FROM KURDISTAN TO LONDON AND NASHVILLE: IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF KURDISH CULTURAL IDENTITY IN DIASPORA

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
with a
Major in Anthropology
in the
College of Graduate Studies
University of Idaho
by
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December 2021

Abstract

The Kurdish people are a unique ethnic group whose origins can be traced from the Zagros Mountains in ancient Media (864 BCE), migrating into what is now Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. From the sixth century (CE), Kurds have inhabited the ancient Mesopotamian plains and the highlands of southern Turkey. There are also significant populations of Kurds in Armenia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. For over 2000 years, Kurds have been in an almost perpetual state of conflict throughout the Middle East. In response to numerous incidents of genocide, sectarian violence, and cultural oppression, Kurdish migrants have fled their native lands in three consecutive waves, establishing diasporic communities in nations around the world. This thesis explores Kurdish identity in Kurdistan and within the diasporic communities of London, United Kingdom, and Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A. Interviews with Kurdish emigrants from Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, combined with demographic and quantitative information obtained from an online questionnaire, suggest an identity negotiation that is both fractured and suppressed in Kurdistan; yet rediscovered and emergent in the comparative safety and freedom of diaspora.

Acknowledgements

To my thesis committee, Drs. Warner, Eichner, Putsche, and Kolpan, thank you for your accessibility, encouragement, feedback, and extraordinary mentorship during this very challenging process. I chose very wisely when I selected each of you.

Dedication

This thesis could not have been completed without my *hevalên nû* (new friends); Kurdish residents of London and Nashville who have spent countless hours with me on Zoom calls, shared my survey and project details with friends or family, and encouraged me immeasurably to persevere. Thank you for inviting me into your world, events, homes, and workspaces – for believing in me and this project. I can't adequately thank you enough for all you have given. I waited seventeen years to meet all of you and to produce this work. I hope that it is worthy of your many contributions. Very special thanks to my father, Stephen Fox, whose many supports were both unwavering and absolutely critical, and to members of my UI cohort, Saffron, Sarah, and Maia, for always inspiring me to do better.

To Kurds everywhere, I stand with you.
Ji bo Kurdên li her derê, Ez bi we re me.
پاڵپشتی هەموو کوردێکم لە هەر شوێنێک لە جیهاندا

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

What words, or labels would you choose if you had to succinctly describe the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that make you a unique human being – what constitutes your personal identity? How would you describe what you are in the larger contexts of ethnicity, nationality, or other group affiliations, and what are the attributes that describe your collective identity? The journey you are about to take is as circuitous as the history, migration, and diversity of the Kurdish people. There are no straight lines to Kurdish culture or identity. It is thousands of years of cause-and-effect conditions leading to anything but a homogenous positionality. Much like pinball or billiards, the collisions and resulting inertia of the Kurds and their dynamic identities are not easily quantified, are vastly dependent on several conditions and circumstances, and are beautifully, intricately, and wonderfully messy. I invite the reader to skip to the conclusion in Chapter 6, and then circle back. Please do not consider it cheating. Think of it as a way of orienting yourself on a map – a scholarly "You Are Here." It will make the path less ambiguous and provide signposts for places of interest where a clearer understanding to the negotiation of Kurdish identity can be found.

There are numerous tales of a supernatural or mythical rise of the Kurdish people. One such fable concerns the legend of Zahak. According to Kurdish folklore, Zahak was a tyrant who had snakes growing from his shoulders. This was a congenital deformity, which physicians were unable to cure. The story suggests that Satan appeared to Zahak, promising him that he would be cured if he fed the snakes attached to him with the brains of two young people each day. The executioner who was tasked with providing the brains would show mercy to some victims, sparing one each day and substituting a sheep's brains for the other. The survivors were smuggled to the safety of the mountains, where they became the founders of a new people – the Kurds (Bulloch and Morris 1992).

Virtually every society and culture on earth has their own origin story. I suggest that the Zahak story represents more than the genesis of a new people. Given the relationship the Kurdish people have had among other Middle Eastern nations, the story is arguably as metaphorical as it is mythological. Multiple genocidal campaigns, national policies intended to erase every trace of Kurdish culture, insufficient foreign policy protections, and betrayal by western governments echo the devouring of identity and the negation of personhood in the

legend of Zahak. Undeniably, the physical bodies of Kurdish people have been under siege since their first days, but also their minds. Language, traditions, attitudes, values, and beliefs are all reflective of shared cognitive constructions of self (Swaab et al., 2016). Kurdish people exist in a world that violently oppresses them, yet in spite of all obstacles, no matter how violent or egregious, Kurds have endured and flourished. Surviving some of the worst cruelty that humanity is capable of – it is not surprising that Kurds maintain a warrior mentality and that their ethos has become deeply rooted in principles of fairness, balance, and equity.

At the time of this writing, the world has been contending with a global pandemic for more than a year. Travel between the United States and EU nations has been significantly restricted. My scheduled visits to London and Nashville were canceled by the British government and the airlines due to high rates of COVID-19 transmission and corresponding mitigation measures enacted by public health agencies. Though I am finding my way through this research using every technological option available, I am frustrated by the absence of a traditional ethnographic experience. It has been a significant challenge to connect with people far away; to create rapport, build trust, and be able to ask them to either complete a questionnaire or consent to a lengthy interview with someone they have never met regarding topics that can evoke deeply unpleasant memories. Throughout this work, I have been mindful of the immense loss of life due to COVID, the economic hardship, social and political division, and considerable uncertainty being felt around the world. As grateful as I am to be relatively safe from this virus, virtual meetings and surveys are not a complete substitute for the emic perspective of ethnographic fieldwork. Nevertheless, there are a variety of advantages and opportunities for accessing meetings and discussions that may have otherwise been unavailable to me. Although it is unfortunate to have been forced to conduct all the research for this project in virtual spaces, I would still choose to include some of these methods in a future project that permitted me to be physically present.

Though not an entirely new concept, virtual ethnographic research may become more commonplace in response to biological, political, or social conditions preventing anthropologists from physically accessing the communities they study. If there is a recipe for success in virtual research, the first ingredient must surely be a combination of humbleness and shameless persistence, followed by a heaping measure of creative thinking and

adaptability. Geographic distance creates an even greater reliance on the support and effort of other people. The development of real relationships in virtual environments, particularly intercultural relationships, requires cultural competence, humility, honesty, patience, and consistent nurturing. Physical distance, cultural and linguistic barriers, and significant time-zone differences are problematic. The inclusion of a global pandemic further tests one's resolve and problem-solving skills. While readers of this thesis are primarily meant to gain understandings of Kurdish identity, I have included details of my adaptation to changing conditions, and the completion of this project using virtual methods in Chapter Two, "Methods & Virtual Ethnography." I hope future scholars will find my experiences useful as they plan and implement their own research design – to improve in areas where I may have fallen short or would have made different choices in retrospect.

This research also lays a foundation for my future work. Over the last five years, I have had the privilege of meeting many Kurdish people whom I now consider to be close friends. These relationships, while certainly valuable for my research, are far more important to me personally. Though I am prevented from living within the communities I am studying at this time, I am undeterred from my primary objective; documenting and reporting Kurdish culture, Kurdish identity negotiation as a process, and the lived experiences of Kurdish people accurately and holistically. I will expose some narratives imposed on Kurds by dominant regional cultures or oppressive regimes who either deny their existence outright, or otherwise seek to erase any trace of them. Even scholarly work on Kurds often asks questions or presents conclusions that suggest biases, or perhaps simply a preference for the narrative of a victim or a classic tragedy.

The Kurdish Question

One of the most common topics for public consumption about Kurds is known as, "The Kurdish Question." That question is essentially, should Kurds control a bordered, sovereign state? Part of this question's import relates to the idea that nationalism, ethnicity, and our cultural spaces are deeply connected to the negotiation and development of identity. Many Kurdish people have suggested to me that there many other questions that concerns them. One of my respondents explained:

> Whenever people research on Kurds, it's always along the lines of, you know, should Kurds have statehood? Do they deserve independence? But nothing really about the dynamics of what makes us the way we are. Why are we so scattered? Why have we relocated? So this…your research… is definitely something that's going to be very important in understanding the trajectory of Kurds everywhere (Rezan 2020)

The trajectory of Kurds everywhere. The phrase struck me as being significant. Kurdish people have developed substantial diasporic communities all over the world. Why? How did they get there, and why did they move? What does relocation, perhaps more accurately, forced migration do *for*, or *to* their identities? What does it mean to be Kurdish, and does it mean the same thing in Kurdistan as it does in London or Nashville? Is there anything resembling homogeneity among people who identify as Kurdish? Perhaps more central to the process of identity negotiation, what are key elements that either unify or divide Kurdish people from themselves and others?

The Kurds have been victimized by any standard of measurement, and as narratives regularly recount, they have endured centuries of tragedy and betrayal. I make note of these events, but not as a stopping point. I do suggest that the arc of development of Kurdish individual and collective identity cannot be substantively understood without a nuanced understanding of how past and present struggles have forged who Kurds are. Though it is not possible to extricate the negotiation of Kurdish identity from the traumas they have endured, I believe my research demonstrates that Kurds identify themselves as significantly more than victims. An entirely different ethos becomes evident from my interviews of Kurds from all four parts of Kurdistan. I believe it to be foundational to Kurdish worldview; a culturally and generationally transmitted "operating system" for how Kurds experience life in Kurdistan and in diasporic communities. One has to wonder if Zahak's snakes could be represented by Tayyip Erdoğon, Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, the Sykes-Picot agreement, the Treaty of Lausanne, insufficient foreign policy, and Donald Trump? However, there are tens of millions of Kurds in the world today. They are the largest ethnic group in the world without a sovereign, independent state (Gunter 2019). Though it is an important aspect of Kurdish history, the issue of statehood largely ignores what are arguably the most important pieces of the Kurdish question; Kurdish culture and identity. "This is unfortunate for the Kurds most of all, since their fate may ultimately depend on their ability to convince the world that, contrary

to the assertions of the states where they live, they have a valid and mature identity of their own which needs to be recognized (Kreyenbrock and Allison 1996, 1). My research does formally recognize Kurdish identity in Kurdistan and in the diaspora, an identity which both needs and deserves to be acknowledged and protected.

The negotiation of identity – personal, ethnic, cultural, etc. – is complex and dynamic. Who we are and how we fit into our family, our community, our nation, and the world is the subject of rigorous study. From early in our childhood, we begin to notice differences between ourselves and other members of our immediate family. As we mature and our awareness expands, we recognize that we look and believe differently from people who identify with different groups or cultures. We speak different languages. We affiliate with different religions or no religion. We are members of different social classes. Our worldview and identities are deeply informed by the environment in which we live. *Environment* includes criteria such as location, generation, history, and socioeconomic status (Reyes 2014). Anthropology, sociology, social psychology, and other disciplines all seek to explain how we arrive at the answer to one of life's most fundamental questions; "Who am I?"

This research explores the environments in which Kurdish identity is formed, both in Kurdistan and in two distinct diasporic communities. There is little consensus even among Kurds, of a precise definition for what *Kurdishness* is. I suggest that it is not possible to condense Kurdish identity into short blurbs. Kurdish identity is profoundly conditional and contextual. However, every Kurdish person I interviewed gave the same answer for the question, "What is most important to you about your Kurdish identity?" Each respondent quickly answered, "Language." I submit there are explanations grounded in theory for the both the variances and the similarities in answers. Many of these variances create obstacles and instability for Kurds in the Middle East, while conversely playing a significant unifying role in the diaspora. In Chapter Three, "History," considerable effort is made to provide historic details central to contemporary Kurdish identity, and analysis of the relationship between modern Kurds and the hegemonic ethnic groups in Kurdistan which are formative to identity negotiation. In succeeding chapters, I present descriptions of social, geographic, political, religious, linguistic, and national differences among Kurds in Kurdistan. The results of my analysis suggest the emergence of Kurdish identity in diasporic communities that is

suppressed in Kurdistan. This identity appears to be forged through shared experiences – most often forced migration, into diasporic communities which then provide a stable environment for identity construction and agreement (Reyes 2014; De Rouen 2015).

Appendix C includes bar graphs and pie charts utilizes demographic and quantitative data to represent men, women, and children who shared their lived experiences of escape, of tremendous personal risk, of building a new life in a new country, and a journey of self-discovery. These are the survival stories of many Kurdish individuals and families. The examination of some of this data is in some respects a sanitized account of extraordinary people who have overcome obstacles few people will ever have to contemplate, let alone endure. Personal interviews recall the experiences of children escaping from Iraq into desolate camp sites in Turkey where it was illegal to speak their language. My research also documents how some Kurdish refugees are transported by *qeçaxçî* (smuggler), pronounced, "ka-kak-see." The qeçaxçî are similar to Mexican traffickers known as "Coyotes" who, for significant sums of money, smuggle Kurdish refugees into Turkey through Greece into Italy, and sometimes to London or Nashville where Kurdish asylum seekers have become citizens and established vibrant communities. In some cases, interviewees or participants for my survey received assistance through U.N. programs or NGO's that cooperated with either the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) or U.K. Visas and Immigration in order to emigrate to their new countries.

It may seem counterintuitive to use Turkey, a country at the heard of Kurdish oppression, as an escape route from the Middle East. Although the topic begins to diverge from the scope of this paper, the relationships, and alliances between nations in the region and around the world are wholly relevant to historic, present, and future Kurdish life in Kurdistan. Due to the lack of formal diplomatic relationships between Iran, Syria, and many western governments, Turkey remains the most commonly used egress route. Since 1952 Turkey has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO is a political and military alliance between thirty EU and North American nations. For reasons that exceed the scope of this research, in spite of Turkey's history of violence and oppression against Armenians, Kurds, and other groups, Turkey maintains a complicated relationship with the United States and other NATO nations. Iran and Syria are not members of NATO. Also, much like Turkey, Ba'athist regimes in Syria under Bashar al Assad and in Iraq under Saddam Hussein have

waged genocidal campaigns against Kurds in the region. This has largely left Turkey as the primary path of escape for many Kurds.

To protect the anonymity of my informants, I have changed their names, selecting from an online database of popular Kurdish names instead (momjunction.com). I took care to not anglicize the names of the people who shared their experiences with me; selecting names with meanings that reflected something about my impressions of them. I am mindful of my responsibility as a researcher to report my findings accurately and without bias. To that end, I must also be completely transparent about my deep respect and affection for every single Kurdish person who contributed to this project, and for Kurdish culture generally. It is my sincerest hope that this project reflects what is true of Kurds, who have endured the very worst of what human beings are capable of, rising to build dynamic, productive communities. This research will demonstrate an emergence of a Kurdish identity – suppressed by discrimination, sectarian violence, and lack of recognition in their home countries – fully revealed in flourishing multicultural diasporic communities.

Theoretical Position

French Sociologist, Émile Durkheim, developed the theory of Structural Functionalism. Durkheim suggested that structures – among which are institutions, relationships, roles, and norms are symbolic – provide meaning and create solidarity. People form agreement over the meanings of these societal structures. The cohesion created over ideas and structures, provides the foundation for societies to develop. Structures are indispensable for the continued existence and maintenance of society because the strength of a society is built on our social agreement. Shared ideas, values, and beliefs – a collective consciousness – shapes behaviors, norms, and social integration. To be clear, Durkheim viewed group agreement (salience) to identity markers such as race, ethnicity, language, religion, socioeconomic status, class, traditions, material culture, etc., as being foundational to the formation of identity. Integration and commitment to a group, our social identity, gives meaning to our individual identities. According to Durkheim, intragroup solidarity creates shared meanings for traditions, beliefs, and behaviors which then give rise to individual identity (Durkheim; Paoletti 2012).

The Kurds have few allies for autonomy or sovereignty among either Middle Eastern or western nations. In fact, Kurds are not often recognized as a distinct ethnic group at all. As of 2020, neither the United States nor United Kingdom census forms have included the option for claiming Kurdish ethnicity. In 2020, the U.S. census provided an "other" category, permitting Kurdish citizens the option to write in their selection. The lack of formal identification of Kurdish ethnicity on census forms not only complicates an accurate assessment of Kurdish populations, but also negates Kurdish identity. Furthermore, the lack of state or institutional recognition of Kurdishness outside of Kurdistan essentially forms a tacit agreement with Kurdish oppressors. Turks, Persians, and Arabs alike have long insisted that Kurds are merely rebellious Turkish, Syrian, Iranian, or Iraqi nomads who have coalesced into tribes. From a purely genetic standpoint, there is merit to this assertion, but it is irrelevant to the recognition of cultural distinction and ethnic identity.

Historically, Kurds in some regions of Kurdistan have led nomadic lifeways. Kurds have always intermarried, producing offspring who could be technically considered bi-ethnic. However, bi-ethnic Kurdish people in the Middle East are essentially impossible to differentiate from the rest of the population. From the context of observable physical characteristics (phenotype), Middle Eastern people share many dominant physical traits. However, it is not skin tone, eye, or hair color and texture that divide Kurds from other Middle Eastern ethnic groups, or from other Kurds for that matter. The notion that Kurds have not developed into a unique ethnic group is patently false. While race and ethnicity were once considered genetic markers, it is now rather uniformly accepted as a social construction rather than biological. In that light, a social constructionist theory of ethnic identity has been applied to inform my conclusion that Kurds are a distinct ethnic group.

Social constructionism makes three general assertions: 1) What we "know" is socially constructed and derived from our human relationships and interactions. Our lived-experiences, exposure to food, clothing, ideas, beliefs, traditions, behaviors, and language significantly shapes our social and individual identities. 2) Language is fundamental to social construction. Language helps us describe and understand our world. Therefore, language cannot be neutral because meaning is informed by the community in which we live and is inextricably tethered to our consciousness, ideologies, and assessment of our reality. 3) What

we "know" is politically driven. Every culture creates beliefs that are filtered through unique cultural lenses. Members of the same community share an understanding and acceptance of particular truths, values, and realities (Berger and Luckman 1966; Gergen 2011). It is foundational in the process of constructing identity to first have agreement – collective acceptance of your personhood. At the risk of sounding silly or something other than scholarly, in order to evaluate the negotiation of Kurdish identity, as a first step, it is imperative to state rather emphatically that Kurds exist.

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* made use of ideas first proposed by Émile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead. Durkheim focused on religion as a foundational structure of society. He asserted that societies coalesce around shared ideas and traditions, most particularly religious ideas. Mead determined that the individual mind; the concept of the self and individual identity arises out of a social process (framework). Mead's framework posited a formula "Society shapes self, shapes social behavior" (Stryker and Burke 2000, 285). These theories, combined with their own research led Berger and Luckman to conclude, "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product" (Berger & Luckman 1966, 213). Humans have constructed group identities (races and ethnicities) reflecting shared physical and cultural traits such as skin color, hair texture, eye color, geographic location, religious affiliation, language, traditions, material culture, and lineage. Kurdish people are indeed a unique ethnic group, but *identity* is an entirely different thing.

The concept of identity has been the subject of significant contemporary discussion and analysis. Consequently, there are many theories that seek to understand and describe the meaning of identity, the formation of identity, and the expression of identity among both individuals and groups. This research evaluates the negotiation of Kurdish identity as a process from shared lived experiences in Kurdistan, to permanent settlement in diasporic communities in London and Nashville. I will incorporate elements of Social Constructionism, Identity Theory (IT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) to that end. For some, it may seem unusual to have selected theories associated with Social Psychology as a means the evaluate ethnographic research. I want to provide some foundation for the process I used to make my selection; to explain why I believe no existing singular theory is sufficient, and why an interdisciplinary approach to my topic is warranted. Kurds are not a monolithic group.

Kurdishness is messy in terms of the complexity of diverse cultural spaces, linguistics, competing interests, internecine conflict, affiliation, expression, and personal identification.

There are four components to Identity Theory:

1) *Culturally prescribed meanings:* Material culture (clothing, architecture, music, art, cuisine, etc.) reflects shared meanings, style, and traditions that are unique to specific ethnic groups. Strong affiliation (identity salience) and solidarity are created through shared cultural meaning.
2) *Individual perception of meanings:* Not limited to the collective (shared meaning), individuals within a group develop deeply personal connections to expressions of culture and tradition. This further strengthens identity salience and affiliation to a group.
3) *The comparator:* In the simplest sense, people recognize differences between themselves and others. We compare ourselves to others aesthetically and behaviorally. We develop preferences for our own cultural practices and may also create hierarchies in terms of status or class based on our biases.
4) *Individual behavior and activity:* The regular practice of unique culture solidifies our affiliation to a group, is transmitted generationally to our offspring, and becomes recognizable as representative of our group, both to members and non-members of a group (Stryker and Burke 2000).

These four components do not operate in all environments. The negotiation of identity involves both an internal and an external process. Externally, an identity is able to develop when there is collective confirmation or recognition that a unique identity exists. People tend to form groups with shared attitudes, values, beliefs, language, religious affiliation, etc. Internally, self-validation of personal identity develops in an environment that permits actions and behaviors associated with that affiliation, such as speaking one's own language, wearing traditional clothing, etc. Since there is little confirmation or agreement (self-validation) for Kurdish identity in the Middle East, in some cases it is possible that according to Identity Theory, Kurds are finally able to fully realize their identity in diaspora. The performance of Kurdish rituals and activities *as* Kurds gives meaning to *being* Kurdish. Kurds identify as

Kurds throughout Kurdistan, but they are often not permitted to behave as Kurds or to fully connect to any specific sense of self, group, or place.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that a *social identity* is a person's awareness that they belong to or are a member of a unique social group. Members of a social group share similarities in language, traditions, values, and beliefs. According to SIT, we categorize people who are similar to us as an "in-group," while others who are different are considered to be an "out-group" through a two-part process: self-categorization, and social comparison (Stets and Burke 2000). Self-categorization results in the "accentuation" of perceived similarities, cohesion, and solidarity with other members of the in-group, and contrasting differences among members of an out-group. Social comparisons are selective, subjective judgements regarding the attributes we associate with our unique group affiliation resulting in enhanced self-esteem. The process may also result in negative judgements for differences between in-groups and out-groups (Stets and Burke 2000).

Given the rather unique relationship Kurdish people have among other cultures within Kurdistan, it is difficult to evaluate the negotiation of their identity using a singular theory. While this may be true for other cultures as well, I suggest that it is particularly complicated vis-a-vis Kurds. Social constructionism provides an effective lens with which to begin to understand Kurdishness in Kurdistan. From the Kurds' point of view, their shared lived experiences in the region, history and folklore, material culture, traditions, values, beliefs, and even their unique languages (although Kurdish is not a single language) create solidarity with respect to self-identification. Furthermore, oppression against Kurds and the free expression of their culture is widespread throughout the Middle East, creating a powerful sense of self and cohesion among all Kurds – even if they speak different dialects, are living in different countries, or affiliate with competing political parties.

Identity Theory further unpacks the process of self-identification among Kurdish people. Strong identity salience is forged through the deeply held affiliation and meaning of Kurdish language, clothing, music, cuisine, and other traditions. Forced suppression of their language and cultural expressions have only further solidified the Kurds' collective resolve to survive, endure, and rebel against their oppressors. As Kurds are "othered" by hegemonic cultures in the region, the perceived differences (The Comparator) between Kurds and other

groups in Kurdistan establishes deeply held preferences for their own culture and traditions. Even in the presence of significant discrimination, one interviewee, “Irem” described, “Yeah, (redacted) is home, but something deep with it. It's pulling me towards (redacted). As in the smells. I miss the smells…I miss…even the people who mistreated me or I didn't like that much or whatever…I miss the smell in the air. I miss the seasons. Yeah, flavors, a lot of things “(Irem 2020).

The performance of Kurdish culture in Kurdistan has often been met with severe sanctions or punishment. Nevertheless, Kurds have resolved to preserve their own language and traditions, no matter the consequence. Neither Saddam Hussein’s, nor Tayyip Erdogan’s genocidal campaigns caused people to deny their Kurdish heritage. Kurds did in fact, find creative ways to rebel. In an interview, Soran shared:

> …they were broadcasting a one-hour Kurdish language and the Kurdish language was only songs and stuff like that. So during a week, there were some certain days that they were playing some of Sivan Perwer’s music and everybody was getting around to the radio, (to) get his spot. Have in the bedroom playing their radio and everybody was kind of getting ready for that moment that they can listen to Sivan Perwer. And…I remember there were, my dad used to lock the doors…and every family used to lock the doors and windows…make sure none of the…Iraqi Secret Service may be around, or one of their military soldiers can listen to this music… because the consequence of listening to Sivan Perwer back then was just hanging them in the public (Soran 2020).

Music – the free expression of Kurdish language, Kurdish ideas, Kurdish traditions, and Kurdish emotions is just one-way Kurds have continued to behave as Kurds, and to preserve their culture from generation to generation. The transmission of language and material culture to the next generation of Kurds, even if they had to be sequestered in their homes to do it, assured the survival of Kurdish culture, strengthening both individual and collective cohesion. No matter which of the four nations of Kurdistan they were from or were residing in, it was clearly “us vs them” with respect to self-identification and affiliation. Regardless of difference or internecine tensions, Kurds identify as Kurds in all parts of Kurdistan. A strong sense of belonging exists among all Kurds. The awareness of self in juxtaposition to “other” is rather intense in an environment where you can be publicly executed for performing your ethnic identity – for simply *being* your authentic self. Where Identity Theory falls a bit short to illustrate Kurdish identity negotiation is the lack of external validation. As previously

mentioned, there is little support for the existence of Kurds as a unique ethnic group in the Middle East. Options for Kurdish self-identification in diasporic communities has, until very recently, also been unavailable. Theories of identity rather necessarily assume that there is collective agreement that something does exist in order to formally label or identify it as such. I suggest that the incorporation of elements from Social Identity Theory create a more effective lens with which to evaluate Kurdish identity negotiation.

According to Social Identity Theory, identity begins at the point of awareness of our own language, values, beliefs, etc. as they contrast with others. It does not require agreement from others, per se. There is no negation of self-identification externally, as it is derived by a process of self-categorization and social comparison to others. Deeply held affiliations to shared languages and lived experiences, the struggle for recognition and acceptance, shared meaning of music, traditions, clothing, food, and apparently memorable scents create both a clear in-group and out-group – Kurds, and non-Kurds. In-group and out-group dynamics can be adversarial, competitive, and even violent as people tend to form biases and hierarchies that preference their own group affiliation over others. Such is the case between Kurds and non-Kurds in Kurdistan. A long history of adversarial relationships with dominant cultures in the Middle East has been very effective at stifling Kurdish identity. However, it is plausible that differences and tensions among Kurds themselves has been even more potent. Internecine conflict between Kurds from warring political parties and nations has not only prevented the type of unity required to govern a sovereign Kurdish homeland, but also the cohesion necessary for effective identity negotiation. Kurdish identity in Kurdistan is fractured through difference and competing interests. Sources of division are outlined in greater detail in Chapter 4, “Kurdistan – Borders Divide Identities.”

Chapter 2: METHODS AND VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

As a student of anthropology, the anticipation of conducting fieldwork for my thesis has been building for years. Fieldwork is the cornerstone for all four sub-fields of anthropology. The notion of developing a substantial ethnographic project without fully immersing oneself within a community feels incomplete, if not counterintuitive. Nevertheless, the arrival of a global pandemic at the same time that I was to conduct my field research was, to put it mildly, unfortunate. The conditions of the world changed enormously between January and March 2020, and I had no choice but to change with it. My original ideas, plans, hopes, and research design were upended, giving way to ethnographic research that was almost completely dependent on available technologies and other people. Without question, the most critical aspect of this project has been the assistance I have received from Kurdish people, none of whom have ever met me in person. Due to the prohibition of travel and gathering, I have made exhaustive use of digital libraries, video conferencing software and websites, social media platforms, virtual conferences, and cell phone applications to gather data. Many of the images featured in this document reflect the virtual and digital nature of my research.

It is difficult to imagine what the world would be like without the internet. Over the last twenty years, people have increasingly relied on the World Wide Web for commercial and social purposes. According to Internet World Stats, as of March 2021, 65.6% of the world's population is connected to the internet (internetworldstats.com). There are more than six billion smart phone subscriptions, connecting users to one another through commerce and social media all around the world (statista.com). Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter combined support nearly four and a half billion members on their platforms (statista.com). Despite the access to people and places through websites, video conferencing, and social media, I was concerned about the potential inaccuracy of virtual ethnographic research. It did not seem plausible to replicate the emic perspective and cultural understanding that are achievable through traditional fieldwork, using only virtual methods. Additionally, the prohibition of gathering in groups due to COVID-19 mitigation measures further challenged my ability to evaluate the way Kurdish identity is publicly demonstrated either in Kurdistan or the diaspora.

Despite the obvious limitations, the internet provides opportunities for research that are not possible to duplicate through conventional means. Simply put, you cannot be in two places at the same time, unless you have an internet connection. The ubiquity of internet users, and the restrictions created by a global pandemic demonstrate just how valuable of a tool virtual ethnographic research can be. Although the traditional performance of in-person field work may be preferable in some contexts, the use of surveys and video conferencing can provide legitimate qualitative and quantitative data for ethnographic work (Crichton and Kinash 2003; Hine 2000). Virtual spaces such as social media permit not only the ability to negate physical distance limitations, but also time constraints. User posts are archived and accessible in perpetuity, allowing the review and comparison of communications over months and years. Therefore, "an ethnographer's engagement can occur after the events with which they engage happened for participants. Ethnographer and participants no longer need to share the same time frame" (Hine 2000, 22-23). Not limited to textual communications, social media platforms include video posting capability. It is possible to observe events happening around the world, in real time. Some regions of the world are dangerous due to social or political conflicts, war, weather events, etc. The ubiquity of cell phones and video cameras permit ethnographers to access these spaces in safety.

Among the potential pitfalls of virtual research are arguably also assets for internet users: identity falsification and anonymity. The assurance of authenticity using virtual methods suggests the need for additional verification of sources and information (Angelone 2018). Online message boards and social media platforms often include member profiles which can be reviewed. In some cases, extensive biographic information is included in member profiles, along with personal photographs and videos. Access to personal information is often limited to members of websites or platforms who approve each other's request to connect. Businesses and organizations often feature information that is publicly accessible. Nevertheless, there are ethical considerations from the use of virtual spaces that may be more extensive than traditional fieldwork. Social media can provide access to the family, friends, and business associates of a person or community. Not only can a repository of a person's history be easily found in text messages, but also photographic documentation of personal experiences and "check ins" that provide a record of where a person has traveled, shopped, eaten, or engaged in any number of social or cultural events. In virtual environments, it is

important not only to protect the anonymity of informants, but also others who have not given informed consent to participate in research or are underage (Steinmetz 2012).

This chapter will detail my research methods and uses of technology, my successes, my failures, feedback I have received, and things I would do differently if I had to conduct this project again from the beginning. Virtual ethnography is a vastly different approach to cultural anthropology, and my thesis reflects those differences.

Interviews

I conducted a total of ten in-depth personal interviews with Kurdish emigrants in London and Nashville using Zoom or Skype. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for patterns and themes. These themes included: place of birth, native language, route of egress from their place of birth to either London or Nashville, occupation, level of education, religious affiliation, personal experience with oppression, discrimination, or sectarian violence, ideas for needed improvement in Kurdistan and in their new home countries, etc. In advance of the interviews, I provided a list of introductory questions (Appendix A). It was important for me to convey to my interviewees that they were in complete control of the interview's length and scope. I wanted them to know what general questions I would be asking in advance, and to inform them that their answers would elicit additional questions for clarification and deeper reflection. I hoped that being transparent about the interview questions would help diminish any uncertainty or anxiety they may have had, and feedback I received suggested it was effective in that aim. It was often surprising how candid the participants of my interviews were. Some topics were either political in nature or recounted unpleasant events and memories. I made sure to explain that anything that was shared would be kept completely confidential and transcripts of the interviews would be stored on secure university servers. Additionally, any and all identifying information in the interview transcripts would be redacted, and that I would create pseudonyms to reference their contributions in my thesis. I was able to derive qualitative and quantitative data through personal interviews and a questionnaire. It was my intention to interview officials at the United States Citizens and Immigration Services (USCIS), the UK Visas and Immigration Agency, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide additional data on national policies and procedures for immigration, along with available

resources for refugees seeking asylum from war zones. I found it to be far more effective to review information available from each of the organizations websites, along with published information on immigration policy from usa.gov and gov.uk because many United States and United Kingdom government offices have either been totally locked down or were marginally staffed due to COVID-19 mitigation measures. As such, multiple attempts to reach immigration officials either by phone or email to conduct an interview were unproductive. I suspect the lack of response is either due to dearth of available staff, disinterest from those who receive correspondence, a low urgency request, or a combination of all three. It is worth mentioning that there were likely clearances and protocols for speaking with me which might

have prevented a formal interview. There are many things we are unable to control when we are fully dependent on software, internet connectivity, and the schedules/willingness/acceptance of other people living in different time zones, but there is one certainty with respect to virtual ethnography: be prepared to adapt. Develop a strategy, but make sure your strategy includes either revamping or totally scrapping your first ideas if they are not producing results. In the event a once-a-century novel virus happens to prevent you from traveling abroad or even leaving your home, it may be necessary to develop several contingency plans. Deadlines are often unforgiving; it helps to be flexible and stay productive.

Interview Transcription

Lengthy interviews can be difficult to transcribe and are very time consuming. There are tools available for transcription which make it faster and easier to convert a two-hour conversation to a text document. Google provides an audio-to-text application, which is workable for small projects, but I found lacking for the type of product necessary for my research. I selected www.otter.ai for my transcription processing. Otter charges a monthly service fee, but it is surprisingly affordable. My Zoom and Skype interviews were recorded, then converted to an audio file. Once the audio file is rendered, it may then be uploaded to the Otter account for transcription. Otter provides options to select the preferred document format desired for the completed transcripts: doc, pdf, txt, etc. Time stamps and speaker identifiers

are optional tools that help to organize the transcript more clearly. Keywords from the interview are automatically displayed at the top of the completed transcript.

Once Otter finishes rendering the transcript, the detailed work begins. Most transcription software does not recognize all words, particularly words in other languages, and the names of cities and people from foreign countries; different accents can also throw it off. Often the software will insert the closest possible match to a word or sound, meaning it is necessary to thoroughly compare the completed transcript with the audio file and make corrections, of which there will be many. Some might ask, "why bother using the software at all?" I found that it takes four to six hours to accurately transcribe a two-hour interview manually. Otter generates a significant amount of correct dialogue transcription and editing can be completed within the application. Corrections are made as you listen along to the audio file. Sometimes, it was necessary to research the correct spelling of names and places. Using the transcription software, it was possible to transcribe a two-hour interview in approximately three to three and a half hours, significantly reducing the time I spent transcribing.

Once the transcript is completed, the text is carefully coded. Figure 2.1 is a sample of a coded document, using highlighted text to separate information. The coding process requires a detailed reading and then re-reading of the transcript. Annotations are made to organize the text into themes. There are many styles and methods of coding that can be used to organize information from text. Among other things, the scope of a research project, the length of an interview, and the type of data being gathered will help determine the best system of coding to use. I selected different colored highlighting of the text to indicate specific themes (e.g., discrimination, route of egress from Kurdistan,

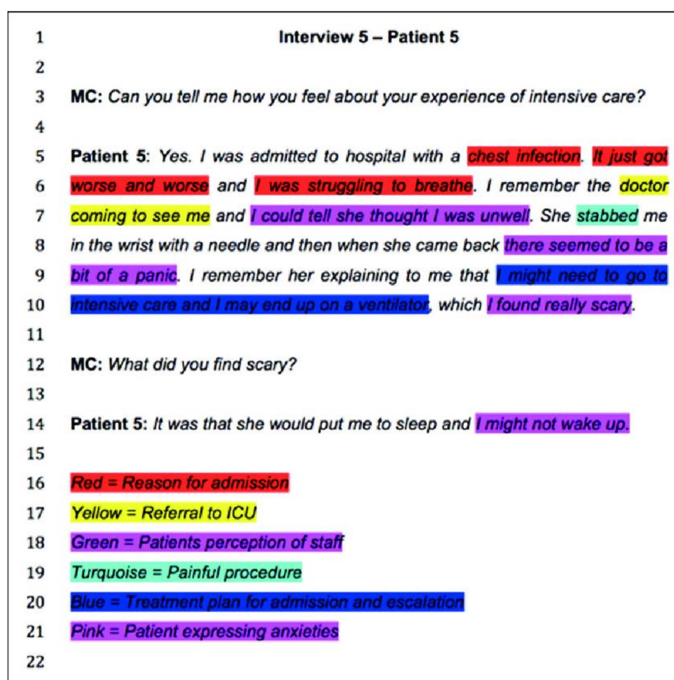
1 **Interview 5 – Patient 5**
2
3 **MC:** *Can you tell me how you feel about your experience of intensive care?*
4
5 **Patient 5**: *Yes. I was admitted to hospital with a chest infection. It just got*
6 *worse and worse and I was struggling to breathe. I remember the doctor*
7 *coming to see me and I could tell she thought I was unwell. She stabbed me*
8 *in the wrist with a needle and then when she came back there seemed to be a*
9 *bit of a panic. I remember her explaining to me that I might need to go to*
10 *intensive care and I may end up on a ventilator, which I found really scary.*
11
12 **MC:** *What did you find scary?*
13
14 **Patient 5:** *It was that she would put me to sleep and I might not wake up.*
15
16 *Red = Reason for admission*
17 *Yellow = Referral to ICU*
18 *Green = Patients perception of staff*
19 *Turquoise = Painful procedure*
20 *Blue = Treatment plan for admission and escalation*
21 *Pink = Patient expressing anxieties*
22

Figure 2.1 Sample Coded Transcript

geographic locations), topics (e.g., language, Kurdish cultural tradition, family), patterns (e.g., preferences, reasons for emigrating, sources of conflict), and quantitative data (e.g., age, gender, country of origin). A key was created to label which highlighter color represented each element I wanted to identify for further research.

Questionnaire

In addition to significant review of existing research, literature, and personal interviews, data was collected through a sample size of fifty-three questionnaires. I surveyed thirty-four males and nineteen females from Kurdish communities at two site locations: London, United Kingdom, and Nashville, Tennessee. There was a total of twenty-three respondents living in Nashville, and thirty living in London. The survey also provided opportunities for participants to expand on questions by entering personal experiences and opinions into text boxes. My reasoning was that both quantitative and qualitative information could be derived from a single survey; an attempt to circumvent my lack of in-person observations or at least to supplement the volume of information I would otherwise collect during an interview. My original plan was to collect one hundred completed surveys; fifty from each site location. I hoped to receive many more than one hundred, as I would be sharing the link on social media pages and web platforms with thousands of followers. Table 2.1 reflects "Yes" answers to question #17 from the survey ("Is there anything you would like to share but was not asked on this questionnaire?") and reflects the type of information I was able to obtain by hybridizing the design of my survey. It should be noted that I would not duplicate this survey design if I were to repeat this project. One member of my thesis committee advised me to "narrow the borders" of my research in order to focus more clearly on the scope of my project. Although I was able to derive some compelling information from my survey, its design was difficult for participants to navigate and overreaching in terms of the information it was seeking. If I were to create a new survey, the questions would reflect narrower borders, as advised by my committee.

Table 1: Questionnaire. Question number 17, Yes response.

I came twice with tourist visa then later I got a work permit
I went through different countries and stayed in Germany as I had relatives there. After a few months I paid a lorry driver who took me to the U.K as my life was in danger in Turkey. I claimed asylum but while waiting I met my wife and applied on the grounds of marriage.
Here I see myself as a second-class citizen, people here are treated much better than me even if I pay tax like everyone, I don't feel supported by government
Corruption of both Talabani\Barzani thugs have reached North America where they are paying low life Kurds to act as pimps and propaganda tools
I've been living in London for almost 27-years, so I feel that the UK is my second home
Finding right ways to integrate without prejudice at the same preservation of your background
We need to be powerful and together, so we should support each other. In addition we should meet sometimes so our children can grow knowing our cultures.
I'm from Italy and have some Kurdish heritage.
That would be great to have online guidance for this immigration and settlement process.
Host country better than my birth country in terms of security and freedom
Were you forced to migrate?, if you had the option to go back would you take it? What tips would you give someone that has just migrated?
The process of migration (forced or unforced) has deep rooted impact on children.
Community centers in host country are not at the expected level
The majority of Kurdish people immigrants came to USA as a refugee, and they've been forced to leave the original countries.

Having introduced the questionnaire to cultural center leaders in both communities, I was given permission to post the survey link on multiple Kurdish group Facebook pages. To further disseminate the survey, I also added links to my Instagram, and Twitter pages. I asked my informants to share the link by text message, social media, or email with their network, family, friends, and coworkers. The numbers of participants slowly increased, but never reached the numbers I hoped to achieve. I routinely sought feedback and assistance from contacts in London and Nashville on how I might increase the number of responses to the survey. I was informed by at least three people that if I had been able to meet in person with a

tablet or laptop, I would have easily collected the number of completed questionnaires I wanted. Surveys are impersonal. The topic of my research is deeply personal, often evoking traumatic memories of life and death circumstances. I believe that the lack of response is not only due to the absence of personal connection with me (considering the topic), but also the questionnaire design. If I were to redo my survey, it would be shorter and would not include text boxes. I would have no more than 10 questions, each with selections the participants could quickly choose from a bulleted list. One of my informants, "Yezda," suggested that I should host frequent live social media broadcasts introducing myself, discussing my research, and posting the survey link. Relationship building, trust, and rapport are a large part of what motivates people to invest their time and energy in sharing their memories and personal information. We rely very heavily on text-based communications today. Emails, text messages, social media posts, and instant messaging are effective at delivering information of

all kinds but can be either insufficient or significant obstacles to building the type of interpersonal relationships required for ethnographic work. Visual communications are able to develop genuine connections with people, either virtually or in person. Seeing faces and hearing voices leads to the subconscious interpretation of verbal and non-verbal cues and messages. Physical and auditory cues are an irreplaceable way human and non-humans create social bonds. Facial expressions, hand gestures, vocal tone, inflection, and body language, are all means of delivering messages that communicate trust, safety, and solidarity – critical attributes for success in ethnographic research. If I had the opportunity to start over, I would take Yezda's advice and frequently host live, topical social media presentations. Though it may not be possible to access an individual or community in person, seeing each other's face is extremely important. More face time combined with more voice, and less text yields increased rapport, trust, and participation.

As I continued to present my survey and conduct personal interviews, my research participants introduced my project to others in their communities. Individuals were made

aware of my identity and purpose through direct support from the managers or staff of the cultural centers at each site location. Through connections made at Kurdish Cultural Centre London, I was introduced to the director of Kurdish House London (KHL), an organization providing support for Kurds creating new businesses. KHL describes themselves as, "…a business development network that supports Kurdish businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs to build and thrive in their start-ups: from ideation through to a viable business. We want to empower Kurds to start and grow business and social enterprises that build on their qualities of perseverance, strength, and resilience" (kurdishhouselondon.com). The director of KHL invited me to present my research during a scheduled Zoom meeting with KHL members. Individuals from at least four different countries were present for the meeting. Although I had given numerous presentations of my work to a variety of audiences, this was my first time addressing a group of Kurds. I love to discuss anthropology. I love to teach and speak publicly. I love the topics of Kurdish culture, Kurdish language, Kurdish history, Kurdistan. Despite my interest in all things Kurdish, I was wary at the notion of presenting my research and findings to Kurdish people who had lived what I have merely been studying. I confessed my nervousness to the group at the beginning of my presentation and explained that I was a dedicated student of their culture, asking for their honest feedback of my analysis and ideas. The response was overwhelmingly positive. I noticed that a few people were openly crying as I completed my presentation. At that moment, I was not sure if I had somehow made a terrible gaffe and caused offense, or if my words elicited happy tears. I was encouraged as they explained that it was extremely gratifying to hear about Kurdish origins, history, struggles, cultural attributes, and an organized examination of what some of them described as "chaos" in a format that was reasonably concise. Other members shared that they found it affirming and moving to be understood by someone who was not Kurdish. At the end of the meeting, I felt a strong combination of emotions. On the surface, I felt invigorated, and perhaps relieved that my ideas and conclusions were not perceived as rubbish. More deeply, I was extremely grateful for the acceptance and encouragement so freely given. In every encounter, without exception, I have found Kurdish people to be helpful, hospitable, welcoming, and measured. There is an openness and politeness for strangers, mitigated by a traditional slow pace of relationship building and rules for connecting over time. I felt profound sadness for what so many Kurds have endured for so long and a personal

responsibility to make a positive contribution of some kind. I wished that I lived closer to these people, so I could get to know them in their daily lives – at a Kurdish pace. Feedback provided from KHL members provided confirmation of themes identified through personal interviews. I considered the following questions for several weeks after the presentation: What are the conditions, environment, or criteria required to create understanding among adversaries, competitors, or mortal enemies? How important is being *understood* to individual and collective identity negotiation?

I was invited to share my contact information with the KHL group. I included my email and social media links, welcoming every member of the group to connect with me who might be interested in being interviewed, completing the questionnaire, or simply communicating further to connect with me outside the meeting. The meeting resulted in numerous connections with my social media accounts, three personal interviews, fifteen completed questionnaires, and an invitation to consult on the future production of two Kurdish films. At this point in my research, I have noticed that making myself available for every possible opportunity that has arisen during this project is a productive mindset. It is normal for me to raise my hand, to volunteer, to go first when others want to go last, and to jump into things rather fearlessly (even when I *am* afraid). Fortunately, these are also highly effective traits and strategies with respect to virtual ethnography and general research. Ethnography and participant observation require a combination of active participation with a "fly on the wall" perspective of events and circumstances. While my eagerness and overall energy may have been excessive at times for conventional field work, it also led to opportunities within the considerable limitations of virtual ethnographic research. Although meetings, interviews, and presentations were given using video conferencing applications, I was mindful that I was a guest to the virtual spaces and needed to observe culturally appropriate behavior, mannerisms, and language.

To demonstrate what I mean, I would like to share what might be called a "transgression" that taught me a great deal during my interactions. One of my connections shared some information with me through an Instagram direct message. I had "liked" a post that was associated with an image on their account, and we chatted briefly about it. During the exchange, as a matter of standard practice as an ethnographer and as an American, I asked a

number of questions, some of them personal. I am informed by many of my international friends that Americans can be…rather bluntly inquisitive. So if you are a cultural anthropologist, or American, my questions may not seem unusual at all. I am an "open book" and I have few or no boundaries for topics that I am willing to discuss, even among strangers. My new Kurdish friend was a bit shaken by my questions, which they interpreted as too personal or overly familiar within the cultural bounds of a new friendship. In Kurdish culture, it takes time to establish trust and a foundation of friendship. They seem to never be rushed, nor do they cut corners with social mores. More than once, I heard the expression, "Kurdish time" to reference a slower pace for nearly everything in Kurdish culture. While I imagined myself to be sensitive to these types of avoidable errors and culturally competent, it reminded me to be cautious and take nothing for granted. Fortunately, I was able to understand my error and make the appropriate amends. The friendship grew as a result, and I learned – or relearned a valuable lesson for future interactions.

Social Media

Over the last five years, I have established relationships with members of Kurdish communities in Portland, Oregon and Nashville, Tennessee. A Kurdish friend recommended that I reach out to the director of the Kurdish Cultural Centre London (KCCL) to develop a connection in that community for my research. Communication with the KCCL was established first through social media messaging, and then through a series of Zoom meetings and WhatsApp messages. The KCCL director introduced me to several Kurdish community leaders in London who later participated in personal interviews via Zoom or completed the questionnaire. Among the many discoveries from these meetings, were that Twitter and Instagram are widely used within Kurdish diasporic communities for personal communications in Kurdistan, and for the global distribution of cultural and political messaging (See Figure 2.2). On occasion, topics, and events that I observed being discussed in social media were corroborated through information shared

Figure 2.2 Twitter. Government suppression of protests in Iraq

during personal interviews. I created accounts on both Instagram and Twitter and have connected to hundreds of Kurds around the world. Some of my connections subsequently invited me to observe a virtual committee meeting of the U.K. Parliament, a Kurdish activist meeting on the use of social media for global communications in war zones, and most recently, an all-day virtual conference titled, “Rising Kurdistan.” Rising Kurdistan was a forum where various Kurdish guest speakers presented information on current events in the four parts of Kurdistan, response to sectarian violence, civic engagement between Kurdish youth and Kurdish community leaders, and how to bring about positive change in both Kurdistan and diasporic communities. The keynote speaker was Karwan Jamal Tahir, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) High Representative to the United Kingdom, London who presented his thoughts on Kurdish youth from two perspectives: The first under Saddam Hussein’s oppressive regime, and the second in the age of social media. Mr. Tahir suggested that the youth in Iraqi Kurdistan play a vital role in the future of the region. He reported that the demographic – ages 16 to 35 – constitute 62.5 percent of the population in the region. Tahir asserted that current political movements, increasing tensions and violence between the KRG leadership and the Kurdish populace, and solutions for safe, prosperous communities in Iraqi Kurdistan are ultimately in the hands of youth who are highly averse to governmental controls and institutions. Figure 2.3 is a twitter post, shared among Iraqi Kurdish youths.

Figure 2.3 Twitter. Iraqi protester killed.

As with the Kurdish Cultural Centre London, I reached out to the director of the Salahadeen Center in Nashville, Tennessee (SCN) through social media. I conducted a personal interview with the SCN director, who then introduced me to other members of the Nashville community through an announcement on the SCN social media pages. My survey link and contact information were shared widely through email and social media, which led to additional personal interviews and connections.

COVID-19 travel restrictions and mitigation protocols have prevented me from

embedding within either of the Kurdish diasporic communities. Even If I had been able to travel, it would have been impossible to obtain observational information that differs from what I have derived through personal interviews, virtual meetings, and my survey because both London and Nashville have been under strict mandates prohibiting public gatherings, thus preventing any social or cultural events for me to observe had I been able to visit in person. As such my visits to either city would have been relegated to conducting virtual research and video conferencing from a hotel room or Airbnb.

It can be uncomfortable asking people for help. It is perhaps more unsettling to ask strangers for help, while admitting that your efforts are not achieving the level of success you had imagined. Despite the discomfort, it is advisable to ignore every impulse to put a "good spin" on your results and ask directly for what you are needing. It is critical to ask for feedback. How do my questions come across? Do I present myself properly, or are there changes that I could make in my approach to connect better with people? Can you refer me to more people who will complete my survey or participate in an interview? It bears repeating that virtual ethnographic research is vastly more dependent on other people than conventional field work, which, in my experience, means that it is in everyone's best interest to be transparent in the areas in which you, the ethnographer, need help. Additionally, it is necessary to cultivate partnerships with participants, and to give back to the communities in which you are working. Let your contacts know where your research stands and what is needed. Nurture your relationships with the people in your research community. Invest in them and in the events, activities, or projects that they value. Ask for ways you can help them with their projects. What skills or resources can you offer to make a positive contribution to *them*? They may decline your offer, have no further options, have further input, or even not care, but they might also offer highly effective suggestions and welcome you into their circle of friends and contacts. I have enjoyed much more of the latter than the former, and I have met many people who have been extraordinarily helpful and generous with their time. During the course of my research, I have had the honor of assisting

with the graphic design of web-based announcements and articles for an organization known as The Kurdish Project and I have designed and built websites for Kurdish groups in both the United States and the United Kingdom. My willingness to be of service, and my desire to make a positive contribution benefitting the Kurdish communities in which I am working have been consequential in helping me cultivate genuine connections, in spite of not being physically present.

Chapter 3: HISTORY, CONFLICT, & FORCED MIGRATION

I leave it to God's wisdom
The Kurds in this world's state
Why are they deprived of their rights?
Why are they all doomed?
See, from the Arabs to the Georgians
Everything is Kurdish and, as with a citadel,
The Turks and the Persians besiege them
From four sides at once.
And they both make the Kurdish people
Into a target for Fate's arrow

Ehmedê Xanî
Kurdish poet and author
from Mem û Zîn
1692

The Kurds are one of the indigenous peoples of the Mesopotamian plains and the highlands in what is now recognized as south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq, north-western Iran, and south-western Armenia. In approximately 844 BCE. The first Kurds migrated out of the Zagros mountain range in ancient Media, into what is now Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. The Kurdish calendar dates from the defeat of the Assyrian empire at Nineveh by the forces of the Medes in 612 BCE (Ahmad 2012; Driver 1922). Although an issue of scholarly contention, I take the position that the original Kurdish group most likely descended from these Medes, who contributed to its lineage from a mixed ethnic population throughout a large geographic region, particularly since Kurdish ancestors are known to have been in the same region, at the same time as the Medes. According to Pelletiere, "The Kurds themselves believe that they are the sons of the Medes, and indeed a marching song of Kurdish guerillas proclaims, 'We are the sons of Medes and Kay Kusraow - Our God is Kurdistan'" (Pelletiere 1984; Bengio 2014, 87). It should be noted that Kurdish tribes were often nomadic, intermarrying with

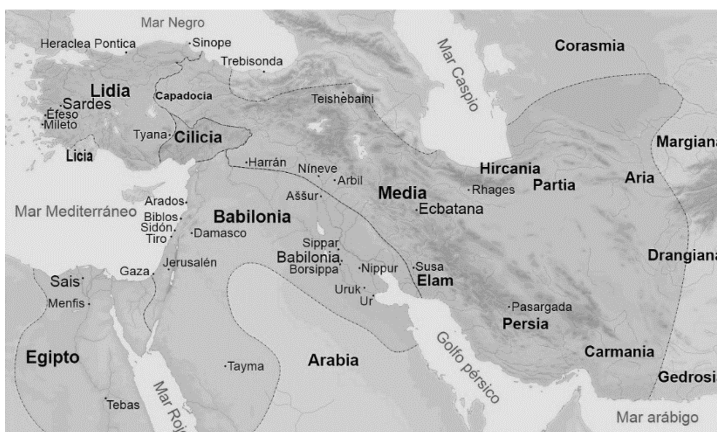

Figure 3.1 Map of Ancient Middle East

other tribes they encountered in the region. For this reason, Kurds reasonably share kinship with a variety of Middle Eastern groups.

The term, “Kurd” was established in the third century, when the Persian king, Ardeshir founded the Sassanid dynasty. Among the rivals Ardeshir was challenged to defeat was *Kurdan Shahi Madrig* - “King of the Kurds” (Bulloch and Morris 1992, 57). Prior to the arrival of Indo-European tribes around the third millennium BCE, the region now known as Kurdistan was inhabited by indigenous peoples related to tribes from Armenia, and the Caucasus. These people spoke languages related to modern Georgian. Among these tribes were the Lullabi, Kassites, Elamites, and the Guti. Of those tribes, the Guti are also likely to be among the ancestors of modern Kurds. All of these tribes maintained an almost constant state of warfare, plundering resources such as timber and minerals (McDowall 1992, 74-77).

Kurds have developed a unique language comprised of two primary dialects and a number of sub-dialects with Persian roots, along with substantial material culture and traditions. It is critical for the analysis of Kurdish identity (Particularly in Kurdistan) to note that most Kurdish dialects are not similar enough to each other to permit intercommunication without bilingual ability (Entessar 1992; Ciment 1996). Kurds have established a distinct cultural identity and have long sought to further legitimize their national identity by forming an organized government within an independent state. Prior to the rise of Islam in the seventh century, Kurds practiced Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Jainism, and a number of pagan beliefs. Select tenets of each of these belief systems were assimilated into Kurdish culture as a result of their nomadic lifestyle (Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996; Izady 1992). I suggest that the amalgamation of both ancient and modern religious principles have significantly informed their contemporary cultural worldview. The influence of numerous religious ideologies may place them in conflict with other fundamentalist Middle Eastern cultures that practice strict interpretations of Islam such as, Sharia. Relatively few Kurds converted to Islam prior to the Islamic crusades (Khanbaghi 2009). Today, the majority of Kurds in Kurdistan consider themselves to be Sunni Muslims, the majority Islamic sect in the region. A small minority are Shi’a or Yazidis. Yazidis practice Ismailia, a branch of Shi’a Islam, but are sometimes considered outsiders and have been the target of considerable discrimination and violence in the Middle East (Izady 1992; Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996).

Kurds Meet Islamic Armies

In spite of the somewhat uncertain origins of ancient Kurds, the historic record of their existence becomes very clear around the time of the Arab conquests. Arabs first attacked the Sassanid territory in 633 CE, led by General Khalid ibn Walid. Walid's invasion of Mesopotamia (now Iraq) led to the capture of Ctesiphon (Baghdad). Walid was then sent to the Roman battlefront in the Levant, and in his absence, the Persians regained much of the territories they had lost through counter attacks. A second invasion of Mesopotamia began in 636 CE under Saad ibn Abi Waqqas (Ahmad 2012; Eppel 2016).

The Battle of Al-Qadisiyyah resulted in the permanent end of Sassanid rule to the west of Iran. At that point, the Zagros Mountains became a natural land barrier, a border between the Rashidun Caliphate, and the remaining Sassanid Empire. It was here where Arab Muslims first encountered the Kurds. Muslim soldiers first contacted Kurds in 637 CE when Arab invaders captured Tikrit. A short time later, the Kurds fought in alliance with Persian governor of Ahwaz, al-Hurmuzan. Caliph Omar was forced to send several groups of Muslim fighters against the Ahwaz Kurds. It was typical of Kurds, if conquered, to rise up and engage their attackers several times. In this sense, no territory was gained easily over the Kurdish fighters, and to be sure, Kurds established a reputation for being fierce warriors (McDowall 1992; Pelletiere 1984; Ahmad 2012).

In the early fifteenth century, two powerful groups competed for the regions of eastern Turkey, and the Fertile Crescent (Iraq and portions of Syria). One of these groups was the Ottomans, a Sunni Muslim group based in Turkey. Most of the Ottoman leaders were Turkish and Muslim, but some of its subjects were Christians from the Balkans. The second group was the newly formed Safavid Empire. Shah Ismail, the groups' founder, was of mixed Turkish, Persian, and Kurdish descent. The expansion of the Safavids was a threat to the territories held by the Ottomans. In 1514, Kurds formed an alliance with the Ottomans, who during the battle of Chalderan, defeated Shah Ismail decisively. The battle of Chalderan had a lasting impact on the Middle East in terms of its borders, but it was also the alliance with the Sunni Ottomans which resulted in the Kurds present affiliation with Sunni Muslims. It is critical to understand that a large majority of Kurds identify with the majority Islamic denomination. More than one thousand years have passed since the Arab conquests, and six hundred years

since the Battle of Chalderan (Wood 2016; Pelletiere 1984; Khanbaghi 2009). Nevertheless, Arabs and Persians alike neither forget, nor do they easily forgive the Kurds for their history.

Modern Conflict and Forced Migration

In modern history, Kurds have fled their native countries over three successive waves: 1974-1991, 1992-1998, and 1999-2014. The causes for these waves of migration have ranged from direct persecution to "…culture of migration…" (Paasche 2020, 191). Kurds have been the explicit target of genocidal campaigns by Iraqi and Syrian Ba'athist movements, and Turkish attempts to annihilate any non-Turkish cultures in Turkey. Iranian regimes have strictly controlled their Kurdish population through oppression, separatism, and isolation (De Rouen 2015; Ünver 2016; Yegen 2009).

Between 1986 and 1989, Iraqi Defense Minister and cousin of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Ali Hassan al-Majid (AKA "Chemical Ali") masterminded attacks against the Kurds known as the Anfal Genocide, resulting in the death of approximately100,000 Kurdish men, women, and children in villages and concentration camps (Montgomery 2001). Using military aircraft al-Majid deployed chemical weapons and cluster bombs against Kurdish villages. Survivors of the bombings were captured and summarily executed or interred in death camps (Montgomery 2001; Burns 2005). During one interview, one of my respondents, "Afran" described the escape from Northern Iraq during the Anfal genocide:

> Saddam Hussein used to rule Iraq back in the 80s and the 90s for about 20-30 years. And he was attacking us, he was attacking the Kurdish region with chemical weapons, like invading the towns and villages. And when this happened when I was—this happened three times, so in 1993 he (Saddam Hussein) came…he was gonna just wipe out anybody (Kurdish) he sees. Everybody just got so scared and just left everything and just ran to the borders. Like, we were closer to the Turkish border. So we ran to the mountains, which provided a little protection. And the, the Kurds that are closer to the Iranian border, they ran there. So we left the cities…the towns empty. I remember… when we left them empty…just we were just trying to survive, and we ran for our lives (Afran 2020)

Turkey was well aware of the attacks on Kurds, closing their entire border with Iraq which forced an estimated 1.5 million Kurds to retreat into the mountains in the eastern border of

Iran and Iraq without provisions of any kind. More recently, U.S. military forces were withdrawn from Syria by order of American President Donald Trump. Since 2014, American forces had been battling Daesh (ISIS) militias with the support of Kurdish fighters known as the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG have been an essential ally in the fight against ISIS. In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal, Turkish troops immediately began shelling towns in Northern Syria. Turkish President, Tayyip Erdoğan has made it quite clear that he intends to wipe out Syrian Kurds, as he has also waged an ethnocidal war against Turkish Kurds ("How Does Turkey's Offensive" 2019; American Journal of International Law 2019).

Routes of escape from Kurdistan can be extremely dangerous. Informants for this project have shared harrowing accounts of their journeys from parts of Kurdistan to new lives in the United Kingdom and the United States. Migrants sometimes pay a great price for the safety and freedom they eventually receive in new nations. In some instances, the people they leave behind are lost forever. The burdens of grief and guilt for having survived are carried with them, as the hope of a new life begins to take root. The following account is from "Soran" fleeing Iraq during the reign of Saddam Hussein:

> I remember I was growing up during those fighting and attacking and the…my people…I remember in in spring of [redacted], they burned our house…I witness those moments. They…forced all this whole village to leave their village. And we left everything we left everything behind us. And …they put us in, in in like a Nazi camp…they burned our village. They forced all our people and I'm not talking about one village just my village I'm talking about 5000 villages in Kurdistan being forced, there are people being forced to leave their village. And they occupied their village, and they burned their house. And my house was one of those houses being burned. I witnessed all that incident. I live in that constraint camp, then my dad find a way to get out of that constraint camp. It was…nearby Turkish border…We went to [redacted], which is one of the three main cities in the northern Iraq today… And so yes, we went through a terrible, terrible life…And I remember the minute the moment that I left my father and my uncle…both of them passed-away several years back. I remember the moment that I left them in the house. They were older people, and they decided not to leave the house. So, I had to grab my, my younger sister, and with her son…He was an infant…we had to leave the home The moment I left the home…there were a lot of bombs hitting around us. And I saw it with my own eyes…those bombs hitting from the tanks, hitting different area in our neighborhood…thousands of people leave their homes at the same time…I was one of them with my sister and her son. We are running to the truck. And there were not enough transportation there. So a lot of people,

> thousands of people, they just started walking, but I was lucky. There were a… big truck in the neighborhood picking up some other people from my neighbor. So I asked that driver if he can help us. He said, "as long as you can find your spot in the truck, I'm okay with it." So we get in the truck and we leave the city…and the further we get, the safer we get. So we spent our, our first night at the, at the mountain without, without food without shelter without anything. Then the following day, Saddam's military attacked our city. So people start leaving the, you know, leaving the area…and within two days after that incident, I ended up of being on the border, in the southeast border of Turkey and Iraq in the mountain area. And it was during the spring of [redacted]. So it was the rainy It was cold. It was mountain area. It was the, you know, between, It was almost the end of February…beginning of March…I was there two years ago. I visited same area where I fled to that area back in [redacted]…but this time I drove my car as a tourist. I took my family, and we crossed the border in same spot. We went to Turkey, Southeastern Turkey in the mountain area…on the mountain of Ararat. So, so it was in June. Imagine right now, right now, there is snow on the top of this mountain today. It never gets wiped out, that snow on the top of this mountain. So the reason I'm describing this, to give you a better picture, how cold the weather was in that area. When we fled, we stayed there without food, without drink, without…without anything. And I remember for…for three days, continuously day and night we were in the rain. We used to cover the fire, the fire with our backs…and just to have the small kids, to get some, to warm up through…between our legs and around us, just to get some heat from that, from the fire…it was terrible. We were not expecting to leave our home…everybody left…the whole area being evacuated from people…the only people left there were people like my dad. He was…older and some sick people…they were not able to run away. They just stayed in their cities. And the rest of them. They just leave the country. They fled…the whole country. There were over 2 million Kurdish people fled to Turkey, Iran, and Syria, but the majority went to Turkey. That's how we live (Soran 2020).

It is difficult to imagine the dilemma of leaving most of your family, having to run from one genocidal regime into the control of another, but such was the case with Soran. Refugee camps in Turkey were anything but comfortable. If the notion of Turkish military supervising the "care" of Kurdish refugees seems counterintuitive, it may be even more outlandish to learn that the United Nations not only rented the land on which Turkish refugee camps were constructed, but according to Soran, also paid the Turkish military to provide oversight (Ozmenek 2001). Soran further described camp conditions:

> …we lived in a tent refugee camp, and it was… during the winter, during rain seasons…. We used to live in the mud…The tents been built on the on the mud and thus I cannot even describe it. You know, how the life was difficult during that time…So back then…the country was run by…Turkey military…the

> United Nation employees organized the camp and even before I get to the camp, so they were renting that land to the United Nations, and they were getting money for all the, all the aid and all the assistance they provided to the refugee but a lot of time there were no food. No food for refugee to eat. A lot of people…were getting sick…there were no…medication and doctors and volunteers in the refugee camp. A lot of…small kids and elderly people were dying every day in the in the refugee camp. When first I entered to the refugee camp…there were about between 13,000 to 15,000 people living in that particular refugee camp. And then because of the bad situation, a lot of people decided to return back to Iraq. And even the situation were [sic] not safe for them and their family to return back but because they were living in that miserable life in their refugee camp, they decide to go back (Soran 2020)

The persecution of Kurds has not been limited to Iraqi and Turkish campaigns. Although Kurdish people originated from the mountains of Iran, the relationship between Persians and Kurds has been anything but congenial. Iran, since becoming the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, has observed a nearly 2500-year code suggesting that Persians hold exclusive power. While Kurds certainly have Persian ancestors, their claim for a separate ethnic identity has placed them in direct conflict with ruling body of Iran. Leaders of Iran have reluctantly conceded that Iran has become a multicultural society, though it refuses to share power with any who do not identify as Iranian. Therefore the government designed a method of isolating Persians from others through separatist programs. According to an estimate from the Kurdish Project, Kurds represent a significant population of Iran; approximately eight million of Iraq's eighty-five million citizens (statista.com). The designation of Kurds as an official out-group relegates them to a second-class lifestyle in Iran. There are exceptions to this, when Kurdish individuals are well connected or have achieved success in spite of the downward pressures against them. One interviewee, "Keje" described their departure from Iran:

> We took an airplane to France and then to Sweden, we took a plane because we had a visa, we had a visitor's visa. This is a route that a lot of people were able to take back then. And then upon arrival, claim asylum based on various different things…what was happening around the time that we left was that there was a crackdown in our city in (redacted) and into surrounding cities, by the government, on Kurds, who owned weapons, because there was a invasion of the Peshmerga, the Kurdish militia, into the cities. And the government was concerned that these people with the Peshmerga would every now and then invade into cities and like, stay in the mountains…and fire guns…it was like a little bit of an anti- government demonstration that we are still here… you can't just ignore us. But then they would disappear because the government would just send in…hundreds of soldiers… So one day, they just stormed our

> house…they made a mess out of the house, like they opened all the kitchen cupboards and whatever…. everything on the floor… just to intimidate. So then my uncles called my father and said, this is happening…and he came back and he got arrested, which really scared him because my father was in a very good place with the government officials in our city, because he was very wealthy. So if he needed anything, he would give a bribe, and then he would just be left alone. But just suddenly been arrested. And that was unprecedented for him. So he got very afraid. And then my older brother from my father's first marriage, also got arrested for joining the Peshmerga…it was…very urgent and very sudden, I think the whole thing…happened within a month and a half…we didn't I take a lot of things with us. And also a really funny thing…We didn't have suitcases. We had sacks (Keje 2020)

Although it is clear that Kurds have experienced significant conflict with nearly all Middle Eastern cultures over more than 2000 years, the reasons for why are ripe for analysis. My research suggests that Kurds have always been fiercely independent; unique among their neighbors in terms of ideology, behaviors, and cultural practices. Kurds are proud of their heritage, but also highly tolerant and receptive of other cultures (Izady 1992; Bulloch and Morris, 1992; Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996). Although internecine conflicts may suggest otherwise, I have perceived a deeply rooted sense of fairness, equity, and moderation reflected by how Kurds interact with other nations. For this reason, at times, Kurds have allied with Western countries against other Middle Eastern groups when politics, policies, or leaders in the region are in opposition to core Kurdish principles (e.g., fairness and equity). It bears repeating that Kurds in the four parts of Kurdistan have engaged in considerable conflict with each other. Even among Kurds, divisions due to geography, natural resources, political interests, economics, and language have resulted in violent clashes and war.

Between 1994 and 1997, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) factions waged a civil war in Iraq, threatening the future of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The KRG was formed in the wake of the 1991 Gulf war in Iraq, when Saddam Hussein was expelled from Kuwait by American and coalition forces. Kurds living near the Iraqi borders of Iran and Turkey fled but were able to return to their homes in Northern Iraq under the protection of U.S. and coalition forces due to the “No Fly Zone” and the allied “Operation Provide Comfort” (Rudd 2004). According to one of my interviewees, “…that year (1991) is when we saw the no-fly zone implemented. Hugely,

hugely successful policy from the U.S. and the U.K.…this helped the Peshmerga basically push back the (Hussein) regime" (Yado 2020).

Seizing on the opportunity, Kurds in the region established a de facto state and government. The Kurdistan region of Iraq (Northern Iraq) and its KRG government was officially formed in May 1992. Its primary objective was to establish a federal state within a post-Saddam, democratic Iraq. Though there are numerous Kurdish political organizations throughout Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani's PDK and Jalal Talabani's PUK held the most power and authority in the newly formed Kurdish autonomous region. Following Hussein's capture, in 2005, a new Iraqi constitution officially recognized the Kurdish autonomous region and its government (Ciment 1996; Gunter 1996). It is worth mentioning that Barzani and Talabani shared a conflicted personal relationship spanning decades. During the 1950s and 1960s, Jalal Talabani had been a member of the KDP under the founding leadership of Masoud Barzani's father, Mustafa Barzani. Jalal Talabani's political views slowly began to diverge from those of the KDP loyalists. Talabani attempted to overthrow Mustafa Barzani's leadership and failed. Talabani and his supporters were expelled from the KDP following his failed coup, and in 1976, Talabani officially formed the PUK to reflect his opposing views and interests. By the time war broke out between the KDP and PUK, there had been twenty-eight years of simmering tension between Talabani and Mustafa Barzani's son; KDP president Masoud Barzani (Rogg and Rimscha 2007; Gunter 1996). To be clear, the division was more than political. It was very personal.

In the years preceding the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), which was something of a precursor to the KDP-PUK civil war, there was a dangerous three-way relationship between the KDP, the PUK, and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. The KDP formed a tacit alliance with Khomeini, against Saddam Hussein in Iraq (Gunter 1996). At the time, the PUK controlled regions of Iraq where Iranian forces were setting up encampments. While the PUK shared in the desire to remove Hussein from power, it opposed using Iran to do it, fearing that Iran would then seek to maintain power in Iraq after his ouster. The PUK also clashed with smaller leftist Kurdish groups such the Communist Party and the Socialist Party of Kurdistan (SPK), who were heavily influenced by the Soviet Union (Gunter 1996; Rogg and Rimscha 2007). The Barzani PDK is largely representative of the Kurmanji speaking populations in Iraq's northern mountains, while Talabani's KUP represents Sorani speaking southern Iraq and parts

of Iran. In addition to political conflicts, class and status divisions exist between Kurmanji and Sorani speaking Kurds. Northerners (Kurmanji speaking) are often considered to be overly aggressive and primitive, while southerners (Sorani) are considered arrogant and culturally snobby (Gunter 1996; Bulloch and Morris 1992; Izady 1992). Remnants of these stereotypes exist in the diaspora, and they do provide fuel for internecine conflict among Kurds. However, there does not appear to be the type of catastrophic division between Kurds in diasporic communities as it has been seen in Kurdistan.

In 1994, a dispute over a small piece of land in Qala Diza, northeast of Sulaymaniyya led to violent fighting between the KDP and PUK. Aggressions between the two parties were further inflamed by conflicting alliances. Initially, the PUK had Iranian support, while the KDP had Ba'athist affiliations. In 1994, the Ba'athist party was led by Hafez al-Assad of Syria (Father of current president Bashar al-Assad) and Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Ba'athism primarily seeks to create a unified Arab state in the Middle East, an ideology which obviously conflicts with Kurdish interests. Why then would the KDP have any association at all with the Ba'athist part? The answer appears to be Tribalism. These parties and governments were led according to tribal traditions and relationships. In fact, the Barzani surname comes from the name of the Barzan region of Iraq, and its inhabitants (Izady 1992) Other than alliances between diametrically opposing parties (Ba'athists sought to exterminate Kurds), tribalism is often plagued by nepotism, sectarianism, and provincialism. In this case, though the Kurdish parties to this conflict had more to lose and less to gain in fighting a war against each other, the conflict over how to control Qala Diza was deemed irreconcilable (Gunter 1996). These cultural conflicts and divided interests made sharing power untenable during the early years of the Kurdish Regional Government, and although the armed conflict ended in 1997, considerable tensions remain between the two main Kurdish political parties, and parties that affiliate with each of them (Gunter 1996; Rogg and Rimscha 2007). Twenty-four years later, some Kurds in the autonomous region have amassed enormous wealth and power. The Barzani family controls billions of dollars in commercial enterprises. Jalal Talabani went on to serve as the sixth president of Iraq (2006-2014). Although Talabani died in 2017, his son has served as Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG in Erbil since 2014. In an interview, "Rezan" explained:

> …the KDP and the PUK, our political parties in Kurdistan…so far only serve their own interests. They've divided the wealth between themselves. They've divided oil, they've divided budget…they, and their patronage system benefit from it. So, I don't see them as the bearers of the Kurdish struggle. I don't see them as those who champion the Kurdish nation. In fact, many would argue, myself included, these two political parties have resulted in a lack of services or lack of stability…lack of democracy…lack of institution building because they only serve themselves…and they only serve those who obey them (Rezan 2020).

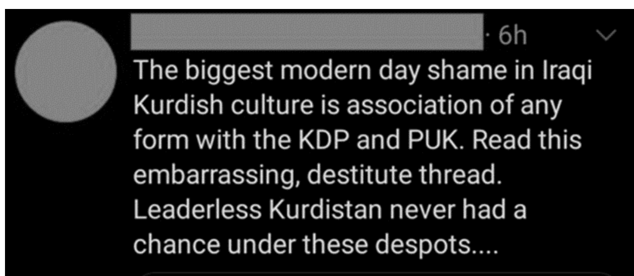

Figure 3.2 Twitter. Political division in Iraq.

The lack of unity and instability of Kurdistan, combined with considerable tribal conflict and a long history of nepotism have created a deeply fractured, and highly complex Kurdish leadership throughout the four parts of Kurdistan. There are dozens of political parties seeking to represent the views and preferences of Kurds in their regions. Figure 3.2 is a Twitter post, reflecting public sentiment about political conditions in Iraq. The largest and most influential in Kurdistan (KDP and PUK), are featured in this research because they not only reflect the disharmony that exists among Kurds in Kurdistan, but the consequence of a tradition of tribal decision making. Indeed since the end of World War II, only a few families have held power in the entire region, passing authority from father to son and brother to brother. The social, economic, and political tensions resulting in the inability to facilitate change that would benefit all Kurds present a significant obstacle, not only for the full expression of Kurdish identity in Kurdistan, but also for the development of a sovereign Kurdish state. Figure 3.3 is a Twitter post, suggesting that Kurdistan lacks the type of leadership required to carry out reforms. War, oppression, sectarian violence, and political disharmony provide a catalyst for three separate waves of mass migration from Kurdistan to diasporic communities around the world.

Figure 3.3 Twitter. Kurdistan is leaderless.

Chapter 4: KURDISTAN – BORDERS DIVIDE IDENTITIES

The geographic region, known colloquially as "Kurdistan" is not a contiguous, sovereign, bordered state and should not be confused with the more recently formed Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq or The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) – also known as *Rojava.* Figure 4.1 shows Kurdistan (shaded) and the formal nations that either govern outright, or heavily influence its territory.

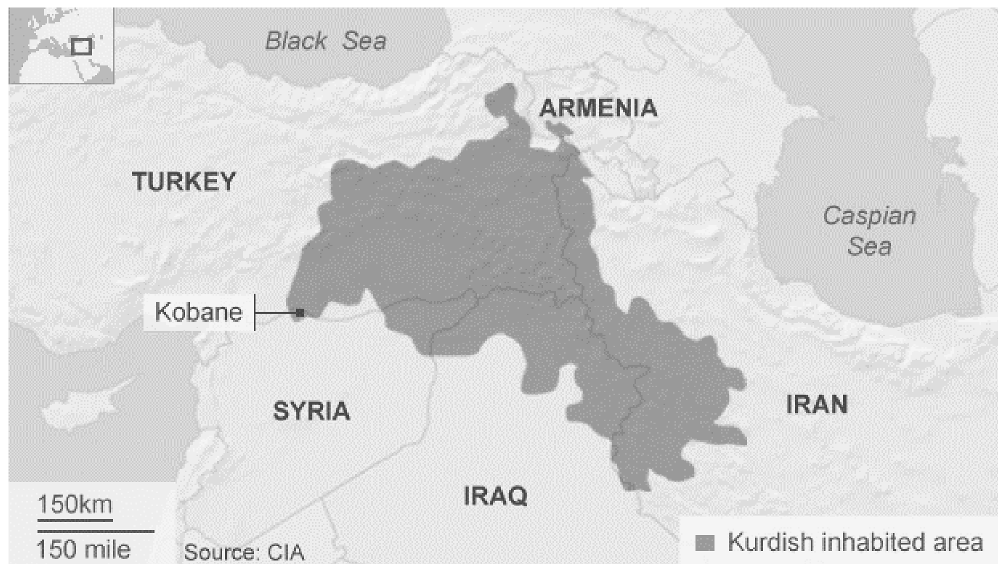

Figure 4.1 Map of Kurdistan region. bbc.com

Kurdistan is an unofficially recognized region, spanning portions of Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. Kurdistan is complicated. The topography and cultures associated with the region are diverse. There are arid deserts, lush agricultural land, and forbidding mountains. The 1740-mile-long Euphrates River flows from Turkey into Syria, then Western and Central Iraq, eventually joining with the Tigris River, terminating at the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates and Tigris River system defines the area known historically as Mesopotamia. Not only does the Euphrates provide the primary source of water for agriculture in Syria, but also for drinking water throughout Kurdistan (Kibaroğlu et al. 2011). There are contemporary reports of Turkey arresting the flow of the Euphrates using their extensive dam systems. Turkey is planning the construction of twenty-two additional dams along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers near the shared borders of Syria and Iraq (Dilleen 2019). Increased desertification in the area

due to changing climate patterns creates even more dependence on the Tigris-Euphrates Rivers throughout the Middle East. Turkish control of the river systems creates a desperate humanitarian crisis with respect to food and drinking water, but also economic hardship due to the absence of irrigation for farmland (Dilleen 2019; Aslan 2020).

Among the many Kurdish political or military groups (KRG, PKK, YPG, PUK, KDP) that are active in the region, there are numerous competing interests and tensions, some examples of which are mentioned in Chapter 3. The issue of a sovereign homeland (The Kurdish Question) is frankly moot, due to a lack of a central leadership body, a unified military, or a uniformly accepted Kurdish leader. Interviews for this project have revealed that Masoud Barzani (Iraq) and Selahattin Demirtas (Turkey) have measurable support among Kurds in Kurdistan and in diasporic communities. Although each of the Kurds I have spoken to identify simply as a Kurd, there are surely Iranian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, Turkish Kurds, and Syrian Kurds. Kurds are separated by variety of different language dialects and subdialects, although this separation also extends beyond semantics and linguistics in Kurdistan.

Language

Kurdish is not a unified language. Although it is collectively classified as an Indo-Iranian language, there are multiple dialects of Kurdish which are not mutually intelligible. Kurmanji, Sorani, Pahlewani, Badini, Zazaki, Gorani, Laki, etc., are all considered to be Kurdish (Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996). Sometimes referred to as *Kurdî*, this group of Kurdish languages represents significant variation in syntax and structure. Many Kurdish dialects do not have a written language, and in order to communicate between them requires bilingual ability (Izady 1992).

Figure 4.2 is a map indicating an estimation of the Kurdish population in each of the four parts of Kurdistan. Kurds in the North (Turkey, Syria, Northern Iraq, and a small portion of Iran) speak Kurmanji and Badini dialects. Note that the greatest concentration of Kurdish populations are contained within the Kurdistan region, with the exceptions of a small slivers of Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Turkey's Kurdish population is far more distributed. In the Central region, Kurds speak primarily Sorani. In the south, Sorani, Gorani, and Habaki dialects are spoken along with non-Kurdish languages (Turkish, Farsi, and Arabic). Among the Kurdish languages, Kurmanji and Sorani are spoken by nearly 75% of Kurds and are the only two with

a written alphabet (Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996). Kurmanji uses the Hawar alphabet, first introduced in 1932 by Jeladet Ali Bedirxan. Bedirxan was a Kurdish linguist, who formally codified the syntax, and grammatical rules of Kurmanji in a series of journals (Yilmaz 2016).

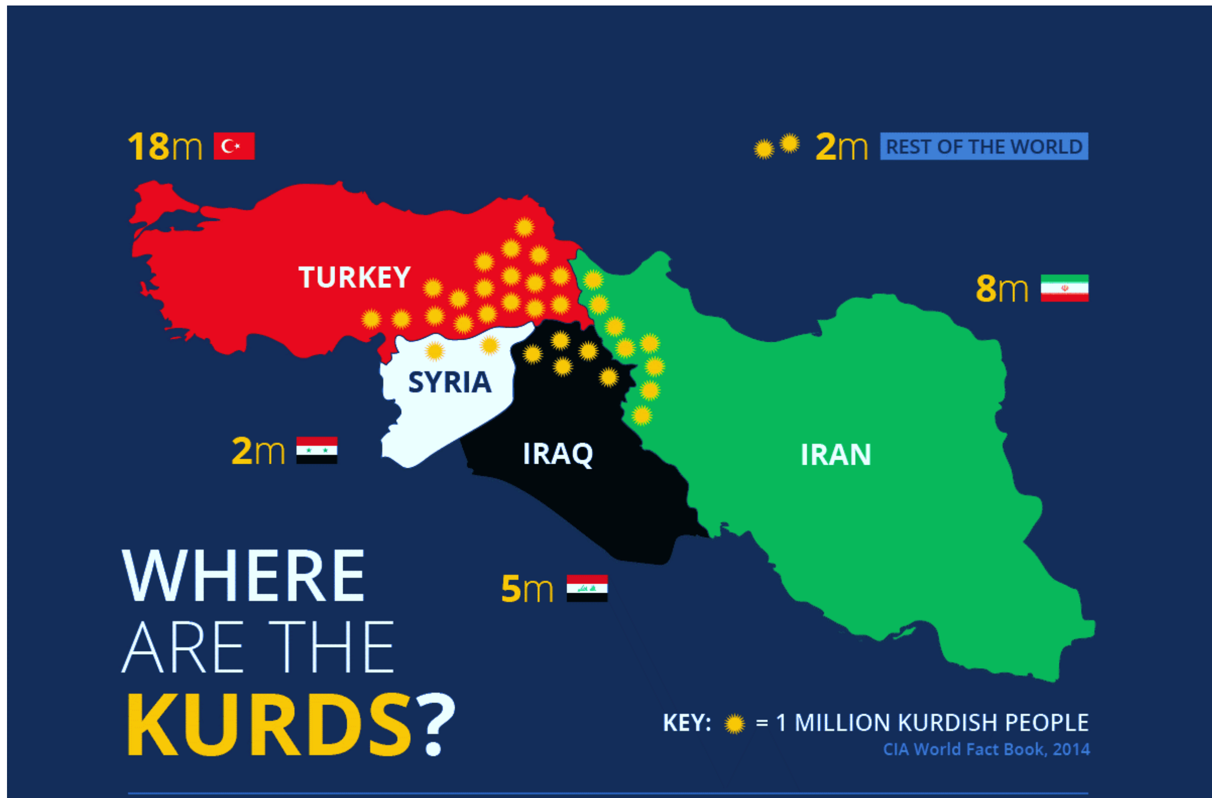

Figure 4.2 Kurdish Populations in Kurdistan. CIA World Fact Book 2014

The fracturing resulting from the competing social, linguistic, and political environment prevents coalescence as a singular group. Therefore, Kurdish identity or Kurdishness is a dynamic, or perhaps more accurately a *conditional* concept in Kurdistan.

Many non-Kurds have little understanding of where Kurdistan is, or who the Kurds are. One interviewee shared:

> Some of the most annoying comments you'd get is ‘Oh, is that where Borat’s from? ‘And I can't tell you how many times I've received that comment growing up, especially in school. And it came to the point where you are forced to say you're Iraqi just to avoid having to explain…Bear in mind by even just trying to explain the dynamic of Kurdistan and, ‘Oh, is that next to Turkey?’ is just tiresome. And then you just have to say no, I’m Iraqi…Iraqi Kurdish. (Yado 2020)

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, there are approximately thirty million Kurds in Kurdistan, and 1.2 million living in the diaspora (cfr.org). It is estimated that as much as half of diasporic Kurds are living in Germany. Some estimate there are as many as forty-five million Kurds globally (institutkurde.org). The range of these estimates is largely the result of discrimination and survival. It can be life threatening to identify as a Kurd in many parts of Kurdistan. In countries outside of Kurdistan, census forms often do not include the option to claim Kurdish ethnicity. Kurds are then tasked with choosing to be Iranian, Turkish, Iraqi, or Syrian. The U.K census offers the option of "Arab," which I was told by an interviewee was often selected by Kurds because it was, "…the closest thing" (Yado 2020). A recent referendum in the United Kingdom will provide the option to select Kurdish ethnicity for the first time in their 2021 census.

The Zagros Mountains and the Taurus Mountains have long been associated with the Kurdish people and culture. Dominant governments in Iran and Turkey where the Zagros and Taurus Mountains are located, have unique histories with Kurdish populations – relationships which have forged distinct identities for Kurds in response to sectarian violence, cultural oppression, and the denial of their existence. Though Kurds have experienced all these aggressions and more throughout their history, in all areas of the region, the "personality" of each nation and its associated Kurdish population is very different (Bulloch and Morris 1992; Entessar 1996). Figure 4.3 is a Twitter post, indicating that Kurdish cultural norms can vary considerably throughout the region.

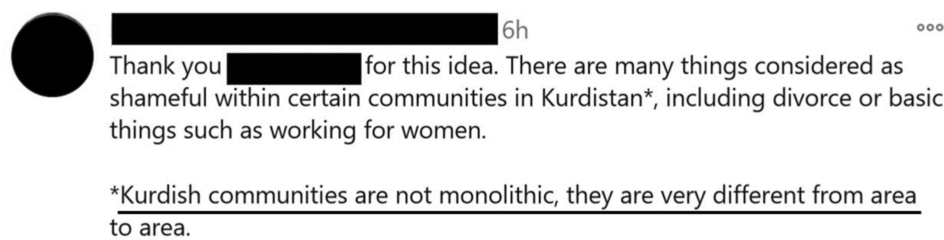

Figure 4.3 Twitter. Kurdish cultural differences in Kurdistan.

Identity is formed in cultural spaces. Our home is our first cultural space (Martin and Nakayama 2010). The concept of home is both an idea that is deeply entrenched in our subconscious, and also woven into the collective fabric of our culture. It is reasonable to conclude that the considerable differences between the countries in each of the four parts of

Kurdistan also create significant variances in Kurdish culture. It follows that tensions are likely to result as a consequence of the cultural cleavage between Kurds in Kurdistan. Some of those tensions are created by the need and availability of natural resources. Although Kurdistan features vast deserts, lush agricultural land, towering mountains, oil fields, and flowing rivers, the control of those resources is not vested in a single governing body. Natural resources such as oil fields and water, and the four controlling governments in the four parts of Kurdistan represent significantly different political and economic interests (Dilleen 2019). Other sources of division in Kurdistan are created by differences in language, religious, social, and cultural ideologies (Houston 2008; Ciment 1996).

At the end of the First World War, a series of agreements and treaties created a new geographic and political landscape in the Middle East. This is critical to the understanding of contemporary divisions between Kurds in Kurdistan, in this case, tensions that are directly traceable to borders drawn by western nations as the Ottoman Empire was carved into pieces (e.g., British Mandate, French Mandate). The primary Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, and the Russian Empire) made the determination that not all nations in the region were capable of self-governance. Consequently, contemporary conditions of the Middle East, and the complex relationships among its inhabitants have been substantially influenced by western governments, playing a significant role in the fracturing of Kurdish identity.

I do not mean to suggest that all current conditions of the Middle East were created as a result of western intervention over the last one hundred years. Inhabitants of the Middle East have long memories and long-standing feuds among tribes that predate most societies in the world. I am not stating that it was part of a plan to subjugate the Kurdish people to their oppressors. I am not suggesting that western governments have done all they can to assure the powers-that-be in the region remain largely the same, changing leaders of regimes in name rather than in substance. Kurds have mentioned to me that they believe part of their current circumstances can be traced to decisions made in the self-interest of western nations and the Triple Entente of WWI. Kurds are intimately aware of treaties which have vested authority and power in outside governments, currying favor with some local regimes, and betraying promises made to the Kurdish people. Although the conspiratorial ideas are intriguing to consider, they are questions for future projects. With respect to Kurdish culture and self-

identification among their neighbors, it is irrefutably true that in their nearly 2400-year history, Kurds have only enjoyed a three-year recognition as a sovereign people (1920-1923), and western governments were the main players (Entessar 1992; Ciment 1996; Houston 2008; Izady 1992).

Treaty of Sèvres

Following the cessation of military hostilities during World War I (1914-1918), members of the Principal Allied Powers; United Kingdom, France, and Greece, met in Sèvres, France (August 10, 1920). What was once the vast Ottoman Empire was carved into individual nation states we now know as Turkey, Iraq, and Syria under the Treaty of Sèvres. Not only did the treaty divide the Ottoman Empire into regions controlled by the United Kingdom, France, Greece, and Italy, but also provided the Kurdish people with freedom from Turkish rule, a sovereign territory, and international recognition. Of the newly formed territory, Winston Churchill said, "…it would be a friendly buffer state…between Turks and Arabs" ("No Fixed Abode" 2019). Articles 62-64 of the treaty outline the geographic boundaries and international recognition for a sovereign Kurdistan:

> ARTICLE 62
> A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II (2) and (3).
> If unanimity cannot be secured on any question, it will be referred by the members of the Commission to their respective Governments. The scheme shall contain full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial or religious minorities within these areas, and with this object a Commission composed of British, French, Italian, Persian, and Kurdish representatives shall visit the spot to examine and decide what rectifications, if any, should be made in the Turkish frontier where, under the provisions of the present Treaty, that frontier coincides with that of Persia.
>
> ARTICLE 63
> The Turkish Government hereby agrees to accept and execute the decisions of both the Commissions mentioned in Article 62 within three months from their communication to the said Government.

ARTICLE 64
If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.
The detailed provisions for such renunciation will form the subject of a separate agreement between the Principal Allied Powers and Turkey. If and when such renunciation takes place, no objection will be raised by the Principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul vilayet.

At the time, some Kurds rebelled at the idea of a sovereign state. Further complicating the issue, a resurgent Turkey led by Kemal Mustafa Ataturk created problems for war-weary western forces over border disputes and his desire for Turkey to remain a dominant force in t

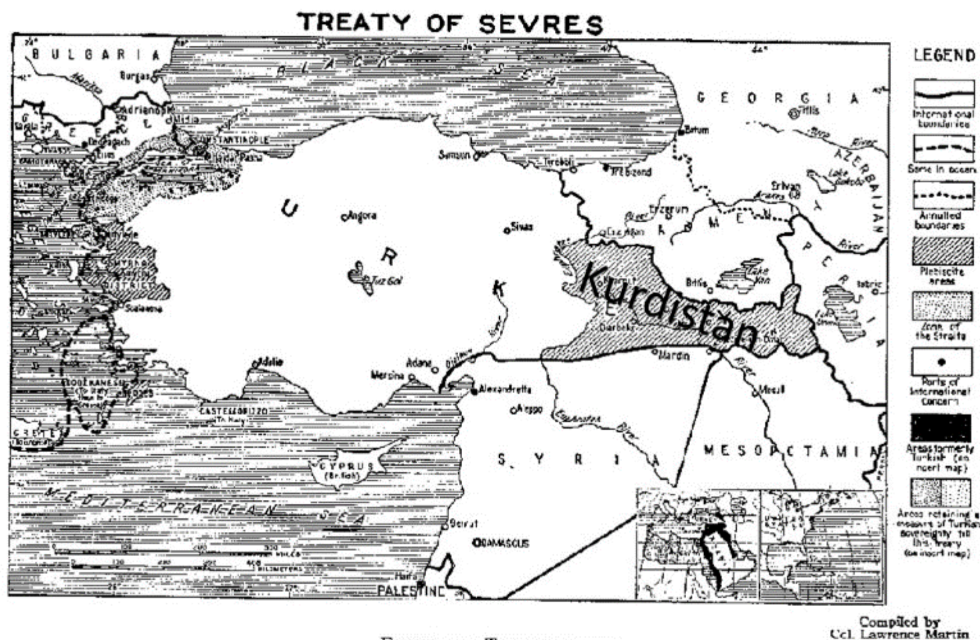

Figure 4.4 Map of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) in: Lawrence Martin, Ed., The Treaties of Peace 1919-1923 vol. II, Carnegie Endowment for international peace, p. 789

the region. Figure 4.4 shows the sovereign Kurdish territory created by the Treaty of Sèvres. Iraq's newly installed King Abdullah (1920-1921), then Faisal 1 (1921-1933), both Sunni and

from the Hashemite family, provided added political pressures due to a Shi'a majority in the Iraqi-Kurd region. Abdullah and Faisal wanted to dilute the Shi'a population of Iraqis by incorporating the Sunni majority Kurdish population into Iraq's control.

Treaty of Lausanne

Following three years of unrest in the region, the League of Nations (now the United Nations) drafted the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). At the stroke of a pen, the recognition, protections, and sovereignty at long last provided to Kurds were nullified:

> ARTICLE 3.
> From the Mediterranean to the frontier of Persia, the frontier of Turkey is laid down as follows:
>
> (1) With Syria:
> The frontier described in Article 8 of the Franco-Turkish Agreement of the 20th October 1921.
>
> (2) With Iraq:
> The frontier between Turkey and Iraq shall be laid down in friendly arrangement to be concluded between Turkey and Great Britain within nine months.
> In the event of no agreement being reached between the two Governments within the time mentioned, the dispute shall be referred to the Council of the League of Nations.
> The Turkish and British Governments reciprocally undertake that, pending the decision to be reached on the subject of the frontier, no military or other movement shall take place which might modify in any way the present state of the territories of which the final fate will depend upon that decision.

The language in the Treaty of Lausanne, "…frontier between Turkey and Iraq shall be laid down in friendly arrangement between Turkey and Great Britain…" resulted in the division of territory depicted in Figure 4.5. Now incorporated mostly into Turkey, with some areas granted to Iraq, the sovereign nation of Kurdistan vanished, ushering in a century of new conflict in the informally recognized region of Kurdistan.

Figure 4.5 Map of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) in: Lawrence Martin, Ed., The Treaties of Peace 1919-1923 vol. II, Carnegie Endowment for international peace, p. 989.

Kurds in Syria

The majority of Syrian Kurds speak Kurmanji (northern Kurdish). Syrian Kurds have often been overlooked. Though they are the largest ethnic minority in Syria comprising approximately ten percent of the population, Syrian Kurds have been called, "The forgotten people" (Yildiz 2005) Northern Syria, a region bordering Turkey known as Rojava, is where the majority of Syrian Kurds reside. The Syrian government considers its Kurdish population to be the result of migration from Turkey, not an endogenous ethnic group. There are tensions even

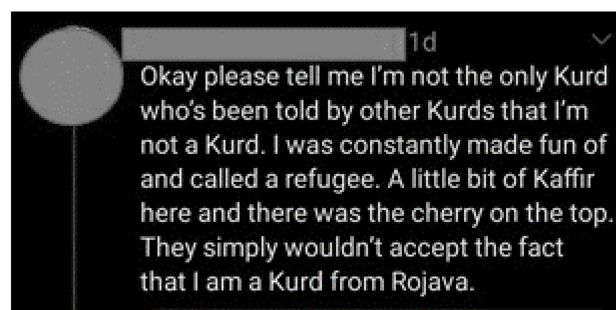

Figure 4.6 Twitter. Syrian Kurdish Identity

among other Kurds in the region as to the national identity of Syrian Kurds. Figure 4.6 is a screenshot from a Twitter dialogue between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds.

Given the close ties between Syria and Iran, the diplomatic relationship between Syria and western nations has been fragile, at best. In the last decade, events in the Middle East have drawn attention to the conditions for Kurds inside Syria from social media, international media organizations, and humanitarian groups. (Yildiz 2005).

The origins of the Syrian conflict that erupted in 2011 can be traced to the events of the Arab Spring, which led to the overthrow of some authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa region. Bolstered by protests in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, Syrian opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist party (Kurds and others) were kidnapped, tortured, and killed. Kurdish-backed Syrian forces battled with Assad's army. Kurdish populations are largely concentrated in three areas, along the north Syrian/south Turkish border: Kobane, Jazirah, and Afrin (Hove et al. 2014). Today, refugee camps near the Syria-Iraq border such as al-Hol established in the wake of the First and Second Gulf Wars hold upwards of 65,000 people (Saad 2020). Many current inhabitants of these camps are Yazidi women and children captured by Daesh (ISIS) forces in Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS has used camps like al-Hol as torture facilities and extermination centers, aimed at eradicating anyone they do not consider to be devout Muslims (Saad 2020; Yildiz 2005).

Though since 2011, Kurds have been slowly increasing their autonomy in northern Syria (a region known as *Rojava*), Kurds have endured considerable repression under the Assad regime. In Kurdish controlled areas, the People's Protection Units (YPG) have clashed repeatedly with al-Assad's forces, the Syrian Arab Army (Kılıçaslan 2016). Assad has begun to view the YPG much in the same way Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan views the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and has taken the position that Kurds have acquired too much power in Syria. A Syrian Arab Army (SAA) statement said it was determined "…to protect the unity of Syria's lands…" according to Syrian state media, an apparent reference to Kurdish aspirations for their own state (Zisser 2006).

Kurdish led militias in Syria, the YPG and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been critical allies for the United States in the fight against ISIS. An estimated 11,000 Kurdish fighters have been killed in combat against ISIS (French 2019). On October 6, 2019, U.S.

president, Donald Trump, announced that US troops stationed in north-eastern Syria along the Turkish border would be withdrawn, clearing the way for Turkish military operations in the zone. Trump's reasoning for the removal of American forces was to "…put an end to forever wars…bring American troops home…" Contradicting Trump's stated purpose, American troops were not returned to the United States, but were instead redeployed into Iraq. Kurds throughout the region (and the world) view the withdrawal of American troops as an egregious betrayal, particularly in light of the YPG and SDF alliance with American forces against ISIS (Roblin 2019; Hove et al. 2014).

Turkey's invasion of northeastern Syria began just days after the Trump administration relocated US troops to Iraq. Erdoğan formally announced that the Turkish military and Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army had launched incursions into Syria, bombing and shelling territory that had been under the control of the US-backed Syrian Kurdish fighters, putting the lives of thousands of Kurdish civilians at risk. Mustafa Bali, a press officer for the SDF issued a statement saying that Turkish planes have begun to carry out airstrikes on civilian areas. Bali wrote, "There is a huge panic among people of the region…" (Fahim 2019). Turkish media and video widely shared on social media showed Turkish forces shelling Syrian border towns. There are reports that Kurds were attempting to flee villages including Ras al Ain and Tel Abyad. The SDF reported that at least two civilians had been killed in the "Turkish aerial bombardment" in the village of Mosharrafa, west of Ras al Ain ("How Does Turkey's Offensive" 2019).

Turkey's aggression against Syrian Kurds is not limited to military attacks. Beginning in early May 2020, Turkey reduced the flow of water from the Euphrates River into northeast Syria's dam, significantly reducing the amount of water received in early June to unprecedented low levels (Dilleen 2019) Officials in charge of the Tishreen Dam, the largest hydroelectric station in Syria, warned that Turkey's continued weaponization of the water from the Euphrates River within its territory, will not only devastate the economy in Syria, but also deeply impact food security and available drinking water (Aslan 2020; Dilleen 2019).

The Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES) called on the United Nations, the Syrian, and Iraqi governments to "put pressure on Turkey, regarding the

violations of international charters and laws, towards dealing with regional waters" (Aslan 2020) Energy and Communications Office in the Jazira region announced that there is a 25 percent reduction in the generation of electrical dams. The office added that the eviction rates increased on the lines feeding the neighborhoods and villages transformers by more than 50 percent. Jazira relies mainly on the Swediyah station in the countryside of Derik and the quantities of electricity received from the Euphrates Dam, located near the city of Tabqa in northeastern Syria (Dilleen 2019).

Though the Pentagon and Trump administration officials tried to suggest that the US does not support or endorse Turkey's offensive against Syrian Kurds, both Democratic and Republican U.S. lawmakers, along with former Pentagon officials condemned President Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from Syria, accusing the administration of abandoning the Kurds, leaving them exposed to overwhelming military attacks, economic pressures, drought, and famine. To date, the United States has not taken action to arrest the Turkish incursions into Syria or to ensure that regional water supplies are not withheld.

Kurds in Iraq

Iraq plays a powerful role in Kurdistan, as the autonomous region and the sole Kurdish governing body exists within its borders of Iraq (KRG). According to The Kurdish Project, there are approximately five million Kurds in Iraq (kurdishproject.com). The Kurdish Institute of Paris reports a total population of 8.4 million Kurds in Iraq. However, the precise number of Kurds in any country or region has been difficult to quantify, and previous surveys have largely been unreliable (kurdishproject.com; institutkurde.org). Given the history of oppressive regimes in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, it is easy to understand why Kurds are reluctant to identify themselves on official forms. In western nations (e.g., United States, and United Kingdom), census forms have not included Kurdish as an option among the selections for ethnicity. So, whether it be in Kurdistan or diasporic communities, Kurdish self-identification has either been unavailable, or dangerous. As previously mentioned, this has had a profoundly negative impact on Kurdish culture and the process of identity negotiation.

Although Kurds represent an estimated 17% of the population in Iraq (institutkurde.org), Kurdish is not included on public signs, in education, and most other spaces. The Arab

majority in Iraq, and most Iraqi youth do not speak Kurdish. Arabic and Kurdish are listed as been listed as a national language in Iraq since 1991 (Kelly 2010) when Kurds won control over three northern provinces, but Arabic is the most widely spoken and used, by far (Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996; gov.krd). According to one interviewee:

> Iraq hasn't done anything to humanize the Kurdish existence or just you know, make it a reality of the makeup of the country. And this is nothing…with the Arab world, especially the…Muslim Arab world where you're Arab or Muslim or you're foreign…I can't go to Baghdad and understand what people are saying. I can go to the Kurdish side, Eastern Kurdistan in Iranian Kurdistan and understand what people are saying. I can cross the border up north and to a degree, understand what people are saying and be able to communicate and feel that sort of friendship in a way…but if I go to Bagdad…I feel like I'm a tourist…when supposedly this is…your country. You don't see signs in Kurdish. You don't see anything being done in Kurdish (Yado 2020)

In Northern Iraq, the most common Kurdish dialect is Kurmanji ("Northern Kurdish"), while in Central Iraq, the Sorani dialect is dominant ("Central Kurdish"). There are at least twelve distinct dialects known as Xwarîn ("Southern Kurdish") which are spoken in Southern and Eastern Iraq. Kurmanji and Sorani each have written forms, though they are not similar. Kurmanji uses a Latin alphabet, while Sorani is written using in a modified Arabic script. For example, the written English expression, "hello" in Kurmanji is roj baş, pronounced "roezsh bosh." In Sorani, the same word is written as, چۆنی and is pronounced "slaw." There are other words for "hello" in both Kurmanji and Sorani (glosbe.com).

The Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq was officially formed in 1992 and is the recognized governing body of the Kurdistan Region of northern Iraq. According to The Kurdish Project, "The KRG has legal jurisdiction over three provinces, Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Iraqi Army security in the region and…occupation by ISIS forces, the KRG gained de facto jurisdiction over an additional three provinces, Diyala, Nineveh and Kirkuk" (kurdishproject.org). In 2005, Masoud Barzani, son of Mustafa Barzani who founded the Kurdish Democratic Party, was elected President, and served until 2017, when his nephew Nechirvan Barzani was elected President. The current Prime Minister of the KRG is Masrour Barzani, the son of former President Masoud Barzani. It should not be a surprise that the Barzanis are all members of the KDP.

Life for Kurds in Iraq has been difficult. Since massive oil reserves were discovered in and around Mosul (Northern Iraq), the Iraqi economy was largely based on oil and railroads. Railroads largely served to increase profits for oil companies.

Kurds in Iran

There are approximately eight million Kurds living in Iran, comprising around ten percent of the population (institutkurde.org). They are mostly settled along the borders of Iraq and Turkey. Kurds in Northern Iran speak Kurmanji, while in central Iran, they speak Sorani. In southern Iran, Kurds speak the Gorani dialect, and Kurds living around Kermanshah speak a dialect closer to Persian (Izady 1992; Houston 2008). Tensions between the Iranian government and Kurds have been percolating for decades. Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, struggles for independence in the Kurdish regions continued. Ayatollah Khomeini warned Kurdish leaders that any attempts to achieve independence in Iran would be met with violent military action (Gunter 1996). Despite the Ayatollah's threats, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Komalah, and the Kurdish branch of the Fadaian launched a rebellion in the spring of 1979. The Iranian regime responded first with the banning of the Kurdish Democratic Party, followed by an armed campaign against Kurdish rebels, and civilians (Gunter 1996; Byman et al. 2001).

Following the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), both the Iranian and Iraqi militaries attacked Kurdish rebels in order to bring their respective Kurdish regions under their control and wipe out the Kurdish guerrilla fighters. Hundreds of villages were bombed, landmines were buried throughout the Kurdish region, and Kurdish populations were uprooted from their homes and villages (Byman et al. 2001). Since the 1980s, the Kurdish insurgency against the Iranian government has persisted, with a history of attacks against Iranian security forces. In 2016, Amnesty International documented dozens of Kurds that were arrested without warrant for alleged associations with the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran ("Rights Denied" 2018). Other Kurds were found to be serving lengthy prison sentences for alleged ties to Kurdish opposition groups ("Rights Denied" 2018).

Iran's official policy with Kurds is to permit them to live in Iran, but separately (Byman et al. 2001). As a result of the separatist national policy, there are high levels of property confiscation and governmental neglect. For example, the Kurdish region in Iran

features significant water resources. The Iranian government has constructed numerous dams to facilitate water irrigation for agricultural development and hydroelectric power generation, but Kurds are generally excluded from the benefits of the program. Many Kurds in Iran suffer from substandard housing, discrimination, and poor living conditions because of forced resettlement due to Iran's separatist policies (Byman et al. 2001; "Rights Denied" 2018). During one interview, I was told:

> In Iran, I…have to wear a scarf…even though I'm the Kurdish side…it's fine as soon as I go, but there is no airport on the Kurdish side. So I always have to go to the Iranian side to fly. And you always have to be very careful with the Persians…people disappear from airports, it's not uncommon at all. So…you deliberately have to put like the scarf really tight. And, and make sure you have no makeup or no gold or anything just so you don't draw any attention to yourself. Put your head down and go…that's the only way I can go to the airport without getting into trouble…that's why I stopped going there (Rojin 2020).

Although Kurdish fighters continue to push back against the Iranian regime, they are outmatched in number and military strength. Iran's explicit policies to subdue religious and ethnic minorities extend to the placement of leaders in Kurdish towns and cities. One interviewee shared:

> In Iran…the mayor of our city was a Turkish guy…he was a Turk, from Azerbaijan. So we felt even more degraded, that they wouldn't even send a Persian in to govern us. They would send a Turk in to govern us. That's how they looked down on us. I remember, my dad…had loads of connections. But he still was less than the Turkish governor of the city. And he still had to bribe his way through everything. Even though this was a Kurdish city. We were just Kurds in a Kurdish city. We had to have someone else come and govern and we had to bribe someone else to let us do things that we want to do (Irem 2020).

Iran has created an oppressive environment for its Kurdish citizens, meeting any trace of opposition with military force. National policy and the Arab separatist movement have resulted in political, economic, and social instability for Iranian Kurds; poor conditions that are unlikely to change due to the placement of apathetic regional leaders. Kurds are relegated to second-class status, bribery of public officials to obtain needed services, and the need to conceal their ethnic identities in public spaces to remain safe from harm.

Kurds in Turkey

There are approximately eighteen million Kurds living in Turkey, and their population is widely dispersed (thekurdishproject.org). It is the largest population of Kurds in any single country. Kurds in Turkey speak Kurmanji Kurdish and Turkish. The Turkish government has oppressed Kurds in Turkey for decades, sometimes prohibiting the use of the Kurdish language and the expression of Kurdish culture in any form (Saatci 2002; Yegen 2009). Armed Kurdish militia known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), have engaged in lengthy resistance against the Turkish government and its military. PKK tactics are not popular among a majority of Kurds, as they have been known to attack Turkish civilian targets. The United States and Great Britain consider the PKK to be a terrorist organization (Casier 2010). The PKK asserts that they are merely fighting the same type of war that Turkey is fighting. For many Kurds, this explanation does not justify some of the PKK's actions, although participants in my research have suggested that they understand the reasoning. One interviewee explained:

> My opinion on PKK is that they exist because of the inherent problem in Turkey. They exist as a consequence of the politics, and they don't exist in a vacuum. And the fact that the way they've been dealt with for example, if you've been raised in the mountains, if you've all you've known are mountains and an armed struggle, how are you supposed to take your arms down If there's no incentive? If there's no…put your arms down, engage with civic society… This is your route to education, this is your route to getting a job, this is your route to being able to have housing, and these, you know, to even have basic identification, these are, these are basic things, that when the peace process happened back in, back in 2000…I think it was 2012…I feel sad that you know, up till now Kurds still have to have armed struggle (Rezan 2020).

Since US forces withdrew from Northern Syria in 2019, Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan launched military strikes against Kurdish populations in northern Syria (Rojava) and Northern Iraq ("Turkey Syria Offensive" 2019). He claims that the Kurds in that region have too much power, and that in order to preserve Turkey's security, a "safe zone" must be created (Ünver 2016). For Kurds, Erdogan's true intentions could not be clearer, that It has long been his intention to annihilate all traces of Kurds and their culture.

In addition to military strikes against Kurds in Syria and Iraq, Erdogan has mounted a campaign to devastate the agricultural lands in Syria, arrest hydroelectric power development

in Iraq, and cut off a major source of potable water throughout Kurdistan by constricting water flow from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (Aslan 2020; Dilleen 2019; Kibaroğlu 2011). The headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates originate in Turkey, flowing into Iraq and Syria through tributaries that also originate from Turkey. The control of one of the region's primary water sources gives Turkey enormous power over the Kurds; control over food production, power production, and drinking water. Figure 4.7 is a Twitter post, decrying the power Turkey wields throughout Kurdistan.

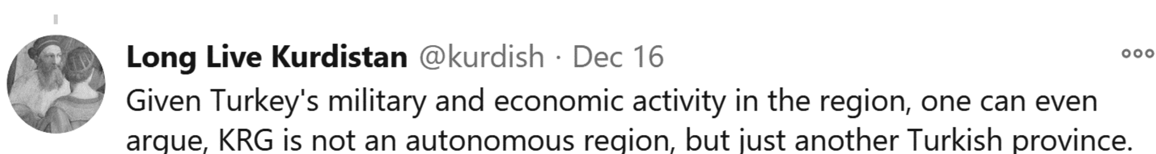

Figure 4.7 Twitter. Turkish military and economic pressures against Kurds increase in Iraq.

Turkey does not appear to be satisfied with its attempts to wage war against Kurds in Syria and Iraq. Within the borders of Turkey, ancient Kurdish villages are being wiped out through intentional flooding created by dams along the Tigris River. The twelve-thousand-year-old town of Hasankeyf is slowing being submerged underwater, as the Ilisu Dam project in southeastern Turkey began arresting water flows in July 2019 (Kucukgocmen 2020). Turkey claims the dam is the be used to create hydroelectric power but is taking no action to prevent the displacement of some 80,000 Kurdish residents from nearly 200 small towns and villages. The dam not only serves to erase ancient Kurdish cultural centers, but also controls the flow of irrigation water into Syria and Iraq (Kucukgocmen 2020; Dilleen 2019).

The use of Kurdish language and the expression of any aspect of Kurdish culture has long been either prohibited by Turkish law, or highly restricted. Article 42.9 of the Turkish Constitution states, "Aside from Turkish, no other language shall be studied by or taught to Turkish citizens as a mother tongue in any language, teaching, or learning institution" (hrw.org). Turkey's violent opposition to Kurdish cultural expression is not limited to Kurds. Turkey maintains an aggressive nationalist policy against the expression of any language, religious affiliation, tradition, or material culture that is not Turkish within its borders ("New CAP Poll" 2018; Ciment 1996; Izady 1992). Turkey's recent "allowances" of the use of

Kurdish language, and the acceptance of Islam seem to contradict their explicit nationalist policies. One interviewee explained:

> Turks wanted everything to be all [Turkish]…for the longest time, no specific religion, certainly no multiple religions, and no other ethnic identity other than Turk. That's it. Turkish nationalism was all there is. So now they're dabbling a bit in Islam. I say dabbling because I don't believe it's genuine. I think it's a political move, because of the region. And the Turks don't want to stand alone against all the other nations over there, let alone against Western governments. So there's the allowance of Islam now. But I believe that's to placate the region. Generally speaking, Turkey wants only people to be Turks, speaking Turkish, reflecting Turkish culture and identity and nothing else (Rojin 2020).

Tayyip Erdogan's military attacks against Kurds in Rojava and Iraq are ongoing, along with economic pressures and governmental control of scarce natural resources. Turkey is waging a very public genocidal campaign against Kurds, while placating the United Nations, other governments in the region, and NATO allies such as the United States.

Chapter 5: THE KURDISH DIASPORA

According to the Kurdish Project and the Kurdish Institute of Paris, there are approximately 1.4 million Kurds living outside of the 4 parts of Kurdistan. As previously mentioned, it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of the estimate, given the inability for Kurds to register their ethnicity on census forms in most countries. The table below outlines the estimated populations of Kurdish diaspora throughout Europe.

Table 2: Kurdish diasporic population, Europe. The Kurdish Institute of Paris.

Country	Estimated Population (Mid to Late 1990s)
Germany	800000
France	120000
Netherlands	80000
Switzerland	70000
Belgium	60000
Austria	60000
Sweden	30000
Great Britain	25000
Greece	25000
United States	20000
Denmark	10000
Canada	7000
Norway	5000
Italy	4000
Finland	3000
Totals	**1419000**

An exploration of current literature suggests a contemporary expansion of the use of the term *diaspora* to describe virtually any group of people who are separated geographically from their native country (Daswani 2013; Dufoix 2008). Modern usage of the term includes expatriates and retirees who have either selected from among the most ideal countries to spend their retirement years or migrated as a preference over some aspect of their native country. The traditional use and connotation of diaspora reflects a population, that has been forced to relocate due to social, political, or economic forces (Dufoix 2008). This definition

usually includes refugees from military conflict, and increasingly, climate change and natural disasters. I will use the term "diaspora" to describe Kurdish populations reflecting the traditional definition and connotation, not merely as a personal preference, but to accurately depict how I believe Kurds view their cultural identity among the global community.

Aggregated data in this section does not attempt to specify either Kurdish community (London or Nashville). Information specific to either of the two site locations will be addressed in the succeeding sections, "Kurds in London" and "Kurds in Nashville." Of the fifty-three Kurds who completed the questionnaire, thirty were residents of London and twenty-three were residents of Nashville. The following tables show the cumulative data collected from all respondents. Table 5.2 indicates an overwhelming majority of those who took the survey had a bachelor's degree (20.75%) or advanced degree (79.25%). Given the sample size, it is not possible to conclude that the entire communities of London and Nashville reflect a similar average, but many interviewees expressed that education is highly valued in their community.

Table 3: Questionnaire. Highest level of education.

Level of Education	Percentage	Number
Elementary/Primary School	0.00%	0
High School Graduate/Some college: Please specify	20.75%	11
College Graduate (Please specify highest degree: bachelor's, master's, Ph.D., etc.)	79.25%	42
Total	100%	53

It was important to construct a survey that protected anonymity. Therefore I did not include a question on exact age. A range of ages was used for the survey: 18-34, 35-49, and 50+ in order to decrease identifiers. Table 5.3 depicts the age groups represented by the fifty-three survey respondents. The age of the respondents is important, as it provides insight into what events were happening in Kurdistan at the time of their departure. Kurds in the 18-34 age range, would not have personal memories of the Anfal Genocide in Iraq (1986-1989), or the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), but may have witnessed events from the KDP-PDK war

(1994-1997), ongoing Turkish aggressions, and the Syrian civil War (2011-Present). In any case, full recognition of these events is still present in the minds of each interviewee, regardless of age. As would be expected, there is damage; emotional wounds and lingering sadness about their personal experiences, those of their parents and family, and conditions that exist in Kurdistan.

Table 4: Questionnaire. Respondent age groups

Age Group	Percentage	Number
18-34	35.85%	19
35-49	41.51%	22
50+	22.64%	12
Total	100%	53

Table 5.4 shows that the majority of survey respondents were born in either Turkey or Iraq. Iran was third, followed by Syria. This is similar to the population distribution as reflected by the map shown in figure 4.2.

Table 5: Questionnaire. Country of Origin

Country of Origin	Percentage	Number
Iran	24.53%	13
Iraq	32.08%	17
Turkey	30.19%	16
Syria	7.55%	4
London	1.89%	1
United States	0.00%	0
Other	3.77%	2
Total	100%	53

The connection between language and identity cannot be overstated. In each of the personal interviews, language was regarded as a critical aspect of Kurdish identity. Until recently, the use of Kurdish language was forbidden in many parts of Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdistan (autonomous zone) is the only area where Kurdish is considered an official language, though Iraq does not include Kurdish on its public signage outside of the Kurdish region, including the capital city of Baghdad. Table 5.5 represents responses to question number five on the survey, "What is the primary language spoken in your childhood home?"

Table 6: Questionnaire. Native Language

Native Language	**Number**
Kurmanji	25
Sorani	18
Badini dialect	3
Gorani dialect	1
Turkish	3
Arabic	1
Persian	1
Italian	1
Total	53

Two of the themes that emerged from interviews revealed a complicated affiliation with Kurdistan, and the self-identification as either American or British in concert with Kurdish ethnicity. I took notice that no matter where any interviewees had been born, when speaking of their native country, rather than Iran, Iraq, Syria, or Turkey, it was always *Kurdistan*. One interviewee said, "I have never felt Iraqi. I've never felt that Iraqi was my identity…I don't feel any sense…even the word Iraqi…like, why should I feel Iraqi?" (Rezan 2020) In many instances, interviewees used the word "Home" interchangeably to reference both Kurdistan, and London or Nashville.. Figure 5.1 is from Twitter. The individual was

engaging with several other Kurds about recent events in Iraq, while making clear that their ethnic identity is clearly delineated from their country of origin, during an online discussion of traditional gendered roles and expectations for Kurdish women.

Figure 5.1 Twitter. Cultural differences in Kurdistan. Gender roles.

Responses from interview questions have confirmed this theme on many topics. To suggest that Kurdish identity in Turkey is the same in Iraq would be highly inaccurate. Kurdishness is diverse and complicated, reflecting a myriad of cultural differences among Middle Eastern nations. Differences in behaviors and worldview remain in Kurdish diasporic communities. Although these cultural variances can elicit , but do not tend to create the type of conflicts that occur in Kurdistan. None of the Kurdish people I communicated with at either site made any claim to tribal affiliation, current or former membership with any of the current Kurdish political parties in Kurdistan, or violent confrontations over cultural differences and practices in their diasporic communities.

Kurds in London

According to the 2011 UK Census, there were 20,988 Kurds living in Greater London, representing a little over 42% of the total Kurdish population living in the UK (ons.gov.uk). I suggest that there are considerably more Kurds living in both the UK, and in Greater London. Until the 2021 census, Kurds did not have the option of selecting either Kurdish ethnicity or language (uk.gov.krd) Instead, they were required either to write in their information in English, or select from Iraqi, Turkish, or Syrian options. According to a number of my UK Kurdish contacts, most Kurds, if they participated in the census, opted to select one of the pre-printed options. It has been reported that among the 3 million people who are registered as Turkish in Germany, over half are ethnic Kurds (ons.gov.uk; van Wilgenburg 2018). The 2021 UK census began on March 21, 2021, and as of this writing the results have not yet been

published. Coincidentally, if not an elegant cosmic nod of approval, March 21 is Nowruz, the Persian New Year celebrated by Kurds all around the world. According to one of the informants for this research, the preprinted option to identify as Kurdish on the 2021 census was won through a grassroots lobbying campaign. Not only is this an important change for the sake of self-identification and institutional agreement, but also in order to accurately depict the numbers of Kurds who make their homes in the UK. They are an important, but under-served constituency, who will soon have more of a voice with their elected members of Parliament.

Figure 5.2 The Kurdish Cultural Centre London (KCCL)

In order to connect with London Kurds, I reached out to The Kurdish Cultural Centre London (KCCL. See figure 5.2), and its members through Facebook. KCCL is located in Kennington, the London Borough of Lambeth, which is in South London. Kennington is considered a residential district, but features many stores, museums, restaurants, and The Kia Oval, an international cricket stadium.

According to their Facebook page, the mission of KCCL is:

> Our motto is “Helping the People” – and we want to do an excellent job of just that! Our Ethos – To relieve poverty & distress by the provision of advice and assistance in such areas as immigration, welfare rights, housing, health, integration, education, and training to those members of the Kurdish Community in the UK who would not otherwise obtain such advice through lack of means. To work towards the preservation and promotion of Kurdish language, art, literature, and cultural heritage. To work for the integration of Kurdish refugees in the UK, assisting dispersed communities outside London, and encouraging ELT and employment so as to enable them to play a productive role in Britain.

Miran Hassan, director of the KCCL, indicated that under normal circumstances, the facility would be the site of regular meetings and celebrations. There is also a repository of Kurdish research and books at the KCCL, none of which have yet been digitized. This was exciting to learn, as it was very difficult to find original Kurdish research for this project as I conducted a

review of existing literature. I plan to review these documents when travel is less restrictive. In addition to leading the Kurdish Cultural Centre London, Miran has previously served as a Parliamentary Staffer in the UK House of Commons and is now working as consultant for a London PR firm. His background in politics and London business enables Miran to connect with a considerable number of UK Kurds. Miran and other members of the KCCL were also responsible for the 2021 UK census change, permitting Kurds to self-identify.

COVID mitigation measures enacted by the British government prohibited public gathering during the full duration of my research. I was therefore resigned to communicate with KCCL members and other Kurdish Londoners using Zoom and Skype, along with the social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. On occasion, I was able to send and receive messages using WhatsApp; a messaging platform owned by Facebook. Personal interviews were semi-structured in order to provide baseline responses to predetermined questions, while allowing for a more organic progression. I prepared a list of questions in advance (Appendix A), which were displayed on screen during the interview. Conversations often diverted from the question list, as personal stories or deeper reflections were shared. Follow up questions attempted to uncover further detail and clarification within the context of identity and the process of identity negotiation. The following excerpts of interviews from London Kurds reveal how they feel about their own personal identities, and of their larger community.

> So coming to London, I…longed, I don't even know how to say that longed for some Kurdish connections, like I longed to go to parties where they would be like, Kurdish dancing and Kurdish music. And I could just go and dance and obviously that's not appropriate as a single girl on your own without your family members, all of that. But I longed for it. And lo and behold, about I think three or four months into just Googling anything Kurdish in London that would be appropriate for me to be a part of, I found the Kurdish student organization at SOAS university in central London. I signed up for the newsletter immediately. And I got a phone call from a guy, a Kurdish guy called (redacted) And he was like,…'I don't know what day of the week, it was like, what this week on Friday, we have a gathering come, we're going to play the tanbur,' you know, the Kurdish instrument?...I was like, Oh, here we go. And I did actually, I went there…I absolutely loved it. They all felt like brothers. So it was amazing to me…these guys. And I long to even have a brother. I made friends with them, would have weekly meetings, and I kind of, I don't know, found my Kurdishness and my Kurdish zone and my Kurdish circle. All together, we would go to…Kurdish restaurants in North

> London…We'd go to Kurdish restaurants owned by Kurds from Turkey, actually. And we would go there and listen. They would put on Kurdish music in the restaurant, and we would listen to Kurdish music and…dance. And it was just a very, very lovely time to sort of live out that whenever I thought Kurdishness was, but this worked for me (Irem 2020).

I followed this up with, "What would you say, if anything, is different about how Kurdish people feel about being Kurdish in Kurdistan versus in London…the way *you* feel now…In England?

> …I think you're definitely more aware in diaspora, outside of the four main places in the world where the Kurds are: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria…I think you're more aware of the significance of your roots for sure. I think when you're in Iran or in Iraq even in autonomous region where actual Kurdistan exists…technically, anyway. When you're there, you're just sort of making it. You're living, and things are how they are and you're "ok" with it. And you're not really…resistance is not exactly an option because it follows with persecution. So you sort of make do, the fact you're a second-class citizen, and they're just never going to be having the same rights as, say, in Iran, the Persians have, or in Turkey the Turks have or whatever. Here you are, I don't know, I think a little bit nostalgic about your roots. And you're a little bit like, I don't know, you get tearful when you listen to a Kurdish song and all of that, but I think I don't, I don't know if anyone knows how to how to be…if that makes sense. Because you want to do something for your people, for your nation. You want to be part of your community, but then you go and be part of your community, but…you've sort of outgrown Kurdish culture. And you just kind of feel this place in between two zones of like, you've become…in my case, I've become quite Western. And in a lot of ways, but then my heart is Kurdish, my longings are Kurdish, my desires are Kurdish. So I want to be part of my people. I want to dress Kurdish, I want to be in a Kurdish party and dance, and I want to eat Kurdish food. And when I'm in a lot of pain, I cry to God in Kurdish or when I'm whenever my emotions are very close my connections to like even to God…are very Kurdish my expressions and prayer…I go and be with them [Kurds], like maybe for two hours. And I can't stand it because I feel like the culture repels me and I repel the culture. So it's a very sort of a conflicting feeling. And I don't I don't think it's just me. I found a lot of people who are in my position who, come to the Western society at a young age and have grown up here, have this sort of a conflict where I can't find peace…I'm not this, but I'm not that either. I think perseverance is a big part of being Kurdish. I think it's a big part of being human. But I think… it's a funny thing with the Kurds because…I don't think it's just the Kurds actually with a lot of ethnicities in the world where you are, like, constantly pushed into a corner for no apparent reason. It does have…an adverse impact on…generationally, it will, it will affect the way you see yourself (Irem 2020).

Irem's internal conflict was common among those who shared their experiences with me. On one side, there is a deep longing to fully connect with their Kurdish identity, to speak Kurdish, dance to Kurdish music, dress in Kurdish clothing – to practice Kurdishness. On the other side, to reconcile the full practice of their Kurdishness with their developing British identity, as if the two were required to be mutually exclusive. For me as an observer and an anthropologist, this struggle defines the process of identity negotiation. Irem is free to express her Kurdish identity in London. She recognized a need to gather among other Kurds and intentionally sought out opportunities to do so. The experience of living her authentic self, and of freely practicing the cultural behaviors and traditions that reflect her identity as a Kurd without fear of sanction, is revitalizing. Nevertheless, in her mind she remains conflicted over the feeling of having claim one ethnic identity over another. It is as if the specter of her oppressor's negation of her personhood in Kurdistan, their voices and judgement, have followed her to England. However, she perseveres just the same.

Most respondents to the questionnaire and participants of interviews expressed positive feelings about their immigration experience and the reception they received in their new communities. However, this was not always the case. One survey respondent said:

> As I lived in London, it was normal to be a migrant and that way didn't feel different. However living, studying, and working with British people was a very different feeling. I came with two cultures (Kurdish and Norwegian) and neither were respected. There was a lack of curiosity from the British people I studied with (specifically Caucasians, but even at times from other minorities). I became the international officer at my Uni, and every international student had the same experience (Anonymous, Survey Question 16).

This experience was an outlier in contrast with the majority of responses, but it was neither surprising, nor would it be unique only to Kurdish immigrants. Histories of discrimination against immigrants in many countries, certainly in the United States and Britain, is widely known.

It was very clear from nearly twenty-six hours of transcribed conversation that members of the Kurdish diaspora are very aware of what is happening in all parts of Kurdistan. Even those who insisted they were "non-political" were well informed on current events. *Home,* along with every emotional and material thing that word implies exists for them in Kurdistan, and their adopted nations.

> You know, the place I really identify with, is United Kingdom, you know, this country. And before I used to think I shouldn't say that, but you know, I actually mean it now when I say it. I, I cannot for the life of me relate to the politics in Kurdistan. I do see myself as Kurdish, but I also see myself as British and, you know, if I were to identify myself, I would say I'm British and Kurdish…Kurdish being my heritage, but really British being most of my identity. And I don't know if everyone feels that way, but I think they should, especially the Kurds in UK…there is, you know…one foot in and one foot out of this country doesn't make sense to me…the country you're raised in, the country that shapes your identity ought to really be a country that people identify with. Obviously, that's my opinion. I can't push that opinion on anyone. Preserving Kurdish identity and culture is one thing. For example, the fact that Kurdish language is under attack in Turkey. The fact that we've got teachers in Iran arrested and sentenced to prison for speaking Kurdish. Or the fact that in Syria, you had you had an experiment in autonomy that was stifled and neglected by the Western allies. And the fact that you still you have this increasing political animosity in Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Those are things that I believe we should talk about, highlight, and promote. Democracy, rule of law…uphold, you know, human rights…those are things I very much believe in…but preserving those things like…you know, being British and Kurdish, don't have to contradict each other…because the way I see it is that I can call for the preservation of Kurdish rights, but in the same breath, I would call for the preservation of…human rights and not just the rights of Kurds, but really human beings anywhere. But the reason I specifically focus on Kurds because it's, you know, it relates to my heritage and it makes more sense that someone like me who understands the dynamics of those specific areas, highlights them…for the diaspora…it's really confusing who we are, what we are…someone wrote…I don't know who wrote this poem, "We are too foreign for the countries that we were born in. And we're too foreign for the countries that we are in or the countries that we call home at the moment." You know, home…home…the concept of home is a very confusing place. And you know, I think our identities, like the parts of Kurdish culture, obviously, clash with British parts of British culture. And you know, and here I am claiming to be both sides. I see it as problematic for someone like me who lives in UK, who has access to the political dynamics here, and then has an opinion on the political environment or the government overseas, because…you know, lately, this is something that bothers me. I don't have the right to tell anyone in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, or the Kurds in the autonomous part of Iraq to say, "This is how your government should be," because my government is in the UK…I see Boris Johnson as my prime minister. I don't see Mr. Barzani as my prime minister. So it's…a difficult dilemma, really, if anything, it's a dilemma.

I then asked, "So you feel, in a way, detached from Kurdistan?"

> Detached and attached. I'm going to end up confusing you quite a bit…it will take young people in the country [Kurdistan] to build a state...it will take young people to build their own businesses so that they escape the political party's patronage system. It will take them to do that. Then I come back to myself and ask who am I to tell them how they should conduct their own affairs, when I live here, and the policies of this country affect me? I'll give you a better example. So when the independence referendum was coming up, In London, I was going nuts saying…you know, we Kurds deserve independence. Everyone must vote yes. This is the right path forward. You know, if you don't vote yes, then you are someone who's completely neglecting Kurdish history. But when I did go back [Kurdistan] and I voted yes…after a couple of, you know, obviously the airport shut down. So after a couple of weeks, I was due to come back to England. I had to take a plane to plane to Baghdad, and then another plane to Sweden and then a plane back to England. But all those things I was saying like go and vote yes. Obviously, I'm not saying anyone really listened to me…but the economic impact, the social impact, the political impact doesn't touch me. I was back in England, you know, back to my own life, whereas people who lived in Kurdistan region were now suddenly dealing with this new reality of airports, shut down borders…Turkey and Iran doing military drills on Kurdish borders. So it's, you know, this is what I mean by the diaspora…these are things I've been talking about recently. As diaspora community, we have to be very careful with how we engage with the political dynamics of *there*. Because the decisions that people make, especially young people, they don't impact us because we have citizenship in Europe. We're protected by better government. We have access to better health care. We have access to institutions that will, you know, help us should we need it, and they don't have it back there. So diaspora communities have to be very careful with what they do.

I replied, "What is…the most important thing to you about your Kurdish identity?

> I would say it's the language. I speak Kurdish. I can read and write, it's not perfect…but doable and, and I think language it's the way you, you know, some things that you express in Kurdish are just not found in English...British…if you're a Kurdish person from…North Kurdistan, obviously you speak Kurmanji, if…like me, you'd speak Sorani. And so it's…I think language is the key that holds everything together. It's the diversity of language. I mean, that's part of the culture because everything else and you know, the food is similar to Middle Eastern food…we have some traditional very unique food, but in general, it's the [Kurdish] language that's very different…language…must be preserved (Rezan 2020).

Kurds in London grapple with the idea of home in two spaces and the reconciliation of two national identities. They share a deep desire to gather together, to preserve traditions and

display their ethnic heritage without fear of reprisal. They remain closely connected to Kurdistan, and current events in their native land. Above all else, interviewees tell me it is their language that is most precious.

In response to a survey question, one person said:

> I have been in the UK for 7 years now, I have fully understand [sic] how life works here. I can get along with almost anyone as I have learned the tradition. Due to this, I'm welcomed as they see me as one of their own. This only started happening as I started to speak English fully, wasn't like this on the first couple years as I wasn't able to share my ideas or just express myself generally" (Anonymous, Survey Question 16).

This response suggests that the freedom to speak Kurdish in their new home country, while so critical to the expression and preservation of Kurdish culture, does not serve to facilitate integration into a new community.

Kurds in Nashville

In the United States, the largest established Kurdish community is in Southern Nashville, an area affectionately known as "Little Kurdistan." According to the Tennessee Kurdish Community Council, the population of Kurds in Nashville is in excess of 15,000 (tnkcc.org). My contacts in Nashville suggest that number is 20,000 or more. As with other nation's census forms, the US census does not provide a preprinted option for Kurdish ethnicity. Therefore, categories such as "non-white," or "foreign born" tend to collect Kurds and others under non-specific labels. Much of the cultural, social, commercial, residential, and religious life of Kurds in South Nashville revolves around a Mosque, called The Salahadeen Center of Nashville (SCN). Figure 5.3 shows the entrance to the main prayer room at SCN. The Salahadeen Center of Nashville's website (scntn.org) describes the complex as three separate buildings: A main prayer room and activity building, a Sunday school, youth library, and youth programs building, and a Kurdish grocery store. Plans are underway for a 36,000

square foot multi-purpose building to house the prayer room, youth and social activity centers, and a school.

Figure 5.3 Salahadeen Center of Nashville. scntn.org

I messaged the director of the SCN through their Facebook page and left a message on the voice mail of their listed phone number. Eventually I received a response through Facebook. I shared my email and contact information, briefly describing the topic of my research and asked if I could be introduced to anyone who would be willing to speak to me. My request was warmly received, and the person I contacted agreed to share my information with others in the community. Within three days of that first conversation, I began to receive emails from Kurds in Nashville. I noted that unlike the cultural center in London, The Salahadeen Center is a place of worship for the community, as well as a social hub. I was given permission to post an advertisement and introduction to my research on SCN social media pages. It is worth noting that my SCN interviews did not include any women. I hoped that interviewing male members of the community would lead to introductions, but that was not the case. Although I was not able to interview a woman from the Nashville community, it is clear from the total results that women did respond to the questionnaire. The following are excerpts from the interview transcripts of Nashville Kurds who shared their views on identity, and the demonstration of Kurdish diasporic culture.

> You know, according, according to my friends, that the number of the people, the Kurdish…people here in Nashville, it's around 18,000…It's a big number, and because they…keep themselves as a group. That's mean they are not affected with the American community…We have to make some change I mean while you are here because we want to make some change, but it seems that is not easy for them to make this change especially for the old generations. The old generations keep the same, even for that marriage…they want a marriage from the each of, I mean to select the marriage from their friends or

> families they want they don't like to be open to the others they have very little relationship with the American people. For me they are surprised to see and still I think still they are living in Iraq on they are they didn't make any change. And still they using the same language and the Kurdish language in their home…Change is difficult…Especially for… most of them…I think that still…their *body* is here in the United States, but their minds…in Iraq and Northern Iraq and Kurdistan…They are, they are, especially in 1991 until 1998 when there was an internal war in Kurdistan, I mean, they force [us]. They have been forced to move…not they willed to come to the United States, but they are forced. Maybe not, it is not a big problem and when you want to…because you want to move or when you force it…is the difference between them…I think most of them have been forced…because of the situation (Ejder 2020).

I asked, "Can you tell me, what is the most important thing about your Kurdish identity?"

> The most important things, I want the Kurdish…to be honest with you, it is not easy to answer this question…I was discussing this point with my friends before I come, we were discussing this point why me or the others I mean friends…maybe in the United States, there is several thousand of us, but they…in Europe, there was a million of Kurdish people there…especially in Germany or the Netherlands, millions of people are there…the question is, why, why the people…want to move? What is that mean? Because we don't like to be Kurdish anymore or what? It is the question…you know, but I told you that maybe we think that we…we don't have a thing to be proud of. It's maybe we think that, you know, in comparison with the other nations. We feel that…and I'm sorry for this point…we feel that we are very, very, nothing…because where is our civilizations? Where's our doings? Where's our success? Where's our universities? Where's our education? Where's our health? Where's…the history? We say that we were against having a state…but why don't people move constantly? We were fighting for Kurdistan this time therefore, when you say that, but the thing that you brought up with the Kurdish people…I am Kurd, and my father [is Kurd], I am a perfect Kurd. And every person…let me tell you something that every person, every person… he is a prisoner of his culture. And I am Kurdish. I'm a prisoner of my culture, my culture, I mean by that my relationship with my parents, my friends, my sister and brothers, and my relationship with others, my relationship with the sky, with the heaven, and with the government…all these issues, all these issues. It is my…my culture…and I am a prisoner of this culture. It's not easy. Maybe I want to be American, but it's not easy to say that I'm American…I understand a prisoner of this culture there. So everything in the Kurdish community, the language, the tradition…the thinking, it is a part of it… (Ejder 2020)

Ejder described the feeling of being stuck in a mindset that he found unproductive in Kurdistan. He indicated that he felt many Kurds in Nashville were resistant to change, and that he would prefer if they became more Americanized. I sensed that Ejder's hope for change, for Americanization, does not at all suggest a reduction of Kurdishness, but rather to escape the captivity and negation Kurds experience not only bodily, but psychologically. This was an interesting juxtaposition to his comments on being "…a prisoner of my culture." It can be a bit difficult to understand the nuances and contexts of these conversations in print. Reading relatively brief snippets of someone who is attempting to communicate enormously complicated ideas in a foreign language is foggier in text than it was as I watched him speak. Ejder feels an inescapable attachment to his Kurdish heritage, with the caveat that he wants it to change. His memories of Kurdistan, and current events in the region affect his life in the United States every day. Many family members remain in Kurdistan, where he knows they are often in danger. Ejder's seemed to struggle to find the perfect way to tell me that he would not allow himself to feel completely at peace, until all Kurds were in peace.. Several times, he mentioned having just spoken with his friends about the topic we were speaking of. I observed his struggle to reconcile being able to fully celebrate all the freedoms he and his Kurdish friends and family now have in Nashville, with the plight of Kurds in the Middle East and his hope for change.

Most interviewees did not express the desire to assimilate into their new host cultures but preferred an integrative approach. Afran described his experience and feelings as follows:

> I can tell people here that I'm Kurdish with no hesitation, you know, and I'm, I'm feeling comfortable. I can express myself here because, um, the, we have a good communication with the government agencies, with the police department, with the mayor. And they come, a lot of the candidates, they come from our center, you know, and we go out and vote. We have good communication with the churches, synagogues, like the Jews and Christians, they come to our, uh, center, we go to visit them. So it's a good communication and they know, they know we're Kurdish, majority Kurdish community here, and that makes us feel good and that's a good thing. ..In our center since it's a religious center…we do bring people from both [Kurd and non-Kurd] …to educate them on the…the religious perspective and the Kurdish perspective too. And we do participate in…the yearly celebration, Kurdish new year [Nowruz]…we do participate in that too. But…it's run by a committee which is from different organization, let's say. They're Kurdish people but it's run by a different…a committee…of different people. Another… event that we hold, we kind of open it up to the people, the Kurdish

> community, and other communities sometimes, open to everyone at our center. A lot of the events is for educational, you know, understanding each other or cultural background (Afran 2020).

I inquired, "Does…the outside community in Nashville…participate fully in those? Do you get a lot of people coming to participate in those events?

> In Nowruz? Yes, we have people come in from other states. They come and participate in Nowruz. And we had, uh, I don't know if you remember, we had the referendum. We were trying to hold the (2017) referendum (in Kurdistan) and we went to…the state capitol or wherever people gathered you know, in support of the referendum. A lot of people came for that too; some came from outside, other states. They came and joined…some people do come from, they participate from other parts of the state (Afran 2020).

I asked, "It sounds like from what you're describing that the Kurds in Nashville are participants in the political process and that the outside communities recognize that. Is that an accurate statement? "Yes…we do support…if anything…to help the Kurdish people, the Kurdish cause, I mean, we've been struggling for the past 20 years to have something of our own but, you know, my brothers, my sisters…is not just the Salahadeen Center, but is the Kurdish community in Nashville" (Afran 2020).

"Are they aware of and do they interact with other Kurdish communities in other countries…the cultural centers in other cities or in other countries?" I inquired

> I believe so…we're aware of them. We have a British organization here. They are aware of what we do, and we are aware what they do…if somebody, some Kurdish organization does something, let's say in other countries…we're aware of it…we look at the situation see what it is…we try to participate if it's for a good cause. We try to help in any way, anything that's positive to the community or to the people in general, you know, we try to help, doesn't matter what it is, maybe even if it's not Kurdish people, you know, we help. If anything happens in Kurdistan—well, not anything, but anything involving attacks on Kurdish people, our community is aware. And whenever somebody attacks Kurdish people from Iraqi side, Turkey side you know…. we get sad, our community gets very sad but there's little we can do, because like I said, we don't have much power. The various people in Kurdistan, we don't have much power as, when it comes to…the current Kurdish cannot even defend themselves from Iraq or Turkey, they don't have much (Afran 2020).

I asked, "What is the most important thing that is, you want [Americans] to know about Kurds?"

> Well…Kurdish people generally are…very hospitable people. You know, if you go to any Kurdish here in Nashville, they will treat you like a family member…one thing you will notice is they're gonna feed you as much as they can [laughs]. Very, very hospitable people, and even in Kurdistan, if people go visit them, if you come to somebody's house, they're gonna, they're gonna take care of you, like, uh, have a conversation and feed you a lot…so, that's one thing I'm really proud of. You know…we stay friendly, a lot of friendly people, to our community…So that's one thing I'm really proud of. Even here, here in Nashville, we have the same community. A lot of regions, we have this little center. And when we ask for help, or we can, we ask the community to help someone that's in need…financially, or support them food and clothing, a lot of them are, they just cannot wait to help. They're really supportive of each other. And that's one, that's another thing I'm really, really proud to be Kurdish. We're doing good here in Nashville. But there's always room for improvement. You know, like we have, we've been trying to have a school for kids, a good school. We don't have a, a—we use our center for kids as a school, and right now it's closed. So we're using Zoom as a virtual class for kids. A lot…of kids don't have the patience to sit in front of a computer for an hour or two. So if we had a school—we've been trying for years to have a school, but it takes…it's very costly. And…we're still not there yet. So that's one thing we, our community is trying to improve here in Nashville…we won't give up…we will keep trying (Afran 2020).

The most common themes that emerged through the ten personal interviews and the fifty-three questionnaires were: 1) The importance of language to identity. 2) The concept of "home" existing both in Kurdistan and in the host nations. 3) The public display of Kurdishness without fear of sanction. 4) The desire to be understood by people other than Kurds. 5) The hope for to success, socially and economically, in Kurdistan and in diasporic communities. 6) To maintain a connection with family and friends still living in Kurdistan. 7) To be of service within their communities – toward Kurds and non-Kurds. 8) Perseverance.

Although the Kurdish Cultural Centre London and the Salahadeen Center of Nashville serve very different purposes (SCN is primarily a mosque, while KCCL is essentially a secular venue), there were more similarities than differences between the two populations with respect to the information shared through interviews and the survey. It was not that religion was less important to London Kurds than in Nashville, but the contexts in which I was introduced to members of each community surely had an affect on the general discourse of our conversations. For Kurds in Nashville, the topic of religion was almost always initiated by them. For London Kurds, I typically had to inquire about their religious affiliation during the interview. In either case, religion played a measurable role in the Kurdish community.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

The process of designing and conducting ethnographic research during a pandemic was daunting, and often frustrating. It was not possible to witness the celebration of Nowruz when Kurds would gather to commemorate the Persian New Year. I was unable to visit the cultural centers in person, to sample Kurdish food, enjoy live Kurdish music, and experience the type of culture shock that makes field work exciting and sometimes overwhelming. Nevertheless, through virtual ethnography, it is possible to know and learn, to experience a sense of immersion that does not require the ethnographer to be physically present. Virtual spaces such as social media platforms, live-streamed conferences, and video interviews provide the opportunity to make genuine connections with people and their communities. Virtual spaces are as real as physical spaces, in that they reflect the language, preferences, habits, beliefs, traditions, and culture of the people who design and use them.

As I carefully evaluated the data from the online survey and coded the interview transcripts, the words of Rezan (Page 4) kept coming back to me, “So this…your research… is definitely something that's going to be very important in understanding the trajectory of Kurds everywhere.” This thesis illustrates the trajectory of Kurdish identity from their origins to modern times. Though there is surely a place for quantitative data in my research, I have elected to present the human aspect; the stories, thoughts, words, and ideas of Kurdish people in the forefront. In this way, it is my hope that my research will lead to a greater understanding of Kurdish identity negotiation as a complex process. There can be no singular definition of Kurdishness at this point. For Kurds living either in the Middle East or in diasporic communities, Kurdish identity is evolving. While Kurdish culture and identity remains both oppressed and fractured in the Middle East, Kurds in the diaspora are actively seeking to be counted and accepted fully. And, as evidenced by the 2021 inclusion of Kurdish ethnicity in the UK census, their efforts are being rewarded.

For Kurds, the process of identity negotiation is more of a reconciliation between the past and the present, between what is hoped for and what is. Their first cultural spaces, their homes, the birthplace of their identities, are neither uniform nor adequately represented under a tidy label. Even in diasporic communities, there are individual tensions with respect to identity agreement. There are institutional forms of cultural suppression, in the Middle East and in host nations. Although Kurds persevere and endure, the shared experience of long-term

and often violent discrimination and forced migration seems to result in considerable internal conflict. One interviewee described:

> And I can't stand it because I feel like the culture repels me and I repel the culture. So it's a very sort of a conflicting feeling. And I don't I don't think it's just me. I found a lot of people who are in my position who, come to the Western society at a young age and have grown up here, have this sort of a conflict where I can't find peace…I'm not this, but I'm not that either" (Irem 2020).

Another interviewee shared, "I am a prisoner of my culture" (Ejder 2020). In short, it's complicated. Kurdish identity is in a constant state of flux, and that is contradictory, complex, and messy. I noted that Kurdish culture is highly conditional. Social, linguistic, religious, political, economic, and topographic conditions in each of the four parts of Kurdistan create significant variances in Kurdish cultural identification. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria each reflect a diverse set of cultures, traditions, and ideologies in their own national contexts. Diplomatic and social relationships between Turkish Kurds and Iranian Kurds do not resemble relationships between Iraqi Kurds and Iranian Kurds. Competing Iraqi Kurdish political parties have literally engaged in a civil war. The lack of a lingua franca (common language), competing economic, political, social, and national interests, internecine conflicts, and significant topographical differences make Kurdish identity an ambiguous, fractured, highly conditional concept in Kurdistan. Further complicating the issue – the virtually unanimous denial of Kurdish ethnic identity by Middle Eastern nations with only sparse acknowledgement from nations outside of the region. Social Identity theory and Identity Theory suggest that the construction of identity without collective agreement is problematic. Nevertheless, Kurdish people have struggled against the most violent opposition imaginable to assert their unique place among world cultures.

Over the last three millennia, Kurds have fought with or against every nation in the Middle East. Putting themselves further at odds among Islamic states, they have also allied themselves with western nations. In each of the four parts of Kurdistan, Kurds declare themselves to be Kurdish, though they war against each other and do not speak the same language. Kurds identify with both major Islamic sects, Christianity, Upanishadism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and secularism. Some Kurds consider themselves to be communists, heavily influenced by the former Soviet Union (Franzen 2011). Others identify with dozens of

political parties in Kurdistan without a shared vision or plan to achieve a unified Kurdish state. There are no unified Kurdish armed forces to defend a singular Kurdish nation. Militia and paramilitary units such as the PKK, YPG, and Peshmerga represent regional interests in each of their respective countries, sometimes warring against each other. No singular contemporary Kurdish leader seems able to inspire loyalty from Kurds in all four parts of Kurdistan, or in diasporic communities. Still, if you were to inquire with the vastly different Kurds from any part of Kurdistan, they would proudly proclaim themselves to be Kurdish.

What is shared among Kurds becomes decidedly more cohesive in the Kurdish diaspora than the many causes of divisions between them in Kurdistan. According to every Kurdish person I interviewed, language is the most important aspect of Kurdish culture. Given the suppression of their language in Kurdistan either due to Turkey's explicit policies, the absence of Kurdish on public signs in Iraq, minimal international support or outright denial of Kurdish existence, and the inability to self-identify as a Kurd outside of Kurdistan, the response is not surprising.

Having been the targets of oppression for so long, attributes such as fairness and equity are extremely important to the Kurdish people. Kurds are deeply committed to their families. They are creative artisans, entrepreneurs, ambitious, patriotic; resolved to endure, no matter what obstacle is imposed upon them. Kurdish people have walked the earth for thousands of years but are only recently beginning to express fully and freely who they are. It is fascinating and perhaps a cruel irony that the full realization of Kurdish solidarity and identity are being achieved in multicultural environments providing Kurds with a shared language that is not any Kurdish dialect. The social, political, linguistic, and religious divisions that exist in Kurdistan that result in the suppression of Kurdishness, are not absent in the diaspora, but they do not result in significant conflict. Kurdistan represents millennia of struggle, survival, and the hope for an independent Kurdish state where the fullness of Kurdish culture and identity can be expressed – where there is no longer any debate over their personhood or right to exist. Kurds are free to be Kurds in London and Nashville, where they worship, work, dance, sing, speak, and live without fear of sanction or punishment. They are proud citizens of The United States and Great Britain, identifying as both Kurdish and American or British. Home is in Kurdistan. Home is in diasporic communities. Biji Kurdistan! (Long live Kurdistan!)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Personal Interview Questions

1) What was the reason(s) for relocating from your native country?
2) When did you relocate?
3) Was there time to prepare? What preparations were made, if any?
4) Was there governmental assistance in relocating? What kind of application process was required, and how long did it take?
5) How do you demonstrate your [Kurdish] identity in your host country? Please describe how this is a positive or a negative experience.
6) What is most important to you about your national identity?
7) What would you like to see improved about your native country? Your host country?
8) Do you plan to return to your native country? Why/why not/when?
9) Is there anything I did not ask, that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Online Questionnaire

Sex: M F

1. Sex
2. Age
3. What is your country of birth? Please type your answer in the text box below.
4. What is your "host" country? (where do you live?)
5. What is the primary language spoken in your childhood home? If neither option is shown, please type your answer in the "other" text box below
6. Do you have children? If "Yes" please include how many in the text box below.
7. Did you emigrate to your "Host" country alone, or with others? If "With Others" please list the total number of people who relocated with you in the text box below.
8. Do you have family members living in other countries? If "Yes" please specify where using the text box below
9. What is your vocation/job title? Please type your answer in the text box below.
10. Where were you trained for your current vocation/job? If "other" please type your answer in the text box below.
11. What is your highest level of education? Please specify using one of the text boxes below, if applicable.
12. What was your opinion of the emigration process? Additional details may be added using the text boxes below.
13. How long did the emigration process take? Please type your answer in the text box below.

14. Were there financial costs to emigrate? If "Yes" please specify approximate total costs using the text box below.

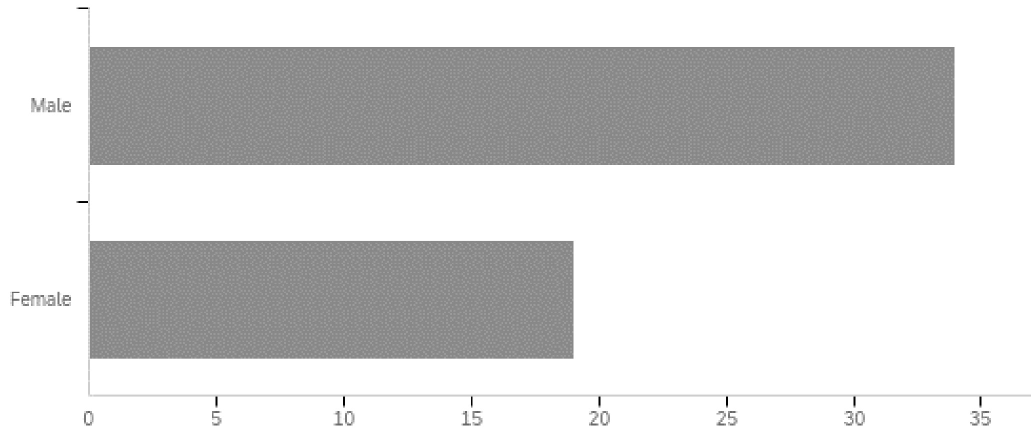
15. Were there any international, national, or local assistance programs to help with the emigration costs or processes? If "Yes" what were they? If "No" what might have helped you through the process? Please use the text boxes below to provide details.

16. Do you feel welcome in your "Host" country and/or city? Please share any details you are comfortable with in the appropriate text box below.

17. Is there anything you would like to share, but was not asked on this questionnaire? Please provide details using the text box below.

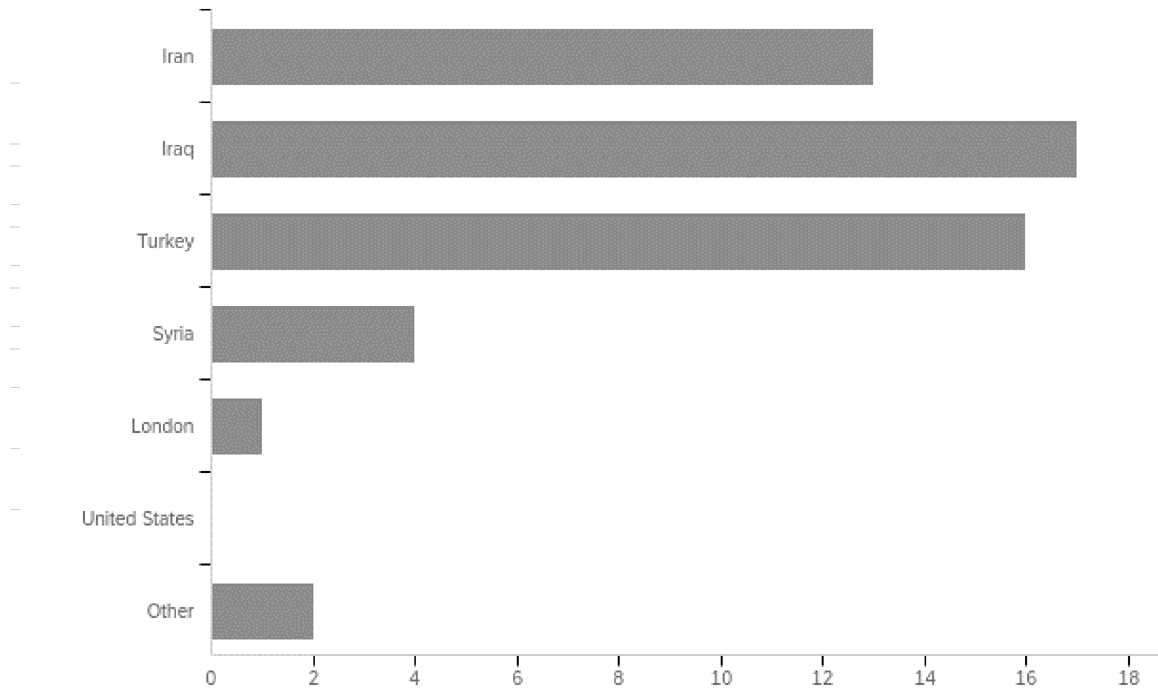
Appendix C: Questionnaire Data

Q1 - Sex



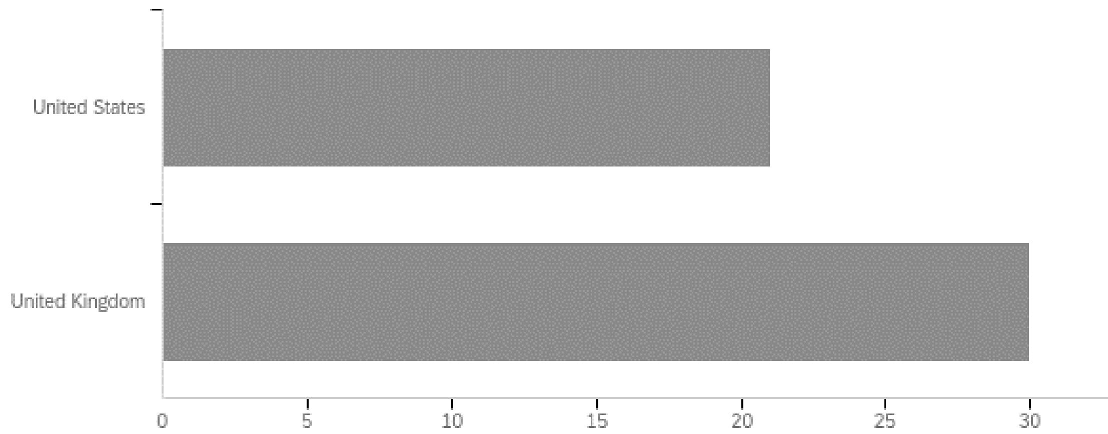
Q1	Answer	%	Number
1	Male	64.15%	34
2	Female	35.85%	19
Total		100%	53

Q3 – What is your country of birth? Please select from the drop-down list.



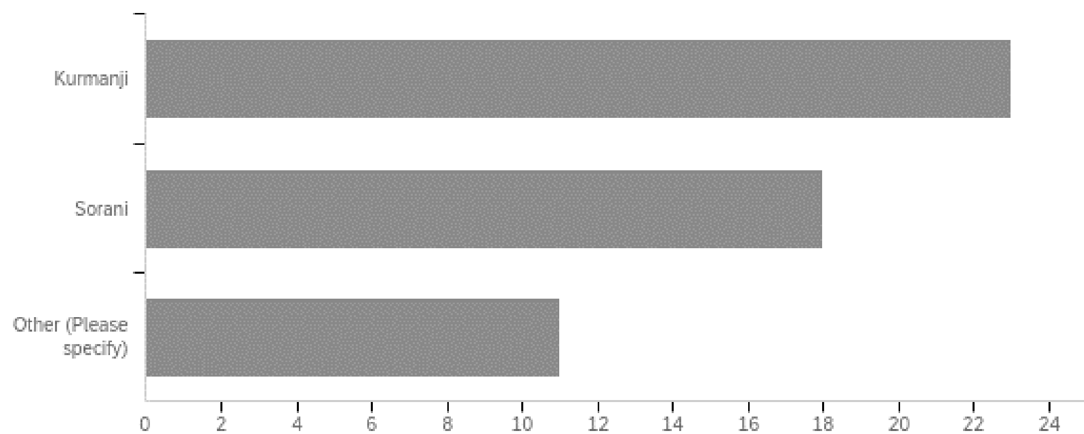
Q3	Country of Origin	%	Number
1	Iran	24.53%	13
2	Iraq	32.08%	17
3	Turkey	30.19%	16
4	Syria	7.55%	4
5	London	1.89%	1
6	United States	0.00%	0
7	Other	3.77%	2
Total		100%	53

Question 4 – Where do you live?



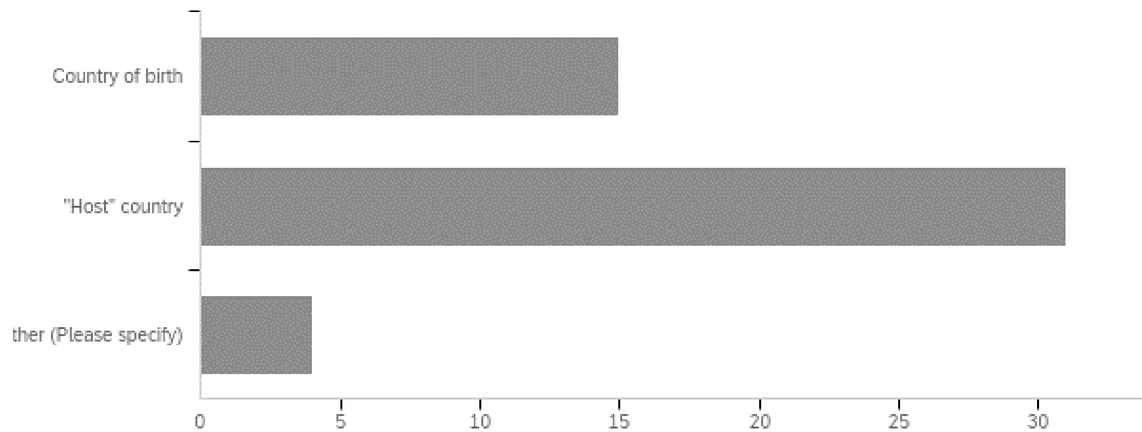
Q4	Answer	%	Number
1	United States	43.40%	23
2	United Kingdom	56.60%	30
	Total	100%	53

Question 5 – What is the primary language spoken in your childhood home?



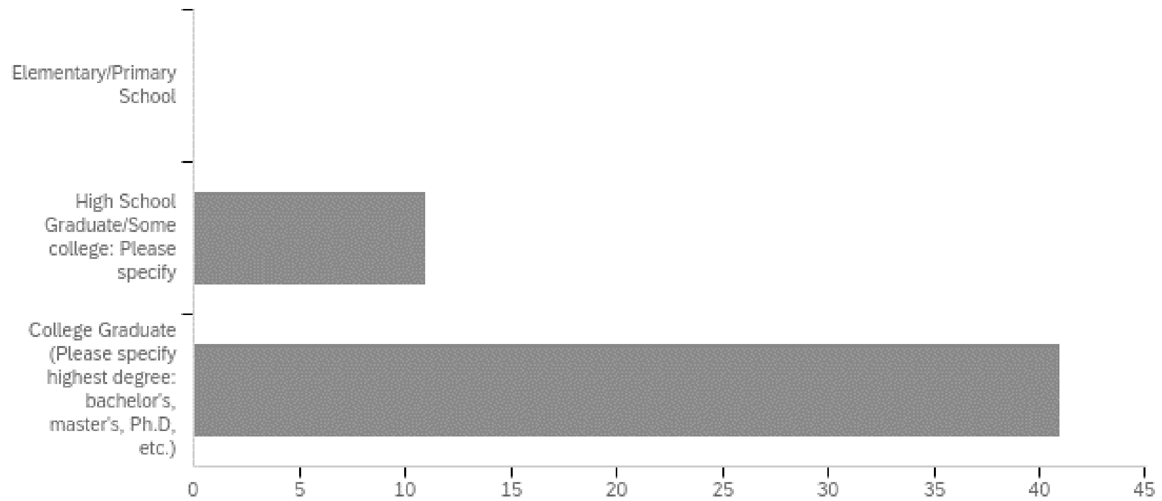
Q5	Native Language	Number
1	Kurmanji	25
2	Sorani	18
3	Badini dialect	3
4	Gorani dialect	1
5	Turkish	3
6	Arabic	1
7	Persian	1
8	Italian	1
Total		53

Question 10 – Where were you trained for your current vocation/job?



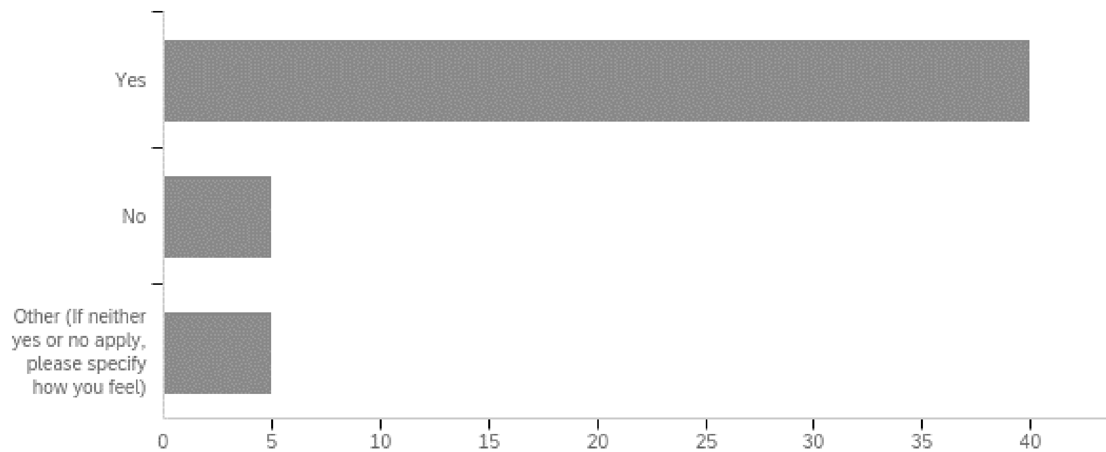
Q10	Answer	%	Number
1	Country of birth	28.30%	15
2	"Host" country	64.15%	34
3	Other (Please specify)	7.55%	4
	Total	100%	53

Question 11 – What is your highest level of education?



Q11	Answer	%	Number
1	Elementary/Primary School	0.00%	0
2	High School Graduate/Some college: Please specify	20.75%	11
3	College Graduate (Please specify highest degree: bachelor's, master's, Ph.D., etc.)	79.25%	42
	Total	100%	53

Question 16 - Do you feel welcome in your "Host" country and/or city? Please share any details you are comfortable with as to why or why not using the appropriate text box below.

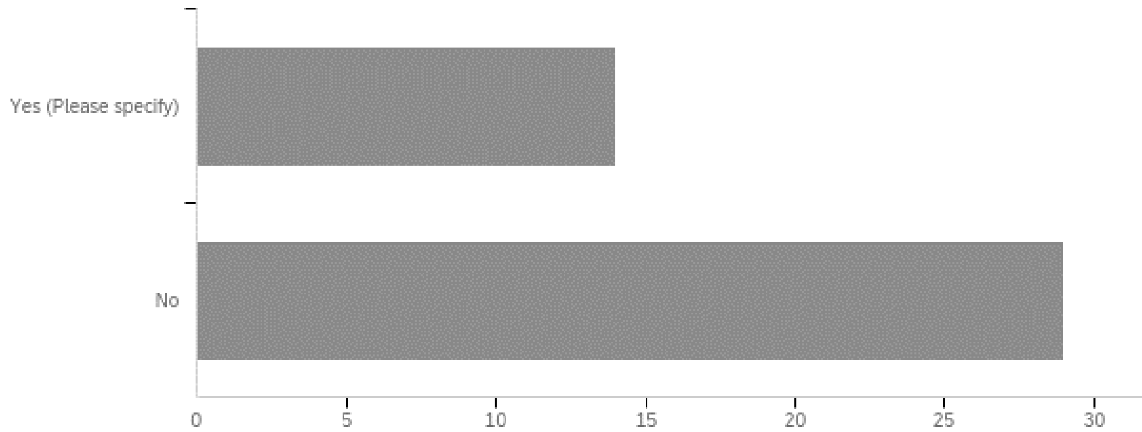


Q16	Answer	%	Number
1	Yes	75.47%	40
2	No	9.43%	5
3	Other (If neither yes or no apply, please specify how you feel)	15.1%	8
	Total	100%	53

Q16 – “Yes” response
Kurdish community is well connected
Very strong community here
I had relatives here that helped me
London really is my home now.
I feel safe and entitled to my human rights
The rules are the same for everyone. There is no racism. London people are cute and good. The park and its surroundings are large and beautiful. I can walk on the street more comfortably. I do not encounter any religious or traditional pressure.
People respect to each other. It is enough for me
minimum legal rules are applied
Better system and Good work condition
Freedom in all aspects
Easy and smooth settlement
London is a very diverse city
Local people were very welcoming and supportive my immigration process.
I mean I have been in the UK for 7 years now, I have fully understand how life works here. I can get along with almost anyone as I have learned the tradition. Due to this, I’m welcomed as they see me as one of their own. This only started happening as I started to speak English fully, wasn’t like this on the first couple years as I wasn’t able to share my ideas or just express myself generally.
I am being respected as a minority
I see a lot of other people that are not British or Swedish. A lot of Kurds and people from other countries, this makes me comfortable
For the most part yes, but there are definitely times we’re that feeling isn’t there and you don’t fit in with the environment around you
Case worker was assigned to reach out
Nashville, TN
All the doors were open for us for successful life
I feel very welcome in my city, Nashville. However, that is not always the case when I go to other cities and towns in Tennessee. the case when
But not always, I been in country for 23 years still I feel it
Lots of Kurdish people

Q16 “No” response
Everything new and unfamiliar, I live in an unfriendly area but I work with family so that helps
its an odd country, I started work straight away no time to settle, I need to adjust to unfriendly local people, my whole family lived in one room, in my home country I had my own room and a big space, I didn’t expect to live in these conditions
Racism
Q16 “Other” Response (If neither yes or no apply, please specify how you feel)
As I lived in London, it was normal to be a migrant and that way didn't feel different. However living, studying and working with British people was a very different feeling. I came with two cultures (Kurdish and Norwegian) and neither were respected. There was a lack of curiosity from the British people I studied with (specifically Caucasians, but even at times from other minorities). I became the international officer at my Uni, and every international student had the same experience.
I was reluctant to emigrate
I feel conflicted between my British and Kurdish identity
I think as a child, I didn’t pick up on a lot of things so in general I’d say yes.
Sometimes

Question 17 - Is there anything you would like to share, but was not asked on this questionnaire? Please provide details using the text box below.



Q17	Answer	%	Number
1	Yes (Please specify)	32.56%	14
2	No	67.44%	29
	Total	100%	43

Q17 “Yes” response (Please specify)
I came twice with a tourist visa then later I got a work permit
I went through different countries and stayed in Germany as I had relatives there. After a few months I paid a lorry driver who took me to the U.K as my life was in danger in Turkey. I claimed asylum but while waiting I met my wife and applied on the grounds of marriage.
Here I see myself as a second-class citizen, people here are treated much better than me even if I pay tax like everyone, I don’t feel supported by government
Corruption of both Talabani\Barzani thugs have reached North America where they are paying low life Kurds to act as pimps and propaganda tools
I’ve been living in London for almost 27-years, so I feel that the UK is my second home
Finding right ways to integrate without prejudice at the same time, preservation of your background
We need to be powerful and together, so we should support each other. In addition we should meet sometimes so our children can grow knowing our cultures.
I’m from Italy and have some Kurdish heritage.
That would be great to have online guidance for this immigration and settlement process.
Host country better than my birth country in terms of security and freedom
Were you forced to migrate?, if you had the option to go back would you take it?, what tips would you give someone that has just migrated.
The process of migration (forced or unforced) has deep rooted impact on children.
Community centers in host country are not at the expected level
The majority of Kurdish people immigrants came to USA as a refugee, and they’ve been forced to leave their original countries.

Appendix D: Glossary of Terms

Alevi: The largest of the religious minorities in Turkey, Alevis fall under the Shi'a denomination of Islam, yet they practice a considerably different interpretation of the Quran than the Shi'as in other countries. The Sunni majority often considers Alevis to be non-Muslims.

Anfal: (Arabic – "Spoils of War") Saddam Hussein's genocidal campaign to break the Kurdish resistance following the Iran-Iraq War. An estimated 50,000 to 200,000 Kurds were killed, including men, women, and children.

Assimilate: Adoption of the traditions, beliefs, and behaviors of a dominant culture while disconnecting from one's culture of origin. Assimilation leads to cultural homogeneity.

Ba'ath: Founded in 1947 by a Christian intellectual (Michel Aflaq), Ba'athism is an Arab nationalist ideology with the primary goal of creating a unified Arab state. The Ba'athist party has largely been confined to Iraq and Syria, and has been responsible for multiple attacks against Kurds (e.g., Anfal).

Badini: Kurdish dialect spoken by approximately two million people in Northern Iraq. Badini is considered by some to be a subdialect of Kurmanji (Northern) Kurdish because the boundaries between the Kurdish languages are not well-defined.

Diaspora: A population of people sharing linguistic, ethnic, and cultural traits, residing in a non-native country.

Emigrant: A person who leaves their native country in order to settle permanently in another.

Immigrant: A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country. When an emigrant settles permanently in their new home country, they become immigrants.

Integration: The retention of one's culture of origin, and identification with the dominant culture of a host country. Integration leads to multicultural environments and cultural exchange.

Internecine Conflict: Relating to conflict within the same group, e.g., Kurdish groups fighting against other Kurdish groups.

KDP: Kurdish Democratic Party - Founded in 1946, the KDP is the largest political party in Iraqi Kurdistan and the senior partner in the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Kurmanji: Most widely spoken Kurdish dialect, also known as Northern Kurdish. Kurmanji is primarily spoken in eastern and southeast Turkey, and Rojava (northern Syria region).

Nowruz: Observed for over 3000 years, Nowruz is the Persian new year, celebrating the arrival of Spring and the vernal equinox – usually occurring on March 21st.

Ottomans: Empire ruling the majority of the Middle East from the fifteenth century until the end of World War I. Following WWI, the British and French governments divided controls of a newly framed Middle East under a secretive arrangement known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Peshmerga: Originally a Kurdish guerilla force in Iraq, the Peshmerga have become the official military security force in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

PKK: Kurdistan Worker's Party. A paramilitary Kurdish separatist group in Turkey, formed to resist Turkish oppression and promote an independent Kurdish state in southeast Turkey. The PKK is considered a terrorist organization by the Turkish government and is included on a list of foreign terrorist organizations by the United States and the United Kingdom.

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan - A Kurdish nationalist political party in Iraqi Kurdistan and a rival of the KDP. Violent conflict between the PUK and KDP constituted a civil war in Iraq between 1994 and 1997.

Peshmerga: Originally a Kurdish guerilla force in Iraq, the Peshmerga have become the official military security force in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

PYD: Democratic Union Party - the leading political party among Syrian Kurds. The PYD was established as a Syrian branch of the PKK.

Refugee: A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal, and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries (UNHCR). *NOTE* I have

learned that many of the Kurdish people I interviewed do not like the term “refugee” to describe them. As a matter of self-identification, they view the term as pejorative; yet another way of distancing or “othering” them from either a national affiliation or of belonging. The majority of informants who have contributed to this project have completed the immigration process and become citizens in the countries where they are now living. Accordingly, I have intentionally avoided the use of the term to describe members of diasporic communities throughout this thesis. The term is used in reference only to non-specific migrants, or to describe a person in the active process of fleeing their native country.

Sharia: Islamic law, based on the teachings of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Sharia law outlines both religious and secular duties for Islamic society, including penalties for transgressions of the law.

Shi’a: The second of two main branches of Islam, practiced especially in Iran, that rejects the first three Sunni caliphs and regards Ali, the fourth caliph, as Muhammad's first true successor.

Sorani: Kurdish dialect, also known as Central Kurdish. Sorani is spoken mostly in Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdistan province, Kermanshah Province, and West Azerbaijan Province of western Iran.

Sunni: The larger of the two main branches of Islam (by affiliation), which differs from Shi’a in its understanding of the Sunna, its conception of religious leadership, and its acceptance of the first three caliphs.

Sykes-Picot Agreement: (1916) Named for its primary negotiators, Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, the Sykes-Picot Agreement divided formerly Ottoman controlled areas of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine into British and French administered areas known as “mandates.”

Treaty of Lausanne: (1923) Signed by the Allied nations of WWI and Turkey. The Treaty of Lausanne sought to placate Turkish dissatisfaction over the lands assigned under the Treaty of Sèvres. The ToL essentially reneged on the 1920 Sèvres treaty, giving the majority of Kurdistan to Turkey, and the remaining portion to Iraq. No language or reference to the promise of a sovereign Kurdistan from the prior treaty was included in the Treaty of Lausanne

Treaty of Sèvres: (1920) Post World War II peace agreement signed between the allies of WWII and the Ottomans, breaking the Ottoman Empire into the nations of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and for the first time, a sovereign Kurdistan.

UNHCR: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is a UN agency mandated to aid and protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people, and to assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement to a third country (unhcr.org)

USCIS: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is an agency of the United States Department of Homeland Security that administers the country's naturalization and immigration system (uscis.gov).

Yazidis: Mostly Kurmanji speaking, Yazidis typically live in the disputed territories of Northern Iraq. Yazidis practice a religion that is related to other ancient Mesopotamian religions. Beginning in 2014, ISIS initiated a genocidal campaign against Yazidis and other non-Muslim groups, using camps in Syria as extermination centers.

YPG: People’s Protection Units. Kurdish militia in Syria. Formed in 2011, the YPG played a pivotal role in the Syrian Civil War and fought with American troops against the ISIS caliphate.