



## **Land reform and Kurdish nationalism in postcolonial Iraq**

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# Land Reform and Kurdish Nationalism in Postcolonial Iraq

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**Abstract:** *This article revisits the origins of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, problematizing the narrative, shared by nationalists and scholars alike, that presents the 1961-1975 insurgency solely as a moment of national awakening. Placing the Kurdish revolt within the social and political conflicts of postcolonial Iraq reveals its strong connection to the Iraqi Revolution of 1958. The early stages of the 1961 revolt must be understood as a reaction of the Kurdish landed class against the post-revolutionary land reform policy and the empowerment of the peasantry. The Kurdish tribal and landowning elite successfully turned its revolt into a national revolution by forcing progressive urban nationalists into a position of subordination and demobilizing the peasantry, formerly the backbone of the anticolonial movement. The hegemonic position of the landed class, won in 1961, had long-term consequences on the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq determining its conservative character and the persistent marginalization and depoliticization of the subaltern classes.*

**Key Words:** *Class; Iraq; Kurds; land reform; Nationalism; 1958 Revolution*

The Iraqi Kurdish revolt that started in 1961, ended in 1975, and was led by Mullah Mustafa Barzani is the pivotal moment for the emergence and consolidation of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq. In September 2020, Masrour Barzani, the Prime Minister of the Kurdish region and grandchild of Mullah Mustafa, described the long revolt as:

*the glorious September 1961 revolution (...) under one leadership led and carried by the eternal national leader Mustafa Barzani. (...) the spark of the September revolution was ignited while the enemies of the Kurdish people were trying to obliterate our culture and erase our identity.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Masrour Barzani (2020) September Revolution unified Kurdish of all components, *Shafaq News* (September 11), available online at: <https://shafaq.com/en/Kurdistan/Barzani-September-Revolution-unified-Kurdish-of-all-components/>, accessed February 8, 2021.

The nationalist narrative that depicts the 1961 revolution – and the Barzani revolts of 1931 and 1943 as its preludes – as the foundational moment of the Kurdish liberation movement is a powerful ideological element that has legitimized the semi-authoritarian rule of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Barzani family in control of the Iraqi Kurdish region since 1991. This narrative also has been reproduced in most scholarship on Kurdish nationalism that unproblematically explains it in exclusively national terms since its beginning in 1961.<sup>2</sup>

This article problematizes this narrative by placing the 1961-1975 Kurdish revolt in the context of postcolonial Iraq and the social conflicts traversing its rural society. With the help of interviews with witnesses, it identifies the origins of the revolt in the threats posed by the 1958 Iraqi revolution to the landowning and tribal elite of the Kurdish region. In particular, land taxation and redistribution, and a mobilized and empowered peasantry were unacceptable outcomes for a class of landowners meticulously bred by British colonialism to rule the country. In these terms, the article reconnects the story of the Kurdish revolt with the history of Iraq and the legacy of colonialism. The national character of the revolt was, rather than being its intrinsic element, the result of a gradual process of subordination of progressive urban nationalists and the marginalization of the Kurdish peasantry, under the tribal leadership of Mustafa Barzani. These power relations characterized the Iraqi Kurdish movement well beyond this period and shaped the hierarchical class structure and repressive institutions of the Kurdish autonomous region established in 1991.

### **Colonialism and Class in Hashemite Iraq**

The forms in which the Kurdish national movement emerged after the 1958 Iraqi revolution were shaped by the structural transformation that the country underwent in its first decades of existence. The mandate-state of Iraq that British colonial administrators created in 1920 according to the

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<sup>2</sup> See Ofra Bengio (2012) *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers); Nader Entessar (2010), *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books); Wadie Jwaideh (2006) *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press); Edgar O'Ballance (1973) *The Kurdish Revolt 1961-1970* (London: Faber and Faber); Hussain Tahiri (2007) *Structure of Kurdish Society and the Struggle for a Kurdish State* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers); Kerim Yildiz (2003) *The Kurds in Iraq, Past present and future* (London: Pluto Press).

broader geopolitical interests of the British Empire, which then gave it to the ‘foreign’ Hashemite King Faisal. The colonial relationship between Britain and Iraq was determined by a series of Anglo-Iraqi treaties the first of which, in 1922, established the mandate. In 1932 Britain recognized Iraq’s nominal independence while maintaining a military presence and control over the country’s foreign policy and oil resources: Until the 1958 revolution repudiated the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, Iraq remained a British semi-colony.<sup>3</sup> In this period of great uncertainty for Iraq, between the end of Ottoman rule and the establishment of the mandate, mass tribal agitation took place in 1920. While not presenting a significant military challenge, the tribal revolt convinced British colonial administrators to co-opt the tribal elite – the shaykhs – into the government of the country and to make them Iraq’s new ruling class.<sup>4</sup>

The history of this project has been captured by Hanna Batatu’s work on the class structure of monarchical Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Colonial administrators empowered tribal shaykhs in both Arab and Kurdish areas to create a ruling class of conservative landowners who would be inherently pro-British. Already in 1916, in the midst of World War I, the British made the tribal chiefs responsible for administering law among their tribesmen, giving them tremendous power and little or no accountability. The gradual process of de-tribalisation which Iraq had been going through since the nineteenth century due to its integration into global markets was reversed, ‘the progress of villages toward independence from surrounding tribes forbidden, and the escape of peasant tribesmen from

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<sup>3</sup> According to Adeb Dawisha, the development of the early Iraqi state was based on a ‘duality of power’, as Iraqi officers at all levels were assigned British ‘advisors’ whose views were to deeply shape the early stages of state building; See Adeb Dawisha (2009) *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 4-14.

<sup>4</sup> Samira Haj (1997), *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power, and Ideology* (Albany: State University of New York Press), p. 30. As Toby Dodge explains, colonial officers did not necessarily need to be convinced as they were driven by the romantic and Orientalist view of an ahistorical Iraq ‘pre-modern and rural’ in which ‘the Shaikh and his tribe were therefore ‘naturally’ the dominant institutions through which British policy aims were to be realized.’ Toby Dodge (2003), *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 83-84.

<sup>5</sup> Hanna Batatu (1979), *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba’thist, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

the shaykhs' lands prevented.'<sup>6</sup> The process of privatization of the land initiated by the Ottoman Land Code (1858) was greatly accelerated by the Land Settlement Laws of 1932 and 1938, 'which facilitated the transfer into [the shaykhs'] hands of vast expanses of state and customary tribal land.'<sup>7</sup> This process took place in both Arab and Kurdish Iraq: in 1958, among the 48 largest landowners of the country, ten were Kurdish (or Arabized Kurds), including the single largest one.<sup>8</sup>

The new power of the tribal elite was sealed in the political institutions of the new state. Of the Iraqi representatives to the Ottoman parliament in 1914 none was a tribal leader. By contrast, among the 99 members of the Iraqi Constitutional Assembly elected in 1924, 34 were shaykhs or aghas.<sup>9</sup> Before the inaugural session of the assembly, these tribal chiefs took a public oath 'to support the [Anglo-Iraqi] Treaty and not to take any action without common consent,' and to prevent the government from alienating the land they had recently appropriated.<sup>10</sup> The oath shows that, at the very moment of the establishment of the Iraqi state, this group demonstrated a degree of class consciousness that transcended ethnic and sectarian divides and the awareness that their interests were best served by colonial rule. As Batatu explains, the decaying power of the shaykh had been resuscitated by colonial rule as 'life was pumped into it artificially by an outside force that had an interest in its perpetuation'.<sup>11</sup> The consolidation of the shaykhly class as the dominant economic and political group made direct colonial rule redundant: The British recognized Iraq's nominal independence in 1932 while maintaining control of its oil and foreign policy.

The concentration of a large part of the county's arable lands in the hands of a handful of families who were also the holders of political power created a system that prevented economic development and fuelled social conflicts. As long as landlords could squeeze their peasants and expand their holdings at the expense of small farmers and uncultivated lands, they had no incentive

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 46-47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 58-62.

<sup>9</sup> 'Agha' is the Kurdish title for tribal chiefs.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

to invest in the modernization of agriculture. Low productivity, land-grabbing, and exploitation drove the peasants toward forms of passive resistance, most commonly land desertion. As impoverished peasants fled the countryside, the urban population of Iraq increased from 30 percent in the 1930s to 42 percent in 1958.<sup>12</sup> However, one of the most important characteristics of the two decades preceding the 1958 revolution was the spread of rural conflicts. The enrichment of the shaykhs at the expense of their fellow tribesmen undermined the social value of tribal loyalties which made the shaykhs ‘simultaneously rising as a class and decaying as a traditional status group.’<sup>13</sup> The social polarization of the Iraqi countryside had created two rural classes with diametrically opposed interests. This process was by no means unique to Iraq and had been a typical path of development in colonized societies, one that Lisa Anderson calls ‘the creation of a peasantry’ and entails the parallel formation of ‘a class of rural powerholders whose access to the agricultural surplus (...) makes them among the most important allies or components of the elite that controls the state.’<sup>14</sup> In this polarized context, nine major peasant revolts broke out between 1947 and 1958, three of which were in the Kurdish region.<sup>15</sup>

This overview of the structural transformations of Iraq between 1920 and 1958 shows that the early history of the country can be told with virtually no mention of the Kurdish question. The dominant political divide in monarchical Iraq – including its Kurdish region – was, rather than ethnic or sectarian, a conflict between rural classes. The Kurdish tribal revolts of the 1920s and 1930s, often seen as the awakening of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and the prelude of a more mature revolution, must be read within that political situation. Shaykh Mahmoud Barzanji’s revolt in 1918-1920 perfectly fits the context of the wider tribal agitation that occurred in Iraq before the

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<sup>12</sup> Haj, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, pp. 36-38.

<sup>13</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Anderson (1986) *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 27-29.

<sup>15</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, pp. 6, 467-468.

establishment of the mandate.<sup>16</sup> Barzanji's brief self-appointment as the 'King of Kurdistan' did not lend him much nationalist credibility as suggested by the hostility toward him shared by most neighboring tribes and the Kurdish town of Sulaymaniyah, but also by his contacts with Kemalist forces in Turkey. By the early 1920s, the Kurdish tribal elite was consistently pro-British and pro-monarchy like their fellow landowners in the Arab provinces. Shaykh Mahmoud's later revolt (1924-1932) was mostly a long period of hiding and raiding and the revolts of another Kurdish Shaykh Ahmed Barzani and his brother Mustafa (1931 and 1943), were marginal political episodes with hardly any nationalist character.<sup>17</sup>

The early Kurdish revolts therefore must be thought of as part of Iraq's postwar reconfiguration of power. In a period of transition and uncertainty, tribal leaders were in position to mobilize sizable military forces and to renegotiate their local power vis-à-vis the new imperial authority, a practice that was not alien to the Ottoman political tradition.<sup>18</sup> After the tripartite alliance between Britain, the Iraqi tribal elite, and the Hashemite monarchy was sealed, revolts in the country acquired a radically different class basis and political content. As Hanna Batatu masterfully explains:

*The tribal rebellions of the first decades of the monarchy [...] appear in retrospect as the gasps of a tribal world approaching its end. The rural rebellions of the last decade of the monarchy were of an entirely different character. They were rebellions not under shaikhs but against them, and were made by tribesmen whose customary ideas and norms of life [...] had given way to an overlord-quasi-serf relationship which chained them to distress*

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<sup>16</sup> For Barzanji's revolts, see Michael Gunter (2011) *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press), p. 25; Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, pp. 55-56; and David McDowall (2004) *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris), pp. 151-183.

<sup>17</sup> For these revolts, see McDowall, *The Kurds*, pp. 287-301.

<sup>18</sup> See Hamit Bozarslan (2003) 'Some Remarks on Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919-1980)', in Abbas Vali (ed.), *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, pp. 185-186 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers); and Şerif Mardin (1988) 'Freedom in an Ottoman Perspective' in: Metin Heper and Ahmet Evin (eds) *State, Democracy, and the Military: Turkey in the 1980s*, pp. 23-35 (Berlin: De Gruyter).

*and privation, and the idea now sank into them that this was not an unalterable state of things. The idea was, of course, spread by Communists.*<sup>19</sup>

### **The 1958 Revolution and the Kurdish Movement**

Rising tension in rural areas, as well as the increasing presence of impoverished peasants in the largest cities, constituted fertile ground for the growth of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), which was established in 1934. The communists' demand for land reform resonated among the landless peasants and the party built a strong base in the Kurdish north thanks also to its commitment toward the recognition of Kurdish cultural rights. The ICP grew even stronger among the workers of the small industrial sector and, in the 1940s, came to dominate a rapidly growing union movement.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fierce repression that the labor movement faced, the effort of the ICP in organizing and mobilizing the urban and rural masses provided the opposition to the monarchy with a significant degree of popular support.<sup>21</sup> The reluctance of the other opposition parties to co-operate with the communists was only slowly overcome thanks to the popular and national uprisings of 1948, 1952, and 1956. During the 1940s, all opposition forces came to blame Iraq's underdevelopment on the shaykhly class, the monarchy, and British imperialism. All of these revolts were preceded by waves of rural uprisings and workers' strikes and the social and anticolonial characters of the opposition to the monarchy gradually welded together. After the 1956 uprising, the opposition forces formed the United National Front, this time with the inclusion of the ICP, which prepared the ground for the revolution of 1958.

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<sup>19</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> In the early 1950s, there were 12,000 industrial workers in the country. (1952) *The Economic Development of Iraq* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) p. 133. At the time, twelve of the sixteen legal labour unions were led by the ICP; Joel Beinin (2001) *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> The other two major components of the opposition were, in fact, the National Democratic Party (NDP), expressing the views of the liberal-minded and non-tribal bourgeoisie; and the Ba'ath Party, on socialist and pan-Arabist positions, strong among the urban middle class; see: Haj, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, pp. 85-98.



The coup d'état that overthrew King Faisal in July 1958 was led by Brigadier 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and supported by a heterogeneous republican front that included all the major parties.<sup>22</sup> Finally allowed to operate legally, the ICP experienced, in the first years of the republic, the apex of its power and popularity.<sup>23</sup> The party expanded its mass basis by building up unions and peasants' societies and, even if excluded from the government, was strong enough to pressure Qasim to keep up with the progressive promises of the revolution such as the land reform approved in September 1958. However, the growth of the communists naturally created apprehension among the other components of the republican front. As soon as Qasim had consolidated his power, in winter 1959-1960, he started to crack down on the ICP and to dismantle popular organizations, rapidly destroying the strength and influence gained by the communists in the previous years of mobilization.<sup>24</sup>

At the moment of the 1958 revolution, the ICP was one of the leading political actors in the Kurdish region. The main Kurdish nationalist force, the *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDP) founded in 1946, had survived thanks to the support of non-tribal middle-class Kurds living in the towns, particularly Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk, but also Baghdad. However, their influence was limited by the small size and scant economic significance of the Kurdish urban centers. Moreover, Kurdish nationalists were facing the competition of the ICP that, unlike the other Iraqi political parties, acknowledged the ethnic specificity of the Kurdish region and demanded recognition of Kurdish cultural rights.<sup>25</sup>

The KDP President was the exiled Mullah Mustafa Barzani, leader of the 1943 tribal revolt mentioned earlier. Mullah Mustafa had gained mass popularity due to his military prowess in 1943

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<sup>22</sup> Decisive to the success of the revolution was the fact that the Iraqi Army was packed with officers sympathetic to the nationalists and the Ba'athists and, although to a lesser degree, the communists. See, Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett (1991) *The Social Classes and the Origins of the Revolution*, in: R. A. Fernea and W. Roger Louis (eds) *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, pp. 130-131 (London: I.B. Tauris).

<sup>23</sup> Dawisha, *Iraq*, pp. 176-179.

<sup>24</sup> For the history of the ICP in the first years of the revolution, see Johan Franzén (2011), *Red Star Over Iraq: Iraqi Communism Before Saddam* (New York: Columbia University Press) pp. 85-126, and Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 71-113.

<sup>25</sup> Ismael, *The Rise and Fall*, pp. 32-34.

and, especially, his participation in the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946, a short-lived Kurdish entity established in then-Soviet-occupied Northern Iran. The popularity gained by Barzani convinced urban-based Kurdish nationalists to offer him the leadership of the movement despite the reserves many activists maintained toward tribal chiefs. Between 1946 and 1958, while Mustafa Barzani and his tribesmen were in exile, the KDP was led by Ibrahim Ahmed, a lawyer from Sulaymaniyah, and his left-leaning supporters. As most of these Kurdish nationalists were Marxists and opposed tribalism and colonialism, their discourse was heavily influenced by that of the communists and their political line overlapped that of the ICP.<sup>26</sup> After the fall of the monarchy, Mullah Mustafa Barzani returned to Iraq in October 1958 and was welcomed by Qasim's regime. Barzani particularly benefitted from the KDP's close relationship with the communist party, then an ally of the government, and in November 1958 KDP and ICP signed a Covenant of Cooperation.<sup>27</sup> In these months, Mullah Mustafa's role as chairman of the KDP was largely symbolic and reflective of his prestige among Kurdish tribal society rather than his influence over the party that was run by the secretary-general Ibrahim Ahmed. Returning from a 12-years-long exile, Mullah Mustafa's main concern was to maintain a low profile and to regain a place within Kurdish tribal society. He toured the region, meeting aghas and shaykhs, building alliances but also reactivating ancient tribal rivalries.

The fall of the monarchy and the advent of a new revolutionary government had made the traditional elite increasingly anxious. The new republican leadership spoke a language of modernization and painted tribal leaders as forces of the past and Qasim's alliance with the communists suggested that the state was no longer going to be on their side to protect landowners from revolting peasants. Moreover, in the Kurdish region, the return of an important tribal leader such as Mullah Mustafa and his good relationship with Baghdad also had a disrupting effect on inter-tribal relations, making the tribes that were historically hostile to the Barzanis increasingly

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<sup>26</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, pp. 267-272.

<sup>27</sup> Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq*, p. 116.

nervous. It is in this context of a rapid deterioration of the established social and political relations of power that the tribal agitation of the post-revolutionary periods must be understood. In the spring of 1959, as the snow melted, the Kurdish tribes of the Baradost area took up arms against the government. The suppression of the Baradost uprising was a joint effort by the Iraqi Army, the ICP-backed peasant societies, and Barzani's tribesmen.<sup>28</sup> As observed by Wadie Jwaideh the Baradost uprising was a 'belated reaction of the conservative and feudal elements against the July revolution,' not dissimilar to the revolt of the Arab Shammar tribe in Mosul that rose in the same weeks in support of an attempt to overthrow Qasim.<sup>29</sup>

In Summer 1959, however, alliances began to shift once again. As Qasim gradually turned against the ICP, Barzani used his power to curtail the influence of the communists over the KDP and, in July, overcame the resistance of Ibrahim Ahmed and the KDP leadership and suspended the Covenant of Co-operation of November 1958.<sup>30</sup> Many years of work, the left-leaning intellectuals from Sulaymaniyah were swept away as Ibrahim Ahmed and his followers were marginalized. The urban and progressive elements had to capitulate to the preponderant power of their tribal allies. Barzani had cared little about the KDP since his return and independently had pursued his tribal diplomacy and entertained a direct relationship with Baghdad. However, when the policies and alliances of the KDP did not match his own, he had the strength to impose his view on the party. For the moment, Ibrahim Ahmed was to remain secretary-general of the party, but it was clear that the center of gravity of the Kurdish movement was no longer the politburo of the KDP but Mullah Mustafa's mobile camp.

By the end of 1959, Qasim had curbed the power of the communists and was growing increasingly wary of the dominant position built up by Mustafa Barzani in the Kurdish north. Barzani already was occupied in low-intensity warfare against the rival tribes – the Zebari, Surchi,

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<sup>28</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, pp. 283-284; see also Avshalom H. Rubin (2007) Abd Al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq: Centralization, Resistance and Revolt, 1958-63, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(3), p. 364.

<sup>29</sup> Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, p. 284.

<sup>30</sup> Johan Franzén (2011) From ally to foe: The Iraqi communist party and the Kurdish question, 1958-1975, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 38(2), pp. 171-172; and O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, pp. 68-69.

and Raikani – and, in early 1960, Qasim started supplying the latter.<sup>31</sup> Baghdad's behavior followed a traditional pattern of state-tribe relations. As a tribal chief became too powerful, the central government armed the rival tribes to restore the balance of power in the region and to avoid the creation of alternative centers of power in the country's periphery.

### **Land Reform and Kurdish Revolt**

The war by proxy that Qasim initiated against Mullah Mustafa's forces in 1960 had a limited scope and was confined to the Barzan area in the north of the Kurdish region. Arming rival tribes was cheaper for Baghdad than committing the Iraqi army against an elusive enemy across the Kurdish mountains. However, different dynamics were to precipitate the situation. In September 1958 the government had passed a limited land reform,<sup>32</sup> that imposed a limit to personal land holdings at 1000 dunums (250 hectares) for the irrigated lands and 2000 dunums for the rainfed areas. The law compensated large landowners for their losses and allowed the peasants to buy the confiscated land. However, only rich farmers had the means to benefit from the reform whereas most of the landless peasants were unable to access the credit necessary to buy the land.<sup>33</sup> Despite its limited reach, the landowning elite that had ruled under monarchical Iraq perceived land reform and the more general empowerment of the organized peasantry as a direct threat.

In 1960, the government had started implementing the Land Reform law in the Kurdish areas and, in the spring of 1961, imposed a land tax.<sup>34</sup> In June 1961, a delegation of tribal chiefs from the southern part of the Kurdish region – roughly the governorate of Sulaymaniyah – traveled to Baghdad to petition Qasim for abolition of the land tax and amendments to the land reform. Qasim refused to meet with them, and the tribal chiefs returned to the Kurdish region committed

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<sup>31</sup> Rubin, *Abd al-Karim Qasim*, p. 365.

<sup>32</sup> Rasool M. H. Hashimi & Alfred L. Edwards (1961) Land Reform in Iraq: Economic and Social Implications, *Land Economics*, 37(1) pp. 68-81.

<sup>33</sup> Haj, *The Making of Modern Iraq*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>34</sup> Rony Gabbay (1978), *Communism and Agrarian Reform in Iraq* (London: Croom Helm), pp. 108-122.

not 'to pay the tax or to allow the implementation of the Agrarian Reform.'<sup>35</sup> The rebellion spread rapidly, easily gaining the support of Kurdish landowners. In the course of the summer, the rebels were increasingly in contact with Barzani, who was fighting his separate war against his tribal enemies in the northern part of the region. In September, the revolt escalated when tribal forces in the rebel areas attacked a column of Iraqi troops.<sup>36</sup> Qasim responded by bombing Barzani's position, holding him responsible for the events in the south of the region. The cold war between Barzani and Qasim turned into a direct confrontation and Barzani became the natural leader of a wider Kurdish revolt.<sup>37</sup> In the Kurdish nationalist narrative, this moment is seen as the beginning of the Kurdish Revolution in Iraq both because the fight involved, for the first time, the Iraqi Army but also because, for the first time, a significant proportion of the tribes – yet never all of them – joined the forces that Barzani led.

Ahmed Ismael Talani, the current head of the Jaf tribe in the Dukan area, depicts the revolt as a national revolution:

*It was a national movement. The first step was taken by the tribes, then the police, the KDP [...] followed. My father was a tribal leader in the movement. [...] my uncle was the first martyr of the movement alongside three other people. They are the first martyrs of the Kurdistan movement, killed on September 11, 1961, in the Chamchamal area. They were killed when they confronted an Iraqi unit that was heading to Sulaymaniyah and Dukan. They wanted to stop them.*<sup>38</sup>

Insisting that Land Reform played a very small role in the uprising, Talani emphasizes the chaos brought about by the 'communist rule' over the country that followed the fall of the monarchy as one of the drivers of the tribal revolt:

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<sup>35</sup> Sa'ad Jawad (1981), *Iraq and the Kurdish Question, 1958-1970* (London: Ithaca Press), pp. 77-78.

<sup>36</sup> Rubin, *Abd al-Karim Qasim*, p. 369. O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> According to historian Farid Assasard, Barzani was, at first, sceptical of taking the leadership of a revolt that implied a direct confrontation with the government and initially tried to leave with his men for Syria. However, when the government attacked him, he had no choice but to ally with the rebels. Author Interview with Fared Assasard, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Author Interview with Ahmed Ismael Talani, Dukan, Iraq, 2019.

*The communist party at that time was influential all over Iraq, including Kurdistan. The KDP was weak. [...] At the time, the shaykhs and aghas were assaulted, sometimes even clashes broke out, and people were killed! [...] The communist chaos was very strong in 1959 and 1960. [...] It continued until 1961 and then the tension between aghas and peasants ended because [...] in all the region, the aghas, the shaykhs, the bags, the mullahs got united [and sided with the] KDP. This is how the revolution started.<sup>39</sup>*

As the Barzani forces increasingly were coordinating their war efforts with those of the anti-Qasim tribes, the KDP was torn apart by the contradiction between its socialist and its nationalist orientations. On the one hand, the tribal agitation in the south of the region had an evident class and tribal character that contradicted the commitment of the KDP to modernization and land redistribution and the party initially condemned the revolt as reactionary.<sup>40</sup> As suggested by Qadir Haji Ali, it was evident that the revolting tribes only were willing to join the nationalist forces under the leadership of a fellow tribal chief such as Barzani.<sup>41</sup> However, the success of Barzani's tribesmen and the rapid territorial spread of the violence was giving it more and more the character of a Kurdish national revolt, and the KDP could not afford to be excluded from a potentially national revolution. Qasim decided on their behalf. On September 23, two weeks after his first attack on Barzani's forces, Qasim banned the KDP, forcing the entire leadership to join the revolt.<sup>42</sup> The KDP support was a precious gift to the tribal elite that then could hide the class character of the revolt and depict it as a national revolution. However, the party, in turn, gained very little. Several left-leaning intellectuals left the KDP, claiming that the party had capitulated to the reactionary aghas.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the party leadership was aware that their contribution to the military effort was going to be insignificant and that they were destined to become instruments in the hands of Barzani.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Jawad, *Iraq*, p. 80; and O'Ballance, pp. 78-80.

<sup>41</sup> Author Interview with Qadir Haji Ali, Sulaymaniyah, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>43</sup> Jawad, *Iraq*, p. 82.

To maintain a certain degree of independence, in December 1962, the KDP established its own military forces, the *peshmerga*, ‘those who face death’, and set up its headquarters in Mawat, near Sulaymaniyah.<sup>44</sup>

After the winter pause, Barzani started attacking Iraqi troops in March 1962. Unable to pursue the Kurds into the mountains, the Iraqi Army fought a defensive war and extensively used its air forces. The army’s indiscriminate bombing and raiding of Kurdish villages contributed significantly to the growing popular support for the uprising. With the ICP gone and the KDP on the sidelines of the uprising, the anti-landowning sentiments of the Kurdish rural masses gave way to the terror of the Iraqi army. As Jalal Jawhar – one of the rare Kurdish politicians with a peasant background – recalls:

*[the Iraqis] saw no difference between a tribal leader and a peasant, between a teacher and a student. [...] I was a kid in 1963 when they looted and burned down our village [...] they saw no difference between aghas, shaykhs, and people [...] This is why people started to think that national oppression is more important than oppression of the aghas. Because national oppression caused displacement and death [...] The oppression of the aghas meant giving them a third of your harvest. This is different than being displaced and killed.*<sup>45</sup>

Because of these conditions, the Kurdish revolt gradually assumed a trans-class character, although at the cost of subduing any demands for land redistribution and accepting the leadership of the conservative aghas.

The Kurdish forces that had sided with the government – and whom the rebels derogatorily called *jash*, ‘little donkey’ – were declining rapidly. By the end of summer, most of the anti-Barzani tribes had given up, switched to the rebels, or had become neutral.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the rebels affiliated with the KDP were operating in the Kurdish cities of Kirkuk, Erbil, and, especially, Sulaymaniyah,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Author Interview with Jalal Jawhar, Sulaymaniyah, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Rubin, *Abd al-Karim Qasim*, p. 374.

where they had virtual control of the streets at night and carried out punitive missions against their enemies.<sup>47</sup> The inconclusiveness of Qasim's efforts to quell the Kurdish revolt eventually contributed to his downfall. On February 8 1963, a group of Ba'athist and Nasserite army officers seized power and, after a short trial, executed Qasim. Mullah Mustafa and the KDP had been in contact with the plotters for several months before the coup and, even though they had not received any written assurance of Kurdish autonomy or cultural rights, they welcomed the new provisional government and agreed to a ceasefire.<sup>48</sup> However, the ceasefire collapsed in early June 1963, and the Iraqi Army attacked Kurdish positions.

The war continued for the entire summer of 1963 and both sides showed signs of weariness. The fighting was slowing down in November when divisions within the government in Baghdad ushered in another military takeover. A new ceasefire was agreed in December and, on February 10, 1964, each side issued a statement that ended the Kurdish war. The agreement only listed vague commitments toward Kurdish rights and did not mention regional autonomy. The KDP leadership, which had not been involved in the negotiations, protested the agreement and refused to comply. Tension rose between Barzani and the KDP throughout the spring and, in July, Barzani convened the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the party. Only a handful of delegates loyal to Ibrahim Ahmed made it to the Congress but they were arrested by Mullah Mustafa's men while the entire faction was expelled. In mid-July, Barzani's forces marched on the KDP headquarters in Mawat, forcing Ibrahim Ahmed and his followers to flee to Iran.<sup>49</sup> By the time the war with Baghdad resumed in the Summer of 1965, Mullah Mustafa was the undisputed leader of the Kurdish revolution, recognized by most Kurdish tribes but also by what was left of the KDP.

From its inception as an uprising of a group of disgruntled landowners, in just a few years, the Kurdish revolt had expanded to the towns and even acquired a certain degree of peasant support.

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<sup>47</sup> O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, pp. 91-92; and Rubin, *Abd al-Karim Qasim*, p. 371.

<sup>48</sup> Jawad, *Iraq*, 107-113.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 169-172.



The KDP had sacrificed its progressive program and given nationalist legitimacy to the revolt only to be forcibly taken over by Barzani's forces while its leftist leadership was purged. From their expulsion from the party in 1964 until the collapse of Barzani's revolution in 1975, the faction led by Ibrahim Ahmed and, increasingly, by his son-in-law Jalal Talabani, was an utterly marginal player to the point of becoming an instrument in the hands of Baghdad to be used against Barzani.

The Kurdish revolution continued following a similar pattern, alternating periods of fighting with ceasefires and negotiations, and a particularly long-lasting peace agreement between 1970 and 1973.<sup>50</sup> When the war was resumed in 1973, Barzani's military capability increased dramatically, thanks to the growing support he received from the enemies of Iraq, such as the United States, Israel, and, especially, Iran, which started supplying the Kurds with heavy weapons.<sup>51</sup> Saddam Hussein – the de-facto ruler of Iraq since the Baathist coup of 1968 – responded to this threat by offering Iran a comprehensive agreement on their border disputes, which was signed in Algiers in March 1975. The sudden end of Iran's military and logistical support caused the immediate collapse of Barzani's Revolution.<sup>52</sup> The sudden end of the uprising in 1975 was a turning point in Kurdish history. The defeat of Barzani and the KDP became a window of opportunity for the marginalized Kurdish left, which, in the same year, founded a new party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

### **Competing Kurdish Nationalisms**

The analysis of the structural context and political events of Iraq in the decades-spanning the aftermath of the 1958 revolution allows for a more informed discussion on the trajectory of Iraqi Kurdish nationalism in its formative period. These developments reveal that Kurdish nationalism in

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<sup>50</sup> See McDowall, *A Modern History*, pp. 324-338; and Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society*, pp. 102-133.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Kissinger (1999) *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster), pp. 584-585.

<sup>52</sup> According to Marianna Charountaki, the Nixon Administration's support for the Kurds had merely the function of wearing out Iraq, as the prospect of the Kurds gaining real autonomy would have been an unacceptable outcome for both Iran and Turkey, key allies of the US in the region. Ultimately, '[Secretary of State Henry] Kissinger and the Shah both hoped that their clients – the Kurds – would not prevail.' Marianna Charountaki (2011) *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945* (London: Routledge), p. 138. In a letter to the Shah signed in early 1975, Kissinger made his order of priorities very clear: 'With respect to the Kurdish question, there is little I can add to what I have already said to you personally during our recent meeting. This is obviously a matter for Your Majesty to decide in the best interests of your nation.' Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 594.

the 1960s succeeded within a conservative political project grounded in the class interests of the tribal landowners, at least after the political marginalization of the peasantry. This section analyses the content of this political project and shows how the changing structural context of the 1970s allowed for the emergence of an alternative nationalist project.

Ideologically, Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his followers tended to be vague except for their unshakeable commitment to Kurdish nationalism but with little reference to a concrete political program for a future Kurdish state. Barzani's own background and his alliance with part of the tribal elite most likely informed an ideological rejection of class politics, setting the KDP apart from most nationalist and anti-colonial movements of the Cold War era. From his exile, Barzani explained:

*Our Party defends the interests of all Kurdish classes including chieftains, mercantilists, workers, small landowners, skilled workers, farmers, and intelligentsia. It brings all these together under the banner of national liberation of the homeland and defending the joint interests of all classes. Under the banner of this party, class struggle in Kurdistan is not appropriate.*<sup>53</sup>

Mustafa Barzani's political project, however, is more easily discernible through the observation of his practices and his approach to power. Since the beginning of his political career in the 1930s, Barzani gave little importance to the role of the political organization.<sup>54</sup> He seems to have regarded his chairmanship of the KDP more as a prestigious title that gave him authority beyond his own tribe rather than an office within the party's organizational structure. For all his life, Barzani pursued his personal tribal diplomacy, ignoring the KDP as a decision-making body and using party offices to please his tribal allies. This attitude reflected the mindset of fellow tribal chiefs for whom ideological differences had little

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<sup>53</sup> Mustafa Barzani (1997) 'Speech Presented to the Congress of the Kurdish Exiles in the Soviet Union: Baku, January 19, 1948', *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, XI(1-2), p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> Both Fared Assasard and Kamran Karadaghi heavily stressed this aspect; author interviews with Fared Assasard, Sulaymaniyah, 2018 and Kamran Karadaghi, London, 2018.

weight in determining patterns of alliances and at most merely were used as retroactive justifications. The Zebari tribe, for example, consistently had opposed Mullah Mustafa throughout the 1960s, but, after the 1970 peace agreement and when Barzani seemed triumphant, the Zebari elite suddenly embraced Kurdish nationalism. Hoshyar Zebari, who was also the brother-in-law of Mullah Mustafa, joined the Kurdish movement after 1970 and paints a telling picture of Barzani's attitude:

*I was brought up more or less in Mosul; I completed my high school in Mosul. At the time there were some tribal differences between us, the Zebari tribe, and the Barzani. But when Mullah Mustafa and the KDP signed the 11 of March 1970 autonomy deal with Iraq, there was a boom of Kurdish nationalism. [...] that was the beginning of change or reconciliation and Mullah Mustafa was a true statesman, a historical leader. Really... with all those Kurds who had opposed him, [...] he pardoned everybody.<sup>55</sup>*

Hoshyar Zebari rapidly rose to prominence in the KDP and, by the 1990s, he already had become one of its most powerful leaders.

After Sulaymaniyah-based intellectuals established the KDP, Barzani accepted to become its chairman on condition that two powerful landowners and members of the tribal elite were elected as vice-chairmen: Muhammad Kaka Ziyad, an agha from Koya, and Latif Barzanji, a shaykh.<sup>56</sup> The ideological inconsistency of these personalities is well represented by Latif, the son of Mahmoud Barzanji, the leader of the tribal revolts of the 1920s. Shaykh Latif was a land-grabbing shaykh and became the target of a major peasant revolt in 1947.<sup>57</sup> Latif's official role in the KDP – at the time an illegal party – did not prevent his brother Baba Ali from becoming a minister in Baghdad several times: First under the king, then under Abd al-Karim Qasim, and once again under Ba'ath rule.<sup>58</sup> In

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<sup>55</sup> Author Interview with Hoshyar Zebari, Pirmam, Iraq, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Author Interview with Fared Assasard, Sulaymaniyah, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, pp. 467-468.

<sup>58</sup> Edmund A. Ghareeb & Beth Dougherty (2004) *Historical Dictionary of Iraq* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press), pp. 349-359.

the same way, during the Kurdish revolt in the 1960s, Barzani relied on local tribal leaders as commanders of the section of the front where they had their land.<sup>59</sup> This strategy created a direct and quasi-feudal relationship between the paramount leader and the local chiefs. Even more importantly, however, this strategy demonstrated to the tribal elite that joining the Kurdish revolt was the best way to preserve power over their estates, which were threatened by the land reform law. In light of this strategy, Barzani's demand for regional autonomy revealed its nature as a project of personal rule underpinned by the traditional structures of Kurdish society. It is then not surprising that in the early 1970s, the survival of the Kurdish revolt depended exclusively on the active support of monarchical Iran and the United States, which systematically opposed progressive political forces across the Middle East.

Mullah Mustafa's power over the Kurdish national movement in Iraq was a direct consequence of the structural weakness of its left-wing. Mostly drawn from the urban middle-classes – lawyers, doctors, army officers, government employees – the KDP leadership viewed the tribal structure of Kurdish society as an obstacle to progress not unlike revolutionary intellectuals of the rest of Iraq and much of the decolonizing world. The strong ties between the KDP and the communist party in the 1940s and 1950s had been based on the similarity of the respective agendas that combined the recognition of Kurdish national rights in a federal and democratic Iraq and social progress. However, the social and economic structure of the Kurdish region did not play in their favor. The peripheral location of the Kurdish lands in the broader economy of Iraq reinforced its rural character. The Kurdish towns remained small and economically marginal and the urban middle classes did not have links with the overwhelmingly rural masses. The weakness of the KDP among the peasantry presumably was due to its reluctance to break with the sector of the tribal elite with whom the party had allied, including land-grabbing landowners, such as Latif Barzanji. The ICP became a natural point of reference for progressive-minded Kurds in the 1950s, and the KDP

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<sup>59</sup> Author Interview with Qadir Haji Ali, Sulaymaniyah, 2019; and O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt*, pp. 83-88, 120-122.

remained a marginal force in the labour struggles of the time and in the movement against the monarchy.<sup>60</sup>

When the Kurdish revolt of 1961 broke out and Barzani allied himself with the tribal landowners threatened by land reform, the KDP lost all room for political initiative and was forced into a rearguard struggle against the Iraqi government. The KDP was then at the mercy of Mullah Mustafa, and as soon as a disagreement between the two sides emerged, the latter could simply take over the party with his armed men and expel Ibrahim Ahmed and his followers.

However, the Kurdish uprising that started in 1961 and continued intermittently until 1975 had deeper consequences on the social structure of the region. The Iraqi army deployed repressive measures and scorched-earth tactics that created continuous waves of rural refugees to the Kurdish towns, adding to the ongoing structural process of urbanization. All of Iraq was going through a tumultuous growth accelerated by the post-1973 oil boom and accompanied by a generalized decline of agriculture. In 1977, the urban population of the Kurdish region reached almost 50 percent.<sup>61</sup> Once they had moved to the towns, rural refugees tended to lose their tribal identity. As Kurdish historian Fared Assasard explains, *'In the 1970s tribalism wasn't a significant force, [...] the heads of the tribes were respected, but people would not particularly listen to them or follow them.'*<sup>62</sup> The rural migrants could be more easily politicized over issues of employment, basic services, or the brutality of the Iraqi security forces. These concerns were understood by several leftist political organizations that were mushrooming in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Kurdistan, as in much of the world. Moreover, after 1975, there was a widespread belief among urbanized Kurds that the defeat of the movement had been largely due to its tribal and reactionary character.

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<sup>60</sup> One of example of this trend is Kamran Karadaghi, a Kurdish student in Baghdad in the 1950s, for whom the ICP represented the only option for progressive activism. Karadaghi fell victim to the anti-communist repression of 1961 and fled to the Soviet Union, where he completed his studies. Upon his return to Iraq, in the early 1970s, the ICP was a marginal political actor and Karadaghi became active in the Kurdish national movement. Author Interview with Kamran Karadaghi, London, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> (2012) *Iraq Population Situation Analysis Report 2012* (Iraq National Population Commission and UNFPA) <[http://iraq.unfpa.org/publications/cat\\_view/1-documents-english](http://iraq.unfpa.org/publications/cat_view/1-documents-english)>, p. 97, accessed 16 March, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Author Interview with Fared Assasard, Sulaymaniyah, 2018.

Qadir Haji Ali, at the time a high school student and leftist activist in Sulaymaniyah, recalls: ‘*Our problem with the [KDP] was that it was a tribal party, the aghas and the shaykhs were with them.*’<sup>63</sup>

These deeper transformations constituted the underlying social conditions for the establishment of a Kurdish force alternative to the Barzani-controlled KDP. When the Kurdish revolt collapsed in 1975, Jalal Talabani and other leftist Kurdish leaders took refuge in Syria and, on June 1, established the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The party was formed as ‘a broad democratic and patriotic front that allows the fighting unity and coexistence of the different progressive tendencies under the leadership of a Kurdish revolutionary vanguard.’ The PUK ascribed the collapse of the revolt to ‘the inability of the feudalist, tribalist, bourgeois rightist and capitulationist Kurdish leadership’<sup>64</sup> and proclaimed its commitment to autonomy for the Kurds and democracy for Iraq. The PUK’s foundation in 1975 was a sign of the autonomisation of the urban middle classes in the Kurdish region, evidence that they finally were able to build an alternative political project to that of the tribally-dominated KDP.

## **Conclusion**

Since the beginning of the Kurdish revolt in 1961, the history of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq is largely a story of the interplay between the tribal and landowning elite and the urban middle classes. From that time onwards, the peasantry, a protagonist of the anti-colonial struggle of the 1940s and 1950s, lost its political agency, and, by the 1990s, after decades of continuous warfare – including the genocidal Anfal campaign (1986-1989) – Kurdish rural society had been virtually destroyed.<sup>65</sup> The process of mass urbanization that followed created a very different Kurdish society that by 1991 had come under the control of the KDP and the PUK and was ruled through an

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<sup>63</sup> Author Interview Qadir Haji Ali, Sulaymaniyah, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (1977) *Revolution in Kurdistan: The Essential Documents of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (New York: PUK Publications), p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Watch (1993) *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds*, available online at: [www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1993/iraqanfal](http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1993/iraqanfal), accessed 15 March, 2019.

authoritarian system in many ways not dissimilar from Baathist Iraq. The KDP-PUK duopoly survived a civil war (1994-1998) and the formal recognition of an autonomous Kurdish regional government in post-Baathist Iraq (2005) and is still the ruling ‘coalition.’. Particularly significant is that the tribal elite has continued to play a dominant role despite the profound social and economic transformation of the region. The Barzanis themselves have maintained uninterrupted control of the region’s highest office since 1991. While events of the 1980s and 1990s are not directly relevant to the analysis in this article, some of the most significant characteristics of present-day Kurdish autonomy in Iraq can be traced back to the pivotal 1960s. The structural weakness of the PUK vis-à-vis the KDP, if analyzed within a historical perspective, is rooted in the class structure of the region, one that prevented the urban middle classes from taking the leadership of the nationalist movement, involving the subaltern classes, and building an alternative social bloc. After the liberation of the region in 1991, the PUK was forced to compete with the KDP for the co-optation of tribal leaders and local powerholders including former Ba’ath collaborationists. The Iraqi-Kurdish ruling class forged in the 1990s had a relatively diverse composition, but the dominant presence of tribal chiefs among Iraqi Kurdistan’s wealthiest and most powerful individuals is partly the result of dynamics initiated by the events of 1958-1961.<sup>66</sup>

Kurdish autonomy was the result of a long liberation struggle that this article presents as rooted in class conflicts. The analysis of the structural transformations of Iraq during the colonial and monarchical periods shows that the resurgence of the Kurdish movement in the 1960s cannot be disentangled from the broader social and political history of the country. In particular, it reveals the centrality of the colonial period in the process of class formation that sets the conditions for the Kurdish revolts of the 1960s. The strength of the tribal landowning class became an element of primary importance that forced the other component of the Kurdish movement – the urban and left-leaning nationalists – into a position of subordination. Moreover, the political marginalization of the

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<sup>66</sup> For the formation and composition of the Iraqi Kurdish ruling class, see Nicola Degli Esposti (2021) ‘The 2017 independence referendum and the political economy of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq’, *Third World Quarterly*, 10.1080/01436597.2021.1949978.

peasantry radically sets the history of the Kurdish movement of Iraq apart from that of Turkey. There in the mid-1970s, a group of Kurdish teachers and college dropouts successfully started a Kurdish insurgency centered around the mobilization of the peasantry and inspired by Vietnam's liberation struggle. An insurgency that started in 1979 with an attack against a 'collaborationist' Kurdish landowner to celebrate the founding of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The contrast with the Iraqi Kurdish experience cannot look starker and constitutes the starting point for what still constitutes the most significant divide in Kurdish politics.

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