

The bifurcated trajectory of nation formation in Kurdistan: Democratic confederalism, nationalism, and the crisis of capitalist modernity

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Abstract

Two different sociopolitical projects of nation formation seem to be in praxis in Kurdistan simultaneously: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq aspires to be an independent nation-state, while the movement led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party advocates a democratic confederal project. How did this bifurcation arise? By putting Abdullah Öcalan's interpretation of nationalism and capitalist modernity in dialogue with existing theories of nationalism, I argue that this bifurcation resulted from a difference in scaling the root causes of the Kurdish question: The former project imagines emancipation through state formation within capitalist modernity, while the latter problematises capitalist modernity itself. The modular and hegemonic expansion of nationalism and the nation-state along with capitalist modernity has been countered in Mesopotamia by politico-social multiplicity. This has given rise to the particular structural dynamics that underlie a "recurring failure" in state formation. The bifurcation in question here has emerged interactively against this background.

KEYWORDS

Abdullah Öcalan, capitalist modernity, democratic confederalism, Kurdistan, nationalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Kurdish question, which emerged as an issue of identity, self-governance, and international recognition, has remained unresolved as a result of (geo)political constellations in the early 20th century. Ever since then, the four states involved—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—have been trying to prevent the Kurds from forming a politically recognised entity, while various Kurdish movements were struggling against them. Although the essence of the problem remains unchanged, the way in which the future of the Kurds and Kurdistan¹ is imagined has bifurcated following an ideological and political transformation that took place in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) from the early 2000s on. The nationalist project, with its long history, imagines an independent Kurdistan based on the mainstream line of nation and state formation, and it is currently fostered in south Kurdistan (the Kurdistan Region of Iraq). The Kurdish movement ideologically led by the PKK, on the other hand, is trying to bring about a radical-democratic transformation, (“democratic confederalism”) mainly in Rojava (West Kurdistan, the Kurdish region in Syria), but also, to varying degrees, in other Kurdish regions. The question to be dealt with here stems from the contrast between these two sociopolitical projects: How has such a substantial bifurcation emerged, while the core problem remains essentially the same?

Since the division of Kurdistan among four states, various Kurdish movements have pursued a nationalist agenda which can be broadly conceived as self-determination as nation and state formation. Violent repression in Turkey immediately after the formation of the Turkish republic in 1923 totally silenced the Kurds until the late 1950s. Kurdish notables, in conjunction with the emerging left in Turkey and developments in Iraqi Kurdistan, provided a basis in the 1960s for the formation of a number of Kurdish revolutionary parties in the 1970s. After the military coup in 1980, however, the PKK was the only party left in Turkey conducting an armed struggle against the state. In Iran, after the failure of early tribal revolts, notably Simko's rebellion in 1920s, Qazi Mihemed formed the Republic of Mahabad under the permissive geopolitical conditions of 1946. It collapsed immediately, however, after the Soviet withdrawal that same year. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and *Komala* have continued their struggle ever since. It intensified during the revolution of 1979 but was brutally put down in 1982. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) used to be the party with a long history of resistance. But the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), split off from the KDP in the early 1970s, was controlling the southern regions of Iraqi Kurdistan when a no-fly zone was declared in 1991. An autonomy amounting to de facto statehood was further stabilised with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In Syria, where the Kurdish movement has historically been connected with the Kurdish parties in Iraq and Turkey, the main struggle was against the Ba'athist regime, which banned all political activities by Syrian Kurds although it supported or tolerated, to some degree, the Kurdish parties operating in neighbouring countries (Bozarslan, 1997; Van Bruinessen, 1992). Despite differing in their position on a scale from pacific activism for greater cultural rights to armed struggle for independence, all the Kurdish movements—including the PKK until 2000—followed a mainstream nation-building path. This path is currently hegemonic in the KRG, led by the KDP and PUK. But a similar project is observable in all parts of Kurdistan to differing degrees: It is a potential route in Turkey, a weak hegemony in Iran, and a competing geopolitical reality in Syria. But, thus far, each attempt at modern nation-state formation has failed, and this “recurring failure” has resulted in a search for different solutions.

Built on a deeper problematisation of capitalist modernity (the condition for both nationalism and the nation-state in Abdullah Öcalan's writings), the ideological and political transformation of the PKK (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2010; Yarkin, 2015) underlies the bifurcation in question here. Heavily impacted by the global 68 and national liberation movements (e.g., in Vietnam and Angola), the PKK was initially formed as a national liberation movement as part of radicalised Kurdish and Turkish youth in the 1970s (Akkaya, 2013). It grew rapidly and remained as the only active organisation after the 1980 coup (Gunes, 2013). The changed geopolitics in post-Cold-War era in the region left countries like Syria and Iraq without immediate international backing, ending the almost 20-year-old status quo among the PKK, Syria, and Turkey. As a result, Öcalan, who had led the party in Syria since 1979, had to leave Syria in 1998 and was handed over to Turkey by the United States. Öcalan (2003) linked his capture to the geopolitical fate of the Kurds and Kurdistan. Combined with the post-Soviet revision of radical political

thought and a structural need to transcend the Leninist party model, these developments pushed him to trigger an ideological and political change within the PKK and to address the core elements of capitalist modernity—global capitalism, nationalism, sexism, and industrialism. After overcoming the immediate shock of Öcalan's capture, the PKK-led Kurdish movement has grown into a regional one, that is, a web of various movements, parties, CSOs, armed groups, and so on, in the four states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and, Syria) and elsewhere. The bifurcated trajectory in the projection of future Kurdistan was a result of these transformations and the search for a lasting solution beyond the exclusionary nation-state. Currently, this trajectory seems to be the hegemonic path in Syria and Turkey, exercising influence in Iran through the PJAK and has a strong presence in the mountainous areas of Qandil but still limited acceptance among the people of the KRI.

A number of studies have addressed the trajectory of Kurdish nation formation through its history (Bajalan, 2016; Özoğlu, 2001), its development in the academic literature (Maxwell & Smith, 2015), and the comparison of different aspects of the Kurdish nationalist project such as forms of governance (Jongerden, 2019), nationalism (Van Bruinessen, 1991), and geopolitical engagement (Gunes, 2019). Complementing these, this paper hopes to explain the difference in the nature of the two nation-formation projects in the Kurdish space. The Kurdish space is generally understood as comprising four historically, culturally, and politically differentiated parts. This understanding, however, leaves out the relationality and structural dynamics of the Kurdish question. In the rest of this paper, I will employ the term *espace kurde* (Bozarslan, 1997, 2013) to denote a concept that takes the latter into account. *Espace kurde*, accordingly, refers to the entirety of the social, political, economic, military, and cultural interactions among the Kurds and their external relations *in* and *with* the four states. The bifurcation in question, I argue, has to do with differentiated interpretations in scaling the root cause(s) of the problem: The mainstream nationalist project is a response to the perceived need for nation and state formation within the scope of capitalist modernity; the democratic confederal project problematises capitalist modernity itself and aspires to be a regional response to its broader crisis. The argument reflects the ideological and political conditions in which two different perceptions of the world, and their application, interactively emerge in the *espace kurde*. It is embedded in, and proceeds through, the modular and hegemonic expansion of the nation, nationalism, and the nation-state alongside capitalist modernity and its confrontation with the social structures in the *espace kurde* which have led to divergent politico-social projections in this space.

In what follows, I first put Öcalan's interpretation of nationalism in dialogue with theories of nationalism relevant to its contextualisation in capitalist modernity. In so doing, I develop the theoretical background for a historical discussion of the structural dynamics of the *espace kurde*, the primary reason, in Öcalan's interpretation, for the “recurring failure” of mainstream nation-formation projects. I then exemplify the contradictions between the mainstream nationalist project and these structural dynamics, through the process of the KRG's independence referendum. Finally, I outline and critique democratic confederalism as sketched by Öcalan. The paper uses the broader debate in international relations on historical sociology as its theoretical framework (see, e.g., Hobden, 1998; Rosenberg, 2006). Methodologically, it employs a “causal-comparative method” that attempts to understand the differentiation between social structures within their own interactive-relational and causal-historical processes, rather than deploying a Eurocentric teleology by situating them on a linear historical ladder.

2 | CAPITALIST MODERNITY, ITS CRISIS, AND THE NATION AS A MODULAR AND HEGEMONIC EXPANSION

To what extent is the debate on the “crisis of capitalist modernity” relevant to the bifurcation of Kurdish nation formation and how can it be used as an analytical lens to understand this phenomenon? Öcalan presents a relatively novel perspective on the globality of seemingly local problems. For him, capitalist modernity is the latest stage in the cyclical hegemonic shift in world history modelled in Europe (Öcalan, 2013b, p. 110). This understanding seems to have been developed through an emancipatory-critical engagement with the “hegemonic expansion”

argument of world-system theorists; three discontinuities in Giddensian sociology, nation-state, capitalism, and industrialism (Öcalan, 2013b, p. 194; 2013c, p. 340) and a historical-sociological consideration of feminist scholarship informed by Mesopotamian history (Öcalan, 2013e, pp. 46–67). Heavily impacted by the main patterns of exploitations and dominations in Upper Mesopotamia, Öcalan's theorisation of capitalist modernity appears to be a systemic and organic totality in constant need of expansion. The four organs of this totality are capitalism, the nation-state, industrialism, and male domination, and these, taken all together, underlie its systemic crisis (Öcalan, 2013a, p. 61).

Wallerstein (2010) defined a systemic crisis in the capitalist world-system as a chaotic period during which a stable equilibrium can no longer be maintained. And he concluded with a bifurcation: In such a situation two divergent possibilities are possible, recurring chaos or a new stable system. The neo-classical strand of world-system theory employs a similar definition of systemic crises (Frank & Gills, 1993). Structural analysis of the world-system illustrates the inevitability of a systemic crisis, which will result in various social formations projecting emancipation from exploitation, domination, or oppression. Despite their structural-materialist determinism—which helps to grasp the systemic character of the crisis, yet obscures various elements of contestation—the nexus of responses to the structural contradictions of world-system analysis forms the analytical framework of this paper.

Wallersteinian conceptualisation of the world-system, which forms the basis on which Öcalan readapted the crisis of capitalist modernity, has been subjected to two main criticisms. First, state-centred economic reductionism in the analysis of the world-system narrows down various forms of domination to interstate exploitation through a core/semi-periphery/periphery structure (Robinson, 2011). Consciousness of this reductionism is crucial, since the bifurcation under consideration here is neither specifically statist nor specifically economic, but a result of the interaction of the two. Second, by locating the initial causality in 16th century Europe without problematising the foundation of Western hegemony in international-historical terms, Wallersteinian world-system theory promotes European exceptionalism. This results in a form of Eurocentrism in which the non-Western world is stripped of its agency (Hobson, 2012, p. 239). Social formations inherently tend to escape from oppression and therefore develop a culturally recognisable, politically organisable, and practically applicable form of agency to resist domination (Cox, 1981; Gills & Gray, 2012), and these grounds of resistance are as varied as the forms of oppression they are a reaction to. In this respect, the various social formations are active participants in the world-system, sometimes through their struggle against and resistance to domination, at other times as accomplices or co-conspirators. In other words, they are not mere recipients of state-centred imperial-economic domination but also co-constitutive of global and historical-sociological interactions.

In Öcalan's interpretation, the current systemic crisis stems not only from the incapacity of the capitalist world-system to recover itself but also from the bottom-up resistance of different social formations to the hegemonic expansion of capitalist modernity. This systemic crisis is intelligible only when we add dialectical-transformative challenges into its constitution. Accordingly, Öcalan's views can be broadly separated into four different categories, each referring to a specific but relational form of confrontation that has potential or actual global resonance: (a) exploitation on a global level: continuous exploitation through informal imperial relations (or, to put it in world-system terms, the core/semi-periphery/periphery relations) and the various forms of resistance on a global level countering this exploitation; (b) sexism: historically deep-rooted sexism in societies and the resistance to it, in a variety of ways, organised particularly by women; (c) the ecological crisis: the destructive consequences of man's mastering of nature, which is being confronted by a variety of ecological/green movements; (d) the crisis caused by nationalism and the nation-state: the unstoppable rise of racism at a global level and intrasocietal conflicts deriving from ethnic and/or religious tensions, opposed by an array of peace movements and an almost equally large number of oppressed ethnic identities struggling for some form of (peaceful) coexistence. While a detailed account of each of these crises is beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to see that nationalism and the nation-state are central components of capitalist modernity and its crisis. This location of nationalism within the systemic-organic totality of capitalist modernity, in Öcalan's understanding, underlies the "recurring failure" of the mainstream nationalist project, both theoretically and historically.

There are two conceptions of the nation in Öcalan's understanding. Firstly and normatively, a nation is a natural social form that is initially constituted as a result of the entanglement of four phenomena: *ethnicity*, whose identity is forged by a shared *religion* as an objective factor, a *kingdom*, that is, a politically delimiting sovereign authority, and finally a *market* that shapes the nature of its social relations (Öcalan, 2013b, p. 161). The right of oppressed ethnicities to exist in national form has always been confused with the formation of a nation-state. A nation can be formed on the basis of a culture and through radical-direct democratic means, without being compelled to become a nation-state (Öcalan, 2013c, p. 299). In this sense, Öcalan does not problematise the nation itself, but its instrumentalisation in order to form a nation-state which leads to his second conception, that of the state-nation. A national society is constituted by a nation-state—as one of the formative components of capitalist modernity—through the nationalisation of its economy, law, politics, and so on (Öcalan, 2013b, p. 162). In this reading of Öcalan, parallel to the seminal article by Rejai and Enloe (1969), a state-nation is the hegemonic reproduction of a nation through the destruction of social multiplicity and the enforcement of homogeneity (Öcalan, 2013c, pp. 178–179). Instead of the normative conception, the rest of this paper will employ the term “nation” in its reconstructed meaning, i.e., the “state-nation,” against which democratic confederalism emerges. Öcalan does not attempt to fix the idea of nation or give a static account of it, but sees the transformation over time and space of nation formation in terms of interactions between expansionist forces of hegemonic order and local resistance. In other words, he sees the modular diffusion of nation, nationalism, and nation-state proceeding alongside the hegemonic expansion of capitalist modernity. If the nation is understood as a *modular*, *hegemonic*, and *expansionist* form, we need to account for these constitutive dimensions in dialogue with Öcalan's interpretation, in order to grasp the theoretical grounds for the bifurcation.

As a *modular* form, the mainstream political and social understanding of nation, nationalism, and nation-state arguably has three theoretical underpinnings: the internal and external explanations and one political component. These are used here mainly as analytical categories. The internal explanation originates from, and is best represented by, the classic theorists of the nation and nation-state, Weber (1965 [1919]) and Durkheim (2007 [1893]), who, as a result of the wide acceptance of their analysis, were constitutive of our understanding of modernity and societies. The external aspect² is closely related to the role of war in nation-state making as illustrated by the widely known contribution of Tilly (1982) and others.³ The political component, finally, was mainstreamed by Wilson and Lenin, as political responses to the specific problems of their era, in the form of the right to self-determination, understood exclusively as state formation. These three should not be kept apart but be seen rather as complementary parts of the modern model. Accordingly, (a) the “nation” can be conceived as a modern form of social segmentation; (b) a “nation-state” can be seen as the secular reconfiguration of hierarchical power relations different from an empire, dynasty or city state, and so on, through newly established institutions; and, finally, (c) “nationalism” can be seen as the legitimisation mechanism for this structure, thus, its ideology. The intellectual and political processes built on this tripartite structure have naturalised, reinforced, and reproduced modern politico-social conditions and contradictions at a global level.

Making sense of the crisis caused by nationalism requires a further engagement with the *hegemonic* dimension. A theoretical tradition that contextualises nationalism within modernity may be helpful here (Anderson, 1991; Conversi, 2012; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Hogan & Pandit, 2003; Miley, 2018). What pushed Öcalan to problematise the state-nation as a production of the nation-state is also an attempt at a contextualisation within capitalist modernity. Accordingly, a theoretical context as such may emerge from a critical engagement with the central concepts of Gellner, Anderson, and Hobsbawm. Gellner (1983, pp. 48–49) rejects the concept of the nation as a “natural, God-given way of classifying men.” According to him, the emergence of the nationalised state through standardising practices such as literacy, national education, and a national language was first and foremost a response to a requirement of industrialism. Given modern conditions, its initial need was for a homogenisation of population, for example, to produce a qualified pool of labour. Anderson (1991) develops the concept of nation as an imagined community, a socially constructed entity through print capitalism. A nation, as he sees it, is something imagined by individual members of a community through an abstract affinity with the other members. However, the

precise political causality seems to be less clear in Gellner's and Anderson's accounts. If these accounts are considered in terms of intrasocietal interactions, then, who needs the community to be homogenised, and who imagines the nation as such in the first place?

By seeing national awakening as a result of the work of “pioneers and militants of the national idea” at Phase B of Miroslav Hroch's three phases of national movements, Hobsbawm a priori emphasises the role of the national elite as political campaigners for the national idea without any problematisation of this role. This seems to result (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 20) in a depiction of nation people from below: “it represented the common interest against particular interests, the common good against privilege.” The core problem that needs to be explored further, vis-à-vis Hobsbawm, is the instrumentalisation of the Smithian concept of *ethnie* for the creation of a nation, to which Öcalan gives a central role in the nation formation. In other words, this means the reconstitution of elite privileges by means of a new form of legitimation (Kumar, 2010).

Nation-building required a national consciousness and its active promotion within a territory assumed to be sovereign, a sovereignty defined in terms of horizontal rationality rather than hierarchical divinity or that is meaningful only when perceived in collective sameness (Touraine, 1996). The political imagination and active promotion of the idea of a nation, applied through a nationalist ideology, required an agent. “‘Nationalisation’ and state-propagated nationalisms were thus the products of deliberate decisions made by European rulers” (Miley, 2018, p. 5). Probably the most important aspect here is the nature of a “nation,” which, parallel to the prevailing narratives of its creation, went hand in hand with the industrialisation and militarisation of society in an elite-led process (Conversi, 2007). It can therefore best be defined as a *hegemonic project*, or a process of securing political, intellectual, and moral leadership of the dominant upper classes.⁴ Nations exist only insofar as the subject believes they do. Nation-building then becomes the dissemination and reproduction of nationalist beliefs by the state apparatus under the strict control of national elites (Bhabha, 1990; Miley, 2018). Accordingly, it is nationalism that engenders the nation, not the other way around (Miley, 2018, pp. 2–3).

Along with these two dimensions of a nation—as a fixed model and a hegemonic project—there is a third, its *expansionist* character, which can be explored through the engagement of uneven and combined development (U&CD) school with nationalism and the nation-state. They put forward a non-Eurocentric explanation for the modular expansion: Following the formation of English nation-state conditioned by colonialism, the nation-state formation process in continental Western Europe was either immediately followed by or went hand in hand with industrialisation. “Latecomer” states, both in the periphery of Europe and in the rest of the world, had to create a nation, mainly by replicating standardisation practices under the pressure of geopolitical competition with “developed states” that they wanted to “catch up with” (Anievas, 2015; Matin, 2013, pp. 74–82). This process normalised the nation as the main framework for the course of human history during the 19th century, requiring the enforced assimilation of smaller communities (*ethnies*) into larger ones (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 39). Conforming to the U&CD approach, Öcalan places causality in the ideological promotion of nationalism and its continuous justification by the hegemonic dynasty or tribe within the territory of expansion, to catch up with the “developed” (Öcalan, 2013c, pp. 178–179). In contrast to the U&CD approach, however, he explains the top-down enforcement of the nation, nationalism, and the nation-state by the British empire as part of its expansion into West Asia, which happened for four main strategic reasons: to control the strategic routes to India, the sacred places, economic resources, and to counter the other rival hegemonic forces in the region, especially France and Russia (Öcalan, 2013d, p. 228).

Öcalan is less precise, however, in explaining the concrete promotion of nation and nationalism. Özkırıklı's conceptualisation of the four processes of discursive promotion of the nationalist programme provides an appropriate constructivist framework for viewing nation-building as social engineering. Özkırıklı's conception is based on (a) a division of the world into “us” and “them”⁵ in a (b) hegemonising setting which (c) naturalises itself as the norm (d) through institutions (Özkırıklı, 2005, pp. 32–33).⁶ Read together with Miley's conception of nation as a hegemonic project, these four interrelated discursive processes present us with an intelligible way of *mainstream nation-building*. Hypothetically, the success of a mainstream nationalist project as a nationalist re-fabrication of society can be understood with reference to these four bases.

Nation, nationalism, and the nation-state emerged in a European context as a hegemonic project of upper strata and were theorised by European thinkers into what later became the unique model and *idée fixe* for development, progress, power, and modernisation (Conversi, 2012, p. 18). The hegemonic expansion of this model in conjunction with recognition of the superiority of the “developed” West created the region-specific conditions, forms, and experiences of capitalist modernity, most of which were evolved within a domination-versus-resistance dynamic. This is where the crisis caused by nationalism and the nation-state is located: the enforced replication of nation-building by the state in the absence of a nation. This results in, first, a continuous tension—that often takes the form of (violent) conflicts—between the state and some segment of society and, second, a confrontation between different identity/societal groups one or more of which is safeguarded by the state elite against the other(s), to ensure the continuity of their domination. Both contradictions are observable to varying degrees across the globe. The way in which nationalism and the nation-state expanded in the region, as a central component of capitalist modernity, also explains the “recurring failure” of the mainstream Kurdish nationalist project which I shall tackle in the next section through the historical emergence of the *espace kurde* and the KRG’s aspiration for independence.

3 | THE ESPACE KURDE AND THE MAINSTREAM NATIONALIST PROJECT AS A “RECURRING FAILURE”

We can trace the emergence of the *espace kurde*—the entirety of the interactions of the Kurds both within and without—in three intersecting processes: border drawing by imperialism; regional nation-state formation led by “orientalised orientals”; and the failure of the Kurdish nationalist *avant-garde* to mobilise Kurdish nationalism.

The impact of nation-state borders on the land historically known as Kurdistan is best understood as a twofold process. The first one is related to the territory historically inhabited by the Kurds laying in the borderland of two empires (the Ottoman and the Safavid). Until the 19th century, most Kurds lived under the rule of autonomous emirates (*Mîrtî*) as tribal confederations (Van Bruinessen, 1992, pp. 157–61), predominantly in the Ottoman territories and without major problems; a smaller portion of the Kurdish population had a somewhat edgy relationship with the Safavids and, later, the Qajars (McDowall, 1996, p. 27). Drawn after the battle of *Chaldiran* (1514), the border between the Ottoman and Iranian empires remained almost unchanged until it was consolidated as a frontier between nation-states in the early 20th century. Second, the drawing and consolidation of the nation-state borders was a specific outcome of the interaction between imperialist powers, competing nationalist projects, and the socio-economic structures of the region in the early 20th century. It proceeded through the division of Ottoman territory in Iraq, the Levant, and South-East Anatolia into zones of influence by and of France and Britain. With Turkey’s war of independence, which was largely supported by the Kurds in Turkey, its borders became more or less fixed. From the 1920s onwards, the Kurds sought the help of Britain in Iraqi Kurdistan, but British imperial rule did not recognise the Kurdish endeavour for independence for strategic reasons (McDowall, 1996, pp. 121–129). French imperial rule, on the other hand, signed the Ankara agreement defining the Turkey–Syria border, to avoid further loss of territory in Anatolia (McDowall, 1996, pp. 139–140). The division of Kurdish-inhabited territory into four pieces gave rise to the transborder nature of the contemporary structural dynamics of the *espace kurde*.

The “orientalised oriental” mentality⁷ in regional state formation was as important as the physical borders. Iran after the constitutional revolution (1905), Turkey following the declaration of the republic (1923), Iraq and Syria after gaining independence from Britain and France, respectively, all followed a similar route to state-building via social engineering based on a discursive and coercive practice of nation formation (Üngör, 2011) on land inhabited by various ethnic and religious communities. Despite the differences between these four countries, the common thread was a strict policy of modernist nation and state formation, which also included the assimilation of the Kurds (Bozarslan, 1997, p. 46). This process was initiated mostly by means of a historically significant “revolution” or a rupture from empire towards a modernised Western-style nation and state. The concept of revolution has always been associated with progress and development in a teleological way (Azeez, 2016), following the European lead and

importing a European solution for problems that—at least in part—resulted from European imperialism. Given the residual multinational complexity of empire, homogeneity was perceived by national(ist) leaders as a necessary condition for nation-state formation. A national myth and history were carefully constructed around these revolutions that were led by a national “hero” and “a number of courageous people.” The “revolutionary heroes” were, in fact, deeply orientalist non-Western subjects whose self-understanding was moulded by orientalist praxis (Bilgin, 2016, p. 2) and who, unaware of their hegemonised subjectivity, fiercely defended and forcefully replicated “European modernisation” (Soguk, 1993, p. 364; Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008, pp. 3–4). This originated from an internalised orientalism in which the local or native becomes a subject to be corrected and civilised (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008). This method of enforced top-down nation and state formation and orientalisation of the “native” Kurd engendered a second form of structural dynamics in the *espace kurde*: state-level denial of the Kurds' existence, state-propagated societal intolerance, and the military suppression of Kurdish rights and their promoters.

Like other ethnic communities, Kurdish elites were aware of the regional transition from empires to nation-states (Van Bruinessen, 1992, p. 229). Unlike other elites, however, they failed to form a Kurdish nation-state. This was mainly because of the divisions between urban-based Westernisers and rural-based traditionalists and their contradicting interests vis-à-vis the central authorities. Under the usual conditions for the geosocial dissemination of nationalist projects, the Kurdish nationalist *avant-garde* would have consisted of urban-based Westernisers who consciously developed knowledge of Kurdish nationalism and programmatically promoted it both within Kurdish society and against competing nation(alist)s. Historically, they had played an intermediary role between Kurdish tribes and the empire as part of Ottoman governance structures. Following the centralisation and modernisation policy adopted by the Empire from the second half of the 18th century onwards, the Kurdish emirates were dismantled, and as a result, the Kurdish tribal chieftains (*aghas*) and religious leaders (*shaiks*) benefited from the power vacuum. From the early 19th century onwards, the Kurds in urban centres became more aware of the nationalist challenge to the empire and sought to mobilise Kurdish nationalism, while the local *aghas* and *shaikhs*, who had more influence on rural Kurds, enjoyed good relations with the central authorities. The nationalist *avant-garde* was, therefore, unable to mobilise either local elites or the Kurds (Özoğlu, 2001; Van Bruinessen, 1992, p. 298). Moreover, the rural Kurds associated European influence on the late Ottoman empire and the early republic with a confrontation between Christendom and Islam (Van Bruinessen, 1992; p. 229) while urban-based Kurdish notables saw European influence as a means to achieve independence. As a result, yet, another reason for division was added to the deep disunity among Kurdish elites, which itself constitutes a third form of structural dynamics in the *espace kurde*.

Particularly since the late 19th century, there have been many Kurdish mobilisations for the purposes of nation- and/or state-building; none managed to create a sustainable nation-state. This has to do with the confrontation between the modular and hegemonic expansion of nationalism and the nation-state under capitalist modernity and the politico-social structures in Kurdistan which gave rise to the three structural dynamics of the *espace kurde*: (a) the *transborder nature* of the question, which confines any development affecting the Kurds within the geopolitical, geosocial and economic dynamics of the wider region; (b) the *orientalist mode of state formation* based on top-down homogenisation, which aims to “civilise” the Kurds through assimilation and propagates (societal) intolerance and (martial) punishment of, the promotion of Kurdish rights; (c) the *Kurds' deep disunity*, ultimately the result of the discrepant interests of Kurdish elites, which becomes an obstacle to success and a tool to be instrumentalised by the states. The entanglement of these three prevailing dynamics results in the experience of modernity in the *espace kurde*: Kurdish mobilisation for state formation versus state pressure to prevent secession. In Öcalan's (2013e, pp. 416–419) reading, it also defines the “recurring failure” of the Kurdish nationalist agenda, or, in terms of the bifurcation argument, the “recurring chaos” from which a “bifurcated response” emerges.

Building on this historical and theoretical grounding, the case of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its aspirations for independence exemplifies well the fact that, despite years of de facto statehood,⁸ neither the population nor the institutions were ready for statehood.⁹ The chain of developments, from the announcement of the independence referendum in early April 2017, to the loss of Kirkuk in late October 2017 shortly after the independence referendum on September 25, illustrates how the structural dynamics explicated above became active.

Despite good relations between the KDP and the Turkish AKP government on the one hand and the PUK and the Iranian regime on the other, the two states developed a kind of coordinated reaction to the independence referendum that led to the annulment of its results, although it confirmed the existence of a major democratic demand for independence. The cause lay in the transborder nature of the Kurdish question. The Iraqi central government—encouraged by the attitude of surrounding states—took advantage of the difficult situation of the politically and economically cornered KRG and employed repressive measures. Exposed to immense internal and external pressure, the already inherent disunity among Iraqi Kurdish leaders was exacerbated. They started blaming one another, which eventually led, among other developments, to the loss of Kirkuk to the *Hashd al-Shabi* and the central government backed by Iran, without any major resistance from the Kurdish Peshmerga. Throughout the whole process of the independence referendum, the structural dynamics of the *espace kurde*, which had always worked against Kurdish aspirations in the past, were in play once again. The causes of their activation should also be seen in the context of the Kurdish leaders' failed nation-formation project in the KRI.

Alongside the leading role given to the nationalist elite, Özkırımlı's conception of nationalist discourse can be deployed to understand that failure. First, the division of the world into “us” and “them” was not successfully accomplished. The “us” is still as much associated with tribal, religious/sectarian and regional identities as with Kurdishness as such, so that the “them” camp varies greatly depending on the interests at stake. In almost none of these cases is there a situation in which the Kurds as a whole are pitted against other nations. Second, deriving from the lack of success in establishing a “Kurds vs. others” division, any hegemonising practices employed have mostly been in the name of the families represented by two opposing political parties, each of which deploys rentier state tactics to ensure and sustain loyalty. The KDP, controlled by the Barzanî family who follow the *Naqshibandi* order, rules Erbil and its surrounding cities, while the PUK, led by the Talabanî family who follow the *Qadiri* order, controls Sulaimaniyah and its surroundings. Third, under such circumstances, the norm is not set by identity-based reasoning on a national level, but in accordance with the needs of leading families or political parties. Finally, the state institutions through which nation formation might potentially take place are either shared among the parties or the parties have set up competing institutions. For instance, *Peshmerga* forces appear to be united, but are under the command of the respective party structures (Aziz, 2017; Kirmanj, 2014; Leezenberg, 2006, 2015, 2018; Matin, 2018).

Nationalist ideology and the politico-social and economic structures in the region, coupled with formal and informal imperialism, were entangled in a way that rendered the Kurdish nationalist project unsuccessful, at least in the strict sense of state-building. Holding the Eurocentric method of nation-building up to the light of the KRG case shows the incompatibility of hegemonic-homogenising nation model with the properties of the non-Western world. Furthermore, Öcalan (2013e, p. 142) concludes that the possibility of a Kurdish nation-statelet in Iraqi Kurdistan has, on the one hand, always been kept as a means of intimidating the regional states but, on the other hand, jeopardises the Kurds' own attempts to realise their freedom by making them dependent on external forces. The bifurcation under investigation here, as we shall see in the next section, has come into existence against this background.

4 | THE DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERAL PROJECT: THE BIFURCATED TRAJECTORY OF NATION FORMATION

Öcalan has attempted to alter nation formation in Kurdistan, on the basis of a radical counter-reading of capitalist modernity and the Kurdish history of inescapable failures. As a result of the PKK's transformation from a national liberation movement into a radical democratic network (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2010), this project is built on a developed critique and articulated awareness of two phenomena: the crisis of capitalist modernity and the historical structural dynamics of the *espace kurde*. Due to its aim of prefigurative transformation (do now what you want to achieve in the end) and proactive agency (do it yourself; Jongerden, 2013), it can be applied practically anywhere where activists with this motivation find a political ground. More particularly, however, this praxis has developed in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) and to a lesser extent in other Kurdish regions, particularly in the North (the Kurdish region

of Turkey). A number of radical thinkers have provided a theoretical basis for it (Bookchin, 1982; Frank & Gills, 1993; Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004; Wallerstein, 2004). As a result, it cannot be described as a “Kurdish nation-formation” which would imply the exclusion of non-Kurdish elements, but as “nation-formation in Kurdistan,” building on a full recognition of multiplicity. In other words, it starts out from a recognition of social multiplicity not collective sameness.

Democratic confederalism, therefore, is a PKK-led project in response to the crisis of capitalist modernity, based on the thinking of Öcalan. A moral and political, eco-industrial, and democratic confederalist society is to be developed against the background of a society based on a capitalist mode of production, industrialism, and nation-statism. The principles underlying it are that (a) a “moral and political society” should be closely related to the good, the beautiful, and the true and should go hand in hand with freedom, equality, and democracy. The infusion and mobilisation of these concepts are meant to retrieve society from the legal cage of the nation-state. His conceptualisation of moral and political society is at the centre of the idea of a democratic nation—the soul of the democratic confederal project. (b) The term “eco-industrial society” means a mode of production that is compatible with nature and society. As is the case with the myth that modernity and the accumulation of capital are products of capitalism, seeing industry as a product of modernity is another misreading. Every technological innovation throughout history can be seen as an instance of industrial advancement. Industrialism is the ideological reproduction of industry and, in this sense, incompatible with society and nature. (c) The democratic confederalist is, Öcalan suggests, a new form of bottom-up self-rule as an alternative to the top-down hegemony of nation-states (Öcalan, 2013c, 2013e).

A democratic confederal society is developed as a response to the classical pattern of nation-statist cultural homogenisation and explicitly refutes it. Its eventual aim is to create self-governance through a revolutionary mobilisation and a bottom-up reconstitution of a society, which is compatible with the multiplicity of societal structures. Unlike homogenising nation formation, it does not aim to create an exclusionary group identity but an inclusive diversity. Unlike elite-led nationalist projects, the *avant-garde* role in its formation is assumed to be taken by women and youth. As a result, the project has a very strong gender perspective. Finally, unlike the nationalist project which is part of the semantics of capitalist modernity, democratic confederalism is defined in terms of radical politics and based on radical democracy (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2010, 2014; Jongerden, 2013; Küçük & Özselçuk, 2016; Üstündağ, 2016).

Organisationally, self-governance in this sense consists, on the one hand, in the liberation of “the political” from the nation-statist cage and, on the other, in the materialisation of a democratic confederalist society. It is assumed to function through assemblies at every social and political level horizontally and to cover the present complexity of societies vertically. Constituted from village and neighbourhood communes, these assemblies in both the towns and the regions are to organise and decide on every aspect of life through radical and direct democratic means with the involvement of different social, and cultural groups. Furthermore, social groups (women, youth, etc.), cultural groups (different ethnic, religious or cultural identities, etc.), and civil society organisations are to be organised and mobilised to cover every aspect of sociopolitical life (Ali, 2016; Jongerden, 2019).

This radical restructuring of self-rule can be achieved through a tripartite struggle, seen as a response to the structural dynamics of the *espace kurde*. The aspects of the struggle are not conceived as separate from one another and are not to be deliberately postponed to a post-revolutionary period. This restructuring makes a revolutionary claim based on a different understanding of revolutionary strategy that is defined through alterative (not alterNative) and radical politics. By this understanding, the revolution alters the power relations embedded in societies both internally and externally, rather than taking power itself. The tripartite struggle is to be carried out first for a *democratic republic*, understood as the democratisation and radical decentralisation of nation-state governance; second, for *democratic autonomy*, understood as the international and national recognition of a legal status for self-ruling entities as well as the model of self-rule set out above; third, on a regional level for *democratic confederalism* which has the aim both of coordinating and connecting self-ruling entities located in different nation-states and rendering nation-state borders meaningless without necessarily menacing the integrity of the state in question (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2014; Groyan, 2017).

Democratic confederalism can be summarised, in contrast to state-centric politics and class-reductionist political thought on the left, as politics beyond the state, political organisation beyond party, and political subjectivity beyond class (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2014). It is attempting to stabilise itself as a local response to the crisis of capitalist modernity by reconstituting society on the basis of moral, political, eco-industrial, and democratic confederalist principles, by means of radical democratic politics, that is, communes and assemblies, and against the structural dynamics of the *espace kurde*, which can be overcome through a tripartite struggle. The democratic confederal project, in this respect, is one branch of the bifurcated trajectory of nation formation in Kurdistan.

Programmatically, democratic confederalism benefits from the rich theoretical resource of the global antisystemic agenda and the experience of the world's revolutionary movements. But it is not totally free from the ills of capitalist modernity: Practising power seems to be bitter (sweet), unlike theorising it. The day is still young for the project, and one cannot really say, therefore, that its practices are fully institutionalised. Given that it is emerging under the dire conditions of uninterrupted wars in the region, we may detect tendencies to misuse power, rather than jumping to conclusions. There seems to be two vicious circles emerging from (a) the hegemonic power structures in the region and (b) their interaction with the remnants of the Leninist party model within the PKK-led movement. As for the first, sovereign authority in the broader region has historically been defined in terms of families, tribes, and sectarian or religious orders. With the formation of nation-states, power was monopolised by them or, in cases of state failure, by socially embedded political parties and/or armed militia groups. The authorities in Rojava are engaging in geopolitical rivalry with these structures in order to create a space for this project to exist. This results in a vicious circle, either "yet another undemocratic project" if it successfully hegemonises (Tejel, 2017) or, the possibility of extinction, if it does not.

The second vicious circle is related to this project's aim of transforming social structures through a bottom-up empowerment of society by means of adapting and strengthening traditional social cooperation and the historical practice of peaceful coexistence. This, in itself, is already a difficult aim, given that taking power is perceived to be a necessary precondition for transforming a society in constant confrontation with hegemonic forces. In contrast, however, monopolising the power does primary damage to the project. This seems to be what the PKK-led movement is facing due to its cadre-driven revolutionary strategy which enables the continuation of the previous Leninist party structure in new forms. Self-rule in the locality does not seem to happen in the absence of cadres, while cadre-driven transformation seemingly monopolises power, contrary to what the project purports to want to achieve (Leezenberg, 2016). This vicious circle is likely to damage the coherence of ideological claims and praxis. How these tendencies are addressed will determine whether the project survives.

The immediate survivability of the democratic confederal project is closely related to the unfolding of the regional geopolitics. The project seems to be geopolitically confined especially after Trump's decision, in early October 2019, to withdraw from Syria and the consequent Turkish invasion of northeast Syria to a depth of 35 km along a 120-km stretch of the Turkey–Syria border. From 2015, there was a geopolitical status quo built on the United States–Russia hegemonic rivalry in Syria, which practically defined the River Euphrates as the boundary between zones of influence (with the exception of Manbij). This situation was exploited by both the Rojava administration and the Turkish government to advance their political agendas. Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria, however, has dismantled this status quo. As a result, the democratic confederal project has become vulnerable in two ways. Militarily, the decision enabled the Turkish government to execute long-propagated invasion plans. Politically, it left the Kurds with little choice but to accept the terms offered by Russia and Assad regime which were waiting for a favourable bargaining position to emerge after the U.S. withdrawal. Because of Trump's confrontation with the American establishment, the U.S. troops did not leave northeast Syria entirely but withdrew to its predominantly Arab-populated southern regions to "control the oil fields." The situation seems to be frozen as such, and bargaining with violent and nonviolent means continue.

To break out of this geopolitical confinement, the PKK-led Kurdish movement seems to be working on three regionally based geopolitical options that will eventually be decisive for the end result. The first and most desirable of these is to push Turkish politics towards a transformation either through renewed negotiations with the PKK or

politico-military action (e.g., a people's revolutionary struggle), in order to ease Turkish pressure on Rojava. The second is to come to terms with the Assad regime, a prospect that has been underway for some time now. This seems to be more realistic as the Rojava administration does not aim at secession, but would be difficult to stomach, even if it were to be achieved, because of the intolerable concessions the Assad regime would require. Finally, forming a Kurdish national unity with the Iraqi Kurdish parties could ease the pressure on Rojava. However, that seems equally difficult in the short run due to the KRG's geopolitical and economic dependence on Turkey, resulting from its land-locked position. Each of these processes is entangled with the American and Russian ambitions and rivalry, not only over Syria, but in the wider region. For the democratic confederal project, in other words, breaking out of its geopolitical confinement is a matter of intersecting regional processes including the United States–Iran escalation, the impasse in the United States/Turkey/Russia triangle, the future of Turkey–NATO relations and a number of more minor issues.

5 | CONCLUSION

The global political interactions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries left the Kurds without an internationally recognised legal and political status. Ever since, they have attempted to form a political entity against the odds. Building on the theoretical explanations for the modular and hegemonic expansion of nations, nation-states and nationalism along with capitalist modernity, and putting them in dialogue with the theoretical reflections of Öcalan, I have attempted to understand the bifurcation in the nation-formation trajectory in Kurdistan. The mainstream nationalist project is attempting to form an exclusive Kurdish nation and/or state while the democratic confederalist project aims at a nation-formation practice that excludes exclusion by building a regional response to the crisis of capitalist modernity. The emergence of the *espace kurde* has created the strategic dynamics that caused the mainstream nationalist project to be a “recurring failure.” The democratic confederal project, by problematising capitalist modernity has brought about a bifurcation in the nation-formation trajectory in Kurdistan. In contemporary Kurdish politics, the KRG tried the mainstream route and failed, once again, at least in the strict sense of being able to form a state. The alternative is being tried in Rojava chiefly, under dire geopolitical conditions, with certain problems regarding the exercise of power which will decisively affect its future form. An assessment of the stabilisation potential of these projects is beyond the scope of this paper, but we can conclude that there is a co-constitutive relationship between local political projects and global structures. This “co-constitution” is the key to the current bifurcation in the Kurdish national imagination.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The term Kurdistan here refers to the regions historically inhabited by the Kurds, comprising roughly the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It does not, in other words, make any reference to statehood.

²The externally driven aspect was studied very late probably due to the methodological nationalism that dominates social sciences.

³Others had already begun to explain the inseparable relationship between state formation and war making (Bean, 1973; Hintze, 1975).

⁴The domination here is not only that of bourgeoisie over proletariat, which essentially leads to a rejection of the various forms of power relations between the *dominant* and the *dominated*, deriving from language, ethnicity, race, gender identity, etc. Accordingly, the term “upper classes” is used in its broadest sense.

⁵For a theoretical reflection on “us and them” in a comparative context of Kurds, Basques, and Croats, see Conversi (1994).

⁶I will later engage with the Özkırmlı's conceptualisation in order to show the incompatibility of nationalism and the nation-state with the characteristics of Kurdistan.

⁷Following Soguk (1993, p. 363), The orientalised oriental is “[l]ocated in the strategic nexuses of power networks ... [that] navigate the political and cultural terrains in the non-West in the hope of maintaining its privileges” ... An “Orientalised Oriental is ... one who ... spiritually feeds on the West.” It is understood here as the formative logic of nation-states in the region.

⁸Such as in working towards a national educational model (Kirmanj, 2017) or the establishment of a diplomatic tradition to represent foreign policy (Abbas Zadeh & Kirmanj, 2017).

⁹The objective here is not a full assessment of the broader political debate in the KRG around independence referendum but rather to focus on the extent of nation-formation practice.

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