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The Shaikh's Republic:
The Kurdish Regional Government's Incorporation of Tribalism

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Abstract

Iraqi Kurdistan in 2015 is polity quite unlike any other. Iraqi Kurdistan has come to be treated in policy making circles as a model for what is sometimes believed to be impossible: a highly tribal, multi-religious and multi ethnic society in the Middle East with sentiments of unity, a burgeoning economy, the makings of a democracy, increasing literacy and quality of life, and (perhaps most impressively) an effective internal security arrangement in the middle of a chaotic region. Yet recent events have cast doubts on the future of Kurdistan. The advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) during the summer of 2014 cast doubts upon the short-term viability of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), and the successes of the Kurdish *Peshmerga* militia versus ISIS have at best forestalled the question of the Kurdish Region's security *vis-à-vis* outside forces. While the future of the Kurdish Region will certainly be determined by a number of factors, this paper seeks to focus on the role of tribalism in particular, seeking to better understand the relationship between tribal structures and heritage, the KRG's major political parties, and the KRG. Ultimately, this paper argues that tribalism is alive and well in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. Kurdish society, including the elements which are non-tribal, is heavily influenced by tribal mores and structures. This influence includes a tendency for different sectors of society to mobilize in opposition to each other to create a sort of balancing effect. In the days of unrestricted tribal authority, this mobilization of support against another's gains occurred through violent attacks, and this is still the case in much of the Middle East. In the modern Kurdish state competition along these lines has been normalized into a peaceful political process. The political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan are neo-tribal entities which follow this pattern of balanced opposition, but they are also full participants in a developing modern state's institutions. This way of incorporating tribalism presents a possible new way forward for other societies influenced by tribalism.

Introduction

Iraqi Kurdistan in 2015 is polity quite unlike any other. The Kurds are famously a people without a homeland and a historically repressed minority, suffering the whims of Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi state action during the tumultuous events of the Middle East in the 20th century. This situation has not visibly changed; Kurds remain officially deprived of a nation state despite the emergence of a totally autonomous zone in northern Iraq. At the same time, Iraqi Kurdistan has come to be treated in policy making circles as a model for what is sometimes believed to be impossible: a highly tribal, multi-religious and multi ethnic society in the Middle East with sentiments of unity, a burgeoning economy, the makings of a democracy, increasing literacy and quality of life, and (perhaps most impressively) an effective internal security arrangement in the middle of a chaotic region. Yet recent events have cast doubts on the future of Kurdistan. The advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS¹) during the summer of 2014 cast doubts upon the short-term viability of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), and the successes of the Kurdish *Peshmerga* militia versus ISIS have at best forestalled the question of the Kurdish Region's security *vis-à-vis* outside forces. Some of the same qualities which have proved to be challenging for Iraq apply to the Kurdish Region as well; it is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic region, with a strong heritage in nomadic tribalism.

While the future of the Kurdish Region will certainly be determined by a number of factors, this paper seeks to focus on the role of tribalism in particular. The driving questions behind the research in this paper all pertain to the ways in which tribal social structures interact with the institutions of a modern state. Can tribes survive as potent political forces in a modern state? Do states with a tribal population have certain fundamentally tribal characteristics? Do

¹ This outdated name for the organization is used intentionally throughout for the sake of consistency in a rapidly changing situation.

tribes constitute their own factions in the political scene? How do tribes interact with political parties? Is a 'tribal' state inherently archaic in some respects or can it act as a 'modern' state?

It is worth pausing for a moment here to note that I generally assume in this paper that the Kurdish Regional Government can be talked about as a state despite its current status as an autonomous region of Iraq. Perhaps before the current war, it may have been possible to speak of the KRG as a component of Iraq, but that is no longer the case. There are no more Iraqi forces patrolling the Kurdish Region. The Kurdish Region has its own government which negotiates with other states independently of Baghdad. It exports its own resources and has its own military. It is reliant on Baghdad in name only. In this paper its independent agency is not questioned, and it is assumed that theories of state-tribe interactions apply just as well to region-tribe interactions.

Chapter 1 of this paper discusses a number of theories about the role of tribalism in the state. For some scholars, discussing tribes at all raises eyebrows. While the theoretical portion of my analysis will touch on the debate over whether tribalism remains relevant, it must be said that the notion that tribes and tribalism have some importance in analyzing Kurdish society is another underlying assumption of this paper. As will be reviewed in greater detail in chapter 2, very few Kurds can claim that tribalism is not in some way a part of their family's recent heritage. Tribalism is, at the very least, a source of certain mores of Kurdish society, and as I will later argue, probably plays a much more significant role as a source of key structural elements of Kurdish politics.

Chapters 2 and 3 attempt to answer the questions raised by the theoretical discussion in Chapter 1. Kurdish tribalism is quite different from the Arab tribalism which most scholars have studied, and as such a thorough review of the structure of Kurdish tribes is needed. Chapter 2

begins with a review of the segmentary tribal structure in Kurdistan, but ultimately seeks to paint an image of modern Kurdish society as broadly following a somewhat tribal pattern. In Chapter 3, the political parties of Kurdistan specifically are examined, and I argue that these parties are the kin of the tribal confederations of old both structurally and in terms of behavior.

Ultimately, this paper argues that tribalism is alive and well in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, which is also a modern state. Kurdish society, including the elements which are non-tribal, is heavily influenced by tribal mores and structures. This influence includes a tendency for different sectors of society to mobilize in opposition to each other to create a sort of balancing effect. In the days of unrestricted tribal authority, this mobilization of support against another's gains occurred through violent attacks, and this is still the case in much of the Middle East. In the modern Kurdish state competition along these lines has been normalized into a peaceful political process. The political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan are neo-tribal entities which follow this pattern of balanced opposition, but they are also full participants in a developing modern state's institutions. While caution should be exercised regarding certain tendencies of tribal society, I argue that heavily tribal political factions in a state heavily influenced by tribalism can succeed in being 'modern' in the common sense of the word, and that this effective cooption of tribalism into a modern state presents a possible new way forward for other countries with similar problems.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Approaches

One main challenge in developing an effective theoretical framework for dealing with Kurdish tribalism is the lack of scholarship on the topic. While there was a brief surge in anthropological interest in Kurdistan during the first two decades of the twentieth century, interest in the Kurdish tribes in particular waned once the predecessor states of modern Turkey and Iraq had materialized and demonstrated themselves to be tenable shortly after the Second World War. Much of the research from before this time comes from British military and intelligence officials. While such material is an interesting primary source for constructing the tribes' histories, it comes with the general lack of understanding that one might expect of an early-twentieth century colonial officer attempting to understand a foreign culture.² What is available on the Kurdish tribes is a handful of anthropological studies and historical texts on the nature of Kurdish tribal society. This material is useful in some ways, but lacks any meaningful analysis of the ways in which the social structure of the tribes affects national political issues.

Another note that necessarily must be made regards the relevance of analyzing the social and political structures of nomadic tribes. While most Kurdish tribes are no longer nomadic, the structures of the nomadic tribe have often persisted. Judith Yaphe, a former CIA analyst and Senior Research Fellow at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, describes how the values and structures of nomadic tribalism have persisted among the Arab tribes of Iraq well beyond the decline of the nomadic tribe as a prevalent social structure. Yaphe explores the somewhat unexpected inclusion of tribal values and heritage in traditionally anti-tribal Iraqi Ba'athist doctrine and finds that beyond being a mere part of the Ba'ath image of Iraq, tribal structures and relationships pervaded even pre-Saddam state and party institutions. She also

² A great example of this is Mark Sykes. "The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 38, no. July-Dec (1908): 451-86. Accessed February 5, 2015. JSTOR.

identifies the praising of tribal values such as loyalty, honor, and courage in Saddam's Iraq.³ According to Phoebe Marr's *History of Iraq*, personal and family honor, factionalism, and intense individualism are just a few of the crucial tribal values which continue to influence Iraqi society.⁴ Chapter three will explore the extent of the role of the tribe in Iraqi and KRG political parties. For now, however, it will suffice to say that the tribal heritages of both Kurdish and Arab Iraq are sufficiently significant to warrant analysis.

This paper argues that a theoretical framework applicable to Kurdish tribes must be developed. Given the lack of Kurd-specific theoretical political scholarship, I draw on analyses of Arab tribalism, with a focus on Iraq and Syria, since these analyses occasionally make cursory reference to the Kurds in each state. The remainder of this chapter seeks to examine existing theories on the nature of tribalism as it pertains to the modern state and state institutions, and to analyze the merits of these theories. I focus on the most prominent characterizations of Arab tribalism, and analyze their merits. The bulk of this analysis will take place later in the paper, in light of some context on the Kurdish tribes which will be provided in Chapter 2, and analysis of the Kurdish region's political parties in Chapter 3. The nature of my criticism of the authors discussed in this chapter is often not a criticism of their arguments in their own right, but rather a criticism of their theories' validity with regards to the Kurdish Region.

Ultimately, the perspective utilized in this paper has three main tenets which represent a fusion of the ideas which will be presented in this chapter. Firstly, tribalism is an important force in the modern Kurdish polity due to the state's tribal heritage and the tribal or neo-tribal entities which make up the Kurdish region's political factions. Secondly, the segmentary nature

³ Judith Yaphe. "Tribalism in Iraq, the Old and the New." *Middle East Policy* 7, no. 3 (2000): 51-58. Accessed February 8, 2015. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2000.tb00162. Digital copy does not have page numbers, so numbers of printing of that copy were used.

⁴ Phebe Marr. *The Modern History of Iraq*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985, P. 19.

of tribal societies provides a mechanism similar to Salzburg's "balanced opposition," in which segments of society tend to mobilize versus groups of a similar size as long as such segments of society exist. Thirdly, both state and tribe significantly affect each other when the two coexist in a political community: the state adopts some of tribalism's structures and mores, and the tribe becomes more compliant with state authority when it exists within a stable state.

Debates on the Character of Tribalism

The overarching problem with attempting to analyze tribalism was identified correctly by Syrian scholar Haian Dukhan in his crucial article, "Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising": despite great interest in tribalism's influence and character, a consensus has not been reached on the definition of a tribe.⁵ Dukhan proposes as a tentative definition, "a localized group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organization, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins."⁶ This inclusion of cultural identity separates him notably from other scholars. The earliest definition of a tribe comes from the 13th century Arab sociologist Ibn Khaldoun, who argued that tribes are segmentary entities that naturally emerge as a way of satisfying the fundamental needs for defense and socialization.⁷ More modern authors have opted for more specific definitions and analyses. English anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard argued that tribes are segmentary entities which originate out of feelings of solidarity, and which make conflict play out along predictable

⁵ Haiah Dukhan. "Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising." *Syria Studies* 6, no. 2 (2014): P. 1.

⁶ Dukhan, "Tribes...Syrian Uprising" P. 3.

⁷ This is an extremely simplified version of Ibn Khaldoun's extensive analysis of the role of the tribe found in Ibn Khaldoun, *The Muqaddimah*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967. The use of the word 'segmentary' here is an anachronism, but later author's use of the word accurately describes his description.

lines by providing social entities of similar sizes to respond to one another.⁸ Dutch anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen seems to hesitate at using the word ‘tribe’ with a clear assumed definition at all, pointing out that the Kurds he analyzes do not have a widely understood translation of that word; they use a number of words which refer to differing sizes of social orders depending on region and dialect. Throughout his analysis, he seems to refer to any group acting independently under the authority of a tribal leader to be a tribe, except very large amalgamations based on mobilized alliances for military purposes. He and most others refer to these as coalitions.⁹

Another subject of great disagreement is the way that tribes interact with political institutions, including both governmental entities and political parties. Ibn Khaldoun argues that tribes interact with states in an inverse power relationship; strong states can subjugate and incorporate tribes, but weak states are especially vulnerable to revolution at the hands of the tribes they have subjugated.¹⁰ Contemporary scholars disagree whether tribes are a dying or resurgent force in the modern Middle East. Reidar Visser, Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, makes the case that tribes have essentially been reduced to social identities, overlapped by stronger cultural and political identities.¹¹ Dukhan and others, however, argue that very recent events herald the re-emergence of tribalism in weak Middle Eastern states.¹²

Scholarship on the interactions between tribes and political parties is regrettably lacking.

In the early history of the modern states of Iraq and Syria, this relationship was clearer; political

⁸ E.E. Evans-Pritchard. *The Nuer, a Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1940. Cited in Dukhan, “Tribes...Syrian Uprising”.

⁹ Martin Van Bruinessen. *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. London: Zed Books, 1992.

¹⁰ Dukhan, “Tribes...Syrian Uprising” P. 3.

¹¹ Reidar Visser. "Opinion: Tribalism in Iraq: Resurgent Force or Anachronism in the Modern State?" *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2010): 495-502. doi:10.1080/17550912.2010.519162.

¹² Dukhan, “Tribes...Syrian Uprising”

parties were modern institutions which directly competed with tribes for power and influence. In the parliament of the early Syrian republic, constitutional debates often revolved around the role that Bedouin tribes should have.¹³ The Syrian Ba'athists have maintained their rhetorical opposition to tribalism and sectarianism, but Bashar Al-Assad has pointedly engaged tribes in maintaining his power and in suppressing, among other movements, Kurdish independence efforts.¹⁴ The Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, dropped both its practical and rhetorical opposition in favor of incorporating tribal structures and values.¹⁵ In modern Jordan, the oppositional paradigm seems to hold sway. The monarchy has relied on tribes' desire for individual representation to suppress the potential of party lists to form a coherent opposition. The tactic works; the Jordanian parliament is more a showcase of tribal leaders' influence than a place for the making of policy, and the sheer number of tribal representatives prevents the election of a majority party. Scholars, including Temple University political scientist Sean Yom, have accurately levied the charge against the regime that the facilitation of this process has been intentional; the Single Non-Transferable Vote, for example, forces voters to choose between supporting their tribal representative and supporting a party.¹⁶ Accusations of tribal behavior continuously fly between Kurdish political parties, despite both major groups' historic reliance on tribal organization. Clearly there are multiple ways to interpret this interaction.

¹³ Dukhan, "Tribes...Syrian Uprising" P. 7-9.

¹⁴ Dukhan, "Tribes...Syrian Uprising" P. 8.

¹⁵ Amatzia Baram. "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-96." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 01 (1997): 1-31. Accessed February 5, 2015. doi:10.1017/S0020743800064138, P. 15.

¹⁶ Sean L. Yom. "Jordan: The Ruse of Reform." *Journal of Democracy* 24.3 (2013): 127-39. Project Muse. Web. P. 127, 137.

The Tribe as Supportive to the State

A compelling argument for the value of tribes to the state is the number of ways in which tribal values and structures can be recruited into state service. Judith Yaphe, among others, argues that the Iraqi Ba'ath party succeeded at incorporating tribal values into their narrative of the Iraqi state and that tribal structures became an important part of the Iraqi government's maintenance of order. The resulting Iraqi state was heavily influenced, at times to the point of being threatened, by its tribes. But Saddam's Iraq did manage to survive despite (or because of) its tribal policy until it was faced with U.S. intervention, and thus is worth examining. It is necessary to examine both the incorporation of tribal structures into the state, and the adoption by state institutions of structures inspired by tribalism. Yaphe's initial description of the nature of tribalism sounds inherently problematic for the modern state. Until settlement, she argues that tribes essentially function as mobile mini-states which behave autonomously and whose members primarily acknowledge only tribal, not state, authority. When placed within the context of a state, however, these tribes change. It is true that tribes maintain certain loyalties and values which may contradict the state's values and the role of the shaikh as mediator-in-chief for personal disputes. Yet despite the maintenance of such tribal structures, forced settlement leads to the elimination of other crucial aspects of the tribe. The loss of mobility removes a great deal of the tribe's autonomy, and the value system of the tribe can be augmented to embrace the concept of state authority. The shaikh may remain the mediator of personal matters, but criminal and religious mediation is outsourced to state authorities.¹⁷

Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abu Jabar argues that three types of tribe subordinate to their state can be observed, two of which are far easier for the state to manage. In "statist tribes," tribal allegiance is obtained by incorporating tribal values into the state's definition. As described,

¹⁷ This is a summary of an argument made throughout Yaphe, "Tribalism..."

Hussein's Iraq did this with some success. In "social tribes," the state has granted the tribes some degree of authority, both through judicial and tax rights. Yaphe says that Saddam's later tribal policy fits this category. The closest type of tribe to an old-fashioned tribal order is the "military-ideological" tribe. Rather than participating in the state, this type of tribe independently mobilizes along tribal lines to confront an external threat, which can well be the state itself. Yaphe says that Iraq's Kurds and Shi'a mobilized along these lines in the 1990s. Alternately, the state can incorporate these tribes into the state security apparatus through the risky mechanism of arming and employing them as a group, as Baghdad did with mixed success in Kurdish areas during the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁸

Regardless of the type of tribe at play, the state must somehow buy the tribe's participation in the system in order for the tribe to strengthen the state. In Iraq this was accomplished in two main ways. Beginning with Hussein's ascendancy, clan and family members and networks were directly recruited by the military and security services. This privileged certain tribal groups with status and control of coercive power. Saddam heavily preferred his own clan, the Bayjat, for service in positions of power and those military units responsible for his safety.¹⁹ But the remainder of the elites in the ostensibly anti-tribal Ba'ath party came from small Bedouin villages where tribal mores still held sway. Officers were recruited from tribal backgrounds and promoted more quickly than those from the Ba'ath party's traditional urban base.²⁰ This incorporation was not without its risk to Saddam, who was targeted by members of his own security services due to tribal tensions more than once. Still, tribal origins provided the regime with a limited guarantee of an individual's commitment to certain

¹⁸ Faleh Abu Jabar, "The Reconstruction and Deconstruction of Iraq's Tribes: Tribalism under Patrimonial Totalitarianism, 1968-1998," unpublished paper, October 14, 1999.

¹⁹ Yaphe, "Tribalism..." P. 4.

²⁰ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." P. 5.

traditional mores and hints toward his political affiliation. The tribes, in turn, were provided with an excellent vehicle for upward social mobility.²¹ This approach was applied extensively during Baghdad's numerous conflicts with Iraqi Kurds; the recruitment of Kurds as *jash* paramilitary units was commonplace.

The second way that Saddam bought tribes' loyalty was through material rewards. Tribes which demonstrated loyalty and heavily contributed to the party and security services were rewarded by the regime with infrastructure improvements. One Shaikh relayed to *The Independent* that Saddam's tribal policy explicitly rewarded support with the extension of roads, electricity, and water systems to loyal villages.²²

Finally, tribes were brought on board with the regime by making the state's image of the Iraqi state highly appealing to tribal mores and reaching out to tribal leadership. Hussein's carefully crafted personal image is the most visible element of this. Hussein took every opportunity in public to remind Iraqis of his small town heritage. He was born in a small village outside of Tikrit, where traditional tribal conservatism held sway. His stepfather refused to send him to school, instead preferring to raise him by a value code which emphasized Islam, patriarchy, and ancient tribal honor codes of honor and justice.²³ Every part of this except for his questionable paternal origins was included in press statements and his comments in public. Despite the original stance of the Iraqi Ba'ath as diametrically opposed to the values of tribal society (which were seen by the Ba'ath as a holdover of colonial domination), Saddam embraced his tribal image. Overtures from tribal leaders were phrased in terms of fealty and received in ceremonies riddled with the symbolism of tribal deference to the Shaikh. State media portrayed

²¹ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." P. 6.

²² Al-Jubburi, Shaikh Mish'an. Interview by Helga Graham. *The Independent*, August 20, 1995. Cited in Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." p. 5.

²³ Yaphe, "Tribalism..." P. 4.

him as embodying manly valor, military prowess, courage, and honor.²⁴ While to the urban Ba'ath he may have been "his Excellency President Saddam Hussein the Commander of the Armed Revolution,"²⁵ to tribal leaders, he was *Shaikh Mashaikh*, the chief of chieftains.²⁶

These three strategies enabled the state to receive the tribes' support without ceding significant power to them. Through the 1980s, state institutions aiming to replace traditional forms of welfare, security, education, and civil society caused a slow decline in tribal influence and traditional social structures generally. State organs became increasingly involved in both Sunni and Shi'a Islam until both were largely controlled. After the early 1980s, however, the state found itself embroiled in a costly war with Iran and crippled by sanctions. The loss of oil revenue and the increase in military expenses caused the state to curtail its vast social and security services. By the end of the war with Kuwait, Iraq's middle class was shrinking. Tribal structures naturally began to fill the void in status and influence left by this contraction and the decline of government services.²⁷ The government in Baghdad facilitated this growth, encouraging the reconstruction of tribal structures in both urban and rural populations. In regions where tribal structures no longer existed, the government granted artificial lead-family status to non-tribal families. These new and propped up tribes were, by all accounts, very loyal to Hussein's government.²⁸ Tribes participated in what Yaphe calls a symbiosis wherein they publicly supported the regime in exchange for their status and power.²⁹ At the same time, all tribes were expected to behave differently than would have been traditionally expected; their

²⁴ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." P. 15.

²⁵ Culture and Information Bureau, The Arab Baath Socialist Party. "A Call to the Heroic Tribes in Southern Iraq." Al-Moharer. September 7, 2006. Accessed April 15, 2015. http://www.al-moharer.net/qiwa_shabiya/baath2006/baath7-9-06e.htm.

²⁶ Yaphe, "Tribalism..." P. 5.

²⁷ Yaphe, "Tribalism..." P. 6.

²⁸ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." P. 7, 11.

²⁹ Yaphe, "Tribalism..." P. 7.

authority was decidedly subject to state law, and retribution against other tribal groups for crimes was prohibited as long as the person could be prosecuted.³⁰

The incorporation of tribal values into the state was far more than a political farce by the 1990s; Israeli historian Amatzia Baram provides several examples where the Iraqi government acted far more in accordance with tribal customs than with Ba'ath party doctrine. One of the earliest signs of this change was Saddam's embracing of the role of chief national holy man. In 1991, he interpreted Quranic text controversially in a public speech, explaining that the prophet had been chosen by God prior to his birth. He concluded, incredibly, with the assertion that, "no one should be allowed...leadership in the Ba'ath party if [he does not] come from a good...family background."³¹ At a party congress in 1992, Saddam invoked the Prophet in justifying his promotion of tribal leaders to state offices.³² In several criminal cases, the government allowed a shaikh's arbitration to resolve disputes of national importance such as corruption. When two members of Hussein's family defected to Jordan, their father declared them family outcasts and declared that anyone could spill their blood. The defectors returned to Iraq and were killed along with several members of their families by their own clan. A state official then cleared the attackers' name, praised two attackers who had been killed as martyrs, and publicly compared their action to cutting off an ailing finger. On numerous other occasions, national actions, including the invasion of Kuwait, were justified in terms of tribal honor.³³

³⁰ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." P. 7, 12.

³¹ Al-Jumhuriyya, 21 September 1991, in FBIS-NES, 26 September 1991, 21-23. Cited in Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." P. 13.

³² Saddam Hussein. "Speech to the Ba'ath Regional Congress." Speech, 1992 Ba'ath Regional Congress, Baghdad, October 7, 1992. Cited in Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." p. 13.

³³ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism..." P. 14.

The Tribe as Decentralized and Poisonous to the Modern State

The case that tribal structures and values are fundamentally opposed to the modern state is probably more widely held and stated, but certainly less developed from a scholarly perspective than its antithesis. The unfortunate situation of current scholarship on the topic is that many scholars who have contributed to this perspective are clearly motivated by a desire to demonize Islam. The effort to separate authors' arguments from their motivation requires that I use some such sources here. There is a case to be made that some of the arguments made are legitimate; as it will be seen, there is much about segmentary tribalism which is cause for alarm regarding such institutions' ability to participate in a modern state. Given the previous arguments which demonstrate the tendency of states to incorporate some aspects of tribalism, this is also cause for alarm regarding the likely conduct of those states. As such, this section engages seriously McGill University anthropologist Philip Carl Salzman's argument on the nature of "balanced opposition" and responds to his application of that argument to the Islamic *umma* as a sort of mega-tribe.

Salzman explores the role of the segmentary tribe in providing Middle Eastern societies with what he calls "balanced opposition." Because tribes are organized into nested kin groups, any attack on an individual by a group theoretically produces a response by a group of a similar size. So one's family defends against an attack by another family, one's clan against another clan, and one's tribe against another tribe. The responses in question most explicitly are required of one's kin group when an individual is physically attacked, but tribal mores require some sort of response to political and personal attacks as well. Within the context of nomadic or settled tribal entities interacting, this is certainly the case. Salzman argues that this applies to larger and theoretically non-tribal groups as well. According to him, Egyptians come to the aid of other

Egyptians, Sunnis to the aid of other Sunnis, and, “the Islamic community faces the infidels.”³⁴

Salzman argues that this tribal type of organization was intrinsically linked to the spread of Islam such that the mores associated with balanced opposition have found their way into fundamental understandings of Islam and states operating within Islam.³⁵

The first accusation that Salzman levies at tribal structures is that predatory expansion is necessary for tribal structures because the tribe must increase its population and livestock in order to maintain its position. Thus the tribe must practice aggressive expansion. Additionally, young men see combat as an opportunity to gain honor, which Salzman identifies as crucial to these tribal societies. Salzman does not explicitly say that the remnants of tribal structures are more prone to violence than non-tribal populations, but he does say that within the tribe, the vanquishing of another in predatory conquest is a path to being celebrated. He establishes that Middle Eastern tribal culture values victory and detests the vanquished, and then goes on to say that this mentality facilitates the ability of Middle Easterners generally (not just tribal populations) to control subservient groups of people and resources, suggesting that modern authoritarian states rely just as much on the notion that the victor should be rewarded as tribes did. He argues that as Islam expanded, a tribal mentality on raiding became the norm for the violent spread of Islam. “Bedouin raiding became sanctified as an act of religious duty.”³⁶ Most controversially, he argues that the tribal tendency to value closeness in degrees enabled raiders in the early days of the Caliphate to treat those who were both ethnically and religiously different from them with tremendous cruelty. He identifies sources which correctly depict some portions

³⁴ Philip C. Salzman "The Middle East's Tribal DNA." *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 23. Academic OneFile. Digital copy does not have page numbers, so numbers of printing of that copy were used.

³⁵ Salzman, "The Middle East's Tribal DNA" P. 3.

³⁶ Salzman, "The Middle East's Tribal DNA" P. 3.

of the Islamic conquest as brutal, and anecdotes of Arab Muslim leaders reneging on agreements and argues that the tribal mentality enabled such behavior.³⁷

More fundamentally, Salzman makes the case that the concept of balanced opposition, which he says is inherent in Muslim culture, prevents systems of government from taking hold which are based on a concept of universal morality. According to him, Islam is inherently relative and contingent; Muslims act politically as Muslims only when in opposition to non-Muslims. In a belief system where a notion of “my group versus the other” is more important than deference to a moral system, he argues that a universalistic and inclusive constitution is not possible.³⁸ Furthermore, he argues that the tribal heritage prevents a true seeking of common interests, instead encouraging Arabs to unite versus non-Arabs and Muslims versus non-Muslims.³⁹

A cursory look at the historical record will indicate that Salzman’s argument on Arabs’ and Muslims’ fundamental tendency to support each other against outsiders is deeply flawed. Contained within this argument, however, is a theoretical argument about the way that tribal structures should be expected to respond to opposition or attack. Salzman treats the tribal segment as more or less absolute. In his view, the importance of honor in the Middle Eastern tribal culture ensures that individuals will always fulfill their tribal obligations. As such, individuals can always count on their family versus another family, clan versus another clan, and so forth. As the famous Arab saying quoted by Salzman and others goes, “Me against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin, my cousin, brother, and I against the rest of the world.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Salzman, “The Middle East’s Tribal DNA” P. 4.

³⁸ Salzman, “The Middle East’s Tribal DNA” P. 6.

³⁹ Salzman, “The Middle East’s Tribal DNA” P. 10.

⁴⁰ Omar Rifai. Comments to CIEE Arab Diplomacy Class. Amman, Jordan. Spring 2014.

The glaring problem with this theory as a model for analyzing the Kurds is that Kurdish history is riddled with examples of Kurds acting against other Kurds. While the majority of these examples are from before the development of a solid Kurdish identity and therefore invalid, many more recent examples involve formerly outspoken nationalists who were swayed by a combined carrot and stick. Kurdish tribes recruited by Saddam to fight for him in his efforts to suppress Kurdish agitators clearly did so not out of a feeling of segmentary loyalty, but out of a rational pursuit of their own interests.⁴¹ Even within traditional, nomadic, pastoral tribes, it was commonplace for aspiring tribal leaders to reach across, up, or down the tribal hierarchy in search of support for their effort to rise to power/predominance. Yet even more examples can be found where Kurdish tribes mobilized precisely along tribal lines in conflicts with outsiders. The more recent history of the relations between Kurdish political parties actually provides support for both of Salzman's arguments; the major parties in Iraqi Kurdistan found it nearly impossible to cooperate until faced with a true existential threat in the form of the Anfal campaigns and the accompanying genocide.

Salzman also argues that tribes operate fundamentally differently from states: the former are based on decentralization and self-help, and the latter are defined by their centralized political hierarchies with specialized institutions to maintain social control and defense.⁴² This differs from Yaphe's view that tribes left to their own devices essentially function as mobile mini-states. As will be demonstrated in chapter two, the realities of the power structure in Kurdish tribes actually lead to an endorsement of Salzman's view. Kurdish tribes rarely mobilize as a whole tribe or tribal coalition except in response to threats of a similar size. The tribal Agha or Shaikh does not handle small judicial matters unless the matter is between major segments of the tribe.

⁴¹ For a stunningly large number of such examples, see Book IV of McDowall, David. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1996.

⁴² Salzman, "The Middle East's..." P. 1-2.

Arbitration and the maintaining of tribal authority and cohesion are both highly decentralized processes, happening at the lowest possible level.

Salzman's argument that Middle Eastern states have internalized tribal values focused on aggression against outsiders can be treated as dubious at best. But in a state like 1990s Iraq, where judicial and security authority was delegated to the tribes, these structures would naturally have functioned in a way that handled disputes at the lowest level. The product of this process of repeated delegation would seem to be the placing of large amounts of authority not just in the hands of tribal governors, but in the hands of unknown patriarchs at various levels of the tribal system, right down to the level of the family. Thus the organizing principle of the judicial and security systems should be expected to be in line with tribal mores.

Tribalism as an Overstated Force

In seeking to analyze tribal structures and actions, some scholars have been accused of overstating or fetishizing tribalism as an exciting portrayal of an exotic culture. Reidar Visser, a research fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, made the case in 2010 that much of the analysis of Iraq's tribal politics has been subject to this sort of misguided analysis. He argues that while tribes may be a potent form of social organization, they are ultimately less influential in politics than western scholars of the topic are likely to believe. Tribes, according to this argument, are just one of many competing identities for an individual in a Middle Eastern society just as geographical origins are but one component of a person's identity in the United States.

One manifestation of what Visser sees as a misguided attempt to analyze tribalism is the proliferation during the Iraq war of "tribal maps" and their use in policy decisions. Visser

viewed a number of prominent maps and found that not one was really accurate. They often misplaced tribes or misrepresent their significance. Much of the information used to construct them appears to have originated from British military records from the 1910s and 1920s, which is largely out of date as a result of the traumatic events in Iraq during the last century. The maps produced by the CIA and used prominently in U.S. decision making circles were among the most woefully outdated.⁴³ The tribe of Iraqi President Nuri Al-Maliki, which Visser's study focuses on, is consistently shown as more prominent and more southern on these maps than they actually are.⁴⁴

Publications by U.S. administrators in Iraq also used tribal labels incorrectly, and these mistakes tend to overstate the role of a tribe rather than understate it. Visser cites examples from Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) press releases, where individuals were referred to as leaders of tribes when they were not, or where the size of a tribe was vastly overstated. One tribe in particular was referred to as having 750,000 members, which as Visser points out, would mean that the tribe made up 3% of all Iraqis.⁴⁵ Individuals' credentials for being appointed to a position included statements of tribal roles which are in reality little more than ceremonial titles. Similarly, American media often made tribal connections between unrelated individuals on the basis of their last names, or made matter-of-fact statements about tribal loyalties based on such individuals' names, despite their vastly different political affiliations.⁴⁶

U.S.-led coalition efforts to engage the tribes have been made based on flawed or incorrect views of tribal boundaries and affiliations. In several cases, rural areas within the zone of influence of a tribe were incorrectly engaged on the assumption that the nearby tribe had more

⁴³ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 495.

⁴⁴ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 497.

⁴⁵ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 496.

⁴⁶ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 497.

influence over these areas than they actually did. Prime Minister Maliki's efforts to build a coalition for himself in the southern part of Iraq focused heavily on winning over tribes based on his own tribe's ancient loyalties, some of which were no longer seen as valid.⁴⁷

In southern Iraq, Visser argues, tribes may not really exist in the traditional sense of the word. If one defines tribes, as Visser does, as "a community of armed men connected by agnatic kinship ties, whether real or imagined," this is true. However, tribes in the Arab portions of Iraq mostly recognize that their political tribal alliances are not based on kinship ties, and track those two types of allegiance separately. As will be shown later, this differs significantly from the situation in the rural parts of Kurdistan, where political allegiance is still often characterized in terms of imagined kinship. It should also be noted that Visser's definition of the tribe used in making this assertion describes only one of the types of tribe identified by Faleh Abu Jabar, as discussed earlier in this chapter: the military ideological tribe. The other types of tribes still have quite a bit of life left in them as can be seen by the application of Hussein's tribal policy to those areas. The fact that tribes no longer function exactly as they once did is a given in almost all modern states; as other authors have shown, this does not mean that tribes do not still act in a tribal way.

One convincing argument made by Visser involves the decline of the Malik tribe's political unity. Their disintegration began under pressure from the Ottoman government, but really accelerated with the British arrival in 1914. Several prominent members of the Malik tribe found themselves at odds with the British, and the British thus sought to force the already-developing separation of the tribe from its southern allies through migration. Later improvements in their relationship with the British allowed this process to stop, but the British made sure that the various parts of the Malik tribe were under the influence of competing

⁴⁷ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 499.

paramount tribes in their regions. A comparison of the early British reports regarding the tribe and the reality of the tribe's power by the 1920s shows that the tribe was no longer a significant political player.⁴⁸ Visser argues that this process of disintegration can be seen in many tribes, and that it happens, "as a result of manipulation by their enemies."⁴⁹ This does not appear to be incorrect, but it should be noted that the enemy in question is generally not a foreign power or a tribal enemy, but the government of the state itself.

A better example of tribal irrelevance in modern Iraqi politics was the recent disinterest of the Malik tribe in supporting the government of Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki. Whereas Saddam was able to draw his most reliable support from his tribe, Al-Maliki was pointedly opposed by the nominal head of his tribe, Sabri bin Badr al-Rumayyid. In 2008, 123 tribal leaders from the Malik tribal coalition signed a petition decrying the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), an ally of Al-Maliki. The same relative who spearheaded that effort later criticized Al-Maliki's tribal policies in the south directly.⁵⁰ Some of this divide was the result of the British policy of separating the powerful tribe from its allies, but that excuse cannot be made for Al-Maliki's own branch of the tribe. A close relative of his, Fadil Al-Maliki has been an ardent critic of the Iraqi constitution, and a number of Al-Maliki's theoretically close tribal allies were released from the government for ties to the Ba'ath party.⁵¹

The easiest criticism of Visser's example is that many tribes have not been so successfully divided. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Ottoman, British, and Iraqi governments have all had less success at suppressing and fragmenting tribes as a result of the mountains' inaccessibility. While Al-Maliki's tribal alliances may have been shaky, chapter three will

⁴⁸ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 498.

⁴⁹ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 497.

⁵⁰ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 499.

⁵¹ Visser, "Opinion..." P. 501.

demonstrate that others, such as Massoud Barzani have strongly benefitted from their tribal ties. Since Visser's thesis is that tribes break down under outside pressure, his theory wouldn't apply to tribes that have not been so directly subjected to this pressure. His argument is likely to be of use, however, in analyzing the PUK-dominated parts of the Kurdish Region, which suffered the most under Saddam Hussein and in which tribes are thought to have the least sway. The primary value in Visser's thesis is that it demonstrates that tribes which are theoretically intact may not act with the same degree of political unity that one might expect them to.

Concluding Questions

This review of the scholarship and theoretical perspectives of tribalism predictably prompts more questions than answers. Vastly different ways of viewing the nature of tribalism lead, naturally, to vastly different views of the future of tribal systems and their influence. Specifically, the scholars reviewed here seem to differ in their answers to two questions which are crucial to any kind of predictive research on Kurdistan. Firstly, is tribalism a force which is persisting, declining, or spreading in general and in Iraqi Kurdistan in particular? Secondly, is the likely relationship between tribes and the burgeoning Kurdish government in Iraq one of cooperation or antagonism? Finally, if the institutions of the KRG and Iraqi Kurdish society are going to absorb some fundamentally tribal character, what should we expect the nature of that government and those institutions to be as a result?

If the arguments of Ibn Khaldoun and Haiyan Dukhan are to be believed, then the question of tribalism's ascendancy or decline would be strongly tied to the question of whether state (or quasi-state) institutions in the Kurdish region are strengthening or declining. Looking at the weak Iraqi state as the state which the Kurdish tribes exist within would lead to an expectation

that dormant or lessened tribal structures could be expected to be resurgent, as Dukhan says the Arab tribes in both Syria and Iraq are. The peculiar situation of the Kurdish Regional Government, however, merits some hesitation on this assumption. While the Iraqi state has undoubtedly gotten weaker recently, there is a strong case to be made that the Kurdish region must be treated in this type of analysis as its own state entity, as the most relevant political entities for Kurdish tribes are in Erbil, not Baghdad. This obviously is not the case for the significant Kurdish populations living outside of the KRG's areas of control in Iraq, nor for the Kurdish groups in northeastern Syria, where the national borders with Iraq are currently so porous that ignoring those tribes as non-Iraqi seems somewhat pointless. Despite the KRG's current strength, the fundamentals of tribalism remain present in government and parties as well as the tribes themselves.

In order to understand the continued strength of tribes and relevance of tribalism within Kurdistan at a time when the KRG is also strong, it is necessary to understand how tribes interact with the KRG. The understandings of Yaphe and Baram would suggest that the tribal and state structures of the Kurdish region would each continue to be affected by the interaction, and that the result would be a state with some tribal values and characteristics and tribes which have changed to operate within the state's authority. Visser, despite his significant disagreements with the character of tribal influence, would seem to agree at least that the KRG, having been formed by people with tribal experience, would in some ways be fundamentally tribal. Based on his willingness to apply this argument to all sorts of institutions, one would also expect that the political parties of Kurdistan would retain some fundamentally tribal nature as well. As the Kurdish tribes have now been within the authority of the Erbil government for about a decade, this process, if it is to occur, should be expected to be in progress already. Evidence of tribal

influence on government might be the role of a quasi-Agha style of leadership at various levels of government, similar to the quasi-shaikh⁵² role of Saddam Hussein described by Baram. Additionally, a tendency towards Salzman's "balanced opposition" in party politics and a strong preference for familial nepotism would demonstrate the influence of tribal values. Tribes, similarly, would be expected to adopt one of Abu Jabar's more cooperative models rather than retaining their military-ideological structure.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I will examine the nature of Kurdish tribes and the Kurdish "state" respectively, with the aim of determining which of these models best fits the Kurdish situation. Ultimately I will argue that a new understanding of segmentary opposition is needed in order to accurately understand the tribe-state interaction in Iraqi Kurdistan and the likely nature of the polity there. Kurdish tribes, when strong, did provide the balanced opposition that Salzman describes. Tribes under the control of state institutions, on the other hand, cannot provide this mechanism because violent conflict is no longer an acceptable means of evening the score between tribes. Subjecting tribal actors to a system where political parties can freely form, however, restores the balanced opposition mechanism. I argue in the following chapters that the KRG's parties are modern replacements to the tribe, which restore the balanced opposition that a developed tribal system once provided. Both individuals and groups can join these new tribes, which have their own mechanisms for maintaining parity versus one another.

⁵² This difference is linguistic; 'shaikh' in Arabic refers to a political leader who may also have religious authority, which is the role of the 'agha' in Kurdish society, whereas the Kurdish 'shaikh' is a more explicitly religious figure who has acquired political significance. This relationship is developed in Chapter Two.

Chapter 2: Uniquely Kurdish Tribalism

As indicated by several of the previously discussed authors studying Arab tribalism, the identity system in tribal societies is complicated. Kurdish identity is a mix of family, tribe and political affiliations, not all of which overlap. Different elements of this complicated identity system take precedence over one another depending on an individual's location and circumstances. The base of the Kurdish tribal system is an array of independent hierarchical social and political entities based on real or imagined kinship ties. The structure of this type of social arrangement is relatively simple, but a detailed description of it is necessary to assess the validity of some of the theoretical claims discussed in chapter 1 of this paper.

The other important identities which interact with tribalism are less clearly categorized. While certain identities are decidedly not tribe-based (in that they are not defined by the tribe of which one is a member) they are not necessarily non-tribal. In fact, as will be shown here, religious identity for Kurds is often heavily tied to tribal boundaries and affiliations. The second part of this chapter will attempt to explain how the roles of religious shaikh and tribe agha began to share and blur roles and responsibilities.

The most thorough and up to date examination of Kurdistan's tribal structures comes from anthropologist Martin Van Bruinessen in his ethnography *Agha, Shaikh, and State*; his work will be used as the main guide to the following sketch of the Kurdish familial tribe's structures. Van Bruinessen's books are among the only comprehensive treatments of Kurdish tribalism in the modern age, and quite nearly all other work on the topic cites *Agha, Shaikh, and State* as a main source. This chapter also relies very heavily on David McDowall's crucial text, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, which is a thorough review of Kurdish history spanning from the pre-Islamic era to the Gulf Wars. McDowall is a British writer and intellectual who has served the

British Council and United Nations. The latter part of this chapter relies heavily on Farhad Shakely's article, "The Naqshbandi Shaikhs of Hawraman," for background on the mystic orders of Kurdistan. Shakely is a prominent modern Kurdish poet and researcher who teaches at Uppsala University.

In this chapter, I seek to show that Kurds are almost universally subject to identities which form along segmentary lines and function in a tribal manner. While this is true almost by definition for the handful of remaining pastoral tribes in Kurdistan and fairly obvious for rural Kurds with traditional identities, it is not so obvious that this is true for urban families. The goal of the descriptions here is to demonstrate conclusively that tribal mores and structures are fairly pervasive characteristics of all segments of Kurdish society.

Kinship in the Kurdish Tribes

A distinguishing factor about Kurdish familial tribes is that the shared common ancestor which tribes are united by is often a figure whose history is invented for the sake of making common cause between groups. Bruinessen identifies multiple accounts of tribal confederations claiming common ancestors despite the various tribes all having well-recorded independent histories stretching far enough back to disprove the supposed common ancestry.⁵³ This claim of common ancestry might be made for the sake of aligning groups that would otherwise come into conflict. In some extreme instances of imagined kinship, the common ancestor has been found to be a completely invented figure. Bruinessen tells the story of two clans called Mahmudkan and Etmankan, whose lineages were combined after an Etman male defected to and was eventually made leader of the Mahmudkan. After reconciliation, the groups were merged. Several

⁵³ Martin Van Bruinessen. *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. London: Zed Books, 1992. P. 51-53.

generations later, the still-cooperating families speak of the leaders of the two groups as being biological brothers.⁵⁴

Imagined kinship ties are sometimes created by less prestigious households and lineages in an arrangement which binds them to their leaders. These families will often claim that a particularly great local leader was their ancestor, or that they are related to a politically powerful family in their area. It is unclear whether these imagined ties are intentional lies or simply tricks of memory. It is possible that households and lineages may join up with a successful family and state that family's name as their tribal allegiance, only to have this political tie be confused with an actual kinship tie several generations later. Either way, this tendency of families to bind themselves tribally to unrelated powerful families explains why successful tribes occasionally rapidly acquire thousands of new "relatives." The result of this practice is a large tribe consisting of only a handful of actual related lineages and many unrelated lineages which follow them. This form of organization, sometimes referred to as a tribal coalition, is particularly common in times of armed conflict. Treating these groups as inherently different from other tribes is pointless, however, as these coalitions often are interpreted later on to be real kinship groups. The very powerful Jaf tribe provides an example of this. Claudius James Rich of the British East India Company in Baghdad in 1820 observed that about 600 of the several thousand households calling themselves Jaf claimed real Jaf lineage.⁵⁵ British diplomat Cecil John Edmonds observed in 1921 that the Jaf had grown to 5,400 households claiming common descent.⁵⁶ Other observers have noticed that Kurdish tribes in conflict tend to have a permanent as well as a fleeting component. Much like mercenaries, the fleeting component of the tribe follows successful

⁵⁴ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 57, 76.

⁵⁵ Claudius James Rich. *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan*. Farnborough, England: Gregg, 1972. P. 177. Cited by Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 116-117.

⁵⁶ C. J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks, and Arabs*. London, NY: Oxford University Press, 1957. P. 139-156. Cited by Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 116.

groups and flees when the leading tribe faces hardship. This naturally leads to extreme volatility in the power base of a large tribal coalition

Some Notes on Terminology

To effectively discuss tribal structures using language originally developed for discussing very different political structures, the use of some imported constructions which do not reflect the Kurds' conception of their own tribal hierarchy is necessary. The terms used for tribal structures in this paper: lineage, clan, tribe, and tribal confederation, do not translate well into Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi, and certainly not into Kurdish. The best translations available for these concepts can only approximate the meaning that these terms carry for native speakers. Kurds variously refer to tribes, clans, classes, religious orders, and other groups with the use of the terms *tayfe* and *ashiret*, among others. The distinctions between these words vary between regions and linguistic groups. Rather than attempt to define all these terms here, the section below on the structure of Kurdish tribes defines these terms through usage while also describing the types of organization to which they occur. The use of these terms throughout this paper is generally in line with what is described in this section. The one word that requires additional defining is the word 'tribe', which is used in this paper as it was defined in the previous; as an independent, hierarchical, hereditary, and segmentary social and political entity which comprises more than one clear lineage. While I attempted to be as specific as possible, the word tribe as used in this section should be thought of as more synonymous with the Kurdish '*tayfe*', which seems to refer to a person's primary tribal identity; at various times this means a clan, a tribe, a religious order, or more rarely, an ethnicity or linguistic group.

The Structure of the Segmentary Tribe

The most basic level of the Kurdish tribal hierarchy is the household, which tends to be nuclear in structure. One married couple and their unmarried children live in the house together, while married children move out as soon as it is feasible to do so. Polygamy is a rare luxury of a few wealthy Kurds and does not really play a significant role. The household is the level at which nearly all economic activity takes place, especially for nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurds. The household is also the primary level of ownership of wealth, land, and animals. Generally property is spoken of as belonging to the household as a corporate unit, not just the head of the household. Though the household is almost always part of a larger structure, economic and personal decisions are made within the household.⁵⁷

The smallest type of organization that can really be called tribal in the typical sense of the word is a lineage. A lineage is a group of households who usually live near each other and move and act with some degree of cohesion. The lineage almost always has a clearly identified common ancestor, usually tied to all the households through biological, not imagined, kinship; often the household heads are his direct descendants. The common ancestor is often still alive if the lineage is still acting as a clear unit. This is not to say that lineages do not continue cooperating after their common ancestor's death, but the equality of brothers of different ages within the Kurdish family prevents there from being a clear leader of the lineage after the common ancestor is gone.⁵⁸

Lineages, more than any other level of Kurdish tribal society, clearly stick together in conflicts and group decisions. Bruinessen suggests that one reason for this is the strong

⁵⁷ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 51-54.

⁵⁸ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 79-80.

preference for endogamy, and specifically for paternal female cousin marriage.⁵⁹ This preference, when practiced consistently, creates extremely insular family arrangements wherein one has no marriage ties to anyone outside of one's paternal grandparents' family. Thus when conflicts or disagreements arise between two lineages separated by more than two generations, there are rarely familial ties to hold them together. Within the two-generation lineage, however, there are many different familial ties along which disputes can be assuaged. Two males may be thrice brothers-in-law if they are cousins, but second cousins are unlikely to be anything besides second cousins.

Lineages tend to stick together, but this comes with important qualifiers. The first is that lineages are not top level political entities. They are simply not large enough to provide the security that the tribal system attempts to provide, to defend significant territory as their own, or to influence politics without cooperation with other lineages. Secondly, lineages almost never own or manage property as a corporate unit. Private land and possessions are owned by the household, whereas collective land for grazing is held by the village or nomadic clan. The Kurds of Iraq who have moved onto the plains are an exception to this; lineages will sometimes maintain undivided estates and select a leader from among the sons of the common ancestor after his death. In most cases, the power of the lineage leader comes from loyalty to him based on descent, and his ability to arbitrate disputes among his descendants.⁶⁰

Moving up the tribal structure from the lineage becomes far more complicated because higher levels of social and political organization take many different forms. The Kurds of Iraq have, at various times, been subject to the laws and structure of Sunni religious entities, Persian and Ottoman kingdoms, European colonial rulers, and several vastly different iterations of the

⁵⁹ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 72-73.

⁶⁰ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 53.

state of Iraq. They are organized into not only tribes but a number of quasi-tribal structures: clans, villages, principalities, religious orders, tribal confederations, and more recently, a secular autonomous region, its subdivisions, and political parties. The result is a social order which retains the segmentary and hierarchical characteristics of tribes in widely varied manifestations.

Continuing up the more standard side of the Kurdish tribal ladder from the lineage, the clan forms the first entity which has the ability to act as a significant independent faction. Clans are theoretically still organized around kinship ties, but as mentioned earlier, these ties are often based on imagined shared ancestry. They tend to live together; settled clans usually live in the same neighborhoods and semi-nomadic groups live together in both their summer and winter pastures. Clans are the first level in the tribal structure to be defined in part by the territories which they control. Clans do not actually own land, nor do they have legal rights with regard to governing land. Yet it is clear that clans treat their grazing land as collective. Households share pastures despite owning separate animals and smaller parcels of land. Outsiders cannot use a clan's traditional grazing lands without obtaining permission. Since the clans must function within the state's framework, and since they do not actually own much of the land being referred to here as theirs, they cannot prevent groups from transgressing their land legally. However, multiple examples can be found of settled clans in modern states charging a traveling group for crossing their traditional holdings. This ability to control territory clearly speaks to the clan's ability to exert power within the areas it inhabits.⁶¹

Despite their geographical boundaries and significant political power, clans are far less permanent than other ranks in the tribal hierarchy. The fact that large portions of their membership are sometimes not bound to the leader by any real relationship allows their size, and therefore their territory, to fluctuate greatly from generation to generation. The territory of clans

⁶¹ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 53-55.

will split and merge as leadership struggles take place after a leader dies, or a clan will disperse totally when it comes upon bad fortune. Lineages are fairly permanent due to their basis in real kinship, so the lineage at the core of a clan will likely continue to exist when the clan disperses, but the clans themselves come and go. Tribes, as will be seen in a moment, are far more tied to permanent territorial boundaries by some combination of laws and expectations. This difference in permanence is one of very few identifiable differences between the clan and the tribe; both can be totally independent and act as significant factions. Both contain real kinship ties, imagined kinship ties, and explicitly political relationships. There is significant evidence that many Kurds themselves do not perceive the difference between these two hierarchies, referring to their primary (clan or tribal) identity as their *tayfe*. From an outsider's perspective, however, there are clearly two different types of organization being discussed. Certain named *tayfe* – the Jaf, Baban, Bahdinan to name a few – never became sub-units to other *tayfe*. They may have gained and lost territory and influence over time, but they didn't really ever disappear or leave their historic homes.⁶²

These units, which I follow Bruinessen's example in calling tribes, are the largest groups in the segmentary tribal system. The tribe is also the most nebulous and varied of all the levels discussed so far, as each tribe is a social, political organization and a territorial entity. More recently, as will be seen, tribes can take on additional aspects by being tied to a particular religious order or province. Tribes consist of a large number of clans, lineages, and villages, and thus have always been very significant political forces.

Iraqi Kurdish state institutions are not explicitly structured with the tribes as components, but there are a number of ways in which tribes are able to wield their influence, and state institutions occasionally serve to reinforce this authority, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

⁶² Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 58, 60-62.

In modern northern Iraq, the tribes do not have real legal control over the land, and their ownership of the land is through their households' ownership of individual parcels. Actual jurisdiction over the land belongs to state or regional governments, and the legal codes do not really provide for special legal rights for tribal entities when it comes to controlling their historic lands. In some instances, though, tribes have been able to hold onto the same contiguous lands over many generations despite changes in property law which made land a totally private commodity. This would indicate a significant ability to prevent land sales to outsiders. Though no examples could be found dealing specifically with Iraq, Bruinessen describes examples of Turkish Kurd tribes maintaining their tribal agricultural land through use of force. When land traditionally belonging to the Reshkotan tribe was sold to an outsider, the tribe attacked the new landowners, sparking violent conflict between the Reshkotan and the new owners' tribe. After unrest broke out and Turkish authorities intervened, government mediators found it far easier to maintain the historic land claims by annulling the sale than to force the Reshkotan to accept the outsider.⁶³

Another type of *tayfe* that plays a role is the client tribe. Client tribes are large, powerful units containing multiple clans and led by their own tribal agha, which are in some way subservient to a larger tribe. This subservience is rarely kin-based since the client tribes and their clans tend to contain an entire powerful lineage at their core. Client tribes have become subservient to paramount tribes either by choice or by subjugation. In the past, a tribe that was decisively beaten or seriously outnumbered might choose to declare its allegiance to a more powerful tribe rather than face obsolescence. Alternately, tribes might become clients to a more powerful tribe as part of a defensive move against another tribe or an external threat. In more recent times, state power has prevented explicit violent conflict, but tribes can still become

⁶³ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 54.

clients to one another via more peaceful means. When documents speak of large tribal federations or coalitions like the Jaf, the group being discussed is generally a single paramount tribe carrying the allegiance of several client tribes. Just like the non-kin clans that made the Jaf increase and decrease in power so dramatically, client tribes tend to come and go with fluctuations in the core tribe's fortune and power.⁶⁴

Due to the settled or semi-settled nature of almost all Iraqi Kurds by the turn of the twenty-first century, the village must be considered as a level in the tribal structure which functions similarly to the clan. Often they are literally the same thing; semi-nomadic clans may belong to the same village by their winter pastures and move to a common tent camp in the summer. Other times, clans of the same tribe will be divided between multiple villages, or a few clans may cohabitate a few villages with no village clearly belonging to one clan or another. Villages in agricultural areas gain another level of complexity in that the peasant farmers in such villages are generally non-tribal. Though these non-tribal villagers are not directly subject to the tribes in modern Iraq, the higher social and political status of tribesmen makes the non-tribal villagers at least slightly subservient to the tribal villagers.⁶⁵

It is possible that in previous eras the village was simply a manifestation of the clan or a group of clans, with little to no structural importance or political power in and of itself. Besides their lack of importance in Kurds' view of political organization, villages also were more heavily populated by non-tribal peasant farmers than by tribal pastoralists.⁶⁶ Their role as an important step in the tribal structure, however, has been solidified by the imposition of state structures over tribal areas. Governments built around the idea of provinces and capitals have struggled to deal

⁶⁴ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 120.

⁶⁵ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 117-118.

⁶⁶ W. Rudolph (1959), 'Einige hypothetische Ausführungen zur Kultur der Kurden', *Sociologus* 9: 150-162. Cited in Van Bruinessen, *Agha...*

with tribal forms of organization and nomadic people generally. The settled village, though often unoccupied in the case of semi-nomadic Kurds, provided a location that a group of people could be tied to in the eyes of such governments. Villages thus became the place where government buildings were constructed, armies stationed, and Pashas installed. For tribes who did live in villages, this proximity to centers of power caused the village to have a place of importance in and of itself. The forming of new tribes among the peasantry due to the rise of village Shaikhs, to which a separate section of this paper is dedicated, also helped the village become an important center in the tribal system since a shaikh's core following would often be the village he inhabited.

“Non-Tribal” Kurdistan

A very common mistake made when discussing tribal systems is to assume that all Kurds are tribal. This is not the case; there is a large, historically non-tribal peasant contingent in most Kurdish villages. In addition to these peasants, a newly non-tribal (or perhaps even anti-tribal) population exists in more urban areas across Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite these groups existing to some extent outside of the tribal structure, they are still very much affected by tribal politics. Furthermore, some groups claiming to be non-tribal modern urbanites are still subject to the remnants of tribal loyalties entrenched in the structures of neighborhoods and extended families.

It appears to be a long-standing struggle for scholars on Kurdistan to estimate the portion of the population that is tribal. The reasons for this difficulty are telling in themselves. Firstly, the definition of tribal versus non-tribal is very hard to identify. Very nearly all Kurds, and certainly all Muslim Kurds, have some sort of heritage either in a tribe or in a population which was directly ruled by a tribe within a few generations. Many urbanites who have long abandoned

a nomadic and pastoral life express some sort of allegiance to their extended family which an outsider would identify with tribalism. Yet these urbanites, often identifying with socialist or nationalist political identities, would probably balk at the use of the lexicon of tribalism to describe their families.⁶⁷ Secondly, the oppression of Kurds by the governments that rule over them has often prevented the collection of good statistics. Several scholars complained of the difficulty of even identifying who was and was not a Kurd in the Turkish and Iranian regions, as those governments have at various times attempted to delegitimize Kurdish as a valid identity.⁶⁸ Van Bruinessen notes that even during its more progressive periods, Turkey severely limited the definition of 'Kurd' in its census data, only counting those who spoke exclusively Kurdish.⁶⁹ Finally, social mobility between tribal and non-tribal groups is significant, especially during times of conflict or hardship. Tribal leaders in need of fighting men have often tapped peasant populations. In the other direction, tribes who have been subdued by their neighbors or state forces or who have come upon hard times economically have sometimes resorted to cultivation. Even more confusingly, these newly-made peasant populations often retain their tribal social structures even as they give up on tribal authority (Bruinessen 116). All of these factors significantly blur the boundaries of who is tribal and who is not.

Still, there are ways to estimate the portion of the population that is tribal. The studies of Rich and Edmonds on the Jaf tribe, approximately a century apart, did not explicitly provide for the distinction between tribal and non-tribal, but they did distinguish between settled and

⁶⁷ The urban areas are traditionally the stronghold of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which rejects tribalism as part of its socialist program. "Definition." Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Accessed March 12, 2015. <http://www.pukpb.org/en/penase>.

⁶⁸ Mesut Yeğen. "Turkish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 1 (November 23, 2006): 119-51. doi:10.1080/01419870601006603. P. 1354-5. Yeğen criticizes the notion that Kurds are simply odd Persians in an article which, ironically, concludes that Kurds should be thought of as unique Turks.

⁶⁹ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 14.

nomadic.⁷⁰ It is important to note that these categories are not synonymous; settled tribesmen and migrant peasants certainly exist. Since settled groups tend towards a loosening of tribal structure, and groups which join mobile tribes tend to become part of that tribe, information on settled versus unsettled families can be used to get a broad sense of portions of the population in the tribal versus non-tribal categories. Additionally, the social position of settled subjugated tribes is not far from that of peasants in that they are kept in “nearly feudal dependence”.⁷¹ Similarly, Rich found the status of newly nomadic tribes to be essentially equal to that of those who had never been sedentary; they were treated as tribesmen.⁷²

Rich and Edmonds provide three important pieces of information on the portion of the Jaf population that was settled versus unsettled. Firstly, the ratio of settled to unsettled families under a tribe’s jurisdiction varies widely over time. In 1820 about 30% of the population of the Jaf tribe was settled and the rest nomadic. In 1920 the portion of settled families was much higher but also harder to define.⁷³ Edmonds noted that sedentary status was temporary and undesirable; nomads became sedentary out of poverty or conquest, and sought to become nomadic again as soon as possible.⁷⁴ There were continual shifts in both directions as families fell upon bad or good fortune. Secondly, both settled and non-settled groups made up significant portions of the population; thirty percent is the smallest minority of settled families recorded, while twenty percent is the smallest minority of nomadic tribesmen recorded. Thus each of these groups has the potential to play a major role in political structures, especially in times of violence.

⁷⁰ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 116-117.

⁷¹ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 116.

⁷² Rich, *Narrative*...P. 177.

⁷³ Rich, *Narrative*...P. 177.

⁷⁴ Edmonds, *Kurds*..., P. 136-159.

The group referred to here as peasants are non-tribal peoples living outside of major cities. In modern Iraqi Kurdistan, access to education at least through age 15 and numerous subsidized higher education options have led to significant mobility out of the agricultural class. Additionally, the introduction of farm machinery has led to decreased need for agricultural workers. Thus, the peasant class is rapidly diminishing, or at least rapidly resorting to trades other than agriculture. Agriculture is still the largest single industry, claiming 27% of the workforce.⁷⁵ Historically, peasant farmers in Kurdistan fell into four categories: land-bound sharecroppers resembling serfs, renters, owners, and migrant workers. As heavier machinery and fertilizer have become necessary elements of agriculture, larger landowners including foreign corporations have bought up large parcels of arable land, and these types of farmers have coalesced into a more general class of agricultural employees. These peasants are disproportionately religious and ethnic minorities, with Armenian Christians making up the most significant group in Iraq. Muslim Kurdish peasants often retain some sort of tribal structure despite being clearly subservient to more successful tribes, but those Christian peasants who remain in Iraq tend to be more obviously non-tribal, as most Christian tribes vacated the area previously or were dispersed in the conflicts of the twentieth century.⁷⁶

When a peasant population is within the jurisdiction of a tribe, it almost always makes up a subjugated working class which is somehow subsidiary to the tribal structure. The most common way in which the power of the tribe over villages is maintained is through the collection of a tithe of some sort from agriculturalists. Tribal aghas have usually succeeded in collecting some sort of tithe even as society has rapidly changed, though the details of this process enter into the confusing quasi-legal world of tribal land ownership. Much land is owned by individual

⁷⁵ "Iraq: Economy." The World Factbook. Accessed February 25, 2015.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>.

⁷⁶ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 18, 107-8.

households, but occasionally the agha himself legally owns the land in a village. The way this came to be is dubious from the perspective of fairness. Traditionally, tithes to the local or tribal agha were paid for the upkeep of the village guest house, which served as the village center. Other times the tithe would be a payment for the agha's dispute resolution services. Either way, the payments could be more accurately be described as feudal dues than as rent payments. It is clear that ownership of the land was not implied in this system by the fact that changes in respect or balance of power could cause the payments to transfer away from one agha or shaikh to another. This system of feudal payments persisted through the Ottoman era. The British and the British-backed government of Iraq interpreted many of these payments as renter's fees, and thus registered the land as owned by the agha who collected the payments. Even in cases where the land isn't officially registered to the agha in ownership, he has generally succeeded in forcing the collections under one of the guises mentioned earlier. The only instances where the payments have been significantly disrupted were times when socialist and nationalist movements inspired peasants to reject their landlords; this trend has largely ceased as the KRG has gotten increasingly democratic, and the socialist parties have ceased encouraging such acts of civil disobedience.⁷⁷

In some instances which have become less common over time, the exertion of a tribal agha's authority has been more aggressively enforced. While village and clan aghas enforce tithe collections through ties and social pressure, a tribal agha who subjugated unrelated tribes generally coerced payments and enforced loyalty via threat of raids. Some tribes in modern Iraq used a different method of payment; the paramount agha in a region would require that each clan and village send some of its peasants to work in his fields for a few days each year. This happened as recently as the 1960s under the rule of the Pizhdar, and perhaps more ironically, at

⁷⁷ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 81-87.

the hands of a governor appointed by the nationalist movement after the agha's overthrow. For the more permanent peasant populations this may not have been any more coercive than what they were used to, but settled tribal Kurds remember this experience as particularly humiliating.⁷⁸

More recently, such explicit coercion has been made illegal. Combined with increasing social mobility and urbanization, the rule of law has caused a decrease in the authority of tribal aghas. Thanks to the pressure of conservatism in rural areas and nomadic groups and the permanent need for dispute mediation, the aghas still carry significant influence.

The other major group that is labeled as non-tribal are urbanites, who reject the very concept. People in urban areas make up a significant portion of the region's modern population; Erbil, Duhok, and Sulemania together make up 23% of the population of the KRG.⁷⁹ The entire population of Iraqi Kurdistan is young to an unprecedented degree; 36% of the population is 14 or younger, and 50% of the population is 20 or younger. Though this is not a uniquely urban phenomenon, its effects are most visible in the cities where the cultural hold of rural conservatism is weakest. More than half of the population in both urban and rural areas has had access to modern education for most of their lives, and has lived in an autonomous and increasingly prosperous Kurdish region throughout their adolescence. Kurdish nationalism,

⁷⁸ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 91.

⁷⁹ The KRG's area of control at the time of writing is both larger and more urban. The retreat of the Iraqi government, and subsequent seizure by the Peshmerga, of Kirkuk brought the KRG's jurisdiction from 1.9 million to 2.7 million. Mosul is likely to come under at least temporary control of the KRG as well, but population statistics from ISIS-held areas are both unobtainable and outdated as hundreds of thousands have fled. It should be noted that in both Kirkuk and Mosul, there are more Arabs than all the other minorities in those cities combined, and that the number of Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyrians has likely decreased during the current war as they are proportionally less Muslim than the Arabs there. (Various sources)

liberalism, and socialism are the main political inspirations, and being accused of “tribalism” can ruin a politician’s reputation in these areas.⁸⁰

Lest this paint an image of a population that is truly divorced from tribalism, several facts and anecdotes are worth noting. Despite the fact that educated youths espouse a rhetoric which rejects tribalism, they appear quite quick to return to tribal lines in the traditional fashion as soon as there is a disagreement between major tribal groups. Van Bruinessen tells the story of a Kurdish village in Turkey, where in 1973 someone of one lineage was killed by someone of another lineage by accident. A violent blood feud did not erupt, as the culprit and his brothers had fled, and modern mores and laws prevented the killer’s relatives from being targeted. But tension did not dissipate and clearly spread even to the younger generation. In what at first seemed like an attempt to reject the feud, five students one day informed Van Bruinessen that they were going (dynamite) fishing together. Yet by accompanying them, Van Bruinessen observed that even these ostensible friends did not quite trust each other enough to share a boat or walk together (while all involved were carrying dynamite).⁸¹ Even if such behavior is couched in terms of family loyalty, it is hard to distinguish between that and the tribal faction-forming that would take place in a rural area if something similar occurred. It is not surprising that even young, modern urban populations are still affected by a tribal mentality; they are mostly either recent migrants to these urban areas or first-generation native urbanites. The growth of the Kurdistan Region’s three largest cities in recent decades shows this clearly; only since the middle of the twentieth century have they become the major urban centers that they are today. Combined with significant intermarriage between the urban elites and the better-off former nomads from the cities, this means that very few young Kurds cannot find a parent or

⁸⁰ Martin Van Bruinessen. "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq." *Middle East Report*, no. 141 (July 1986): 14-27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3011925>.

⁸¹ Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, P. 70-71.

grandparent who was either from a tribal entity or directly subject to a tribe as a village-dwelling peasant.

Even if it is to be accepted that many urbanites have “de-tribalized” in the way that many assert that they have, the makeup of political parties ensures continued contact with the tribes. While previous eras saw a clear political divide between the less tribal, more socialist urbanites of Sulemania and the more tribal groups around Duhok and Erbil, the modern governing coalition relies on support from nationalists in multiple cities as well as tribesmen. These bases often diverge sharply on social issues, and so it is reasonable to suspect that the coalition would not hold up during peacetime. The current political situation has created remarkable unity for reasons that will be discussed at length later. For the purposes of this section, it suffices to say that tribesmen follow their allegiances, urbanites want independence for either nationalist or liberal reasons, and Sunni Islamists want separation from the newly Shi’a government in Baghdad.

The Collision of Religious Orders and the Tribal System

Further complicating this variable tribal arrangement is the relationship between tribes or tribe-like structures and Islamic religious organizations and leaders. In Kurdistan, the most visible collision between political and religious structures occurred as mystic orders began to spread through the region. Mystic orders’ ability to often exist within the Sunni and Shi’a establishment while also maintaining their independence and identity has made them powerful forces in Kurdish tribal politics. As will be seen, it is sometimes difficult to tell where the tribal leadership’s power ends and that of religious authorities begins. Understanding this mixing of authority is crucial to understanding the current political power structure as well as the limits of

tribal identity in Kurdistan. The religious orders eventually became totally woven into the fabric of Kurdish tribal leaders, but in this process the role of tribes in society was fundamentally altered.

Though religious orders have played a part in Kurdish politics since the early centuries of Islam, the most relevant recent arrival of a mystic order in Kurdistan took place throughout the 1800s with the rapid growth of the Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders. The Qadiri had existed among several prominent families in Kurdistan for hundreds of years; the Barzinjis of Sulaymaniya and the Sayyids of Nihri both claimed descent from the order's twelfth century founder Abd al-Qadir Gilani. These families both held the privileged *sayyid* status of claiming descent from the Prophet, and so the leaders of the families were able to maintain strict control over the order by ensuring that only their family members were initiated into the order.⁸² In this system, the religious order was clearly subservient to the tribal structure, and as a result the power of the order was either coopted as a normal part of tribal leaders' legitimacy or limited to mostly apolitical spiritual leadership. This arrangement, that is, the lack of independently powerful religious orders, was the situation throughout most of Kurdistan at the outset of the 19th century.⁸³

The seeds of the destruction of this system can be found in two main places. In 1810 Shaikh Khalid, a Kurdish noble of the Jaf tribe who had studied under both *sayyid* families as a Qadiri scholar, traveled to India to meet a shaikh of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi order. He soon began claiming powers including foresight, the ability to grant immunity from harm, and communication with the dead.⁸⁴ The other element can be found in the strategy of early nineteenth century Istanbul. By this time, Istanbul had set out to suppress the Kurdish satrapies

⁸² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 51.

⁸³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 50.

⁸⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 53.

and principalities within Ottoman borders, and often had attempted to do so by upsetting the existing power structures of the region at the expense of law and order. Additionally, the Naqshbandi order's orthodox Sunni views called for loyalty to the Sultan, whereas the local Kurdish power centers of the Qadiri were less tied to the empire's interests. Whether this was a part of a broader strategy to incorporate the fickle principalities on the Persian border or in response to a series of particularly destructive set of wars that Kurdish chiefs had instigated is a matter of some debate. Either way, it appears that Istanbul deliberately encouraged Mahmud Baban to invite Khalid back to Kurdistan. Khalid quickly began acquiring his own following. Notably this new *Naqshbandi-Khalidi* order began to exert influence *over* the rulers of Baban, directly threatening their allegiance to the Qadiri-supported Barzinji princes. More importantly for the discussion on tribal structure was the fact that a rapidly spreading and truly independent religious order was generating a powerful following of its own and gaining enough power to influence or coerce political leaders.⁸⁵

Another reason why the Naqshbandi order spread so quickly and so fundamentally altered tribal politics has to do with its own leadership structure. The Qadiriya, and most other orders, have a centralized authority which appointed all of the order's shaikhs. The deputies of the Naqshbandi order, on the other hand, were entitled to train and initiate their own deputy shaikhs. This pyramid-like structure was able to spread much more quickly and maintain a much more oppositional posture than the traditional Qadiri shaikhs, who were all more or less directly subservient to the Qadiriyya of the Barzinji and Sayyid families. This made the Naqshbandi order so attractive that many Qadiriya shaikhs converted to the new school. The Naqshbandi rapidly became numerous, influential, and widespread. Importantly, tribal leaders lower in the political order were able to either become trained in the school as shaikhs themselves or enlist

⁸⁵ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 51-3.

the help of a Naqshbandi shaikh to gain religious legitimacy at the same structural level of the princely ruling families' Qadiri authority.⁸⁶

Immediately, the new shaikhs began to wield their political power in meaningful ways. The ongoing demise of the most powerful principalities in the Ottoman empire's eastern marches, actively encouraged by Istanbul, had removed much of the conflict-resolution and protective structures in Kurdistan. Shaikhs in Baban lands began to mediate disputes between competing Baban rulers, a role that normally would have been reserved for a higher-level tribal leader. Shaikhs gained power most quickly and most effectively in regions with many feuding tribes, thus filling the power vacuum that normally would have been filled by a more powerful conquering tribe. By provoking and resolving conflicts to their benefit, they became a potent political authority in these areas. They found it more difficult to penetrate areas dominated by a large tribe such as the Jaf, because the tribal leaders remained the undisputed conflict arbitrators in these areas. Additionally, the Naqshbandi shaikhs struggled to exert authority in organized villages and other areas closer to government power centers where there was no power vacuum to fill.⁸⁷

Far from being strict oppositionists, the Naqshbandi shaikhs actively sought integration into the existing power structure. Early on, Ahmad Pasha of Baban joined the order and became prince. Rizaquli Khan of Sandaj, prince of Ardalan, also joined the order.⁸⁸

The Naqshbandi shaikhs' political strategies soon made them a totally integrated, and occasionally indistinguishable, part of the tribal system. Since the order allowed the appointment of deputies, shaikhs were able to initiate their own relatives as deputies who

⁸⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 51-3.

⁸⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 52, cites Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, but does not provide a page number.

⁸⁸ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 53.

'reported to' them in the order's structure. While there wasn't a clear hierarchy of authority between the shaikhs, the teacher-student relationship certainly generated loyalties. When combined with existing tribal notions of patrilineal kinship authority, these loyalties became very difficult to qualitatively distinguish from a tribal loyalty. Power was exerted through an expectation of familial loyalty. The Naqshbandiya also gained political authority by soliciting their abilities as conflict mediators and leaders to peasant villagers who previously had no potential arbiter besides their local tribal leader. Some shaikhly families' tribes were not long-standing tribes, but rather a following of peasant villager families who defected from more oppressive neighboring tribes. The shaikh structure provided the protection through unity that would normally be provided by patronage to a tribal authority, except that it was accessible to peasants who normally were subject to raids even at the whims of their own tribal leaders.

The final merging of the shaikhly religious structure and the older tribal structure occurred through intermarriage between the major tribal families and the upstart shaikhly dynasties. The major tribal chiefs, rapidly declining in power in the face of the shaikh's growing authority and the loss of favor of Istanbul, were eager to coopt the religious authority of the shaikhs. Meanwhile, the marriages cemented the shaikhly families' status as explicitly political authorities.⁸⁹

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Kurdistan's tribal politics had become inseparable from the religious politics of the shaikhly families. With Istanbul's destruction of the non-shaikhly principality ruling families which held sway before, three crucial political dynasties occupied the scene, all of which claimed shaikhly status. The shaken but still important Qadiri Barzinji princes briefly lost but eventually regained control of Sulaymania. The

⁸⁹ Farhad Shakely. "The Naqshbandi Shaikhs of Hawraman and The Heritage of Khalidiyya-Mujaddidiyya in Kurdistan." *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 19 (2005): 119-35.

Sayyids, now fully converted to the Naqshbandi order, ruled in Nihri. The upstart Naqshbandi Barzanis, from their namesake Barzan, were the most powerful group in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan.

How then, do the shaikhly dynasties differ from the older tribes? They are the leaders of political power structures held together by ties of real or imagined kinship and religious authority, and inherited on vaguely patrilineal lines. In each of these respects, they are tribes in the normal sense of the word. The most significant difference for the purpose of this paper is that the shaikhly dynasties are able to exert direct political influence over both seminomadic tribes and settled peasant villagers. As Kurdish political parties developed, this would turn out to be crucial in bridging the gap between the two populations. By the turn of the twentieth century, the political and religious structures were fully merged. The titleshaikh came to be applied to leaders of tribal structures regardless of the leader's religious affiliation.

For the Naqshbandi shaikhs, another crucial difference lies in their allegiance to Istanbul. The Naqshbandi, ardent Sunnis, tended to be unwilling to be disobedient to the Sultan, and were thus opposed to political efforts against him. This would eventually place many tribal leaders at odds with Mustafa Kemal's Turkish nationalist revolution which initially sought to incorporate them. Additionally, the more aggressive Sunnism of the Naqshbandiya would later combine with the significant anti-colonial (and thus anti-Christian) reaction that swept the falling Ottoman empire. These sentiments likely contributed heavily to the willingness, or even eagerness, of some Kurdish groups to participate in a young Turkey's efforts to "relocate" Armenians. This participation in genocide, besides being tragic, cost the Kurds a lot of American, French, and British goodwill at the crucial Vienna peace conference after the First World War.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 56.

Concluding Comments

The first crucial concept which has been reviewed here regards the segmentary nature of the Kurdish tribe. The degree to which an individual takes the side of another in a tribal dispute is at least in part determined by that individual's perception of the tribal "distance" between them. Thus disputes between those in different lineages mobilize whole lineages; those between tribes mobilize whole tribes, and so forth. It can also be seen from the anecdotes in this chapter that these identities matter enough that people still fear blood feuds enough to flee when their close relative has besmirched the honor of one in another lineage. It should be noted, however, that there are many different sizes and strengths of tribe in Kurdistan. While small groups will almost always be faced with opposition comparable in size to themselves, a large tribe targeting a small tribe need not fear "balanced opposition", at least exclusively at the tribal level.

Secondly, this chapter demonstrates that the concept of a person or group being "non-tribal" is a bit of a misnomer when discussing Kurdish society. Someone with no tribal affiliation in a rural area is likely subject to the whims of a tribal entity in one way or another. A person in an urban environment might be actively opposed to the concept of tribal identity, but would still be influenced by their recent ancestors having either been a part of or subject to a tribal system. As a result, serious disputes between families tend to maintain a decidedly tribal character. This remains true for the younger generation.

Finally, and most generally, it must be said that the religious, social, and political affiliations of Kurds are heavily intertwined. Religious leaders in many villages have a role to play that is explicitly political, and many have taken advantage of their religious authority to rise to political power. Political leaders of the past were also spiritual guides, and as such it would not be surprising if modern political leaders were subtly expected to fulfill a similar role. The

maintenance of political power in the tribal sphere relies heavily on highly personal pressures.

Thus the social is political and vise-versa.

Chapter 3: The New Tribes

Both of the major political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan have occasionally been accused of ‘tribalism’. Generally, this accusation points to nepotistic behavior in party and government appointments and in fact, the two leading Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), do in fact engage in nepotism. When discussing a tribe, it is natural for family members to be given positions of responsibility; the tribe is hereditary and thus an inherently nepotistic structure. This preference for appointing family members to office appears to have been carried over into both major political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan. But the parties’ tribal tendencies are not limited to nepotism. In this chapter I argue that the parties have acted in a fundamentally tribal way despite their rhetorical rejection of tribalism. This can be seen both by the parties’ familial composition and in the nature of their conflicts with each other during the second half of the twentieth century.

Nepotism in the KDP and PUK

The party at whom the accusation of tribalism is most often leveled is the KDP. This is to be expected, since the KDP is generally the more conservative of the Kurdish parties, and had generally been headed by the Barzani family, which has a long tribal heritage as the Shaikhs of Barzan. A look at the composition of the modern KDP and the government of the KRG reveals that they are to some extent Barzani family businesses. The current president of the KRG, Massoud Barzani, is a son of the famous leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani. Mulla Mustafa’s other sons were Idris Barzani, who (like his son Nechirvan is now) was a prominent party leader, and Wajy Barzani, who is a General in the Kurdish Peshmerga. Massoud’s sons are Masrouf, who is

a KDP intelligence officer; and Mansour and Wajy, who both serve as high-ranking Peshmerga officers.⁹¹

The PUK, by contrast, is explicitly anti-tribal in orientation. Its socialist doctrines are diametrically opposed to what it sees as a holdover of feudal society.⁹² As such, it is less often accused of nepotism or tribalism. Yet the Talabani family maintains a significant presence in the upper echelon of the PUK and of Kurdish society. The lynchpin here appears to be Talabani's marriage to Aero Ahmad, as a number of the appointments are her relatives. Jalal Talabani is the president of Iraq (a mainly ceremonial position). His son Qubad was made the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG as part of the unity government agreement formed after the last election, and represents KRG interests to the United States. Bayaz Talabani, Jalal's cousin, is the KRG's Finance Minister. Aero Ahmad Talabani, Jalal's wife, is the owner several media companies in Kurdistan including *Hewal*, a major news weekly, and KurdSat Television. Mullah Baxtiar, Aero Ahmad's father, is on the PUK Politburo. Shanaz Ahmed, Aero's sister, is the PUK representative to the United Kingdom, and her husband is the Minister for water and irrigation for Iraq. Lahur Talabani, Jalal's nephew, is the leader of the PUK's counter-terrorism unit. Latif Rashid, Jalal's brother-in-law, is a government minister. Bavel Talabani, Jalal's son, is the head of the PUK's special forces. Hama Sabir, Aero's brother-in-law, is Iraq's ambassador to China.⁹³

⁹¹"THE MAIN KURDISH POLITICAL PARTIES IN IRAN, IRAQ, SYRIA, AND TURKEY: A RESEARCH GUIDE." Rubin Center. August 19, 2013. <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, and Michael Rubin. "Kurdistan's '\$265 Million' National Security Council: Nepotism Not Good Governance." The Kurdistan Tribune. July 12, 2012. <http://kurdistantribune.com/2012/kurdistans-265-million-dollar-national-security-council-nepotism-not-good-governance/>.

⁹² "Definition", Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

⁹³ KurdMedia. "Bloodline Instead of Merit: The Talabanis." *IndyBay* (blog), January 10, 2007. <http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2007/01/10/18345489.php>.

Purely listing the Barzani and Talabani family members who are in each party would give the impression that the PUK is the more nepotistic, but this is not quite a fair assessment. The nepotism of the PUK appears to be more tightly focused around Talabani's immediate family. This makes sense considering that Jalal Talabani doesn't have an official affiliation with a major tribe. The Barzani family, on the other hand, is the historic lead family of a large tribal coalition in the northwest of the Kurdish region focused around the village of Duhok. As such, the nepotism of the KDP involves not only the Barzani family, but its traditional allies. While it is nearly impossible to identify exact allegiances for individual members of parliament, a look at the KDP's current members of parliament is highly telling. There are 111 seats in the Kurdish parliament, of which 100 are not restricted. (The other 11 are reserved for ethnic and religious minorities.) Of the 36 KDP members of parliament, 21 come from the city of Duhok or its immediate vicinity, and 23 come from the area that is typically within the area of influence of the Barzani family. It is not likely that all of these people are tribal allies of Barzani, but it is also highly unlikely that such an arrangement occurred naturally, given that Duhok's population of approximately 350,000 makes up only 4% of the region's population.⁹⁴

It is easy to see why in political discourse nepotism is sometimes referred to as, "the Kurdish disease." To say that of the major parties of Kurdistan is not truly a condemnation of them, as nepotism appears to be the norm in Kurdish politics. The presence of such nepotism is, however, a clear example of a way in which tribal politics have influenced the norms of modern Kurdish politics.

⁹⁴ Numbers produced using information from "The Members of the Parliament for Fourth Term 2013." Kurdistan Parliament. Accessed April 10, 2015. <http://www.perlemanikurdistan.com/Default.aspx?page=members&c=Presidency-Member2013>.

Tribal Behavior in the Kurds' 20th Century Conflicts

From the rise of the Ba'ath party in Iraq in 1960 to the formation of a united Kurdish administration in 1987, the two major political coalitions in the Kurdish region engaged in a campaign for greater autonomy from the government in Baghdad. Simultaneously, they struggled against each other for primacy as representatives of the Kurdish movement in Iraq and internationally. Though portrayals of the conflict were nearly always framed in terms of political party identity and ideology, the struggle closely followed patterns of age-old tribal conflict. The major Kurdish factions were organized in blocs which relied heavily on tribal support, and the conflict itself followed many of the patterns that tribal conflicts followed previously. This is true of both major Kurdish factions involved, and the government in Baghdad. The actors' descriptions of themselves would give an image of a struggle between a moderate democratic Kurdish party, a socialist Kurdish workers' party, and an Arab nationalist regime. Ultimately, the conflict is better characterized as a repeat of earlier conflicts: a struggle between rival Kurdish factions heavily influenced by tribalism, taking place in the context of a broader hegemonic struggle between non-Kurdish actors.

At a very practical level, the fighting between Kurdish groups during the conflicts of the 1960s-1980s were continuations of tactics normally associated with fighting between tribal groups. One such tactic is the focus on rapid, guerrilla attacks with the goal of causing fright, damage, and chaos. This tactic is highly reminiscent of the tribal raiding tactics of old. The typical tactics of a raiding band were vicious, but limited.⁹⁵ Avoiding large-scale killing enabled tribesmen to avoid having an unpayable blood debt upon their heads in the eyes of their enemies. In more recent conflicts a similar tactic can be seen with the attacks on important industries or against small bands of fighters. In 1969, Mulla Mustafa Barzani ordered attacks on the Kirkuk

⁹⁵ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 27-81.

oil fields, not against Iraqi soldiers or a civilian area, as the opening round of hostilities with the Baghdad government.⁹⁶ In isolation this would not be indicative of anything; the attack could have been targeted at the oil field because it is a high value target, or because the Iraqis were significantly better armed than Barzani's fighters. But a long list of attacks by the forces of Kurdish parties reveals that tribal combat tactics are the norm.

Once again harking back to an earlier era, party leaders often opted for quick raids on their enemies' small expeditionary bands or leadership. These raids seem to be designed more to scatter and decapitate the enemy by killing its leaders than to kill many enemy soldiers. In the tribal context this makes sense; eliminate the unifying tribal figure and the tribal coalition is no more. When whole groups did engage in fierce combat, the size of the forces involved is telling as well. One of the most widely criticized actions of the fighting in the 1970s was the attack by 7,500 KDP fighters on a small band of Talabani's men under the lead of Ali Askari, who were annihilated.⁹⁷ Such a large mobilization was not the norm of combat in modern Kurdistan, just like it was not the norm of tribal fighting earlier in Kurdish history.

Beyond the fighting fitting a tribal pattern, the broader strategy that each faction engaged in fit the mold of earlier tribal conflicts. Understanding this pattern better requires taking a look back at the political situations that tended to surround Kurdish tribal conflict.

The first pattern which applies to almost all instances of Kurdish tribal conflict is one of courting autonomy. Kurdish tribal leaders court autonomy when they tread the delicate ground between independence (which could isolate them) and actual subservience (which would render them powerless). The Kurdish principalities engaged in this careful game for most of the history of the Ottoman Empire. In a near-perfect replication of Ibn Khaldoun's theory of cyclical tribal

⁹⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 326.

⁹⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 345

power, they asserted themselves when the state was weak, but were sufficiently conciliatory during periods of imperial weakness to make incorporating them a better option than conquering them.⁹⁸ By remaining on the periphery of an empire, they were usually able to hold near-absolute power for themselves without being subject to the whims of another empire or another Kurdish tribe's expansionist urges.

A separate but related aspect of classic Kurdish political strategy is straddling the border between two or more larger powers' areas of control, and playing the margin to maximize their own influence and protect tribal authority. Specifically, this behavior characterized the actions of Kurdish tribes during the Ottoman-Safavid struggle of the 1500s. The influence of each empire at that time reached into, but didn't cross, the mountains. The Kurdish tribes further into one zone or the other might have been essentially stuck within one orbit, but many examples can be found of tribes hopping from one camp to the other, and using the threat of their conversion as a means for obtaining political leverage. McDowall specifically explores the histories of the houses of Ardalan and Baban, who seem to have methodically kept one part of the family in each camp as a source of refuge. While the Kurds often succeeded in doing this as a means of opposing imperial power, empires often also succeeded in using the Kurds against one another militarily by recruiting tribes along the borders into their service. This tactic provided the dual benefits of advantage versus the enemy and the potential weakening of the Kurds in use.⁹⁹ Another crucial aspect of this model is that this switching of sides is not something which Kurds do in unison. In fact, it would be a mischaracterization to say that the Kurds even do it without regard for one another; in fact the motivation for switching sides seems more often to be to gain

⁹⁸ See McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 38-64.

⁹⁹ See McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 29-36.

the upper hand versus a tribal rival than to maintain a certain position in the eyes of a foreign empire.

In the modern era, the powers which the Kurds have attempted to remain peripheral to have changed, but the fundamental conduct of Kurdish groups has not. During the conflicts from the 1960s to the 1980s, each of the major Kurdish factions came very close to an agreement with Baghdad that would have been significantly better than the way the conflict actually played out, both for them and the Iraqi Kurds generally. Yet neither group took this opportunity, instead choosing to retain authority over its own zone of influence.

In the early days of Hussein's Ba'athist regime, Mulla Mustafa Barzani was fairly clearly the most important Kurdish leader. Many traditional rivals of the Barzani shaikhs were displeased with this reality, but it was a reality nonetheless.¹⁰⁰ The Ba'ath regime, seeking to further consolidate its hold on power, declared not an autonomous Kurdistan but a smaller autonomous zone centered on the Barzani stronghold of Duhok, with the aim of recruiting Barzani to the Iraqi government's side.¹⁰¹ It should be noted that at this time the Ba'ath party was not the neo-tribal group which Saddam Hussein would later build to promote the interests of his own family and village. In the early days of Saddam's rule, the Ba'ath party was still a revolutionary movement which seems to have been very much committed to the socialist and Iraqi nationalist points of its platform. The Iraqi Ba'athists disregarded ethnicity as the primary source of identity, insisting that Arabs, Kurds, and Turks should be equal partners in a new Iraq.¹⁰² As such, the situation of the Kurds in a united, Ba'athist republic had a good chance of being better than it had ever been before.

¹⁰⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 324-26.

¹⁰¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 326.

¹⁰² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 327, 329.

The overture initially succeeded in wooing Barzani to the Ba'athist cause. He began serious conversations with Baghdad, but always maintained an unwillingness to give up autonomy for the Kurdish regions.¹⁰³ Following the failure to reach agreement on a number of points, neither the Kurds nor the Ba'athists were willing to make further concessions or act upon the more difficult parts of the tentative agreements that had been reached.¹⁰⁴ The standoff culminated in the exchange of accusations between Kurdish authorities and Baghdad and the total collapse of the accord in 1973.¹⁰⁵

As chances for a peaceful negotiated solution disappeared in the years after 1973, Barzani's goal appears to have been the same. He was willing to talk to Baghdad on the condition that the Kurdish region would maintain a large degree of self-governance (read: governance by the Barzanis) in any agreement that was reached. As soon as Baghdad began seeking any type of meaningful authority over the Kurdish region, Barzani balked.¹⁰⁶ Certainly some of Barzani's hesitation was justified; one of Baghdad's demands was that the Kurds abandon direct negotiations with Iran, which remained a lifeline for them. Yet specific issues don't seem to have been the core of the problem. The pattern was repeated after Idris Barzani gave in on the Iran point, promising that the Kurds would cut their ties if agreement was reached. After tentative agreement was reached between Idris Barzani and Saddam Hussein in 1974, the point of Kirkuk became the new sticking point.¹⁰⁷ The oil-rich city of Kirkuk was obviously not something that Baghdad could be willing to give up. Kirkuk was neither within the KDP's area of control, nor were most inhabitants Kurdish.¹⁰⁸ Baghdad expressed a willingness to concede

¹⁰³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 327.

¹⁰⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 331-2.

¹⁰⁵ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 332.

¹⁰⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 333.

¹⁰⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 335.

¹⁰⁸ Mehrdad Izady R. *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*. Washington: Crane Russak, 1992. P. 125.

several other territorial disputes and an portion of Kirkuk's oil revenue, but not political control of the city, and Barzani pulled out of the negotiations. It is difficult to believe that Barzani genuinely wanted an agreement that would cede control to Baghdad given his demanding of the impossible. He may well have been happy with the situation he was in, wherein he was the most influential leader in Kurdistan and Baghdad couldn't quite exert its authority over him. It was widely suspected that Mulla Mustafa Barzani didn't actually want an agreement, and this suspicion was reaffirmed quite publicly by the defection of his son, Ubayd Allah Barzani, who defected to the National Front after his father rejected the Autonomy law of 1974.¹⁰⁹

While the Barzani family's long history of leadership in the Kurdish region makes it the easiest target, Jalal Talabani and the Peoples' Union of Kurdistan cannot be totally exempted from criticism. By 1980, the failure of negotiations and Hussein's reprisals against Barzani and his allies had caused the PUK to control most of Iraqi Kurdistan. Talabani's PUK entered into negotiations with Baghdad and announced a ceasefire. By this time, the Kurds' position versus the Iraqi government and Hussein's position generally had both declined. It was still impossible for Hussein to give up Kirkuk's oil wealth, but Talabani still insisted on it. In a position of power, the PUK was just as willing to maintain their direct control under a condition of unofficial autonomy as the KDP was a few years earlier. The negotiations eventually petered out, culminating in Talabani's brother being killed by pro-government Kurds in 1983 and the arrival of U.S. aid in Iraq. Baghdad's moment of weakness had passed, and both Kurdish parties had chosen to maintain their personal strength at the expense of a sustainable legal arrangement.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 337.

¹¹⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 349-50.

During the same period just reviewed, the clashing Kurdish groups also played the border between different power centers. In the 20th century world, these power centers were not as clearly placed on opposing sides of the Kurdish mountains as they had been in the Ottoman-Safavid struggle; Israel, the United States, and the USSR were key players just as much as Iraq, Iran, and Turkey were. The principle, however, is the same as it was in previous conflicts. The Kurds attempted to use their position on the periphery to either sidle up to or antagonize one power or another.

Perhaps the clearest example of Kurdish groups playing the border is the efforts of the KDP and the PUK to negotiate with both Iran and Iraq during the war between those countries. During Mulla Mustafa Barzani's negotiations with Saddam Hussein, he made sure to maintain an open line of communication with Tehran. This infuriated Hussein, who had opened the negotiations with what he saw as a number of good-faith gestures towards the Kurds.¹¹¹ From the perspective of an outsider, Saddam's outrage seems almost reasonable; he was engaged in a war with Iran, and people he saw as his own citizens were participating in talks with the enemy capital, even after the principle of Iraqi unity had been tentatively agreed upon. But considering Barzani's perspective makes some of the reasons for this classic Kurdish strategy visible. Without the constant threat of switching to the Iranian side, Barzani could not hope to take on Baghdad. In fact, a reading of the last few hundred years of Iraqi history would show that no group of Kurds has really *ever* been sufficiently powerful to singlehandedly take on the governments in Istanbul, Baghdad, or Tehran.¹¹² Idris Barzani offered to cut ties with Iran in exchange for a binding agreement on Kurdish autonomy, but he would only accept one in which

¹¹¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 332.

¹¹² Any solid text on the region's history would do, but McDowall demonstrates this to have been the case for the Seljuk, Abbasid, Ottoman, Safavid, Turkish, Iranian, British, and Iraqi administrations which operated from those cities.

the Kurdish autonomous region was so large and powerful that the calculus just described would no longer apply. Indeed, the Barzanis proved to be correct about his need for the Iranian connection. After the failure of his negotiations with Baghdad, Barzani was able to turn (albeit briefly) to Tehran for material support in his preparations for war with Hussein.¹¹³

While different Kurdish groups certainly maneuvered versus Baghdad and Tehran in the conflicts of the late twentieth century, they also maintained their position in the political borderlands at each other's expense. For the majority of the conflict, each gained influence and security at the expense of the other. As Mulla Mustafa Barzani's bargaining position became weaker towards the end of his negotiations with Saddam, Saddam took advantage of the situation by turning to Talabani's PUK as an alternative. Talabani was all too happy to step into that role. To demonstrate his faction's potency and potential value to Baghdad, Talabani ordered attacks on the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), Kurdish Socialist Party (KSP), and tribal Kurdish militias. It is quite a condemnation of Talabani's commitment to his rhetoric of socialism and Kurdish unity that, of the three groups he targeted in making his example, two were explicitly Kurdish, and two shared the PUK's leftist orientation.¹¹⁴ The PUK grew closer still to Baghdad and positioned itself as the new representative of the Kurdish people in the weeks immediately following Hussein's public parading and execution of 8,000 members of Barzani's clan. (The event would later come to be seen as a harbinger of the genocide to come.)¹¹⁵

For their part, the state powers with whom the Kurds interacted during these conflicts were eager to drive wedges between Kurdish factions. While this initially seems like a potential reason besides tribal behavior for the inter-Kurd fighting described above, the ease with which various governments were able to use one Kurdish faction against another is ultimately a

¹¹³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 334-5.

¹¹⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 325.

¹¹⁵ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 349.

statement in favor of the idea that a tribal pattern was still followed by the PUK and KDP. As was referenced previously, the Ba'ath government was able on several occasions to make peace or align itself with one Kurdish faction with the aim of weakening or excluding another. As early as 1968, Baghdad successfully brought Talabani's faction of the KDP into its orbit by offering the opportunity to represent the Kurds' interests to Baghdad. Talabani's faction was theoretically still a part of Barzani's party at the time, but his struggle for influence against Barzani was a significant enough difference that Baghdad could cleave them apart, leaving both sides weaker.¹¹⁶ This split would eventually become the basis for the formation of separate parties.

The Iraqi, Iranian, and Turkish governments both succeeded in using each other's Kurds as leverage against each other during conflict, and at cooperating to suppress Kurdish movements during peacetime. During their war, both countries supported Kurdish groups within the borders of the other in attacking targets of value to the state. Iran armed the KDP semi-regularly throughout its conflicts with Iraq and allowed Kurdish groups to retreat into Iran when they needed to.¹¹⁷ Iraq, on the other hand, used Kurdish tribal militias as a part of its defense of the north against Iranian aggression.¹¹⁸ Iraq and Iran eventually reached agreement on the Kurdish issue, which led to the KDP's supplies being cut off just as it was preparing for war with Iran.¹¹⁹ When faced with a violent campaign by the PKK, Turkey obtained permission from Baghdad to attack Kurdish groups in the north of Iraq.¹²⁰

If there is one aspect of the Kurdish parties' conduct which is perfectly fits the model of segmentary or "balanced" opposition and tribal conflict generally, it is the nature of the events

¹¹⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 325.

¹¹⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 331.

¹¹⁸ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 329.

¹¹⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 345.

¹²⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 347.

which eventually led to peace between the Iraqi Kurds finally being established. As was mentioned, in 1980 Saddam Hussein marched 8,000 male members of Barzani's clan through the streets of Baghdad to their execution. Some were as young as thirteen.¹²¹ In 1983, pro-Iraqi militias killed Talabani's brother and two nieces.¹²² Soon after, the PUK's talks with Baghdad broke down, and the Iraqi military began razing villages, leaving 55,000 people homeless and many dead. In September of that year 500 children between 10 and 14 were rounded up in Sulaymania, tortured, and killed. In May 1987, the Kurdistan Front formed consisting of the KDP, PUK, and other smaller groups including the Kurdish Socialist Party, Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, Pasok (a leftist group), The Toilers' Party, the Iraqi Communist Party in Kurdistan, and the Assyrian Democratic Movement. Forces were merged and a joint command was established.¹²³

This sudden unity was found in two ways. For the first time, the outside challenge to the Kurds was a total and existential threat. After all, what followed these events was a systematic genocide of the Kurdish people. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to think that this fear would have been the only motivation due to the terrible events which followed. But another element must be considered: honor. The conflicts between Iraq and the Kurdish groups had previously followed the acceptable patterns of tribal conflict outlined earlier: raids were conducted, leaders killed, and so forth. Also importantly, Hussein had generally gotten Kurds to kill other Kurds rather than attacking Kurdistan himself, except during the 1974-75 war, which the Kurds clearly started.¹²⁴ The mass killings carried out by Hussein leading up to the establishment of a united Kurdish front were different. They constituted a blood debt that

¹²¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 352.

¹²² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 350.

¹²³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 352.

¹²⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, P. 337.

Saddam could never peaceably repay, and it was owed to all of Kurdistan, not just one faction.

The Iraqi *tayfe* under Saddam had attacked the Kurdish *tayfe*, and that was a challenge that had to be responded to by all parties involved.

Conclusions: A Tribal Way Forward?

The recent history of the Kurdish political parties demonstrates the fragmentation that has, alongside other factors, long prevented a cohesive Kurdish state from forming. But a closer analysis will show that it displayed something else: a new version of the segmentary tribe described by Bruinessen and a new type of balanced opposition described by Salzman. The different political parties proved to be a highly effective form of social organization, which rapidly came to influence large swaths of Kurdish society. Geographically, the Kurdish region was covered by a mosaic of influential parties which would eventually coalesce into the KDP and PUK blocs which now characterize Kurdish society. More important than their geographic inclusiveness, though, is the tribes' ability to incorporate different parts of society. The parties' varying ideologies of independence, democracy, socialism, and resistance brought in the younger, more urban, more educated parts of Kurdish society. Jalal Talabani and Aero Ahmad, modern urban political elites by anyone's sense of the word, were particularly successful in this role. The Barzanis, on the other hand, used the KDP and the desire by tribal leaders to stay relevant, to incorporate tribes in rural areas.

The story told in the latter part of the last chapter was one of conflict, but it is eventually also the story of the formation of a pluralistic state institution within which formerly violent enemies come to compete in the political realm. Through quite a lot of turmoil and various pressures, that fledgling state has now remained peaceful and secure for over a decade. The parties themselves can be criticized for being undemocratic, but the same cannot really be said for the KRG, which has now experienced three successful election cycles. The parties' merger of their armed forces to combat Saddam Hussein turned out to be relatively permanent; each major party now maintains counter-terrorism brigades but the *Peshmerga* answers to the KRG.

The state in question no longer has Iraqi or American troops patrolling its roads and has survived intact something that cannot really be said for the Iraqi state as a whole. The Kurdish state in northern Iraq is rapidly approaching de facto independence by nature of its sovereignty over the use of force in its borders, its independent international stance, and its growing economic viability. By all accounts, it appears that the parties of the KRG, despite their hatred for each other, have opted to participate in what is beginning to look like a successful state rather than resort to their old patterns of violence.

Unity in Kurdistan was initially achieved, as is argued in Chapter 2, by the presentation of a threat and insult on such a scale that Kurdistan's segmentary society reacted as a whole tribe. According to Salzman's theory of balanced opposition, this unity might only be expected to last as long as the existential threat that created it. For several reasons, this appears not to be the case. Firstly, let us call to mind the example of the Jaf tribe as observed by Rich and Edmonds between 1820 and 1920. The Jaf coalition grew large as the Jaf needed to fight a war. But the tribe did not immediately wane in size; it took serious misfortune on the part of the Jaf's leading lineage for that to happen. This is a less-than-resounding endorsement for the future of the Kurdish state in Iraq. This predicts not a stable state, but a weak entity which holds together only as long as there is a Saddam Hussein or an ISIS surging up the steppe to fend off. It can be said that the KRG persisted for a few years in between the end of American military presence and the beginning of the war with ISIS, but that is hardly a ringing endorsement of the state's future.

In justifying my assertion that the Kurdish state will persist, it is necessary to return to some other theories discussed in Chapter 1, specifically those of Judith Yaphe and Faleh Abu Jabar. Yaphe proposed that as the state exerts its influence over a tribal population, the tribes

fundamentally change. They take on one of several forms which are more cooperative with the state than their nomadic tribal predecessors were. What can be seen in the modern KRG is exactly this. As the Barzani tribe and its allies rose to what is essentially neo-tribal paramountcy in the KRG, Barzani and the KDP began speaking as leaders of a state, which that Abu Jabar identifies as evidence of a statist tribe. With this rhetoric came a reality that tribes in Kurdistan are now subject to: state authority over judicial matters. Political parties have taken on the role of mobilizing large blocs in balanced opposition to one another, but they have no mechanism with which to replace the role of the tribe as mediator-in-chief; only state institutions can do that. As the state has strengthened, tribes have given up another crucial role by ceasing to maintain independent militaries. Thus a new image of the tribe in the state is formed, in which tribes maintain their spiritual and social characters, are part of permanent supra-tribes as far as political mobilization, and part of a state which fulfills the judicial and defense roles that the tribes and parties are no longer able to fulfill.

If this suggestion for the future of Iraqi Kurdistan holds true, its significance is much farther reaching. If a modern pluralist state can successfully incorporate tribal structures and attitudes in this manner, then this may represent a new path for other parts of the Middle East. Only a few aspects of this event are unique to Kurdistan. The first and most unique is the presence of a true external existential threat to convince warring factions to combine. While this could exist for other Middle Eastern nations, it is not a desirable situation to replicate. The second element is that the combat between factions in Iraqi Kurdistan retained a certain tribal civility alongside its tribal brutality; the fighting was often fierce, but rarely involved the wholesale destruction of fighting forces. If these and the other conditions that led to unity in Iraqi Kurdistan are met, it may be possible to replicate this success.

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