inviting neighbour, even though an armed confrontation between the army (and *pasdaran*) and the Kurdish movement was going on. The refugees from Turkey lived in Iranian Kurdish villages or in guerrilla camps, and they became acquainted with the language, habitus and political culture of the Iranian Kurds — to the extent of becoming involved in internal conflicts among their hosts.

As the Iranian military offensive against the Kurds was successful, the Iranian Kurdish guerrillas and their guests were pushed back into ever smaller pockets near the border, and then across it (1982-83). In this critical period, one of the Iraqi Kurdish organisations, the KDP (provisional leadership), co-operated with the Iranian forces against the Iranian Kurds, and the other Iraqi Kurdish party, PUK, lent them active military support. The Iranian Kurdish nationalists established bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, where not only guerrilla fighters but also civilian politicians and their families lived. Most of the Turkish Kurds, who had initially hoped to find a safe haven in Iran, followed to northern Iraq. The Iraq-Iran dragged on, life in the region became more and more precarious; because the prospect of significant changes in Turkey itself remained dim, these Turkish Kurds set their eyes on Europe. By way of Iran or Syria, and mostly along circuitous routes, many of them ultimately ended up as political refugees in European countries.

There were similar, and quite voluminous, currents of refugees from Iran into Turkey, hoping to find a way to go on to America or western Europe. The most conspicuous Iraqi Kurds in Turkey those years were not refugees but relatively well-to-do and a-political tourists. I remember my surprise at seeing, in the mid-1980s, large numbers of people in (Iraqi) Kurdish dress strolling around the Aksaray-Laleli-Beyazit districts of Istanbul. Unwittingly, they were brokers, bringing about a certain exchange between (non-political, presumably) Turkish and Iraqi Kurds. The increased mobility of which their presence in Istanbul was a symptom brought the message home that there was a "Kurdish reality" that sooner or later would have to be recognised (even

though it was to take a longer time before consensus would emerge as to what constitutes this "Kurdish reality").

In more pressing manner the existence of unpleasant Kurdish realities was imposed on the public consciousness in Turkey by two great and potentially destabilising waves of refugees from Iraq. The first took place in 1988, as tens of thousands fled from the genocidal *Anfal* offensives in Iraq (see above) into Turkey. Some 60,000 succeeded in entering Turkey, of whom perhaps half returned after Iraq had announced another amnesty. The others remained settled in tent camps near Mardin, Diyarbakir and Mu• under — to put it euphemistically — unenviable circumstances. Their presence had a great impact on public awareness in Turkey, among Kurds as well as non-Kurds. It was the first time people could hear Kurdish spoken on radio and television. The difference in treatment of these Kurdish refugees from Iraq and the Turkish refugees from Bulgaria who entered Turkey around the same time gave rise to inevitable comparisons and the conclusion that Kurds were clearly different from Turks in the view of the authorities, and were not entitled to the same rights.[\[6\]](#)

In spite of attempts to do so, these Iraqi Kurds could not be kept isolated from the local population, and they contributed significantly to the awareness of each other's dialects, cultures and socio-political conditions. This closer acquaintance could, of course, work two ways: it could reinforce the awareness of a common Kurdish identity, but also increase an awareness of differences, and even strengthen mutual prejudices. I believe it had both effects simultaneously. However this may be, like the earlier population movements mentioned, this one also swelled the number of Kurds who have some knowledge of the northern as well as southern dialects and who are acquainted with the situation of the Kurds in neighbouring countries. It contributed to the "national" integration of Kurdish society.

The second wave of refugees from Iraq was more threatening from Turkey's point of view: after the Kurdish uprising that followed the Iraqi defeat in Kuwait, an unexpected military offensive caused an unprecedented mass flight. This time it was not tens of thousands but hundreds of thousands that in panic reached Turkey's borders. Foreign television crews were there too, and public opinion in Europe and America was shocked by the live horror it saw. Western governments could not resist the pressure from their populations for intervention. It was in these same days that Turkey's President Özal declared his country should act as "the protector of the Kurds" (*Kürtlerin hamisi*) and requested international support to offer them protection within Iraq (instead of having to admit them into Turkey).

Turkey's allies agreed that such numbers of refugees (even if formally declared "displaced persons" only) would be an unbearable burden on Turkey and supported Özal's proposal of creating "safe havens" in northern Iraq. The sequel is known: the Iraqi army was gently persuaded to retreat from the Badinan area, and the part of northern Iraq above the 36th parallel was declared a no-fly zone, enforced with daily surveillance flights by the British and American air force. Kurdish guerrillas took control of the Sulaymaniyya region to the south-east of this official "safe haven". The Kurds established their own administration, with an elected government and parliament. For over seven years now, Iraqi Kurdistan has maintained a precarious existence as an almost independent entity, supported by an international relief effort and international protection.^[7] I shall return to the implications of this internationalisation of the Kurdish question below. Let it suffice here to say that the international intervention was an unforeseen response to the most dramatic movement of Kurdish refugees in modern times.

Migration abroad: the Kurds of Western Europe

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

The first labour migrants from Turkey were recruited from the western and central parts of the country, and the Kurds were therefore under-represented among them. The balance changed in the course of the 1970s, when the proportion of migrants from eastern Turkey increased. Most of these migrants thought of themselves primarily as Turks in Europa, however, even if they belonged to such religious or ethnic minority groups in Turkey as the Kurds or the Alevis. Many of them had internalised, or were reluctant to challenge, Turkey's official doctrine that every citizen of Turkey is a Turk. Only gradually did these immigrants in Europe "rediscover" or dare to emphasise their Kurdish identity.

Estimating the number of Kurds among the Turkish workers abroad is just as impossible as estimating the number of Kurds in Turkey, and for much the same reasons. German police authorities have recently spoken of 400,000 Kurds among the total of over 2 million people originating from Turkey^[8] — a figure that appears to be based on an extrapolation from the assumption that the Kurds constitute 20 per cent of Turkey's population. Except for a few population samples, the guest workers have never been systematically questioned about their own ethnic self-definitions.

In the imaginary case that such surveys had been made at regular time intervals, it is my firm conviction, we should have seen a remarkable increase in the percentage of persons describing themselves as Kurds over the past two decades. The same happened in Turkey itself; besides those who actually speak Kurdish (or Zaza) there are those whose parents do (or one of whose parents does), those with one or more Kurdish grandparents, and those with more distant Kurdish ancestors. Nothing prevents these more peripheral potential Kurds from discovering and emphasising their Kurdishness in certain contexts.

Until the late 1970s, relatively few migrant workers emphasised their Kurdish identity. Most of the workers, especially those of rural origins, were reluctant to become involved in politics. Moreover, their European surroundings defined them as Turks, and this remained in most contexts the relevant identity. The 1980 coup in Turkey led to a great influx of politicised, mostly young Kurds as asylum seekers. Their presence, and of course the news about the guerrilla war in Turkey, worked as a catalyst on the Kurds' ethnic awareness. The process of rediscovery is still going on. The so-called second generation, children of immigrant workers who have grown up in Europe, tend to be much more interested in Kurdish identity and Kurdish politics than their parents were. Many parents returned to their Kurdish roots under the influence of their children.

A comparison between two European countries is interesting in that it brings out quite different but perhaps complementary styles of ethnic mobilisation and nationalist activity. Sweden does not have a large Turkish workers community, but a relatively large and relatively highly educated Kurdish refugee community. Especially writers, journalists and other intellectuals chose Sweden as their place of exile. Sweden gives all immigrant communities great facilities for teaching, publishing and broadcasting in their mother tongues. The Kurdish writers found here a much more stimulating environment for developing Kurdish into a modern literary language than they would have found back in Turkey, even if the language had not been banned there. Since many of the Kurds in Sweden already were highly politicised before reaching that

country, the PKK made relatively few recruits there, although there were not a few who, out of a grudging admiration, began to sympathise with it.

In Germany, on the other hand, where the large mass of workers were not politicised, PKK organisers found a much more fertile field for recruitment. To especially the marginalised members of the second generation growing up in Germany, involvement in PKK activities offered a sense of meaning and self-respect. Numerous young men and women devote their lives entirely to the party, to an extent not much encountered in other political organisations. Rival parties, whether Kurdish or of the radical left, have stopped opposing the PKK and have reached various degrees of cooperation or at least mutual tolerance with it.

Linguistic and cultural activities in Europe

The lasting importance of cultural activities can, in my view, hardly be exaggerated. In 1980 Kurdish was an adequate language for use in the household and in village life, but it was hardly possible to discuss contemporary political and social matters in it. Most Kurdish politicians and intellectuals thought their most important thoughts and spoke their most sophisticated words in Turkish. Several of those who wrote stories in Kurdish thought them up in Turkish first and then translated them. In this respect much has changed; Kurdish has been enriched and sufficiently developed to serve as a vehicle for modern political and literary discourse. Many who 15 years ago spoke only a rudimentary Kurdish, or some idiosyncratic dialect, have meanwhile mastered some form of standard Kurdish.

The Kurdish Institute of Paris, founded in 1983 by Kurdish intellectuals living in various European countries, has pioneered attempts to develop a standard for northern Kurdish (Kurmanci) through a series of conferences and a journal that published lists of agreed upon terms for objects and concepts in various spheres of life. Later, Kurdish institutes were also founded in Brussels (1989), Berlin (1994), Moscow (1996) and Washington DC (1996), and a well-endowed Kurdish library in Stockholm (1997), each differing from the others in constituency and types of activity, but all of them contributing to the consolidation and strengthening of Kurdish language and culture.

Journals and books in Kurdish were published in Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and especially Sweden. Since the mid-1980s, the number of books in Kurdish published each year has been several dozen, and there is at least a dozen of long-living journals.^[9] It is true that these publications did not have a very large circulation, for

their reading public constituted only a small fraction of the Kurds and "potential Kurds" in Europe.[\[10\]](#) But their readership and contributing authors constituted enough of a critical mass for the development of a modern written language. Returning labour migrants smuggled books and journals into Turkey, where they initially cannot have reached much larger audiences than in Europe. This changed, however, when in 1991 the law on publications in other languages than Turkish was withdrawn, and books and journals in Turkish could be published inside Turkey again. Books that had earlier appeared in Europe were reprinted in Turkey, and several Kurdish journals suspended publication in Europe to continue in Turkey.

The revival of Kurmanci as a language actually used (and not just as a symbol of identity of little use value) is remarkable when compared with the situation of other minority languages. Among the Irish, Gaelic has never regained the same degree of currency, in spite of at first sight more favourable circumstances. The number of Kurmanci speakers has perceptibly increased over the past decades. Language courses that were organised throughout Europe taught this gradually developing standard language to those who opted for Kurdish identity but had Turkish, Zaza or a non-standard Kurmanci dialect as their first languages. Both in writing and, as far as I can judge, in oral discourse Kurdish was increasingly often used.[\[11\]](#)

Kurdish institutes, Kurdish print media, and Kurdish language courses that operate in western Europe outside the control of the Turkish state have provided the Kurdish movement with instruments of nation building comparable to those normally used by states. In 1995 a powerful instrument was added to this arsenal, the satellite television station MED-TV, which broadcasts to the Middle East but can also be received in western Europe and a large part of Asia. Video cassettes of its programs are circulated among Kurdish communities elsewhere. Lessons in standard Kurdish, old Turkish movies now spoken in Kurdish, and live discussion programs with simultaneous telephonic participation by people in various parts of the globe belong to the station's weekly fare.[\[12\]](#)

The initiative for this television station came from the PKK, but it has made efforts to present a more pluralistic image — if only to comply with the regulations of the (British) Independent Television Commission, which gave the station access to a satellite and which monitors the transmissions. Kurds of all persuasions were quick to perceive the revolutionary potential of such a station and enthusiastically endorsed it. Kurds of diverse backgrounds have been able to voice opinions that clearly differed from the PKK party line, without being

censored.

Decentralising technologies and the deterritorialisation of the Kurdish question

MED-TV provides only the latest example of technological developments that militate against central government control and that affect serious breaches in individual states' sovereignty. An earlier invention with highly decentralising effects was the cassette recorder. Cassette tapes with recordings of Khomeini's sermons, smuggled from Iraq into Iran helped preparing the ground for the Islamic revolution in the mid and late 1970s. Audio cassettes with songs and music and folktales from various parts of Kurdistan were a hot item with the Kurds too in those years. They taught the Kurds to better understand each other's dialects and were an important medium for spreading the notion that Kurdish culture was alive and rich and varied.

Cheaper and lighter radio transmitters, and the invention of the transistor receiver again have had a great impact too. It was especially the Kurds of Iraq who have made extensive use of radio for propaganda purposes; the PKK's transmitter in north Iraq, if it still is in the air, does not appear to be much listened to. Radio and television are among the most powerful means of national integration, and indeed they have played this part in Iran, Iraq and Turkey quite convincingly. (I heard from several Kurdish friends that their illiterate mothers, living in distant villages in the East, had learned Turkish in the 1980s after television had come to their villages.) The arrival of MED-TV heralds a competition between two nation-builders, the Republic of Turkey and the Kurdish movement.

Faxes, cellular telephones and satellite links provide individuals and groups with instant communication around the globe which it is extremely hard for states to monitor, let alone censor. Kurds have also been experimenting with the possibilities of the Internet: bulletin boards, E-mail, a news group, mailing lists and a rapidly growing number of websites. The major political movements have their own homepages, and so do several institutes and individuals. Not only news and information is being communicated; a growing corpus of modern written Kurdish is becoming available online, and the web is likely to play a crucial part in the effort to develop a modern standard language. The Kurds have so far failed to gain independence or a significant degree of autonomy on the ground (with the exception of a part of Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991). Due to the civil liberties enjoyed in exile and to the new technologies that some of them have learned to use, the Kurds have, however, achieved a degree of sovereignty on the airwaves and in cyberspace, that is gradually making them actors in the international

arena to be reckoned with.[\[13\]](#)

Transnational Kurdish politics

Another new transnational Kurdish institution is the Kurdish Parliament in Exile, which was established in 1995 and held its first convention in the Netherlands. It played a significant part in placing the Kurdish question on the European political agendas. Some of its core members had represented the pro-Kurdish party DEP in Turkey's parliament and sought asylum in Europe when their immunities were lifted and they were threatened with imprisonment for "separatism." (A number of their colleagues, including the popular woman parliamentarian Leyla Zana, who had remained in Turkey, were in fact arrested and sentenced to long prison terms.) Other members represented various Kurdish associations and constituencies, most of them close to the PKK. Furthermore, a number of seats in this parliament were given to representatives of the various religious and ethnic minorities of Kurdistan.

This parliament is transnational in more than one respect. Most obviously, it is itself part of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. It is "trans-state" in that, although established by Kurds from Turkey, it includes at least one member from Iraqi Kurdistan and attempts to strengthen the representation of the other parts. Finally it is transnational in that its permanent offices are located in Brussels and that it has convened in different European countries, including the Netherlands, Denmark, Russia and Italy. It acts as a Kurdish diplomatic representation and has established contact with numerous parties and personalities in Europe.

The Kurdish Parliament in Exile is not the only nor the first institution that represents the Kurds in European political circles. The Kurdish Institute of Paris, established in 1983 with support from Mitterrand's government, is primarily a cultural institution but has also provided a forum for Kurdish and European politicians to meet. The Washington Kurdish Institute has the same functions and is spearheading a Kurdish lobby in the capital that matters most to the Kurds. Kurdish Human Rights organisations based in London and Bonn have effectively brought Turkey's treatment of the Kurds to the attention of national and international bodies, resulting in numerous condemnations of Turkey by the European Commission for Human Rights and pressure on the country from such international bodies as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe.

The major Kurdish political parties have offices representing them in one or more European countries (the two main Iraqi Kurdish

parties also in the USA). They have established wide networks of contacts with non-government organisations and with politicians and bureaucrats at the local, national and European levels. Governments have avoided dealing directly with the elected Kurdish administration in Iraqi Kurdistan, not wishing to lend it more legitimacy and thereby to open the door towards complete independence. Since 1991, however, the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties have had direct contacts with many governments at high levels. Even in Turkey, which until recently denied the very existence of the Kurds, both have offices, which function as minor embassies. A wide range of foreign non-governmental organisations have carried out relief projects in Iraqi Kurdistan in co-operation with the Kurdish administration and the Kurdish parties (bypassing, in many cases, the Baghdad government).

The PKK is banned in Germany, but since 1995 several high-level German government representatives have met with PKK chairman Abdullah Öcalan in Syria or Lebanon, and even in Germany itself solidarity committees and information bureaus obliquely linked to the PKK have continued operating and have had lower-level contacts with the authorities. The PKK had been the first Kurdish organisation to recognise the importance of the Kurdish diaspora, sending organisers to Germany and Sweden even before the 1980 military coup in Turkey. From the mid-1990s on, it also recognised that it could not gain much more through armed struggle than it had gained so far, and it has made efforts to make a transition from military struggle to diplomacy. It wished to involve European countries as intermediaries between the Kurds and the Turkish government and at the same time hoped for Europe to put pressure on Turkey on behalf of the Kurds' cultural and political rights.

The immediate reason why Öcalan travelled to Rome and requested asylum in Italy in November 1998 (referred to in footnote 3) was that he had been obliged to leave Syria a month earlier under heavy Turkish pressure. The event also reflected, however, the PKK's conviction that Europe was the arena where the next phase in the Kurdish struggle was to be fought. The organised Kurdish diaspora could in this perception in the long run exert more pressure on Turkey than the PKK's guerrilla army (which, because of the depopulation of the Kurdish countryside, was gradually cut off from civilian society and becoming militarily less effective). Öcalan's arrival was welcomed by rival organisations and caused a flurry of Kurdish diplomatic activities as Kurdish politicians of many different organisations started preparing for a "Kurdish national conference" to be convened somewhere in Europe in the spring of 1999.[\[14\]](#)

Emerging "smaller" ethnic identities among the Kurds

Migration and long-distance communication have not only been crucial to the development of present Kurdish nationalism and thus paradoxically contributed to the internal integration of Kurdish society. In much the same way they have also contributed to the growing ethnic awareness of "sub-national" groups among them, most conspicuously the Alevi and the Zaza speakers.[\[15\]](#) It has been precisely the greater freedom of publishing in Kurdish and (in Sweden) of teaching Kurdish in primary school to immigrant children (in the hours reserved for mother tongue education) that made some of the Zaza speakers more aware of the difference between their language and Kurdish proper. In the 1980s a number of Zaza speakers in Sweden and Germany, who had previously identified themselves as Kurds, began speaking of the Zazas as a distinct people, with their own culture and a common history that separate them from the Kurds. The entirely new toponym of "Zazaistan" was coined to refer to the region where Zaza speakers were proclaimed to have always lived.[\[16\]](#) Zaza nationalism has thus far not fallen on very eager ears inside Turkey — in spite of, or perhaps because of, being sponsored by certain official circles.

Many of the Kurdish Alevi have long been ambivalent about their ethnic identities, Kurdishness in their view being too closely connected with Sunni "fanaticism". (The Sunni Zazas until recently identified themselves unambiguously as Kurds, but the Alevi Zazas tended to distance themselves a little from this identity.) The late 1980s and early 1990s were also a period of Alevi revival, both in Turkey itself and in the diaspora.[\[17\]](#) The revival was in part a response to the resurgence of Sunni Islam — the strongest organisations in the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora are the Sunni Muslim ones, and the Alevi did not wish to be represented by them and therefore had to establish their own organisations to stress that they had different needs and priorities. It was welcomed and supported by secular circles in the Turkish administration. At the same time, official circles in Turkey believed that the Kurdish Alevi could more easily be wooed away from the Kurdish separatist movement by appealing to the old mutual distrust between Sunnis and Alevi.

A competition is going on for the hearts and minds of Zaza speakers and Alevi. The contending parties are spokespersons for distinct Zaza and Alevi identities on the one hand, and Kurdish nationalists on the other. European cities (especially Berlin) presently constitute the chief arena where this battle is being fought out. The events in Europe and those in Turkey are, however, closely interrelated, and it probably was at least in part to forestall Zaza and Alevi "separatisms" that the PKK stepped up its efforts to gain a foothold in

Tunceli. This in turn led to the military operations of 1994 and 1995, in the course of which a large proportion of the village population was forced to evacuate their villages.[\[18\]](#)

Conclusion

The large-scale population movements of the 1980s and 1990s, voluntary and involuntary, have completely changed the face of Kurdish society and the nature of the Kurdish question. The locality of Kurdistan remains central in the Kurds' consciousness as the historical land of their people, but the proportion of the Kurds who actually live there has dramatically declined. Many of the most significant Kurdish cultural and political activities do not take place in Kurdistan but elsewhere (this is especially true of the Turkish part of Kurdistan). The Kurdistan on the ground has been supplemented with a Kurdistan of the airwaves and in cyberspace, and much of the Kurdish nationalist struggle is going on in the latter.

The European diaspora, with its large Kurdish workers' community and with its exiled intellectuals, has played a key role in the renaissance of Kurmanci Kurdish culture and has stimulated a similar revival in Turkey and Kurdistan. The diaspora has been of crucial importance to the Kurdish political parties, most notably to the PKK: it has provided financial as well as human resources, allowed the parties to educate their cadres and develop communications in various media, established useful networks of contacts with governments and non-government organisations and persons, and constituted the human masses needed to put pressure on governments and public opinion.

The Kurdish question thus no longer is a conflict over a distant and marginal piece of land, that primarily concerns Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. It is increasingly also a European problem, and Europe has a stake in contributing to its solution. This is not to say that the legal status of Kurdistan is becoming irrelevant; as a symbol of Kurdish identity it will remain of prime importance to the Kurdish diaspora, just as Israel is to the Jewish diaspora. Turkey's authorities apparently expect that the mass emigration from Kurdistan will ultimately lead to the assimilation of the Kurds and the gradual disappearance of the Kurdish question. The thrust of this paper has been to show that it was precisely because of this mass migration that Kurdish identity as well as the identities of smaller ethnic categories among the Kurds have been invigorated.

Notes:

[1] M. Mahmut Beyazîdî, *Adetên Kurdîstan*, edited by D. Îzolî. The Hague, 1979.

[2] See the recent study by Rohat Alakom, *Eski İstanbul Kürtleri (1453-1925)* [The Kurds of old Istanbul] (Istanbul: Avesta, 1998).

[3] The last two of these events had a sequel: Öcalan left Syria and unexpectedly turned up in Italy on November 12, drawing much media attention and provoking a major row between Turkey and Italy when the latter country refused to extradite him. These later events are briefly discussed below.

[4] The seriousness of these offensives, and the Kurds' claims that poison gas was used on a large scale were at the time doubted by some journalists and has only been proven beyond doubt after 1991, when Iraqi government documents were captured by the Kurds and shipped to the USA to be analysed. See Human Rights Watch/ Middle East, *Iraq's crime of genocide: the Anfal campaign against the Kurds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). For a bibliographical survey of publications on these events see my "Genocide of the Kurds" in: Israel W. Charny (ed.), *The widening circle of genocide* (Brunswick: Transaction, 1994), pp. 165-91.

[5] The Turkish parliament established in 1997 a committee to investigate the problem of forced village evacuations. According to this committee's report, a total of 905 villages and 2523 "hamlets" (*mezra*, in Turkish) were evacuated. For a detailed report on the evacuations in one district that was hit especially hard, see: Netherlands Kurdistan Society, *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and western Bingöl, September-November 1994* (Amsterdam, 1995).

[6] Mehmet Ali Aslan, *Mülteci Kürtler* [Refugee Kurds] (Ankara: Demokrasi, 1988); Erbil Tu•alp, *Zehir yüklü bulutlar: Halepçe'den Hakkari'ye* [Poisonous clouds: from Halabja to Hakkari] (Ankara: Bilgi, 1989); Ümit Fırat et al., *Halepçe'den kamplara... Kürtler* [The Kurds... from Halabja to the camps] (Istanbul: Alan-Belge, 1990).

[7] The international implications of operation "Provide Comfort" (which established the "safe haven") and the allied "Poised Hammer" force (which takes care of its protection) are discussed in: Helena Cook, *The safe haven in northern Iraq: international responsibility for Iraqi Kurdistan* (London: Kurdistan Human Rights Project, 1995); Baskın Oran, *"Kalkık horoz": çekiş gücü ve Kürt devleti* (Ankara: Bilgi, 1996).

[8] Police spokespersons gave two other, and probably more reliable, relevant figures on the occasion of the 1996 Newroz disturbances in Germany: there were estimated to be some 7,500 hard-core PKK militants, and for demonstrations and mass meetings the PKK could mobilise up to 50,000 people.

[9] Mahmûd Lewendî lists 123 Kurdish journals published in Sweden alone during the years 1956 through 1998, of which 98 were in one of the Kurdish dialects ("Di 100 salîya rojnamegerîya Kurdî de rojname û kovarên ku li Swêdê derketine", in the Kurdish quarterly *Çira* 15-16, 1998, 103-6). The number of books in Kurmanci published in Sweden since 1974 is given as 268 by Lale• Qaso (in the Kurdish weekly *Ronahi*, 7-13 September 1996, 10).

[10] Most of the journals published in Sweden have had a circulation of less than 1000. For a detailed study of Kurdish publishing in Sweden, see: M. Tayfun, *Kurdiskt författarskap och Kurdisk bokutgivning" bakgrund, villkor, betydelse* (Stockholm: Apec, 1998).

[11] The PKK initially was the one Kurdish organisation that appeared not to care much for the development of the Kurdish language; all of its publications were in Turkish. More recently it has also been giving Kurdish more attention, sponsoring language congresses and, most influential, the Kurdish-medium MED-TV broadcasts. It was often said about Öcalan that he spoke no or a very poor Kurdish, but he now also delivers speeches in flawless Kurdish.

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

[13] The expression "sovereignty in the air" is borrowed from Hassanpour, "MED-TV, Grossbritannien und der türkische Staat".

[14] On January 16, 1999, Öcalan was persuaded to leave Italy for an undisclosed destination. He had stated his willingness to stand trial in an international court on the accusation of terrorism, expecting to be able to turn the trial into an indictment of Turkey's Kurdish policies, but neither Germany (which had issued a warrant for Öcalan's arrest in 1990, on the basis of which Italy initially detained him) nor any other European country was willing to put him on trial.

[15] Alevis are a heterodox religious community to which perhaps 20% of Turkey's Kurds belong (and about the same proportion of the Turks are also Alevis); Zaza is a language closely related to Kurdish spoken in Turkish Kurdistan. I have discussed these "intra-Kurdish" particularist movements in "Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes", *Peuples Méditerranéens* 68-69 (1994), 11-37, and in "Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir! The debate on the ethnic identity of the Alevi Kurds", in: K. Kehl-Bodrogi et al. (eds.),

Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1-23.

[16] The toponym of "Zazaistan" was first coined by Ebubekir Pamukçu in Sweden in the late 1980s. A map of this region (more modestly named "region where the Zaza language is spoken") is shown in the published Ph.D. dissertation by another Zaza nationalist: Zülfü Selcan, *Grammatik der Zaza-Sprache. Nord-Dialekt (Dersim-Dialekt)* (Berlin: Wissenschaft & Technik Verlag, 1998).

[17] See Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks, and the Alevi revival in Turkey", *Middle East Report* #200 (Summer 1996), 7-10.

[18] Netherlands Kurdistan Society, *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim* (see note 5).