Martin van Bruinessen, 'Tribes and ethnic identity'

published in:

Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour (eds), *The Kurds in a Changing Middle East: History, Politics and Representation.* London: I.B.Tauris, 2019, pp. 141-170.

# Chapter 6. Tribes and Ethnic Identity

_Martin van Bruinessen_

Forty years ago, during Mulla Mustafa Barzani's last and largest-scale uprising, anthropological field research took me, among other places, to the 'liberated areas' of Iraqi Kurdistan. One of the questions that occupied me then was whether and how the 'primordial' loyalties of family and tribe were giving way to the wider solidarities of class or nation. I was aware that several major tribes that had long been hostile to Barzani were fighting on the government side, but was expecting that the armed confrontations might strengthen a sense of common Kurdish identity among Barzani's allies and those who happened to live in the areas controlled by him and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). At the time of my stay, in the winter of 1974–5, there were allegedly around 50,000 peshmerga (guerrilla fighters) defending the liberated areas, many of whom appeared to be tribesmen under the command of their own chieftain or another prominent member of the tribe. The Barzanis – recognizable by their red, tightly wound turbans – were reputedly the most effective fighters among the peshmerga.

The Barzanis were not a typical tribe, however, nor was Mulla Mustafa Barzani a tribal chieftain. He hailed from a family of religious leaders associated with the Naqshbandi Sufi order, in whose village of Barzan a devoted following of diverse origins had settled, who venerated the shaykhs as holy men with superhuman qualities. In the course of decades of confrontation between the shaykhs and large neighbouring tribes, several of the smaller tribes of the region allied themselves with the shaykhs and were gradually incorporated as Barzanis. Mulla Mustafa was a younger brother of the incumbent shaykh, and had since the 1920s led the Barzanis in numerous battles – against the British and Iraqi military, against hostile Kurdish tribes and later also against rivals within the KDP. In 1946, he had, with a fighting force of some 1,000 Barzanis, joined the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iran, becoming one of its three generals, and following its collapse had taken refuge in the Soviet Union with his men, only returning to Iraq after the 1958 Revolution.

These adventures had made Mulla Mustafa into a symbol of the Kurds' struggle for self-determination – and the urban, educated men who led the Kurdish nationalist party (the KDP) made him its president, hoping thereby to extend the party's influence from cities and towns to the

tribal environment. After the onset of fighting between the Kurds and the new revolutionary regime in 1961, Mulla Mustafa gradually marginalized the party's urban, educated leaders and took direct control of the party apparatus as well. He actually fought his main rivals in the party, the Ibrahim Ahmad–Jalal Talibani faction, in 1966; by the time of the 1974–5 war, these rivals had reconciled with him but had lost all positions of influence in the party (they would, however, later establish a rival party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – PUK).

The 'liberated areas' were in theory administered by the KDP party apparatus, which still included educated, urban Kurds; they were in practice ruled by the peshmerga commanders. In the hills overlooking the town of Ranya, where I spent some time, the commander was one of the men who had accompanied Mulla Mustafa to Mahabad and the Soviet Union. He was, it was said, a poor peasant's son, had studied agriculture during his Soviet years, and believed in empowering peasants against landlords (who, in this region, were tribal chieftains).

The major tribal chieftain and landlord had, in fact, fled this 'liberated area' for the safety of government-held land, but many of the commoners of the tribe stayed behind to cultivate the land. Young party workers spoke proudly of the liberation of the peasants from feudal oppression by the *agha*, the tribal chieftain. I found, however, that the traditional 'feudal' obligations (corvée labour and a share of the harvest) had not disappeared but that the peasants now had to deliver them to the party, as taxation in kind. The KDP, or the peshmerga commander, had taken the place of the tribe *agha* and integrated the tribesmen into a larger entity, without however changing much in the way that the tribe functioned at the local level. The village community and the tribe were still the social entities with which the villagers identified themselves in the first place. They saw themselves as Kurdish because they belonged to a Kurdish tribe. Tribal identity was not giving way to ethnic or ethno-national identity but was considered as a condition for it. In the KDP's discourse, everyone in the region was a Kurd, including the Christians, Yezidis and non-tribal Muslim villagers; but for my interviewees, belonging to a tribe and respecting tribal custom was an essential part of Kurdishness.

In Turkish Kurdistan, I found that it was especially the tribes that identified strongly with the Kurdish movement in Iraq and looked to Mulla Mustafa Barzani as not just another tribal leader but a unifying national figure. I met tribesmen who had spent time in Iraqi Kurdistan and joined the peshmerga in some battles. Others had supported the Iraqi Kurdish movement by smuggling

food and arms. 'My religion is Kurdistan, and Barzani is my prophet', one of these men told me; he was committed to his own tribe but placed the ideal of Kurdistan above it. In 1965, a sister party of the KDP had been established clandestinely in Turkey; its founders were educated men of tribal background. Most of the Kurdish nationalist groups that became active in Turkey from the mid-1970s onwards were, however, urban-based and explicitly critical of tribalism and of the Iraqi KDP's policies – even though many of their prominent members also were of tribal background.

The final collapse of Mulla Mustafa Barzani's movement in March 1975 and his subsequent exile in the United States seemed to mark a turning point in the history of Kurdish nationalism. The armed insurrection and the counter-insurgency response had mobilized tribes on both sides, providing favoured chieftains with arms and money and strengthening tribal moral values. Following Barzani's defeat, the Iraqi regime initially embarked upon a policy of winning hearts and minds by financial handouts, accelerating urbanization and undermining the foundations of the tribal economy. Turkey's Kurds seemed to be taking the lead in the nationalist struggle along with, a few years later, those in Iran awakened by the 1978–9 revolution there. In both cases, the movement was led by urban-based parties that claimed to be opposed to tribalism. By the time I submitted my dissertation, in 1978, I believed that the tribal society that I had studied was gradually vanishing, or at least becoming irrelevant to Kurdish nationalist politics.[1]

The developments of the following decades forced me to nuance my views. Settlement of the last nomads and massive urbanization loosened many Kurdish families' ties to the land, and thereby their dependence on their tribes; mass education broadened people's horizons and opened up more individualized perspectives on life. These developments have undeniably contributed to an ongoing process of de-tribalization. On the other hand, however, tribes and tribalism have in some places made a remarkable comeback, as a direct result of state intervention or of social insecurity. The resumption of guerrilla warfare in Iraq in the late 1970s, the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–8 and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-led guerrilla campaign in Turkey of the 1980s and 1990s led to the mobilization of tribal militias against the Kurdish movement on an unprecedented scale. In Iraq

---

[1] M.M. van Bruinessen, 'Agha, shaikh and state: on the social and political organization of Kurdistan', PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 1978. An abridged and updated version was published by Zed Books in 1992. Further observations and reflections on state–tribe relations, partly based on the developments of the following decades, can be found in Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurds, states and tribes', in Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (eds), *Tribes and power: nationalism and ethnicity in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2003), pp. 165–83.

as well as Turkey, existing tribes were mobilized, paid and armed, and also some new tribe-like entities were created by the State. In response, the neighbours of these militias had either to leave their region or to strengthen their own tribal organization and defensive potential. This re-tribalization was probably a temporary and reversible process, lasting only as long as the military confrontations took place and there was special government funding for the tribes (as is suggested by the case of Iraq, where the militia tribes have gradually lost power and influence since the mid-1990s).

There was yet another way in which the tribes made a comeback, or have become more visible. The massive influx of tribespeople, fleeing from war or forcibly expelled from villages, into the towns and cities has made a noticeable impact on social life and public morality. Tribes have provided their members in the urban environment with a social 'safety net', but have also brought conservative social norms and a violent code of honour.

Women's-rights activists have complained of a strengthening of patriarchal structures constraining women's lives in Iraqi Kurdish towns.[2] This, too, may be a passing phenomenon, due to the geographical movement of people holding 'tribal' values rather than a general resurgence of those values, but it shows that tribes, tribalism and the associated practices and values may persevere even when the economic and political conditions to which they were adaptations have changed.

Tribes have shown a remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances and environments, and to assume new functions. In the final part of this chapter, I shall return to the various modalities of adaptation accounting for their survival and lasting importance. I begin with an overview of attempts, from standpoints close to the State, to understand and 'domesticate' the tribes. I then pass on to anthropological analyses and theoretical explanations of tribal dynamics and state–tribe interaction, and the analysis of two other social formations that have contributed to shaping, and have been shaped by, Kurdish tribal society: Sufi orders and the nationalist association or party, both of which appeal to loyalties broader than those of the tribe.

---

[2] Nazand Begikhani, Aisha K. Gill and Gill Hague, *Honour-Based violence: experiences and counter-strategies in Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish diaspora* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015); Andrea Fischer-Tahir, *Brave men, pretty women? Gender and symbolic violence in Iraqi Kurdish urban society* (Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2009).

**Ziya Gökalp, Sultan Abdulhamid and the Kurdish Tribes**

Not long after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the ideologist of Turkish nationalism and pioneer of sociology in the country, Ziya Gökalp, who was himself at least partly of Kurdish descent and had grown up in Diyarbakir, wrote an important study of the Kurdish tribes of his region, to which he added proposals on how best to 'civilise' them and integrate them into the new nation state. The study was commissioned by a confidant of Atatürk much concerned with nation-building, Minister of Health Rıza Nur, and long remained unpublished but had a significant impact on later official thinking and policies.[3] Tribal organization, in Gökalp's analysis, was an adaptation to environmental factors. In the desert and in the high mountains, only pastoral nomadism is possible, and Gökalp appears to consider tribalism as the natural form of organization of nomads. Agricultural populations of the plains and the edge of the desert face the permanent threat of incursions by armed nomads, and they have adopted tribal organization and tribal custom (such as the blood feud) in a defensive response to the danger posed by their nomadic neighbours.

From this follow Gökalp's counsels on how to modernize and civilize the Kurds: the nomadic mountain people should be brought down from the mountains, for instance by offering them land in the plains. This would remove the threat from the other villages in the plains, which would then no longer need tribal organization and would gradually de-tribalize and become fully settled communities obedient to the government and its laws.

Gökalp notices significant differences between Arab, Turkish and Kurdish tribes. Arab tribes, he claims, are genealogically homogeneous; chieftains and followers are each other's relatives. Kurdish and Turkish tribes are more similar to each other in that they are often led by families that have a different ethnic origin than the commoners. Most Turks, he notes, were de-tribalized much earlier than the Kurds; he considers Turkish culture as more advanced than Kurdish culture, at least in part because of its stronger association with urban life and settled agriculture. He notices examples of Kurdish tribes that once were tribal Turks and of Kurds adopting Turkish identity in an urban environment, and he perceives a close correlation between de-tribalization, sedentarization and assimilation into Turkish culture. Ethnic identity, for Gökalp, is not primordial but a consequence of social dynamics, and historically the balance between Turkicization and

---

[3] It was eventually published as Ziya Gökalp, *Kürt aşiretlei hakkında sosyolojik tetkikler* [Sociological studies on the Kurdish tribes], ed. Şevket Beysanoğlu (Istanbul: Sosyal Yayınlar, 1992).

Kurdicization had often shifted depending on ecological conditions. Modernization and nation-building demanded, in his view, deliberate assimilation policies based on settlement and de-tribalization.

Echoes of Gökalp's counsels can be found in numerous later policy proposals, from the 1927 Settlement Law to President Turgut Özal's 'last will' on the Kurdish question of 1993. The Settlement Law envisaged the complete evacuation of the more inaccessible, mountainous parts of Kurdistan and the deportation of their inhabitants to the regions where Turkish culture was dominant, as well as the settlement of Turkish pioneers among the population of those parts of Kurdistan believed to be capable of being civilized.[4] Özal was concerned with the increasing strength of the separatist PKK, which he believed to depend on support from nomads and mountain villagers. His proposal for a solution involved the wholesale deportation of this mountain population to western Turkey along with economic investment in the parts of the region that were effectively controlled by the State.[5]

Gökalp associated tribalism and the tribes with ecologically marginal regions (mountains and deserts), with pastoral nomadism and with social and cultural backwardness, and he firmly believed that it was possible as well as desirable to de-tribalize these entities and assimilate them into (in his view) superior Turkish culture. Changing their ecological environment, through settlement in a different part of the country and/or urbanization, was in his view the crucial factor in this civilizing process. Gökalp's analysis no doubt owed much to his familiarity with the new French sociology, but his dim view of the backwardness and the threat to progress represented by tribalism was inspired by his disgust with the policies of the last great Ottoman Sultan, Abdulhamid II (ruling 1876–1909), who had armed and empowered the larger Kurdish tribes in order to strengthen his grip on the eastern provinces of the empire. As a young man, Ziya Gökalp belonged to the reform-minded opponents of Abdulhamid's authoritarian rule, and had led protest

---

[4] The Settlement Law is discussed extensively in İsmail Beşikçi, *Kürtlerin 'Mecburi İskan'ı* [The Kurds' 'Forced Settlement'] (Ankara: Komal, 1977).

[5] Özal's 'testament', a letter written not long before his death to then-Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, in which he advised how the Kurdish question could be solved ('Özal'ın Demirel'e Kürt Vasiyeti'), was leaked to the press not long after his death, appearing in the newspaper *Hürriyet* on 12 November 1993. It was summarized in English by Hugh Pope: 'Voice from grave airs a Kurdish solution: Ozal letter published advocating forced migration to defeat PKK', *The Independent*, 13 November 1993.

actions by Diyarbakir's citizenry against the incursions of a tribal chieftain favoured by the Sultan – Ibrahim Pasha, of the Milli tribe.

Sultan Abdulhamid famously established the tribal light-cavalry regiments known as Hamidiye, primarily to defend the Ottoman frontier against the Russian threat – in the Russian–Ottoman War of 1877, Russian troops had penetrated deeply into Ottoman Kurdistan, and vulnerability of the frontier had remained a major concern ever since – and secondarily against the threat of Armenian separatism. Beginning in 1890, ultimately some 64 Hamidiye regiments were established, each consisting of men from a single tribe under the command of their own chieftain.

The Ottoman civilian administration had no jurisdiction over these regiments, which answered only to the military general charged with establishing and overseeing the Hamidiye and who, in turn, reported directly to the sultan. Armed, salaried and privileged with virtual impunity, the Hamidiye commanders and their tribesmen considerably strengthened their position vis-à-vis the other segments of the population, including not only the Armenian and Muslim peasantry and townspeople but also the non-Hamidiye Kurdish tribes as well as rivals for leadership within the tribes that provided the regiments.[6]

Reform-minded members of the administration and urban notables resented the impunity enjoyed by the Hamidiye and the empowerment of the tribes over the educated elite. For the Sultan, however, these regiments, which were personally loyal to him, constituted a more reliable chain of command than the civil administration. To the reform-minded elite of the region, the Hamidiye represented a return to lawlessness, barbarism and insecurity. Seen from the centre, however, the establishment of these regiments was a means to tie the Kurds more firmly to the empire. It was, moreover, part of a broader range of tribal policies aiming to integrate and 'civilize' the Kurds without de-tribalizing them and sacrificing their military potential.

It had long been an established practice, both in Iran and the Ottoman Empire, for the ruler to keep tribes in check by offering positions of honour at court to members of the most powerful and influential tribal or religious families, so that they could serve as go-betweens as well as guarantors

---

[6] Janet Klein, *The margins of Empire: Kurdish militias in the Ottoman tribal zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Stephen Duguid, 'The politics of unity: Hamidian policy in Eastern Anatolia', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 9(2) (1973), pp. 139–55; Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: the Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), pp. 185–9.

of the tribes' loyalty. Rebellious leaders were forced into exile, but their sons in many cases were recruited into the higher levels of the state bureaucracy, as had happened to the Kurdish lord of Cizre, Bedir Khan Beg, and the religious leader Shaykh Ubaydullah of Hakkari, both of whom led large-scale uprisings that were considered proto-nationalist by later generations.[7] Under Abdulhamid, these policies were modernized by the establishment of a special school, the *aşiret mektebi*, for the children of the tribal elite in Istanbul opening up bureaucratic careers to at least some of them.[8] Leading families of Kurdish, but also of Arab, tribes were thereby more systematically integrated into the central Ottoman state while maintaining their authority over their followers in the periphery.

The Kurdish policies of Turkey and Iraq – and, to a lesser extent, of Iran – have oscillated between 'Gökalpian' efforts at de-tribalization and cultural assimilation, and the 'Hamidian' empowerment of certain tribes against security threats, which in the twentieth century mainly meant the Kurdish nationalist movement. In Iraq, this process culminated in the physical destruction of virtually all Kurdish villages in the 1980s, except those of tribes that had joined the pro-state militias. In Turkey, the de-tribalization drive reached its first culmination with the brutal pacification campaign against Dersim in 1937–8 and the ensuing massive deportations and forced assimilation. The policy was resumed with renewed vigour in the 1990s with the forced evacuation of numerous mountain villages and the recruitment of tribal militias (*korucu*, i.e. 'village guards') to conduct counter-insurgency operations against the PKK.[9]

There is hardly any nomadism left in Kurdistan today. All large nomadic tribes have been forced to sedentarize, and only here and there do small groups of tribesmen take their – now much reduced –

---

[7] Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 62–74, 88–101; Ahmet Kardam, *Cizre-Botan beyi Bedirhan: sürgün yılları* [The years in exile of Bedir Khan, the lord of Jazira-Botan] (Ankara: Dipnot, 2013).
[8] Eugene L. Rogan, 'Asiret mektebi: Abdülhamit II's school for tribes (1892-1907)', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996), pp. 83–107; Alişan Akpınar, *Osmanlı devletinde aşiret mektebi* [The school for tribes in the Ottoman state] (Istanbul: Göçebe Yayınları, 1997).
[9] Martin van Bruinessen, 'Genocide in Kurdistan? The suppression of the Dersim rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)', in George J. Andreopoulos (ed.), *Conceptual and historical dimensions of genocide* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 141–70; Netherlands Kurdistan Society, *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and the western part of Bingöl, Turkish Kurdistan, September-November 1994* (Amsterdam: SNK, 1995); Joost Jongerden, *The settlement issue in Turkey and the Kurds: an analysis of spatial policies, modernity and war* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

herds to the old mountain pastures in summer, while spending the winter in town or a nearby village.

Many tribespeople have, in fact, moved to the large cities and do not flaunt their tribal affiliation. Surprisingly, however, even in the urban environment the tribes have not lost their relevance, although they no longer hold the same degree of control over their members that they had in the past.

**What is a Tribe?**

In the anthropological literature, tribes have often been discussed as kinship-based social formations preceding the State and/or continuing to exist in peripheral regions where the State's authority is not effectively exercised. Evolutionary anthropology has postulated a development from small bands of hunters and gatherers through egalitarian, segmentary tribes to more hierarchically organized chiefdoms and finally the full-fledged state.[10] British anthropology especially has often described and analysed tribes as if they existed in a vacuum, independent of the pervasive influence of states. There may in the twentieth century still have been human communities, here and there, that lived in isolation and were hardly affected by the existence of states. This was, however, not the case for Kurdish and other Middle Eastern tribes, which had long lived in intensive interaction with highly developed states in the region.

Many structural features of the Kurdish tribe, such as its internal hierarchy, can best be explained as a result of this interaction with the State. To the fourteenth-century North African author Ibn Khaldun, we owe a brilliant sociological analysis of tribe–state interaction as an explanation of history and dynastic change in the Maghreb.[11] The State is represented in Ibn Khaldun's model by a city, where the ruler lives, surrounded by agricultural lands that feed the city. Beyond these well-protected domains belonging to the State (*makhzan*) lies the wild periphery of mountain and desert (*siba*), where unruly Bedouin tribes roam. These tribesmen periodically raid the state lands and

---

[10] Marshall Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1960).

[11] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah. An introduction to history*, vol. 1, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal (New York: Bollingen Foundation Inc., 1958). The British anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner adopted Ibn Khaldun's theory of dynastic change in his influential study *Muslim society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). More recently, the political scientist Hamit Bozarslan has drawn attention to the usefulness of Ibn Khaldun's conceptual model for understanding state–society relations in the modern Middle East: Hamit Bozarslan, *Le luxe et la violence: domination et contestation chez Ibn Khaldûn* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2014).

may even conquer the city and overthrow the ruling dynasty, taking its place. They are militarily superior to the townsmen due to two main factors: their harsh living conditions have made them sturdy and have forced them to develop a strong social cohesion and group feeling (*asabiyya*), essential to survival.

The concept of *asabiyya* is central to Ibn Khaldun's analysis. The Bedouin tribes have strong *asabiyya*; settled groups also have it, but in weaker form. Once the conquering tribesmen, who owed their victory to their strong *asabiyya*, settle down to urban life and get used to luxury, their physical prowess as well as their *asabiyya* weakens, making them vulnerable to the next wave of conquerors. The main source of a group's *asabiyya* is, according to Ibn Khaldun, the blood relationship but he recognizes that it may also be generated in patronage relations. A group needs to permanently cultivate its awareness of kinship (as the Bedouin tribes do); if not, it will gradually lose its *asabiyya*.

Ibn Khaldun thus appears to define the tribes by their relationship with the State – although he also believes that the Bedouin tribe precedes the emergence of the State – and attributes their distinctive characteristics of sturdiness and *asabiyya* to the harsh ecological conditions of their existence. He does not consider tribes and urban populations as different by nature; tribesmen may turn into civilized urbanites, but in the process lose much of their *asabiyya*. (There seem to be some unacknowledged echoes of Ibn Khaldun in Ziya Gökalp's comments on how Kurdish tribes may be civilized and assimilated; he may have read Ibn Khaldun as well as Émile Durkheim.)

Ibn Khaldun appears to equate tribalism with pastoral nomadism and the rough life encountered in resource-poor environments. Gökalp, however, makes the interesting observation that settled communities living on the edge of the desert or mountains also adopt tribal organization in order to defend themselves more effectively against raids by the desert or mountain tribes. Collective self-defence, no doubt, is a major function of tribal organization, and it may well exist in the absence of nomadism. Many of the major Kurdish tribes have a memory of once having been nomadic or at least semi-nomadic, but nomadism has virtually disappeared while the tribes are still there.

### Kurdish tribes: the segmentary and hierarchical principles

There is a considerable range of variation in the degree of complexity of the social organization of Kurdish tribes but they all share two basic structural principles, which are also found in other tribes

in the Middle East.[12] The first of these is the *segmentary lineage*, defined by patrilineal descent and endogamy. The tribe consists of a number of sections that are, at least structurally, equal to one another. Each of these sections consists again of several sub-sections, which in turn are divided into yet smaller sections, and there is a strong preference for endogamy down to the lowest level of the extended family. A man is expected to marry his father's brother's daughter or, if that is not possible, another close relative. (Or rather, a father is expected to give his daughter in marriage to a brother's son or another close relative within the same descent group.) This marriage pattern keeps the daughters' reproductive potential within the extended family or shallow descent group, and thereby strongly reinforces its cohesion at the expense of its integration into the tribe as a whole or its larger segments (which might be better served by different marriage patterns).[13] And, we should add, it significantly reduces women's individual freedom and ability to negotiate.

Lineages would keep breaking up into smaller segments if this pattern were not balanced by common interests keeping the segments together, the most important of which is common rights to pasture and agricultural land. Tribes claim traditional rights to land, which have to be unceasingly asserted and defended against rival claimants. Conflicts are the 'glue' of tribal organization, and the segmentary structure of the tribe is best seen at times of conflict. Tribes unite in conflicts with rival tribes but they are also often riven by internal conflicts, in which alliances and opposition closely follow the segmentary structure of the tribe. In the case of a blood feud, it is not only the families of the original perpetrator and victim that are involved but the conflict mobilizes the largest possible segments to which these families belong: each member of the perpetrator's larger lineage is a legitimate target for revenge, followed by counter-revenge against the entire lineage of the original victim.[14]

---

[12] For a general discussion of Middle Eastern tribes, see Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East, an anthropological approach* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1989), chapter 6; Richard Tapper (ed.), *The conflict of tribe and state in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (eds), *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 1991).

[13] Marshall Sahlins, 'The segmentary lineage: an organization of predatory expansion', *American Anthropologist* 63(2) (1961), pp. 322–43; Fredrik Barth, 'Father's brother's daughter marriage in Kurdistan', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 10(2) (1954), pp. 164–71; Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state*, pp. 50–9.

[14] Examples of feuds in Kurdistan, and analysis are given in Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state*, pp. 64–74. For a more general statement and comparative analysis, see Jacob Black-Michaud, *Cohesive force: feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East* (New York: St Martin's, 1975).

Segmentary-lineage theory was dominant in British anthropology in the mid-twentieth century and inspired the first anthropological studies of Kurdish society,[15] but from the 1970s onwards it came increasingly under critique.[16] My own field research and oral-history interviews in the mid-1970s convinced me that segmentary lineage was not just a model invented by anthropologists but that it also corresponded to the way that many Kurds believed their social organization worked. However, segmentary lineages coexist with another structural principle that complements, and may override, the egalitarian principle of segmentary alliance and opposition – namely, *hierarchy and authoritarian leadership*.

In theory, the most senior male in a household, extended family or lineage is also the most respected person and the natural leader; there may be relations of seniority among the lineages of a tribe as well, and the senior elder of the most senior lineage might act as the chieftain of the entire tribe.

However, this is rarely the case – and even then, only in relatively small tribes. In the larger tribes, it is more common to have a chiefly family or lineage that is not closely related to any of the commoner lineages that together constitute the tribe.[17] Some chiefly families deliberately emphasize the fact that they are not genealogically related to their tribes – some even claiming descent from the Prophet or early Muslim dynasties, others maintaining memories of different regional or ethnic origins. As outsiders, they are not party to any conflict between the segments of the tribe and are in a position to mediate, negotiate and impose solutions – especially when aided by an armed retinue personally loyal to the chieftain. In fact, a chieftain's position is dependent on his ability to manage conflict within the tribe as well as with the outside world. Similarly, as we shall see below, the influential position of religious leaders, especially of Sufi shaykhs, in Kurdish society is to a large extent based on their ability to manage conflicts *between* tribes.

---

[15] E.R. Leach, *Social and economic organisation of the Rowanduz Kurds* (London: Percy Lund Humphries & Co., 1940); Fredrik Barth, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan* (Oslo: Universitets Etnografiske Museum, 1953). For the broader context, see Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurdish studies in Western and Central Europe', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kurdische Studien* 2 (2015), pp. 18–96.

[16] For overviews of the criticism, see the contributions by Richard Tapper and Steve Caton in Khoury and Kostiner, *Tribes and state formation*; Eickelman, *The Middle East*, pp. 131–8.

[17] Examples are given in Barth, *Principles of Social Organization*; Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, pp. 78–94. As noted above, Ziya Gökalp also commented on this phenomenon of 'alien' leadership in Kurdish tribes, which he believed distinguished them from Arab tribes.

For similar reasons, the marriage pattern of the chiefs of larger tribes often deviates from the endogamous norm. Many members of chiefly families do in fact marry cousins (i.e. closely related women of the same social stratum), but strategic marriage alliances result in a conspicuous degree of exogamy. Chiefs may marry women from other Kurdish tribes; it is not uncommon for chiefs of rival tribes to seal the end of a conflict by an exchange of daughters as spouses for themselves or their sons. They may also take wives from other ethnic groups in the region, or intermarry with urban notables or families of bureaucrats. Polygamy allows them to balance such exogamous alliances with cementing ties within the family.[18]

Important though conflict management within the tribe may be, the authority of a chieftain over his tribe depends even more on his ability to represent the interests of the tribe towards the outside world – which has, in the first place, traditionally meant the State. Both Iran and the Ottoman state dealt with tribal populations as collectivities, developing various forms of indirect rule in which the tribal chieftains constituted the crucial interface. In Safavid Iran (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries), the State in fact consolidated or even created large tribal confederacies (*il*, pl. *ilat*), appointing a chieftain (*ilkhani*) over them and incorporating these confederacies into a decentralized military-command structure.

The Ottoman system of indirect rule allowed for large, autonomous Kurdish principalities in the sixteenth century; as the central administration penetrated more deeply into Kurdistan in the nineteenth century, large tribal confederacies replaced the region's principalities as the units of indirect rule; and with further expansion of the state bureaucracy, ever-smaller regions were left under indirect rule and the relevant tribal units became smaller and less complex.[19]

The cohesion and group feeling (*asabiyya*) of the tribe is no doubt in part due to the awareness of blood kinship among its major sections, but is also fostered by the patronage that the chieftain can dispense due to his privileged relationship with the State. A good chieftain is generous, and a

---

[18] Celadet Bedirkhan, one of the pioneers of Kurdish nationalism, was a scion of one of the great aristocratic families of Kurdistan in which exogamy was the rule; his own mother was Circassian and the entire family was an ethnic mix. Daughters also married out (and were thereby lost to the family, although some of their descendants later rediscovered their Kurdish backgrounds). Bedirkhan, being a nationalist, took the deliberate decision to marry his paternal cousin, conforming with the Kurdish marriage preference. See Ahmet Serdar Aktürk, 'Female cousins and wounded masculinity: Kurdish nationalist discourse in the Post-Ottoman Middle East', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 52(1) (2016), pp. 46–59.

[19] This process is traced in some detail in Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, chapter 3.

model of manly virtues of whom the entire tribe can be proud. He takes care of the interests and problems of individual commoners as well as the collective. Belonging to a strong tribe provides security in an otherwise insecure environment. And yet, in spite of strong *asabiyya*, tribes are fissiparous and prone to internal conflict. The segmentary structure of their lineage is not the only reason tribes are often riven by conflict.

Another major factor is that there may be competing contenders for the position of paramount chieftain, each of whom may mobilize external resources in the pursuit of his interests. Their rivalry may result in breaking up the entire tribe into two feuding factions, in which either each contender was supported by entire sections of the tribe, or each of the sections was in turn divided into factions supporting one or the other.[20]

The geographical position of Kurdistan on the periphery of several states often gave ambitious chieftains the opportunity to strengthen their position by playing one state off against another; some of the more successful chieftains switched allegiances more than once in the course of their careers. It also happened regularly that two contenders for leadership within a tribe allied themselves with different states. These were, until the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire and Iran; later, Russia occasionally had its Kurdish tribal allies and, since World War I, so did Britain. In the postwar years and under Iraq's mandate, British political officers propped up the power of 'loyal' tribal chieftains and found that there were also 'traitors' in the same tribes, who were in collusion with Turkey.[21] Later still, when Kurdish nationalist movements emerged in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, we often find members of the leading family of a tribe active in a Kurdish party, and others working with the central government.[22]

**Transcending Tribal Boundaries: Religious and Ethnic Loyalties**

The years 1880 and 1925 mark the beginning and end of a period that saw a number of major Kurdish uprisings led by religious leaders, in which Kurdish ethnic identity was a major factor and

---

[20] For a description of one complicated case, the Hevêrkan tribe in the Tor Abdin and the Syrian Jazira in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, pp. 94–105.

[21] Portraits of such 'loyal' and 'unreliable' chieftains may be found in W.R. Hay, *Two years in Kurdistan. Experiences of a political officer 1918-1920* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1921); C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs. Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq, 1919-1925* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

[22] Examples are given in Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurds, states and tribes', in Jabar and Dawod, *Tribes and power*, pp. 165–83.

in which many different tribes took part, temporarily overcoming traditional hostilities. Shaykh Ubaydullah of Nehri in Hakkari (1880) and Shaykh Said of Palu (1925) were leaders of different branches of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, Shaykh Mahmood of Sulaymaniya (1919, and again 1923) was the head of a major branch of the Qadiri order. All three belonged to families that had long been established in their region, claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad and were highly (though by no means universally) respected. The shaykhs of Barzan, who also were Naqshbandis but not *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet) and who were looked down upon as heterodox upstarts by the more established families, also established their reputation and gained a wide following in anti-Ottoman and later anti-British uprisings during this period.[23]

These and other great religious families were not affiliated with any tribe but had religious followers in many different tribes, and among the commoners as well as the leading stratum. Their religious charisma and the widespread belief in their ability to perform miracles enabled such shaykhs to play a mediating role in conflicts between tribes and make peace between rival chieftains, and thereby acquire considerable worldly power and wealth. The Sufi orders (*tariqa*) superimposed a centralized network structure on the fissiparous, segmentary structure of the tribes, thus making coordinated action possible. The network consisted of the shaykh and his deputies (*khalifa*), whom he had appointed to represent him in different districts. These deputies would lead the Sufi rituals, initiate new followers, bolster the shaykh's charisma by their devotional stories and act as his representatives and propagandists. Around each of these *khalifa* were groups of men who regularly took part in the spiritual exercises of the order, and perhaps one or more second-level deputies as well as a more diffuse and much larger group of followers who looked upon the shaykh and his *khalifa* as spiritual advisers, protectors and healers.[24]

The said shaykhs, or rather the Sufi networks established by their families, strengthened regional identities that transcended the individual tribe. As the highest authorities recognized by the tribes of Hakkari, Shaykh Ubaydullah and his descendants could arbitrate in conflicts and maintain a degree of cohesion among these tribes. Ubaydullah's son, Muhammad Siddiq, was in the early

---

[23] Among the Kurds, the term 'shaykh' does not refer to tribal leaders but to religious authorities, and more especially to the leaders of Sufi orders. The uprisings mentioned in this paragraph are studied in some detail in Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, and David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* London: I.B.Tauris, 1996); the role of the Sufi orders in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism is a major theme of Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*.

[24] Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, chapter 4.

twentieth century reported to actually rule over four settled tribes of the region and have influence in a much larger region.[25] In the case of the Barzinji family, to which Shaykh Mahmood belonged, the network included tribes as well as non-tribal peasants in the Sulaimaniya region of southern Kurdistan, but it was also strongly opposed by other tribes that felt threatened by the shaykhs' ambitions.[26] Shaykh Said's family had established a dense network of *khalifa* and village mullahs in the Zaza-speaking districts between Erzurum and Diyarbakir. (Zaza is considered a distinct language by most linguists, and a Kurdish dialect by Kurdish nationalists.) Prior to the uprising, the shaykh had toured those districts, resolving conflicts between tribes and persuading chieftains to sign up to the rebellion. The uprising spread well beyond the Zaza districts, and Shaykh Said, who was publicly hanged after the suppression of the rebellion, became a national hero to Kurds even beyond Turkey. Almost a century later, the shaykh's family still is at the centre of a dense network of *khalifa* and village mullahs spread throughout the Sunni, Zaza-speaking districts, which in a sense serves to integrate the Sunni Zaza tribes with one another.[27]

**From Sufi Orders to Political Parties**

The role of coordinating corporate action by various tribes has shifted from Sufi orders to formal associations and parties, but Sufi orders remain influential in Kurdish society, in urban centres as well as in rural districts. In Turkey, the Naqshbandi order has profoundly shaped religious sensibilities and had an impact on Islamist politics.[28] It has a number of distinct Kurdish branches

---

[25] Basile P. Nikitine and Ely B. Soane, 'The tale of Suto and Tato', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 3(1) (1923), pp. 69–106; Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Sâdatê Nehrî or Gîlânîzâde of Central Kurdistan', *Journal of the History of Sufism* 1-2 (2000), pp. 79–91, reprinted in Bruinessen, *Mullas, Sufis and heretics: the role of religion in Kurdish society. Collected articles* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2000).

[26] In the 1950s, Fredrik Barth's informants of the Jaf tribe were very suspicious of the Barzinji shaykhs and especially their non-tribal followers, whom they believed to be using the mobilizing potential of the Qadiri Sufi order as an instrument of class struggle against the landowners. Barth, *Principles of Social Organization*.

[27] Mehmed S. Kaya, *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey: a Middle Eastern minority in a globalised society* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), pp. 54–74, 195–9.

[28] Serif Mardin, 'The Naksibendi order in Turkish history', in Richard Tapper (ed.), *Islam in modern Turkey. Religion, politics and literature in a secular state* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1991), pp. 121–42; Hakan Yavuz, 'The matrix of modern Turkish Islamic movements: the Naqshbandi order', in Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), *Naqshbandis in western and central Asia* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1999), pp. 129–46.

that are now also active in major cities in western Turkey, presumably especially among Kurdish migrants.[29]

All Sufi orders were formally banned in Turkey in 1925, and most Kurdish Naqshbandi shaykhs – including those not involved in the Shaykh Said uprising – were sent into exile. Teacher–disciple networks persisted, however, especially among the Kurds, and after the return to multiparty politics in 1950 *tariqa* shaykhs have acted as vote-getters for political parties, which in turn enabled them to dispense patronage and strengthen their positions.[30] In this respect, they differed little from the tribe *aghas*, many of whom also consolidated their positions by taking part in political-party-based patronage politics.

In Iraq, several branches of Sufi orders transformed themselves into politico–military entities that positioned themselves in the tribal environment as a sort of warrior tribe, fighting other tribes and at the same time attempting to incorporate them. The most remarkable example, no doubt, is that of the Barzanis. Although originally it was the Naqshbandi network and veneration of the charismatic shaykhs that gave this heterogeneous coalition its cohesion, under Mulla Mustafa Barzani the shaykh and his pious followers faded into the background and the Barzanis became a sort of Praetorian Guard, a confederation of tribal and non-tribal groups unconditionally loyal to him and later to his sons Idris and Masud. With the help of this formidable fighting force, the Barzani family brought most of Badinan, the Kurmanci-speaking northern part of Iraqi Kurdistan, under its control (with the exception, until 1991, of the large tribes that remained allied with and were armed by the central government). In the course of the armed confrontation with Baghdad, Barzani also wrested control of the KDP from the hands of its originally urban and Sulaimaniya-based leadership and gained the allegiance of some southern tribes. Iranian, Israeli and finally covert US support helped him to further consolidate his position as the *Serok* (headman, president)

---

[29] Thierry Zarcone, 'Les branches à Istanbul des ordres soufis kurdes', *Annales de l'autre islam* 5 (1998), pp. 109–23. One of these branches, named after the shaykhs' village of Menzil (near Adıyaman), has adopted a Turkish nationalist discourse and has been a strong supporter of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), for which it was rewarded with a number of deputies in parliament and ministerial posts in government. It is also strongly represented among the Turkish diaspora in western Europe.

[30] On these developments, see the interesting study by Müfid Yüksel, *Kürdistan'da değişim süreci* [The process of change in Kurdistan] (Ankara: Sor, 1993), which focuses especially on the shaykhs of Norşin. See also the biography of Shaykh Said's grandson Abdülmelik Fırat, who lived part of his life in exile but also became an influential and widely respected member of parliament – Ferzende Kaya, *Mezopotamya sürgünü. Abdülmelik Fırat'in yaşam öyküsü* [Exile from Mesopotamia: Abdulmelik Fırat's life story] (Istanbul: Anka, 2003).

of the Kurdish movement, ruling a complex chiefdom of tribes and non-tribal groups through a tightly controlled party apparatus and intelligence service, with the Barzani 'Praetorian Guard' as the main enforcers.

Mulla Mustafa Barzani's main rival, Jalal Talibani, who in the mid-1960s not only fought the government but also clashed with Barzani's peshmerga, and who in 1976 established the PUK as a 'progressive' alternative to the KDP, also belonged to a well-known family of Sufi shaykhs – this time, of the Qadiri order.

The rival parties, the KDP and the PUK, have occasionally been described as fronts for the Naqshbandi and Qadiri Sufi orders, respectively – an unwarranted exaggeration that appears to reflect secularist Kurds' perceptions of the lasting influence of these Sufi orders.[31]

Most of the Barzanis were not practising Naqshbandis, and there were to my knowledge no Qadiri Sufis among Talibani's collaborators and political followers. The Talibanis are a large notable family with influence and land in Kirkuk and in Koy Sanjaq, and the Talibani shaykhs of Kirkuk have a large religious following but Jalal Talibani and his associates were always secular, urban intellectuals. Neither is there a Talibani Praetorian Guard to balance the Barzanis' one as a tribal fighting force. The core of the PUK has been urban and non-tribal; the party has recruited tribal allies, but few of these were firmly committed and many changed sides repeatedly in the course of the conflicts with Baghdad.[32]

There were, however, Qadiris who did become a politico–military force without giving up being Sufis. These are in the Kasnazani branch of the Barzinji family, the most conspicuous Qadiris nowadays, who have numerous followers in Iraq as well as Iran and Turkey. In the 1960s, the

---

[31] In several conversations that I had with Iraqi Kurds in the 2000s, this association of the two parties with Sufi orders was made explicitly. The political scientist David Romano appears to reflect these perceptions when he writes that 'Talibani's PUK rallied a disproportionate number of Sorani-speaking Kurds, tribes in opposition to Barzani, members of the Qadri [sic] Sufi religious brotherhood, and people from the southeastern part of Iraqi Kurdistan […] Barzani's KDP […] was disproportionately composed of Kurmanji-speaking Kurds, Barzani tribes and their allies, Naqshibendi [sic] Sufis, and people from the northwestern part of Iraqi Kurdistan.' Romano, *Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, p. 197.

[32] Noshirwan Mustafa, one of the PUK's commanders (who was later to found the Gorran party), spoke at large about the unpredictable nature of tribal alliances in south Kurdistan. PUK-allied tribes might suddenly join the irregular militias established by the government, and militias might suddenly join the PUK, bringing along their government-supplied weapons and ammunition. The militias commonly avoided full-scale confrontations with the PUK Peshmerga, and often gave warnings of military operations (interview, Nawzeng, Iraq–Iran border, April 1979).

incumbent shaykh, Abdulkarim, and his followers in the Kirkuk region constituted a pro-government militia force that actively fought the peshmerga. His son, Shaykh Muhammad, was likewise both a Sufi teacher and a militia commander. Unlike the Barzanis, the Kasnazanis were both a quasi-tribal fighting force and actively participated in Qadiri Sufi rituals. In the 1990s, the shaykh lived in Baghdad, where he had disciples in all branches of the state apparatus and was involved in various business deals with Saddam Hussein's sons. After a falling out with Saddam, he fled Baghdad and was offered asylum in Sulaimaniya by Jalal Talibani. Throughout the years of fighting on opposite sides, the shaykh and the nationalist politician had always kept lines of communication open. In Sulaimaniya, he remained politically active and a force to be reckoned with due to his ability to mobilize followers. In the years following the US invasion of Iraq, one of his sons established a political party, attempting to translate his father's Sufi network into votes in the country's first elections – with limited success.[33]

**Iraqi Kurdistan**

***Kurdish pro-government militias, the Kurdish movement, and Kurdish ethnic identity***

Shaykh Muhammad's Kasnazaniyya was not the only Kurdish militia to maintain ambivalent relations with the Kurdish nationalist movement that they were supposed to be fighting. During the Iran–Iraq War, unprecedented numbers of tribesmen were recruited – voluntarily or under duress – into pro-government militias (nicknamed *jash*, 'donkey foals' by the Kurds). Each militia battalion was commanded by a *mustashar* ('adviser') – in many, but not all, cases a tribal chieftain, who besides his own salary received a sum for each of his men.

Kurdish young men could evade being drafted into the army by enrolling in the *jash*, which obviously caused the militias' numbers to swell. Their enthusiasm for engaging the peshmerga varied: some *mustashar* were firmly committed to defeating the KDP and PUK forces, but on the

---

[33] While in Sulaimaniya, Shaykh Muhammad and his sons Nehru and Gandhi remained well-connected in Baghdad and became important CIA assets, enabling the CIA mission in Sulaimaniya to meet people of all branches of the state apparatus prior to the US invasion. See Bob Woordward, *Plan of attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) (where the shaykh and his sons appear pseudonymously as 'the Pope' and 'the Rockstars'). Annabelle Böttcher made valuable observations, partly based on her own fieldwork in Iraq, in an unpublished paper, 'Sufi resistance in Iraq', presented at the Deutsche Orientalistentag (DOT) in Freiburg in September 2007. The Kasnazaniyya is the subject of a forthcoming PhD dissertation by Awaz Kadir at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, provisionally titled 'La Kesnazaniyya en Irak: le passage d'une confrérie soufie au parti politique (1980-20014)'.

whole active participation in military campaigns appears to have been limited; many avoided open clashes with the peshmerga when they could, and mainly restricted themselves to guarding their own tribal territories against peshmerga incursions and a possible Iranian offensive.

These militia tribes' villages enjoyed immunity when the other Kurdish villages were evacuated and destroyed, culminating in the 1988 genocidal *Anfal* operations. In these operations, *jash* were deployed on a large scale to round up villagers; there are numerous reports about cruel behaviour and massive plunder of villages by *jash* but also many accounts of individual *jash* saving the lives of villagers marked for deportation and annihilation.[34]

Less than three years later, in the aftermath of the Kuwait war, many *jash* took active part in the massive Kurdish uprising of March–April 1991. By some accounts it was in fact *jash* who initiated the rebellion, capturing towns and the centres of Ba'ath party control; the nationalist parties were at first allegedly reluctant and only later brought the uprising under their control. (Other accounts, less convincingly, claim that the parties organized the uprising from the very beginning.) Many of the *jash*, like the nationalists they had fought, appeared to be eager for Kurdish autonomy.

In the safe haven created by international intervention later that year, former *jash* tribes such as the Surchi, Herki and Zibari – long-time enemies of the Barzanis – remained a significant force; they were armed and prosperous, though no longer in league with Saddam's regime. The KDP and PUK had to reach an accommodation with them (in which the PUK was the more flexible party), and were forced to accept that they were politically active. The early and mid-1990s were a period of increasing tension between the KDP and the PUK, each of which was now in control of a major part of Iraqi Kurdistan and building up an administration. Both co-opted remnants of the previously existing civil service and the urban middle classes, and relied on the tribes for territorial control. The sociologist Andreas Wimmer, who visited the region a few times in the early 1990s, described both parties as 'a mixture of tribal confederation and patronage-based party apparatus'. The KDP had long incorporated tribes in its command structure, which is why it was the stronger of the two parties and could offer protection to urban populations and the numerous internally displaced in camps. The PUK had depended less on tribal support but now allied itself with several

---

[34] Human Rights Watch / Middle East, *Iraq's crime of genocide: the Anfal campaign against the Kurds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 28–30 (on recruitment into the militia battalions), 109–12 (on the *jash*' ambivalent role in the *Anfal*).

large former *jash* tribes to consolidate its territorial control and form a defensive anti-KDP coalition. As Wimmer observed, perhaps somewhat overstating his case, the PUK 'in a sense took over the role of Baghdad in relying on the tribal enemies of the Barzani coalition'.[35] Although there was no significant armed confrontation with the central government, this was a period in which tribes were very prominent and the position of tribal chieftains bolstered.

A few dozens of these chieftains, led by Umar Khidr Surchi, formed an alliance that they called the Mosul Vilayet Council, which announced its intention to renegotiate the inclusion of the province of Mosul in Iraq by the League of Nations, demanding self-determination on behalf of the Kurds and other ethnic and religious communities of the region. They invited the KDP and PUK to join their efforts to get the United Nations involved in a revision of the status of the region – apparently with little success.[36] Some of the same men established the Kurdistan Conservative Party (KCP) as a vehicle to defend the interest of tribal chieftains.

The Surchis' habitat is in the KDP-controlled northern part of Iraqi Kurdistan, but the Surchi and the KCP cultivated relations with the PUK and remained hostile to the KDP. They were punished for this when in 1996, at the height of the fratricidal KDP–PUK war, KDP peshmerga overran the central Surchi village, killing the head of the leading family. The KCP moved its base to the PUK region, where it briefly had one minister in the regional government at Sulaimaniya. A reconciliation with the KDP finally took place in 2005, when the two major parties reached agreement over a jointly ruled Kurdistan regional government.[37] Not much later, however, in

---

[35] Andreas Wimmer, 'Stammespolitik und die kurdische Nationalbewegung im Irak', in Carsten Borck *et al.* (eds), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan* (Münster: LIT, 1997), pp. 11–43 (especially the section on state-building by clientelism, pp. 32–8). See also Andreas Wimmer, 'Stämme für den Staat: tribale Politik und die kurdische Nationalbewegung im Irak', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 47 (1995), pp. 95–113.

[36] The Mosul Vilayet Council hired the services of a Swiss lawyer to press their claims (which ultimately came to nothing). Their petitions and other documents, which are of some historical interest, can be retrieved from the website www.solami.com/a33c.htm (accessed February 2018).

[37] Michiel Leezenberg, 'Urbanization, privatization, and patronage: the political economy of Iraqi Kurdistan', in Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (eds), *The Kurds: nationalism and politics* (London: Saqi, 2006), pp. 151–79, esp. 163–74; Martin van Bruinessen, 'Iraq: Kurdish challenges', in Walter Posch (ed.), *Looking into Iraq* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2005), p. 65.

preparation for the 2008 provincial council elections, the Herki, Surchi and Zibari tribes were reported to be seeking cooperation with Arab Sunni tribes against the Kurdish nationalist parties.[38]

As the parties consolidated their rule, they lessened their dependence on the tribes – especially, one may presume, on those of doubtful loyalty. The KDP and PUK held a monopoly of financial resources in their respective regions, and could weaken the positions of chieftains by withholding or re-channelling patronage. The reconciliation between the two parties gave the chieftains in between less leverage.

The reorganization of the peshmerga army along non-tribal lines is also likely to have weakened the position of tribal chieftains – but very little concrete information on the peshmerga army is publicly available. Officially the PUK and KDP peshmerga have been integrated in a single force with mixed regiments, but there are doubts as to how seriously the integration was carried out. Party loyalties remain strong, and the all-pervasive patronage has allowed commanders at all levels to continue recruiting trusted men, which often means men of their own extended family or tribe.[39]

**Turkish Kurdistan: Various Modes of Integration in the State**

The dominant political movement of Turkey's Kurds, the PKK, identified tribal chieftains in its earliest broadsheets as collaborators with the colonial state and carried out its first major attack against a chieftain closely linked to the then-ruling party, Mehmet Celal of the large Bucak tribe. Unlike the Iraqi Kurdish parties, the PKK has never attempted to accommodate the tribes. There are tribespeople in its ranks – men as well as women – but they joined as individuals and not on the basis of their tribal affiliation. Wherever it could exercise influence, the PKK has attempted the break the power of tribal chieftains and other powerful families.

Many tribal chieftains were in fact closely allied with the State. During the period of high Kemalism, in the 1930s and 1940s, the State had attempted to de-tribalize Kurdish society by sending numerous chieftains and their families into exile, thus separating them from the tribe, and by deploying the usual institutions of national integration, the school and the army. The return to

---

[38] Denise Natali, *The Kurdish quasi-state: development and dependency in post–Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010), p. 124.

[39] Some US documents released by WikiLeaks provide a glimpse of the reorganization process. See, for instance, 'Peshmerga force unification, Iraqi Kurdistan', dated 6 July 2007, available at www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAGHDAD2242_a.html (accessed February 2018).

multiparty democracy, from 1950 onwards, had the effect of revitalizing many of the tribes and strengthening the positions of tribal chieftains. Competitive elections, in which each province elected a number of deputies, propelled tribal *aghas* (as well as Sufi shaykhs) who could command a significant proportion of the vote in their provinces into the role of political brokers allied with one of the parties. New structures of patronage emerged, in which Kurdish members of parliament – who were in some cases *aghas* themselves, or more often educated men representing an *agha* – served their constituencies by giving them access to various resources, from infrastructural investments and marketing of goods to legal representation, employment and education. Similarly, the army units that policed the countryside found it easiest to deal with the population of their district through village and tribe *aghas*, and the same was true of other centrally appointed officials. Not all tribes were thus revitalized, but in each province several chieftains could position themselves at the interface of state and society and consolidate their tribes.

These *aghas* and shaykhs were typically allied with conservative parties of the political centre – this was one of the reasons why military and civilian bureaucrats were suspicious of the first of these parties, the Democratic Party, which was brought down in the 1960 military coup – but the other parties also found tribal allies in the Kurdish provinces, including even the ultranationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party). As politicians, they represented some of the interests of their constituencies, which were by and large Kurdish, but most of them cautiously stayed aloof from the emerging Kurdish nationalist movement.

A different type of Kurdish representation in parliament began with the establishment, in 1990, of the first of a series of short-lived 'pro-Kurdish' parties that were in fact rooted in the Kurdish movement and took up such issues as recognition and cultural and political rights. With a few exceptions, tribal chieftains have not been much in evidence in the pro-Kurdish parties; both for the chieftains and their dependents, alliance with one of the establishment parties was more useful for purposes of patronage. Until the spectacular rise of the pro-Kurdish HDP (People's Democratic Party) in 2015, most Kurdish members of parliament owed their seats to patronage politics rather than their views on the Kurdish question.

Turkey's military and intelligence services kept a close watch on the tribes, and distinguished sharply between those that were (more or less) reliable and those that had once taken part in

uprisings or given other signals of dissent.[40] Since Ottoman times, 'loyal' tribes have been called upon to put down rebellions. When the PKK, which started a genuine guerrilla war in 1984, became a serious security threat that could not be effectively contained by the police, Turkey recruited 'reliable' tribes as a counter-insurgency militia: the *korucu*, or 'village guards.' Initially drawn from only a few tribes, the numbers of village guards gradually increased, reaching almost 50,000 salaried militiamen and an additional 25,000 volunteers.

Some units consisted of existing tribes or sections of tribes, others of apparently randomly recruited men under a local strongman. The *korucu* were integrated into a military-command structure but have had licence to exert violence on their own behalf. Money, arms and virtual impunity before the law gave the favoured chieftains unprecedented power and led to the intensification of inter-tribal conflicts. Local as well as outside observers spoke of the 're-tribalization' of society. It would be misleading, however, to think of this in terms of a return to the past: the *korucu* system introduced new forms of patronage relations, based on a mix of kinship, class and political interests.[41]

**Final Observations**

The massive destruction of much of the rural economy in the counter-insurgency operation of the 1980s (in Iraq) and 1990s (in Turkey) has undermined the economic foundations of tribal organization in large parts of Kurdistan. Pastoral nomadism has virtually disappeared (but there has been a significant revival of transhumant pastoralism in eastern Turkey as a complement to agrarian or urban economic activities) and a high proportion of the rural population has been displaced. On the other hand, the Iraqi and Turkish states' establishment of tribal and quasi-tribal

---

[40] See the anonymous Aşiretler raporu [Report on tribes], Istanbul: Kaynak, 1998, a leaked intelligence report that contains for each of the Kurdish-majority provinces detailed information on the tribes and their loyalty to the state.

[41] Bruinessen, 'Kurds, states and tribes'; Hamit Bozarslan, 'Kurdistan: Kriegswirtschaft - Wirtschaft im Krieg', in: Carsten Borck, *et al.* (eds), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan*, Münster: LIT, 1997, pp. 79-112; Gilles Dorronsoro, 'Les politiques ottomane et républicaine au Kurdistan à partir de la comparaison des milices Hamidiye et korucu', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 5 (2006), available at ejts.revues.org/778 (accessed February 2018); Semsa Özar, Nesrin Uçarlar and Osman Aytar, *From past to present, a paramilitary organization in Turkey: village guard system* (Diyarbakir: Diyarbakir Institute for Political and Social Research, 2013); Mehmet Seymen Önder, *Devlet ve PKK ikileminde korucular* [The village guards, caught between the state and the PKK] (Istanbul: Iletişim, 2015).

militias bolstered tribal organization with new resources (and changed the balance of power between tribal groups).

Tribal organization remains complementary to the administrative structure of the State. Tribes exist where the State cannot exert its authority effectively or where it deliberately delegates tasks to them. In this respect, tribal organization is comparable to civil society (although it lacks the voluntary character and benevolent qualities commonly associated with civil society).[42] Tribal militias such as the *jash* and *korucu* – or, in an earlier period, the Hamidiye – are extreme examples in that they were deliberately created out of previously existing tribes (but never fully coinciding with those tribes). There are numerous less extreme examples, in which tribes are left to perform tasks that are too costly for the State to implement. I briefly mention two such examples, in a rural and an urban setting.

Land conflicts are perpetual. Land registration by the State started in the mid-nineteenth century and has not yet been fully completed. There are often competing claims to the same piece of land, and control of land is frequently seized from the person with the strongest legal claim by a rival who can mobilize sufficient local backing. It is possible to go to court and register one's claim against an illegal occupant (and, in fact, people do go to court and do win verdicts). The court verdict determines legal ownership, but the State in many cases does not have the resources to enforce such decisions. So even where state law is recognized and appealed to, a claimant may need to invoke the support of his tribe, or even of his tribe's allies, to press his claim against the usurper (who also has tribal support) and actually obtain his right – or not.[43]

The numerous cases of seizure of entire villages by *korucu* in Turkey, which could not be undone by court decisions in favour of the original owners – or could be, but only with great difficulty –

---

[42] Richard Antoun and others have argued that in non-Western societies, forms of civil society exist that may not be recognized as such because they differ from the formal, associational type to which much of the relevant literature usually restricts itself. Antoun focused on the tribal councils (*diwaniyya*) of Arab society as performing many of the functions attributed to civil society elsewhere. Richard T. Antoun, 'Civil society, tribal process, and change in Jordan: an anthropological view', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000), pp. 441–63. For a more general statement, see Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn (eds), *Civil society: challenging western models* (London: Routledge, 1996).
[43] Kaya, *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey*, pp. 34–41 provides interesting examples from Solhan district, where several tribes are represented in each village and where local tribal factions may call upon their tribesmen from outside the village, and where ultimately shaykhs and other respected great men are capable of acting as the arbiters in land conflicts.

underline the importance of tribal support (and, incidentally, also bring out the role of the PKK as a new arbiter alongside the shaykhs).

A considerable proportion of the Kurdish population of tribal background has migrated to such metropolises as Baghdad, Tehran, Istanbul and Cologne. No doubt many of them have individualized and loosened ties with their tribal origins. Yet for recent migrants, and probably especially for those of low education and low economic position, networks based on region of origin or tribal affiliation remain essential resources that allow them to survive in the new environment.

'Hometown' associations, in which people from the same town or district in Turkey organize themselves for sociability and mutual aid, are a well-known phenomenon about which there is a growing body of academic studies.[44] At least some tribes also perform that role very effectively, as is documented for the case of the Koçkiri in Istanbul by Günter Seufert.[45] Early migrants of this tribe, arriving in the 1960s, found themselves a particular niche in the labour market, which they had to defend against other Kurdish tribesmen. Newly arriving Koçkiri found lodging, jobs and protection in their tribal network, and the need for these services kept that network intact and solidarity high. Anecdotal information suggests that there are many such economically specialized tribal networks in the major cities.

In all these examples, the tribes that we encounter are hardly the tribes of segmentary theory but rather patronage networks in which kinship and (the belief in) common descent is only one factor. The alliances and oppositions in conflicts involving militias, voting in elections, land conflicts or scarce resources in the urban environment do not neatly follow the segmentation of descent groups but do involve vertical relations of patronage in which physical prowess, loyalty, abilities and political convictions are also important factors. The tribes involved have names and in many cases a documented history going back centuries. Corporate action by the entire tribe has been extremely rare in modern history (and may very well always have been rare). When we see a tribe in action, it

---

[44] For instance, the special issue of the *European Journal of Turkish Studies* on hometown organizations, *EJTS* 2 (2005), available at ejts.revues.org/359 (accessed February 2018); Anna Grabolle-Çeliker, *Kurdish life in contemporary Turkey: migration, gender and ethnic identity* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013).
[45] Günter Seufert, 'Between religion and ethnicity: a Kurdish-Alevi tribe in globalizing Istanbul', in Petra Weyland and Ayse Öncü (eds), *Space, culture and power: new identities in globalizing cities* (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 157–76.

is often one or more members of the leading family with a following consisting of relatives and assorted clients and dependents. It is in this form that tribes are likely to remain part of the political landscape of Kurdish society.