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# Hot Milk and Yoghurt: A Historical Analysis of the Dynamics between the Kurdish Nationalist Movement and the State in Iraq and Türkiye

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## Citation

Vliet, J. van. (2024). *Hot Milk and Yoghurt: A Historical Analysis of the Dynamics between the Kurdish Nationalist Movement and the State in Iraq and Türkiye*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Hot Milk and Yoghurt: A Historical Analysis of the Dynamics  
between the Kurdish Nationalist Movement and the State in Iraq  
and Türkiye**

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BSc International Relations and Organisations

Bachelor Thesis

Supervisor: Dr Seohee Kwak

Date:

Wordcount: **7986**

**Embargo statement: Public**



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### **Abstract**

This Bachelor Thesis seeks to explore the effects of temporality and timing on the advancement of the dynamics between ethnic nationalist movements and the state. It investigates traditional theories of contentious politics and aims to merge these with highly influential temporal tools of historical institutionalism. As the largest stateless population in the world, the Kurds and their Kurdish nationalist movement present an effective case study. This research focuses on the Kurdish nationalist movements in Iraq and Türkiye. Herein, the Iraqi branch is considered discernibly more successful than the Turkish branch. This juxtaposition poses a perfect opportunity to dissect historical processes and identify crucial differences that might help to understand how some ethnic nationalist movements become more successful than others. The analysis employs the tools of historical institutionalism and consequently, critical juncture theory in order to evaluate crucial differences and similarities between Türkiye and Iraq. It is found that political opportunity structures, timing temporality are important factors, as well as the assertion of essentialist identity politics. This thesis engages in historical process research to discover the factors that structurally impacted the current achievements of Iraqi Kurds as opposed to the Turkish Kurds.

*Keywords:* Kurds, Historical Institutionalism, Critical Juncture, Political Opportunity Theory, State response

*“Sütten ağız yanan, yoğurdu üfleyerek yer” (one who is burnt by drinking hot milk, eats their yoghurt carefully)*

- Famous Turkish proverb on the effect of past experiences on one’s choices and conduct in the future (Turner, 2016)

## **Foreword and acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to express the pleasure I experienced diving into this project. As a person who is highly interested in cultures of the Middle East, getting to learn about the Kurds was truly an amazing honour. Despite this thesis reflecting mostly the struggles and hardships of this ancient people, I have also read endless stories of persistence in the face of adversity, and cultural pride beyond assimilationism and colonialism. The Kurdish people have a unique history, culture and spirit and I appreciated all of the wonderfully interesting things I was able to learn about them. I sincerely hope that they will meet a future that cultivates and fosters their colourful culture.

Incipiently, I must express my gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Dr Seohee Kwak. Her expertise and knowledgeability were enlightening, both during the plenary lectures and our one-on-one meetings. I am eternally appreciative of the time and effort she was willing to dedicate to this (and many other) project(s).

I would also like to profess my thanks to my parents, Lies and Freek. Their endless advice and support have truly helped me not only to carry out this thesis project, but also find my way to the end of my bachelor's degree, for which I am truly appreciatory.

Furthermore, I am thankful for my partner Jesse and his limitless patience. I must have bothered him 5000 times with new concerns, ideas and theories and he has been nothing but supportive. Thank you for taking the time to listen and for making sure I was doing alright throughout the process.

Finally, I am grateful for my friends and peers who supported me academically and personally. A specific thanks goes to Evelyn, my accountability date every Wednesday. Our writing sessions were unfathomably helpful, and I am very glad we found each other. Another huge thanks to Catharina, my dear friend and kindred academic spirit. Thank you so much for your readiness and wonderful insights.

## Glossary

Abbreviation	Definition
KNM	Kurdish Nationalist Movement
POT	Political Opportunity Theory
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
POM	Political Opportunity Model
HI	Historical Institutionalism
MSSD	Most Similar Systems Design
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)

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## **I. Introduction**

The Kurdish people are the world's largest population without a state of their own (Vali, 1998, p. 83). The largest share of Kurds lives in what is referred to as Kurdistan; a non-autonomous region compiling areas of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria (p. 83). They are defined by a large (cultural) history, a range of 'Kurdish' languages and a wide variety of religions, with most Kurds adhering to Sunni Islam (Meho, 2001). Currently, Kurdistan is not a sovereign country, and the degree of autonomy varies per region depending on which government controls it (Bozarslan et al., 2021, pp. 4-5).

The Kurds are one of the indigenous inhabitants of the near Middle Eastern region, dating back to about 3000 BC (Meho, 2001, pp. 10-12). For centuries, the Kurdish population lived nomadically, either under self-rule or under various invaders (pp. 10-12). After long rule of the Median empire, a pivotal point became the Islamic conquest, which subjected the Kurds to over three centuries of Muslim rule before scattered groups were able to topple Islamic authority (pp. 10-12). However, isolated and vulnerable on its own, Kurdistan experienced a downturn in development during the 13th century, which subsequently excluded them from profitable trading routes and access to knowledge and technology (pp. 10-12). Ultimately, the land was invaded by and split between the Persians and the Ottomans (pp. 10-12). When the Ottomans defeated the Persians, unrest broke out and many Kurds started rioting, leading to countless casualties (pp. 10-12).

The following centuries were marked by revolts, riots, and oppression (Meho, 2001, pp. 10-12). The 'Young Turks' revolution of 1908 overthrew the Ottoman Sultan and granted some degree of autonomy to the Kurdish territory (pp. 10-12). However, internal political instability left it weak and, during World War I, Kurdistan was reconquered by the Ottomans, who sought to assimilate the Kurds (pp. 10-12). The victors of World War I apportioned Kurdistan to their desire and divided the region over (contemporary) Türkiye, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Beyond redistribution, strict repressive measures emerged intended to hinder efforts to conserve the Kurdish identity (Bozarslan et al., 2021, pp. 4-5). Although these measures effectively contributed to the active fragmentation and ostracisation of the Kurdish people, they also intensified Kurdish nationalist sentiment and solidified the legitimization of the Kurdish nationalist movement (KNM). The KNM is a movement scattered over the area that champions an autonomous Kurdistan and the protection of Kurdish cultural identity (pp. 4-5).

Interestingly, the Kurds experience distinct social and legal standings in the different countries that envelop Kurdistan. The difference in state conduct is remarkably stark between Türkiye and Iraq. Türkiye has committed to a particularly aggressive approach to oppress the



Kurdish population. Especially over the last decade, as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has accumulated power and consolidated authoritarian features of his rule (Aydas, 2022). Increasingly, President Erdoğan's forces have penetrated the relatively isolated Kurdish communities of the South-East and, even attacking Kurdish strongholds in North Syria (CFR, 2022). Domestically, partial bans are enforced on Kurdish languages, many Kurds are forcibly displaced, and the Turkish-Kurdish provinces are heavily securitised (Minority Rights Group, 2024). The amplified hostilities between the Turkish state and Kurdish populations, after an already turbulent and contentious past, are gradually eroding the likelihood of peaceful relations.

Contrarily, the Kurds in Iraq enjoy a relatively high degree of self-determination as enshrined in the constitution (Barkey & Laipson, 2005, pp. 66-67). The 2005 Iraqi constitution grants religious, cultural, political, and social freedoms to all Iraqi citizens, including the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan (Shareef, 2023). Kurdistan has its own legislative parliament which the Kurds can vote for every four years (Kurdistan Parliament, 2018). Although the Kurds in Iraq experience more liberties and rights, the group is not unfamiliar with severe repression and assimilation politics (Hiltermann, 2023). Especially during the regime of Saddam Hussein, Kurdish people were murdered and assimilated at a genocidal rate by the Iraqi government (European Parliament, 2014). Despite historic struggle and despair in the quest for autonomy and freedom, the Kurds in Iraq currently enjoy more political rights compared to the Kurds in Iran, Syria, and Türkiye.

Despite contextual- and geopolitical similarities, the Kurds thus enjoy distinctly different positions in Türkiye and Iraq. This 'puzzle' has motivated the formulation of this paper's research question and thus, the aim of the research. This thesis aims to delve deeper in the contentious politics of the KNCM and its subsequent branches, and especially the dynamics between these movements and state governments. Therefore, the following research question has been formulated: "*What factors contribute to the differences in contemporary state conduct of the Kurdish nationalist movement between Türkiye and Iraq?*".

Therefore, this thesis will investigate why the Iraqi KNCM has seen more successes, and how Turkish and Iraqi state responses have differed in their conduct with Kurdish movements. The following structure will be adhered to; firstly, the following chapter will provide the theoretical framework through an analysis of existing research and literature on relevant concepts and theories. This will cement the justification of the hypothesis. Then, the research methods-section will highlight the methodology, operationalisation, research protocols and positionality. Hereafter, a section will present the results and discussions of the historical

process research and critically discuss their implications and analytical values. Finally, the conclusion will briefly summarise the relevant aspects of the paper and emphasise important implications of the results and potential points of further research.

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, existing research will be analysed to construct a framework of concepts and theories that will underpin the foundations of this thesis. The information is categorised thematically and starts with a discussion of concepts important to the academic framework of contentious political action. Then, it moves to key concepts relevant to the discussion of state responses. Thereafter, it moves to a conceptualisation of ethnic nationalist movements. Subsequently, comes a theoretical discussion of historical institutionalism. Finally, the conceptual- and theoretical aspects that are most important to this thesis will be emphasised and connected in a brief reflection.

### *II.I. Concepts of Contentious Political Action*

It is fundamental to designate what exactly is referred to as ‘contentious political action’. McAdam, Sydney, and Tarrow (2009) have been incredibly important in defining and operationalising contentious politics. Contentious politics are defined as “public, collective making of consequential claims by connected clusters of persons on other clusters of persons or on major political actors when at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a third party to the claims” (p. 261). Ketchley (2017) contends that this conceptualisation allows for a holistic approach to contentious politics instead of the traditional way of viewing different events and movements as distinct phenomena (pp. 8-9). This means that ultimately, contentious politics should be understood by analysing who are the claimants, what is their objective, how are they expressing the claim and how does the status quo (or regime) respond to the claim (pp. 8-9).

Ample scholarly work seeks to conceptualise mobilisation processes of contentious political actors. An important approach to these processes is ‘Political Opportunity Theory’ (POT). POT posits that the room for a movement to act, and its potential for success, is determined by situational factors (Goldstone & Tilly, 2012, p. 183). Central to this approach are ‘political opportunities’. According to Goldstone & Tilly (2012), these are either internal or external factors that might change the power of the state, alter social conditions, or amend the supply of resources to a movement (p. 182). Political opportunities may shift the balance of power between the state and a movement and present movements with a chance to influence

policy- and decision-making (p. 183). Eisinger (1973) first introduces the political opportunity structure (POS); the collection of political opportunities that are available to movements within a state. Furthermore, ‘political opportunities’ are not always identified as positive opportunities. Koopmans (1999) defines these political opportunities as constraints, threats and possibilities that emerge from outside the mobilising group but influence its odds at realising its interests (p. 96). To that effect, Goldstone and Tilly (2012) have separated ‘opportunity’ from ‘threat’, with opportunity conceptualising the potential successes a movement may experience, and threat referring to the costs and negative consequences associated with contentious political action (p. 183). Thus, to the extent of this thesis, POT contends that emergence and mobilisation are contingent on the existence of political opportunities, which interact with calculations of potential threats to create a roadmap for movements to navigate towards desired outcomes.

### *II.II. State Response in Theory*

Naturally, states respond to the emergence and mobilisation of contentious political acts. Davies (2016) posits that when faced with contentious political actions, states have three optional responses: I. diversion; II. repression; III. concession (p. 119). Repression can be used to reduce the threat of contentious politics according to Davies (2016, p. 120). However, Davenport (2010) gives a more inclusive definition;

A mechanism of state influence that involves force or the threat of force used in an effort to (1) counter and/or eliminate domestic challenges, (2) create specific political-economic arrangements, and (3) sustain domestic order as well as political-economic arrangements once they have been established (p. 75).

Davenport’s (2010) definition arguably goes beyond that of Davies (2016) by including motivations for repression that are not solely based on removing threat-factors. For instance, a state can resort to repressive behaviour to create a specific political atmosphere (e.g. to ‘scare off’ future dissidence) and maintain the domestic order (p. 75).

Relatedly, a large body of work considers the different motivations for different types of state response. Earl (2003) has typified the various approaches to repression (pp. 52-58). Relevant to this thesis are the threat-, and political opportunity models (POM) of repression. The ‘threat’ approach contends that the more threatening a movement seems to the political elite, the more repressive the state response is likely to be (p. 52). Thus, movements that threaten the stability of a regime are more likely to be met with repression. Furthermore, the POM dictates that under closed POS, movements are more likely to be repressed than under

open POS (p. 52). Similar to its aforementioned namesake, it contends that situational factors can either limit or fortify a movement's position (Zhang et al., 2018, pp. 501-503). Importantly, both the threat- and POM models predict authoritarian regimes are more likely to resort to repression because political stability is less contingent, and the power of the state is usually unrestricted by checks and balances. Many researchers concur that regime type is of importance to a state's response formulation. According to Davies (2016), democratic design and principles predicate an approach focused on concession-making to satisfy electoral demands (p. 124). However, Leuschner and Hellmeier (2023) argue that authoritarian states also might make concessions when this is strategically feasible and does not erode at governmental stability (p. 6). Succinctly, states respond to contentious political actions in anticipatory synthesis and with contextual awareness of political consequences.

### *II.III. Ethnic Nationalist Movements*

The KNM is an example of an ethnic nationalist movement (Romano, 2006, p. 5). To comprehend what this entails, it is paramount to consider the conceptualisation of 'ethnicity'. According to Romano (2006), ethnicity alludes to a culmination of social and historic characteristics that synthesise to form one's identity (p. 5). He adds that common definitions highlight collective origins and ancestry, as well as shared characteristics based on language, traditions, religion, culture, or history (p. 5). However, Fought (2006) finds this definition too broad, and adds the conceptual importance of interethnic relations to establish ethnic identities (pp. 12-13). This suggests that ethnicity encompasses an 'us' and 'them' logic to separate a specific ethnicity internally from other groups, even those that might share the same race, language or religion (pp. 12-13).

Furthermore, nationalism is commonly defined as the desire of a culturally coherent and territorially bound group (a nation) to self-govern and form a country (a state) (Danforth, 2020, p. 14). Synergistically, ethnic nationalism thus combines components of ethnicity and nationalism and culminates in a nation's desire to self-govern based on ethnic coherence. The KNM ultimately professes nationalist goals motivated by ethnicity, thus exhibiting characteristics of ethnic nationalism. Danforth further contends that ethnic nationalism can be regarded as a response to assimilation or eradication by a larger, dominant culture (p. 1-2). Thus, ethnic nationalism oftentimes amplifies when an ethnic group feels their cultural identity is threatened (p. 1-2). Therefore, ethnic nationalist movements and the state are heavily intertwined, and frequently collide.

#### *II.IV. Historical Institutionalism*

Historical institutionalism (HI) is concerned with bringing questions of temporality and timing to the forefront of the analyses of institutions (Halperin & Heath, 2020, pp. 266-269). According to historical institutionalists, timing, temporality, and sequencing are greatly influential to politics as they predict and shape the calculations of actors and the opportunities and constraints presented at a point in time (Fioretos, 2011, pp. 370-371). According to Fioretos, this is because future events are conditioned by past developments (pp. 370-371). Additionally, Pierson and Skocpol (2002) emphasise three features which make HI distinct from other traditions: the emphasis on substantive questions, temporal arguments, and emphasis on context (p. 3).

Furthermore, HI comprises a variety of analytical tools that are useful for International Relations research. Most important are the critical juncture, path dependence and positive feedback. The critical juncture refers to an event in time, which emanates a further course of events that is hard to reverse (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 267). After a critical juncture (once institutions move into a certain direction), self-reinforcing mechanisms are generated by positive feedback which remove various political opportunities (p. 267). These self-reinforcing mechanisms are referred to as path dependence (p. 267). However, the exact processes around a critical juncture are still heavily debated. Historical institutionalists Collier and Munck (2017), describe the process of critical juncture emergence and contingency, which follows five steps: antecedent conditions, cleavage or shock, critical juncture, mechanisms of production and, legacy (p. 3). This process first takes into account the prior conditions which set the system up for change, for example the party system or POS (pp. 4-5). The second step refers to the political cleavage or the event that triggers the critical juncture. According to Tarrow (2017), 9/11 exemplifies such a shock and thereafter generated the conditions for a critical juncture in the US (Tarrow, 2017 in Collier & Munck, 2017, pp. 5-6). Therefore, critical junctures in this approach are referred to as “major episodes of institutional innovation that generate an enduring legacy” (p. 7). Finally, mechanisms of production and legacy are very similar to positive feedback and path dependence respectively. Moreover, HI provides tools and structures for researchers to look at different past events and place them in an appropriate context, in order to observe consequences for the future.

#### *II.V. Connecting the Pieces*

This literature review has investigated a plethora of relevant concepts and theories. It can be observed that political opportunities are key to understand the interactions, emergence

of movements, and the subsequent role of the state. Within state response, POS play a particularly salient role in predicting whether a state chooses a repressive response. Furthermore, the ethnic nationalist movement was discussed as a concept which can be tied back into the threat model of state response, because ethnic nationalist motivations inherently pose a substantial threat to the dominant state. Additionally, with mostly secessionist demands, authoritarian regimes are theoretically less likely to concede to ethnic nationalist movements. Finally, HI provides conceptual tools to discern the importance of temporality and timing in analysing institutional processes of change. In HI, it can be observed that POS are shaped by critical junctures and their legacical mechanisms. Thus, the emergence and mobilisation of (ethnic nationalist) movements can be analysed from a historical institutionalist perspective. The information gained by this literature review, in combination with extensive preliminary research into the two cases, has resulted in the formulation of the following hypothesis:

*H1: The relative success of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iraq can be attributed to more open political opportunity structures than those in Türkiye, because of the nature of its critical junctures and subsequent path dependencies.*

This hypothesis will be tested via the research methods and design described in the next chapter.

### **III. Research Methods**

The following section will display the chosen methodology and research design. It will present an overview of the steps and measures taken to conduct the research. Furthermore, it will exhibit the operationalisation of the variables that will be employed to find results.

#### *III.I. Methodology & Research Design*

In order to fully capture the essence of the research objectives and question, the research design for this thesis will be twofold; it will follow a historical research design braided with comparative aspects. Therefore, the research is constructed in a Most Similar System Design (MSSD). MSSD considers similar cases which differ in one crucial aspect (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 239). To justify, the two cases share similar demographical shares of Kurds (around the 15-20% benchmarks), histories of oppressive measures, multiple large-scale Kurdish revolts, and both host substantial branches of the Kurdish nationalist movement, and share cultural-, ethnic-, political-, and religious similarities. Additionally, both states have authoritarian governments wherein basic liberties are heavily oppressed. According to Freedom House (2023; 2024), Iraq scores 30 and Türkiye scores 33 in terms of basic rights and

freedoms. However, one considerable difference is the relative success experienced by the Iraqi KRM in comparison to that in Türkiye. The Iraqi constitution of 2005 stipulates that Kurds have their own autonomous federal entity of Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Regional Government [KRG], n.d.). Furthermore, the Kurdish language is officially recognised as a state language (KRG, n.d.). Contrastingly, the Kurds in Türkiye have yet to experience such autonomy and freedom. The Turkish government is violently cracking down on Kurdish populations in the South-East, resulting in thousands of casualties (Minority Rights Group [MRG], 2024). Furthermore, Kurdish cultural practices are physically disrupted and speaking Kurdish languages is restricted by law (MRG, 2024). Although Iraqi Kurdish nationalists have not fully achieved the movement's goals, there is a very noticeable difference between the treatment and legal positions of the Kurds in Türkiye and in Iraq. An MSSD construct is thus employed to single out the different circumstances and observe them in context.

The research itself will be conducted through meticulous longitudinal historical process research. This model seeks to investigate a series of events that happened over a set period of time in order to understand how processes and phenomena change over time (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 262). The historical process research will be carried out by process-tracing, meaning that the source base will be subjected to an analysis of events and mechanisms that constitute historical processes in both cases (p. 270). The operationalisation of the variables of the analysis is rooted in historical institutionalism; the historical events will be presented and sorted in pre-determined groups grounded in critical juncture theory literature. For clarification, the guiding operationalising principles will be described in Table A.

*Table A*

<b>Operationalised variable</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Sources</b>
<b>Antecedent Conditions</b>	Pre-existing economic, social, and political conditions that set the system up for change.	(Halperin & Heath, 2020; Collier & Munck, 2017)
<b>Shock</b>	An event or cleavage that causes change to systematic structures, or causes masses to challenge them, and generates the conditions for a critical juncture.	(Collier & Munck, 2017; Tarrow, 2017)

<b>Critical Juncture</b>	A period of time where there is significant possibility of decisive, institutional change that leaves a legacy.	(Liu et al., 2014; Halperin & Heath, 2020; Collier & Munck, 2017)
<b>Positive Feedback</b>	Generates self-reinforcing mechanisms, conditions and motivations that seek to prevent future change ('positive' refers to self-reinforcing character).	(Halperin & Heath, 2020)
<b>Path dependence</b>	Causal patterns that determine a contingent path by limiting POS and generating irreversibilities and are observably triggered by a preceding event or change.	(Mahoney, 2000; Halperin & Heath, 2020)

### *III.II. Database & Positionality*

The data used in this research include primary and secondary sources. The primary sources comprise official state documents from the Wilson database and the US archives, which store a plethora of legitimate government documents. The data is supplemented with secondary sources, which consist mostly of news articles and credible historical papers. The secondary sources strengthen validity and reliability, as few primary sources are available from Iraqi, Turkish or Kurdish governmental institutions in the Greater Kurdistan region. Furthermore, the data is restricted to a timeframe from 1916 until now. 1916 was chosen because it is the year that the Sykes-Picot agreement was signed. This agreement officially established the borders of the nation-states in the Levant and Middle East, which have been oppressing the Kurds and prevented the creation of an independent Kurdistan (Saeed, 2016). The contemporary is selected as the 'end' marker because relevant developments are still unfolding in the region, which can be useful to the historical analysis.

Considering positionality, it is important to recognise that analysing and operationalising historical events is always biased, even if all attempts are made at neutrality. This thesis is not absolved from (un)conscious biases. This applies not only to the extent of the researcher, but also to the scholars, journalists and organisations relied on for the purposes of gathering data. Efforts were made to limit bias mainly through peer review and checking literature for alternative explanations. In accordance with Thakur and Chetty (2020), the steps and guidelines of the research design were clearly established before conducting the actual



research in order to limit researcher bias and amplify reliability. Moreover, the researcher is not a member of any of the affiliated communities, nor does she hold a stake in the cultural and political conflicts between the Kurdish people and the Iraqi and Turkish governments.

#### **IV. Findings & Analyses**

##### *IV.I. Historical Overview & Analysis of Events in the Greater Kurdistan Region between 1916-1923*

In 1916, when the Ottoman empire is on the brink of collapse, a void emerged in the Near-Eastern region which was filled by the UK and France, through Sykes-Picot (Yildiz, 2007, pp. 10-14). The Ottoman losses during World War I solidified the UK and France's position, and in 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed which divided up the Ottoman empire (Danforth, 2015). Interestingly, this Treaty left some substantial regions to the native ethnic minorities; the Kurds were granted a portion of land in their native Kurdistan, with relative freedom from the state governments in the region (Treaty of Peace with Turkey [TS], 1920, p. 21). However, these provisions were short lived as the Treaty of Sèvres was not accepted by Turkic nationalists (Brown, 1924). A Kemalist revolt led by Atatürk (Demiriz, 2023), and demanded a secular, Turkish-majority state (Ali, 1997, p. 521). The swift and overwhelming force of the Kemalist uprising in combination with imperial interests in the Middle East coerced British representatives into the Lausanne conference (pp. 521-523). Kurdish autonomy had now become a powerful bargaining chip for the British to relinquish to appease Kemalist forces (Tusan, 2023, p. 217; Ali, 1997, pp. 521-523). The Treaty of Lausanne replaced the Treaty of Sèvres and held no mention of Kurdistan or Kurdish independence (Treaty of Lausanne [TL], 1923). The Kurdish populations were redistributed over the Lausanne-drawn borders (TL, 1923). Figures 1 and 2 (University of Michigan, 2005) visually portray the sizable consequences of the Sèvres and Lausanne treaties to the Kurdistan region.

The volatility and political ambivalence in the region early in the timeframe, shaped the situational conditions that are foundational to the remainder of the century and the subsequent critical juncture cycles in both cases. Therefore, these earlier developments can be considered antecedent conditions in the larger framework of events. Although ostensibly, events impactful as Sykes-Picot and Lausanne can be considered shocks in itself, it is important to note that they play a large role in the creation of antecedent conditions that shape the dynamics between the KNM and state governments. Thus, understanding the early development of antecedent conditions in the greater region is crucial for comprehending the remainder of each critical juncture cycle and emphasises the history that is shared between both cases.

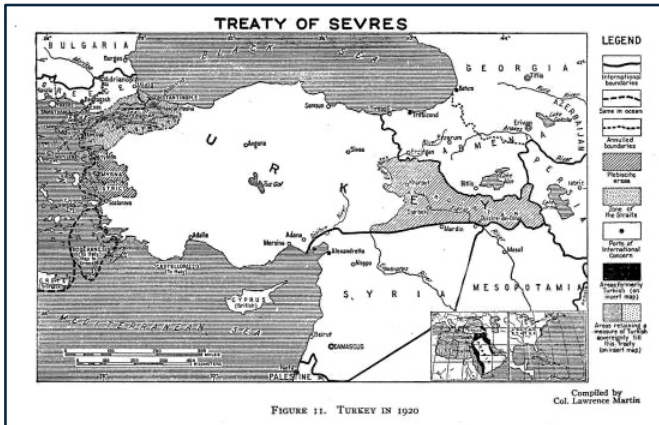


Figure 1

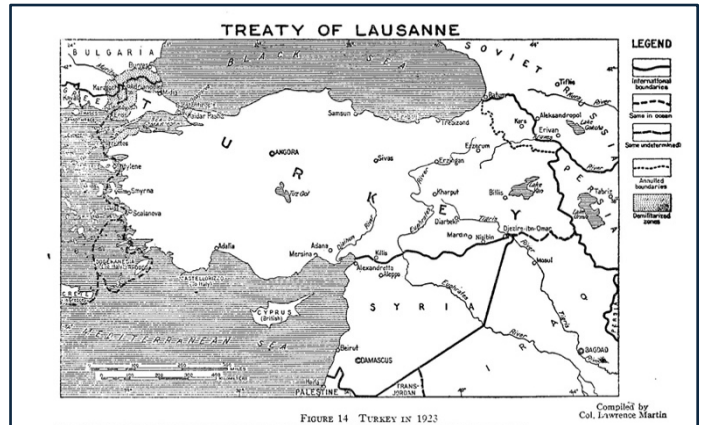


Figure 2

#### IV.II. The Kurds and Iraq: A Historic Overview of Critical Events

After the treaties of Sykes-Picot and Lausanne, Türkiye and Iran emerged as full-fledged sovereign states. In Iraq however, the British still enjoyed mandated control over Iraqi government matters (Bengio, 2012, pp. 10-11). The British allowed for the Kurds in Iraq to enjoy relative freedoms and to nurture the Kurdish culture, leading to the rapid development of a lively Kurdish nationalist movement (pp. 10-11). When Iraq finally gained independence in 1932, its government was too weak to reject the League of Nation’s impositions which granted the Kurdish people freedom and the protection of their rights (Yildiz, 2007, p. 14). During this time, Mullah Mustafa Barzani (the creator of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)) became a key figure in the Kurdish fight for independence and consequentially, was forced to flee to the Soviet Union (BBC News, 2017). Relations between the Kurds and the Iraqi government were thus tumultuous, yet less violent in comparison to the other states in the Greater Kurdistan Region (Mohammed & Alrebh, 2020, pp. 217-218).

A turning point came in 1958, when a coup d’état overthrew the Hashemite Monarchy and instated the Republic of Iraq (Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training [ADST], 2014), which codified more rights to the Kurds and allowed Barzani to return (BBC News, 2017). However, this new regime was swiftly overthrown in 1963, by the Arabist Ba’ath party (Yildiz, 2007, p.17). Talks between the KDP and the Ba’ath party presented an opportunity to fortify Kurdish rights and autonomy but collapsed when the KDP demanded to keep the (oil-rich) Mosul- and Kirkuk regions native to Kurdistan (p.17). As a result, the Ba’ath party started an Arabisation campaign which forcibly cracked down on the Kurdish provinces (p. 17). This included President Saddam Hussein’s infamous ‘Anfal Campaigns’ between 1987-1989,

largely recognised as an attempted genocide on the Kurds (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2019). The Anfal are remembered as one of the most destructive annihilation campaigns in the Middle East, further honing Kurdish nationalist desires (HRW, 2019).

The severity of the Anfal campaigns prompted international condemnation and action (Gunther et al., 2004, pp. 108-109). In 1991, the US and the UN launched a large-scale aid campaign, dropping medicine, food and water into the regions and declaring Northern Iraq a no fly-zone to prevent air attacks on the Kurdish populations (UNHCR, 2004). Although these provisions offered the Kurds some physical protection, a double embargo (imposed by the US on Iraq and by Hussein on the Kurdish provinces) caused a scarcity in necessary resources, leading to tumultuous intra-party conflict (Barkey & Laipson, 2005, p. 67). In 2003, the US invaded Iraqi territory, on the basis of allegations of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (CIA, 2003; Department of Defense, 2002; Katzman, 2002). Due to the atrocities of the Anfal campaigns, the Kurds formed a strategic alliance with the US against the Ba'ath government (Gunther et al., 2004, pp. 108-109). In over a month of war in Iraq, the US managed to topple Hussein's government (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), and because of their pivotal position, the Kurds played an important role in rewriting the Constitution (Dawisha, 2013, p. 248). Resultingly, the 2005 Iraqi constitution provided the legal framework that made Iraqi Kurdistan the semi-autonomous federal region that it is now, self-determinant yet remaining heavily contested.

#### *IV.III. The Kurds and Iraq: An Analysis of Critical Events*

In order to understand the facilitating conditions that eventually led to the Ba'ath coup, it is paramount to comprehend the impact of British rule on the Iraqi population. British influence was enforced directly as a League of Nations Mandate between 1920 and 1932 as a result of Sykes-Picot. Beyond independence, the British remained influential through their relationship with the Hashemite monarchy (Fieldhouse, 2008, pp. 69-72). The contingency of British influence generated antecedent conditions that can be observed in two ways: I. British tolerance of Kurdish minorities allowed them to develop and the KNC to grow; II. Growing dissatisfaction among Iraqi citizens with foreign influence especially after independence. The former is crucial to understand the development of Iraqi Kurds in the larger comparative framework, whereas the latter clarifies the conditions which hatched the subsequent steps in the critical juncture cycle.

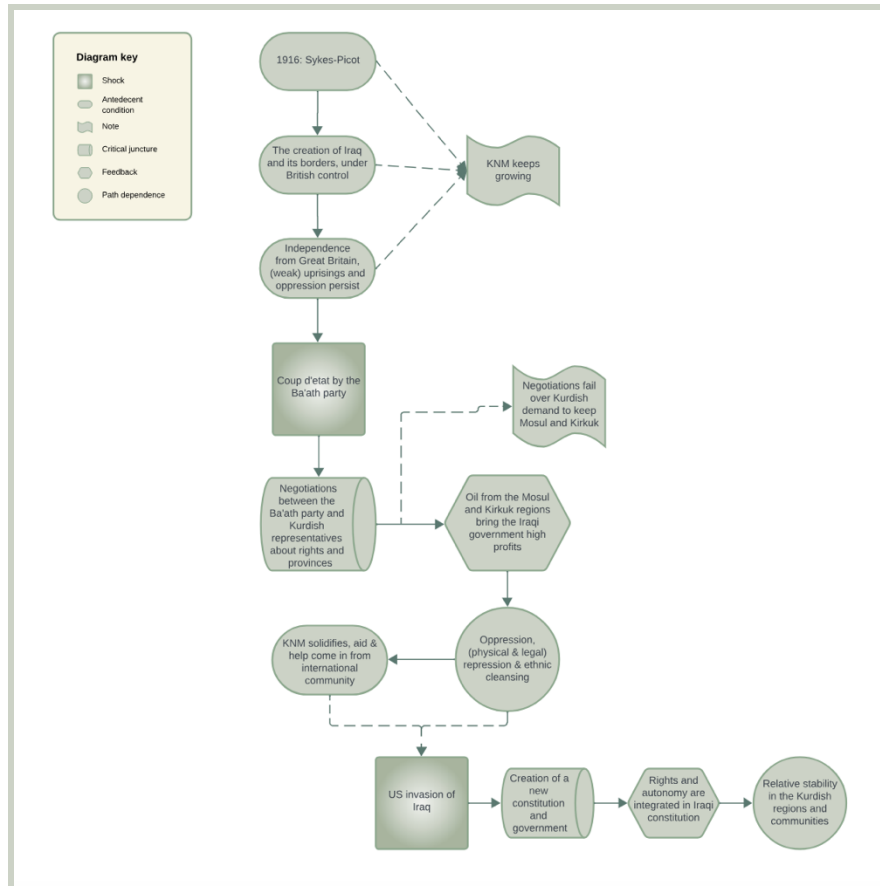
These antecedent conditions fostered the first shock in this cycle; the establishment of the Republic and the Ba'ath coup. Both coups were a direct response to British imperial

influence and consequently, a call to pan-Arabism and Islamism which was not uncommon in the region (ADST, 2014). The coup instigated a critical juncture; a period of decisive changes to the (in)formal institutional framework as the Ba'ath party installed itself as the ruling elite. This proved imperative to the Kurds, as it was an opportunity to negotiate more rights and autonomy. However, the Kurds' insistence on maintaining Mosul and Kirkuk within the bounds of Iraqi Kurdistan decided the direction of the institutional change as the critical juncture proceeded into feedback stages. For the Ba'ath government, keeping and exploiting the oilfields in Mosul and Kirkuk delivered much wealth that arguably converted into positive feedback. To maintain this, the Ba'ath government created oppressive path dependent mechanisms, limiting POS for the Kurdish movement. Thus, oppressive measures were implemented to establish control and to bar change. All attempts at protest by the KNCM, were met with repressive responses in order to maintain path dependence. The culmination of these policies resulted in the Anfal campaigns; the ultimate manifestation of Kurdish oppression and ethnic cleansing.

Although change to the path dependence was aggressively rejected, the continuous and severe nature of the oppression facilitated the antecedent conditions that started a new cycle. As supported by Demirel-Pegg (2018), contextual timing and severity of repressive state tactics are influential factors in their effectiveness. The circumstances of the Anfal campaigns and oppression of the Kurds under Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party triggered a reaction among domestic and international parties. Domestically, Kurdish nationalist sentiment grew massively in response to oppression and genocidal acts. Internationally, a similar feeling led to EU, UN and USA aid and protection. These antecedent conditions fostered the Kurds' negative perceptions of the Ba'ath party and weakened the relations between Iraq and the US, leading to tensions that would offset large-scale government suspicion of Iraq in the US. A shock came in 2003 when the US invaded Iraq. Although not the primary reason, the harsh treatment of the Kurds and the US-Iraq tensions could have easily contributed to the US' negative perception ('axis of evil' (BBC, 2023)) of Iraq and thus its reasons to invade. Quickly, Hussein's Ba'ath regime was overthrown, and the governmental slate was wiped clean, signalling a critical juncture. This time, the Kurds were positively included in state-building as they had fought alongside the US to oust Hussein. The Kurds were able to participate in the writing of the constitution as a result of this critical juncture and consequently, the rights and semi-autonomous status of the Kurds and Iraqi Kurdistan were recorded in the 2005 Constitution. This resulted in relative stability in the Kurdish provinces; due to lesser oppressive measures and more tolerance towards the Kurds, Kurdish uprisings became infrequent, evaded the need

for large institutional changes to disrupt the path dependent stability. Although the Iraqi KNM has not achieved all its goals, Iraqi Kurds enjoy rights, freedoms, and peace not extended to the Kurds in Türkiye, Syria, and Iran.

#### IV.IV. The Kurds and Iraq: Diagram of Findings and Analysis



#### IV.V. The Kurds and Türkiye: A Historic Overview of Critical Events

Furthermore, Lausanne not only set the current boundaries of the Greater Kurdistan region (excluding an independent Kurdistan), but it also set up the legal principles in Türkiye that would be used to systematically exclude and oppress Kurdish minorities (Radpey, 2021, pp. 1200-1201). Lausanne provided the framework for the 1924 Turkish (Kemalist) constitution which made citizenship dependent on ‘Turkishness’ and started the systematic denial of all other ethnicities (pp. 1200-1201). The Treaty of Lausanne directly prompted the increase of Kurdish nationalist sentiment (Yegen, 2021, pp. 312-316). This resulted in the 1925 Kurdish rebellion, seen as a catalytic point in the inception of Kurdish nationalism in Türkiye (Olson & Tucker, 1978, pp. 195-196). The violent squashing of this rebellion agitated the Kurdish people further. This led to a series of rebellions which were, again, violently struck

down, until tensions eased in 1930 (Yegen, 2021, pp. 312-316). Many of these smaller-scale uprisings functioned as covert excuses for the government to systematically clear large proportions of the Kurdish population (Calisar, 2013, p. 31). The synthesis between small uprisings rooted in Kurdish nationalist sentiment and the highly violent response from the Turkish state marked the following decades as a period of violent dialogue (p. 31).

An extended period was marked by rebellions and oppression. Most notably the Seyh Said, Ararat and Dersim revolts were important conflicts that each left distinct marks on both sides (Olson, 2000, p. 68). The decades thereafter, violent uprisings decreased (caused by World War II and the high number of Kurdish leaders who were killed or exiled), and Kurdish nationalism was forced to paper (Bozarslan, 2009, pp. 343-344). Despite persisting oppression, this era and its writings have contributed greatly to the development of Kurdish nationalism in Türkiye and simultaneously, to the further agitation of the Turkish Kemalist nationalists (pp. 343-344). In 1961, as a result of a military coup d'état, the constitution was revised and allowed for a few new civil liberties for the Kurdish people (p. 345). Resultingly, there was more space to nurture Kurdish nationalism which coincided with a general rise of left-wing ideology in Türkiye. The two schools of thought integrated organically, forming a much larger collective threat to the Turkish government (p. 345-346).

This culminated in the creation of the PKK, or the Kurdistan Workers Party in 1978 (Palmer & Holtz, 2023). In its formative years, the PKK's repertoire of action consisted mostly of small-scale attacks and direct participation in municipal and regional politics (O'Connor & Jongerden, 2023). Only after the 1980 military coup and the mass arrests of PKK members did the organisation start to confront the Turkish government directly (p. 8). From here, an endless dialogue commenced between the Turkish government and the PKK. Whenever the PKK attacked civilian or military targets, the Turkish government countered with a deadlier attack on the Kurdish provinces, even extending beyond the Turkish border (Pusane, 2015, pp. 727-730). During these decades, the two sides have repeatedly discussed potential ceasefires, most notably during the 'secret' Oslo talks between 2006-2011 (Kadioglu, 2018). However, none of these talks were effective, with violence between the government and the PKK ensuing, even in very recent times (Balkiz, 2024; Daily Sabah, 2024; Middle East Monitor, 2024).

#### *IV.VI. The Kurds and Türkiye: An Analysis of Critical Events*

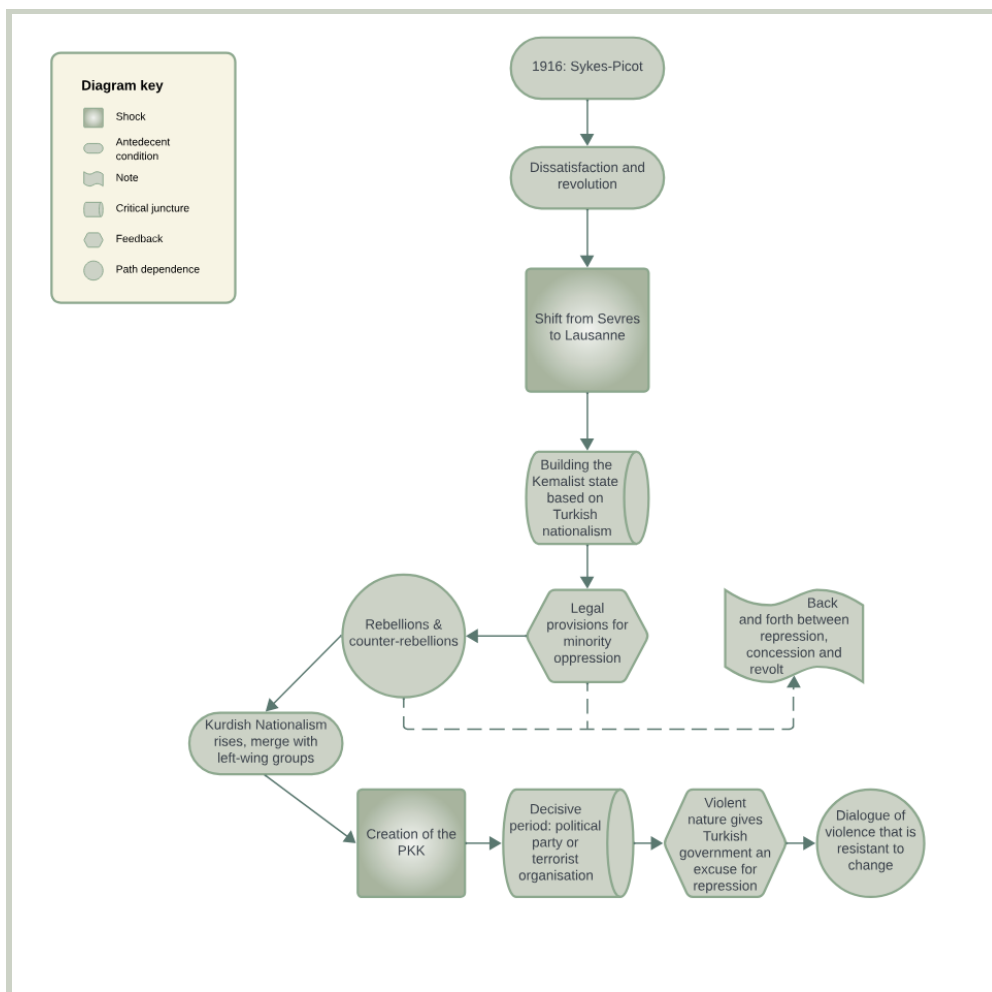
As antecedent conditions, Sykes-Picot and Sèvres signified the Ottoman losses during WWI and against the British, and directly contributed to political dissatisfaction as well as the

rise of Atatürk and Kemalism. These factors conditioned the first recognised shock; the Treaty of Lausanne. Due to dissatisfaction with British influence and harsh impediments of the Sèvres Treaty, an ethno-nationalist, secular revolt defeated British troops and demanded a redraw of the Treaty before it was even implemented. Going from Sèvres to Lausanne prompted very different perspectives for the Turkish state and thus, launched a period of institutional change. Lausanne formed the foundation of a new Turkish Constitution rooted in the Kemalist ideology that had celebrated victory over the British influences. Thus, Lausanne as a shock, led to a critical juncture period: decisive institutional changes upon the transformation of the Ottoman empire to the secular Republic. With Kemalism as the grounding principle of the new state, ethno-homogeneity and secularism became prevalent in all sections of state (Akan & Fehmi Yörük, 2015, p. 1). The Kemalist Constitution posed exclusionary policies leaving the Kurds second-rank citizens and justifying aggressive repression as positive feedback mechanisms. Consequently, this established a path-dependent dialogue between small-scale armed attacks by the KKM, and the Turkish state, responding with aggression.

During this back and forth, antecedent conditions formed a new critical juncture cycle. Due to excessive state violence, Kurdish nationalism spread fast and far. Its growth agitated groups of Turkish nationalists leading to explosive popular tensions. Moreover, even after some Kurdish liberties were introduced after the 1961 coup, conflict between Kurdish- and Turkish nationalists never wavered. Additionally, in congruence with the temporal global atmosphere, the Kurdish nationalist movement's ideology fused with the left-wing. The merge granted the Kurdish movement a larger participant base, and further polarised the Kurds and Turkish nationalists. These antecedents facilitated a shock: the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Upon inception, it might not have been recognised as a shock, but in retrospect, the creation of the PKK has been a crucial shift in the pre-existing political order. Furthermore, one can recognise the distinct decisive features of a critical juncture moment thereafter, as the PKK sought to establish its repertoires of action and tactics. The early strategies of the PKK were quite clearly marked by the pre-existing lack of political opportunities in the late 1970s, and the fusion with socialist ideology (O'Connor & Jongerden, 2023). Observably, the PKK sought to avoid direct confrontation with the Turkish government before the military coup of 1980 and the succedent mass arrests of party members (O'Connor & Jongerden, 2023). The formative years of the PKK comprised a critical juncture, as it determined its foundations as well as the social position of the Kurds in Türkiye. Thus, the moment of decisive institutional change for the PKK and its relations with Türkiye was marked by the violent coup, triggering stronger Kurdish nationalist sentiments in the PKK, and the direction of the critical juncture

was determined. Ultimately, the insurgent course of the PKK led to a ‘back-and-forth’ dialogue of violence wherein the PKK carries out small-scale terrorist attacks, and the Turkish government responds repressively, essentially repeating the earlier cycle. This process set up the self-reinforcing mechanisms of positive feedback. As a result, Turkish Kurdistan experiences path-dependent patterns of state repression, conditioned by terrorist attacks carried out by the PKK, in a process that is resistant to change.

*IV.VII. The Kurds and Türkiye: Diagram of Historical Events*



*IV.VIII. Holistic Conclusions*

Conclusively, there are several aspects in which the two cases can converge or differ. Both historical processes are cyclical and demonstrably adhere to critical juncture theory. In both cases, antecedent conditions tend to set up a shock, which then causes formal and informal institutions to be subjected to a critical juncture moment. The critical juncture is decisive in establishing a direction for the following years and its efficacy is reflected in the positive



feedback, which creates the conditions for the critical juncture to persist. The direction, determined during the critical juncture, and the self-reinforcing mechanisms, generated by the positive feedback, result in a path dependence. Although it is difficult to divert from, these cases have demonstrated that often during path dependence, the antecedents are generated that gradually invoke the new cycle. Ostensibly, the cases of Iraq and Türkiye both diverge very little from the cyclical projections of critical juncture theory and such patterns are pivotal to understanding the different positions of the KNM in either country.

Both cases observe instances of Kurdish nationalist-based revolt and aggressive state response. Excessive repression agitates the KNM and invites more drastic counter-responses, inciting a cycle of violence between the KNM and the governments. Furthermore, the KNM responds expressively to policies that threaten to assimilate Kurdish identity into the dominant culture. In accordance with state response theories, it can be argued that the ethnic nationalist KNM posed a substantial threat to the homogenous stabilities sought by Kemalist and Ba'ath revolutionaries. This essentialist disposition hinges on the dominance of Turkish and Arabist identities and is threatened by the KNM. Herein, one can recognise aspects of the threat-model of state response; aggressive responses by the Kemalist and Ba'ath government to Kurdish revolts due to the threat they pose to political elites.

This also signifies the first difference: political threat-conceptions of ethnic minorities in Türkiye have remained relatively similar, whereas regime changes in Iraq have changed its internal dynamics. In Türkiye, political elites have generally stuck to ideologies of essential Turkishness through the fall of the Ottoman empire, British attacks on Turkish sovereignty, Kemalist takeover and the contingency of these principles in state-building. During these epochs, the Turkish governments have continuously (but to various extents) viewed Kurdish separatism as a threat and found necessity to repress. In Iraq, the Ba'ath party adhered to similar principles of Arabism and homogeneity, resulting in repressive frameworks resembling those in Türkiye. However, in pre- and post-Ba'ath Iraqi politics, emphasis was less on Arabism and nationalism and more on traditionally democratic Western-imposed principles. Despite being motivated by interventionism and imperialism, the democratic impositions of the American and British influences might have resulted in governments that were more willing to make concessions to the KNM, as predicted by existing literature on state concessions.

Moreover, the shocks in the second cycle of each case are profoundly different. In Türkiye, the second shock amplifies and regurgitates the conflictual perspectives into a revised frame that hinges on the persistence of the PKK. Instead of starting anew, the second cycle recycles and reframes conflicts between the state and the KNM, further souring the relations

between the two parties. Contrarily, in Iraq, the second shock creates a ‘clean slate’ as the US invades and topples the regime in its entirety. The removal of the Ba’ath party allows the opening of POS for the Kurds in Iraq. Due to their supportive role in the US invasion, the Kurds were extended the opportunity to rewrite the essentialist paradigm and fortify their rights and autonomy. Following POT, it can be observed that the American invasion of Iraq allowed the Kurds political opportunities unique to relative Kurdish groups in other states. Such political opportunities are unheard of in Türkiye, where POS have remained (variably) closed.

## V. Conclusion

Through meticulous historical process research, this thesis has sought to answer the research question: *What factors contribute to the differences in state conduct of the Kurdish nationalist movement between Türkiye and Iraq?* Using a Most-Similar-Systems-Design study, two cases were analysed to outline marginal differences in a vast web of similarities and subsequently determine why the current situations differ. The research followed a semi-structured, inductive approach wherein guiding principles were established and used as tools in the analysis of historical sources. Patterns, deviations, and idiosyncrasies were outlined and used to draw conclusions about the specificities of the cases. More broadly, observed results largely aligned with theories of contentious political action and state response, as described in the Theoretical Framework. For example, elements of the threat-model and principles of ethnic nationalism were observed. As ethnic nationalist movements usually form a larger threat to the stability of authoritarian regimes, the state’s threat perception is arguably higher than that of ‘regular’ movements, more likely triggering a repressive response. Simultaneously, this response is perceived by the ethnic nationalist movement as assimilationist or oppressive and thus further amplifies ethnic nationalist sentiment. Demonstrably, the two react to each other in synthesis, entering a spiral of mutual escalation.

In relation to the research question, the importance of POS is highlighted in the analyses. Interestingly, in Iraq, one can observe two antitheses in the historical context; firstly, the Ba’ath coup closed POS for the KNM, resulting in counter-responses and excessive state repression. Secondly, the American invasion opens POS, allowing the Kurds a more favourable political position and contributing to the semi-autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan. In Türkiye, the shocks closed POS further to Kurdish groups, making it hard to demand change and warranting repressive state responses. It can be seen that POS and their open- or closeness play a crucial role in the relative success in Iraq and the lack thereof in Türkiye. Additionally, the PKK in

Türkiye gets more violent than the KDP in Iraq, enhancing the Turkish threat conception and thus predicting a more repressive approach to Kurdish resistance according to the threat model.

Furthermore, the two cases both follow patterns of critical juncture theory. The variables (as outlined in the operationalisation) can be observed in each case and helps to view events in a more relevant historical framework. A noticeable difference, however, is in the critical junctures and the implications for the KNM. Although both follow cyclical patterns, respective shocks form different critical junctures, leading to vastly different outcomes. In relation to the previous section about POS, the different critical juncture cycles are shaped by the different conditions generated by the availability of political opportunities. Thus, the temporal contexts of both cases have observable implications for individual steps of the critical juncture cycle, especially pertaining to POS.

Additionally, an element that unexpectedly emerged was the essentialist identities of the Kemalists in Türkiye and the Ba'ath in Iraq. In both cases, regimes produced policies that were highly exclusionary of minorities and pushed for the dominance of the majority ethnicity (Turks and Arabs). In Türkiye, this ideology remained more or less constant, even temporarily under President Erdoğan (Coskun, 2023). In Iraq, however, the complete uprooting of the Ba'ath party and toppling of its governing principles reduced homogeneity and allowed for more inclusive policymaking, visible in features such as the status of Kurdish as an official language (The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, 2021). The contingency of essentialist, identity-based politics in Türkiye, influenced the situation of the Kurds there, as opposed to those in Iraq. Although it relates to identity cleavages described in ethnic nationalist movement theory, essentialism in governance was not marked in literature studies prior to conducting the research, but rather a product of its inductive approach.

Thus, from the historical process research and the forthcoming analyses, one might find that factors contributing to the statuses of Kurds in Iraq and Türkiye are attributable to temporal context, POS and essentialism. In Iraq, events in particular moments contributed to the opening of POS and disbanding of Arab-dominant policies. Alternatively, in Türkiye, these events happened in different historic vacuums, resulting in the closing of POS, creation of the PKK and its manifestation as a violent organisation, and subsequently the continuation of Turkish-dominant governance. Furthermore, going back to the hypothesis: *“The relative success of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iraq can be attributed to more open political opportunity structures than those in Türkiye, because of the nature of its critical junctures and subsequent path dependencies”*, it can be argued that the conclusions largely support this prediction. The importance of open POS and its mutual influence on critical juncture cycles were reverberated

by the thesis' findings and analyses. The added importance of essentialist identity politics, however, was not accounted for.

Conclusively, this research has sought to explore the intersect between contentious politics and historical institutionalism through the case of the KNCM in Türkiye and in Iraq. This research has ensured to uphold certain standards of reliability and validity. Unfortunately, the word count posed a limitation and prevented this thesis from capturing the full spectrum of historical dynamics between ethnic national movements and the state. A more elaborate study would benefit the research and help create a more extensive picture of the relevant phenomena and contexts. Finally, the conclusions of this thesis have theoretical implications for the related research areas. The fields of contentious political action and temporality-based paradigms such as historical institutionalism are connected, which provides important tools for further research in the application of critical juncture theory. The implications of this study suggest further research in the generalisability of its findings, warranting research into whether temporality, essentialism, and political opportunity structures pose as important factors in other ethnic nationalist struggles, such as the Tibetan resistance or the Palestinian cause. This thesis contributes to the theoretical- and practical frameworks of ethnic nationalist movements and state response. Most importantly, it contributes to the academic framework of Kurdish cultural- and political resistance. The development of this field is paramount to fully comprehend and appreciate the historical struggle and political adversity of the world's largest stateless nation.

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