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*Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman  
and Middle Eastern / North African Studies*

A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj

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# Minorities, Statelessness, and Kurdish Studies Today: Prospects and Dilemmas for Scholars

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There are few topics in which the academic and the political are as deeply intertwined as the subject of minorities in the Middle East. From its inception, Western scholarship on the region has been closely connected to European attempts to protect and indeed “liberate” the Christian populations of the region, or at least to disguise their wider efforts to control the region’s lands and resources under the pretext of safeguarding Christians, as Said outlined in his famous *Orientalism*. As others have shown, the very notion of minority as we know it today arose in the context of European attempts to classify and control the regions (inside the Middle East and beyond) they colonized or otherwise attempted to influence. Although scholarship on minorities in the Middle East has come a long way, particularly in recent decades, it is still fraught with tensions, a key factor being the pervasive linkage between the academic and the political in the study of Middle Eastern minorities.

“Minorities are not automatically minorities,” as Pandey notes; “minorities, like communities, are historically constituted.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed the term, “minority,” which was used in reference to a group that was “distinguished by common ties of descent, physical appearance, language, culture or region, in virtue of which they feel or are regarded as different from the majority of the population

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1 Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 171.

in a society”<sup>2</sup> only emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, and here only was restricted to religious groups.<sup>3</sup> Although political interests in religious minorities continue, the focus has been, since the First World War, on ethnic identity and “national” self-determination, a creed that became an intellectual/political fait accompli after Woodrow Wilson issued his Fourteen Points, the twelfth calling for the self-determination of the various Ottoman (ethnic) groups.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of the nation-state, frontiers became borders,<sup>5</sup> and the people who lived within those borders took on or were given new identities—national identities—a process that continues to be fraught with tension.

Since that moment a concept/category that was inextricably bound to the larger question of minorities materialized—that of statelessness. It took some time, however, for the concept to become widespread and to make it into the mainstream vocabulary for many. Indeed law journals from the end of the First World War dealt only with stateless *individuals*,<sup>6</sup> but by the Second World War, legal scholars looking back on the First World War asserted that the “problem of statelessness became more complicated after the Great War,” as a “larger class of stateless persons was created as a

2 Alan Bullock et al., eds., *Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*, new and revised ed. (New York: Harper, 1988), cited in Benjamin White, “The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of ‘Minorities’ in Syria,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7/1 (2007): 65.

3 White, “The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of ‘Minorities’ in Syria,” 65.

4 The relevant portion reads: “The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development....” White also points out that the “11<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1910-1911, contains no entry for ‘minorities,’” but that by the 14<sup>th</sup> edition in 1929, “the entry on minorities runs to eleven pages, mostly discussing the post-World War One peace settlements and the League of Nations;” *ibid.*, 64. The Oxford English Dictionary only began to cite “national” and “ethnic” minorities in the 1918 and 1945 editions respectively; *ibid.*, 65.

5 Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume Two of a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 4, 50.

6 See, for example, “International law—nationality—statelessness,” *The Yale Law Journal* 27 (1918): 840-1; “Law of nations—nationality—statelessness,” *Michigan Law Review* 20 (1921): 115-16; and “International law—nationality—condition of statelessness,” *Harvard Law Review* 35 (1921): 210-11.

consequence of the Treaties of Peace.” These were people who “lost their nationality and became of indeterminate nationality as the result of the creation of new state boundaries,” but here scholars did, however, recognize how nationalist sentiment complicated matters where minorities were concerned, and how the notion of statelessness, for some, began to extend beyond its legal definition.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the concept entered the mainstream vocabulary—at least in the English speaking world—but only well after World War II, when dictionaries began to refer to “statelessness” as “not having any nationality,” instead of its earlier definition, “without pomp.”<sup>8</sup> Nationalist concepts that linked peoplehood and the state, with the notion that a “people” should have its own nation-state, impacted the discourse on statelessness and certain groups who became minorities in their new states agitated to have a state of “their own.” The Kurds were one of these peoples.

The Kurds are now referred to in academic and mainstream sources alike as “the largest nation without a state” as they emerged from the post-war state-building projects without their *own* state, a conceptual leap at the time since they did not think of themselves as minorities in the Ottoman context, or (apart from a small number of intellectuals) as a group that needed its own state. As the Kurds pose exceptional dilemmas, and indeed prospects, for scholars working on the wider question of minorities in the Middle East, I would like to focus on the intersection of the academic and the political in what might be called “Kurdish Studies.”<sup>9</sup>

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7 Erwin Loewenfeld, “Status of Stateless Persons,” *Transactions of the Grotius Society*, vol. 27 (Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 1941), 59-112.

8 I looked at dozens of dictionaries at the University of Chicago and discovered that “stateless” meant “without pomp” in the general lexicon until at least a decade after World War II; see, for example, *Webster’s Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Cleveland, New York: The World Syndicate Publishing Company, 1937), 1621, in which “statehood” is defined as “the condition of existence and recognition of a state,” but “stateless” continues to mean “without pomp.” In 1955—according to the dictionaries I was able to access—finally we see “Not having any nationality” in a dictionary of *new words*; Mary Reifer, *Dictionary of New Words* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 197. Thereafter “statelessness” as referring to the condition of a person with “no state” or “no nationality” begins to make its way into mainstream dictionaries.

9 Clémence Scalbert-Yücel and Marie Le Ray, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power: Deconstructing Kurdish Studies,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 5 (2006): 15, note that the term, “Kurdish Studies,” first appeared in Russia in 1840, and the

I offer these remarks as part of a self-reflective project I have undertaken in the spirit of critically examining one of the fields in which I am sometimes said to participate as well as my own place in this field. In this I have been inspired by the mentorship of Professor Rifa‘at ‘Ali Abou-El-Haj, in particular his continued efforts to push scholarship—and hence our visions—beyond myopic categories and teleologies. In preparation for three presentations I gave (one on minorities in the Middle East at the University of Michigan and two on Kurdish Studies at Columbia University and the University of Exeter),<sup>10</sup> I was inspired to rethink these categories (both of minority and also of this field called “Kurdish Studies”) and to move beyond the “orientalist/non-orientalist” debate by Professor Abou-El-Haj’s contribution to the edited volume by Vinay Bahl, Arif Dirlik, and Peter Gran called *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*. Professor Abou-El-Haj was working on his chapter, “Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies since Sa’id’s *Orientalism*,”<sup>11</sup> when I was fortunate enough to have him as a visiting professor at Princeton.

The term, “Kurdish Studies,”<sup>12</sup> in and of itself poses unique fields of

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more common term, “Kurdology,” became more popular after the Yerevan Conference in 1934.

- 10 I thank the participants at these venues for their valuable insights and conversation on this topic.
- 11 Rifa‘at ‘Ali Abou-El-Haj, “Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies since Sa’id’s *Orientalism*,” in *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*, eds. Vinay Bahl, Arif Dirlik, and Peter Gran (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
- 12 Perhaps the most nuanced analysis of this question is by Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power: Deconstructing Kurdish Studies.” Although the authors address the question in the context of “Kurdish Studies in Turkey,” the article offers wonderful history and context for those interested in larger issues of Kurdish historiography. Other useful articles that examine Kurdish Studies and/or historiography on the Kurds include Konrad Hirschler, “Defining the Nation: Kurdish Historiography in Turkey in the 1990s,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (2001): 145-66; Abbas Vali, “Nationalism and Kurdish Historical Writing,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 14 (1996): 23-51; Abbas Vali, “Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing,” in Abbas Vali, ed., *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 58-107; Hamit Bozarslan, “Research Guide: Kurdish Studies,” *MERIA News*, Vol. 3 (<http://meria.idc.ac.il/research-g/kurds.html>); Hamit Bozarslan, “Some remarks on the Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919-1980),” in *Essays on the*

interrogation for scholars,<sup>13</sup> and these questions are intimately linked to the historical development of nationalism on a global level and also to changing methodologies scholars have adopted when researching nationalism and identity politics. On the one hand, the legitimacy of the nation-state in global politics has not declined in the way that many (mostly leftist) scholars had predicted; to the contrary, new states keep declaring their independence, and identity politics are more ethnic-based than ever, at least in appearances. So it makes sense in this regard that Kurdish Studies as a field is growing stronger, particularly since the onset of the most recent war in Iraq when the Kurdistan Region appeared to be not only the only part of Iraq that “works” but as one of the more democratic societies in the Middle East. More scholarship emerged to explain this, and of course there were clear beneficiaries of some of this scholarship in the shape of those governments (primarily the U.S. and the U.K.) who had waged this war and wanted to show that it was not all in vain, even if this has not been the mission of the authors of such scholarship. Kurdish Studies have always been more popular in Europe due to the larger Kurdish diasporic communities there, but they are also growing in North America as well, particularly against the backdrop of recent events in Iraq. And recently the University of Exeter announced its first Kurdish Studies program, which offers graduate degrees and has esteemed faculty to mentor scholars in the program. While this is happening (and while an ever-increasing number of ethnic groups are also adding themselves or attempting to incorporate themselves into area studies programs), the newer and more cutting-edge scholarly currents, however, are moving away from area-studies and ethnic approaches and into post-nationalist, theme-based, and global or world histories.<sup>14</sup> How does recent scholarship on the Kurds fit into these confusing trends? This question cannot be addressed without historicizing Kurdish Studies and locating its paths within both Kurdish-specific politics and larger hegemonic trends.

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*Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, 14-39; and Hamit Bozarslan, “Rompre avec l’hypothèse d’une singularité kurde: Entretien avec Hamit Bozarslan,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 5 (2006): <http://ejts.revues.org/index761.html>.

13 I focus here primarily on historians, since this is the field with which I am most familiar, but I should point out at the same time that works on Kurdish society have been produced much more by anthropologists and political scientists.

14 A helpful volume to consult here is Bahl, Dirlik, and Gran’s *History after the Three Worlds*.



“The Kurds are the largest nation without a state.” You will read or hear this statement as the frequent opening line to a general discussion on the Kurds.<sup>15</sup> This statement is both defensive and “informative.” It says, “The Kurds are a nation. Nations have states. But the Kurds don’t have one.”<sup>16</sup> It also assumes, mostly correctly, that people do not know who the Kurds are because they do not have their own state and to the extent that the average person (in the United States, for example) knows about people it is those whose grouphood is associated with a recognized state. While this statement may be uttered with more frequency in the media, scholars working on Kurdish-related topics have historically adopted the same defensive stance, which has often stemmed from their sympathy with the people who are the focus of their studies. This concept has also been the guiding light behind the vast majority of scholarship on the Kurds until very recently, and even now the trend continues. Scholars working on the Kurds have—wittingly or not—constructed their projects around the things that have been most important to Kurdish *nationalists*: establishing that the Kurds are a people, and as such are a valid topic of study, and explaining why the Kurds do not have a state today, i.e., an overwhelming focus on Kurdish nationalism, Kurd-state relations, or some aspect thereof. In many

15 A simple Boolean search on Google (May 14, 2008) returned 2,090 hits on the search “Kurds” + “nation without a state.” Hits range from random study guides (one called “The Kurds: A Nation without a State” [http://www.studyworld.com/newsite/reportessay/History/Asian/The\\_Kurds\\_A\\_Nation\\_Without\\_A\\_State-321957.htm](http://www.studyworld.com/newsite/reportessay/History/Asian/The_Kurds_A_Nation_Without_A_State-321957.htm)) to reputable academic works by esteemed authors such as Gareth Stansfield, whose 2005 paper bears a similar title: “The Kurds: Nation without a State” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Hilton Hawaiian Village, Honolulu, Hawaii, Mar 05, 2005). There are even term papers for sale with the same title: <http://www.termpaperslab.com/term-papers/19710.html>.

16 Statelessness is a problematic concept, particularly for the Kurds. By the UNHCR definition—“Nationality is a legal bond between a State and an individual, and statelessness refers to the condition of an individual who is not considered as a national by any State under its domestic law” (<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect?id=3b8265c7a>, accessed on November 5, 2008)—only a tiny fraction of Kurds, some 2-300,000 in Syria, are technically stateless. In reference to the Kurds, the term “statelessness” should be considered a political statement rather than a reflection of legal status. For more on the Kurds in Syria who are actually stateless see Peter Fragiskatos, “The stateless Kurds in Syria: Problems and prospects for the ajanib and maktumin Kurds,” *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 21/1-2 (2007): 109-22.

cases this can be justified because these things have, indeed, constituted an overwhelming part of Kurdish experience in all of the states in which they live.

Just as Kurdishness has been marginalized in the international arena that listens to voices with state backing, so has scholarship on the Kurds been relegated to the backwaters of history and even of Middle Eastern Studies departments, most of which are sure to teach the other major languages of the Middle East—Arabic, Turkish, and Persian (and even Hebrew)—and often have more than one faculty member who works on the groups that speak these languages or the states that are identified with them. Furthermore, to the extent that scholars do work on Kurdish topics, they are frequently marginalized in the field at large and have faced enormous difficulties in conducting research in the states that house Kurds since these states have looked unfavorably upon scholarship that views Kurds as legitimate subjects of study as their official policies have been to deny or repress that identity since it has not dovetailed well with official state-sponsored nationalist identities. This situation has led to a vicious circle in scholarship on the Kurds: with no state to promote Kurdish studies or grant access to archives and other materials, scholars working on Kurdish-related topics have had to settle for less than desirable sources and/or be extremely creative in constructing their projects. At the same time, their focus cannot help but be informed by the Kurds' very statelessness and the dilemmas that it poses to researchers, and as such, the reasons for this situation, which centers around Kurdish identity politics, has tended to pique the interest of researchers for academic and personal reasons.

Scholars working on Kurdish-related topics are grappling with these issues today as they seek to situate their work in this field that offers new opportunities, continued obstacles, and serious academic dilemmas. With the reader's indulgence, I will recount my personal path in "Kurdish studies" to illustrate some of these issues. My interest in the Kurds first arose seriously in 1990, when I spent some nine months in Turkey teaching English and teaching myself Turkish. My approach to learning Turkish was not conventional—I merely had a textbook that I studied, and I practiced Turkish on the street with anyone I could find who would talk to me, mostly taxi drivers, waiters, and shopkeepers. I soon discovered that a good segment of the Istanbul working class with whom I was conversant was actually Kurdish, and after beginning to trust me they began to relate



their experiences to me, and I developed an interest in the Kurdish issue in Turkey, since I was generally one to sympathize with the “underdog.” When I later began my graduate program at Princeton, I declared my interest in working on Kurdish-related topics, but found that many attempted to discourage me from such a venture, telling me that I would never find a job, that I would have difficulties in conducting research, and that it was simply not on the radar of Middle Eastern Studies. I was stubborn and persisted, and luckily found wonderful mentorship nonetheless, as my mentors realized that I was not to be dissuaded from pursuing my interest in spite of the fact that I faced massive difficulties in conducting research, including a seven-year ban from archives in Turkey. Their continued support, however, was with the understanding that my work was situated within the larger realm of Ottoman Studies, which, indeed it was (although we might question that term as well; I prefer to just be a “historian”). I use my own example to highlight many of the practical and historiographical issues I have described thus far. I started out as someone who became interested in the “Kurdish cause,” who was committed to social justice, and who connected the two politically.<sup>17</sup> My initial research was, like so many other scholars of things Kurdish, on nationalism, although, due to the scholarly trends that were current when I began my graduate studies, I had the benefit of being informed by postcolonial works on nationalism and focused, as such, on Kurdish nationalist discourse rather than simply on proving that the Kurds existed as such, or tracing the Kurdish nationalist movement with little or no theory to inform my study. However, in the course of my study, I began to notice the limitations of working solely on nationalism, and even within the realm of area-studies, and I discovered that it was important to look at wider social dynamics in late-Ottoman Kurdistan to help me understand not only Kurdish society in particular and Ottoman society at large, but also larger thematic issues such as violence, state-society relations, transformations in local power structures, and how all of these were part of modern statecraft in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere. In this sense I can use my personal academic path to exemplify the larger historiographical trends about which I have spoken. I also use my

17 Others whose scholarship on the Kurds began as political/social interest include Martin van Bruinessen and Joyce Blau, to name but just a couple; see Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray on this point, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power: Deconstructing Kurdish Studies,” 7-8.

own story to illustrate the unique opportunities, obstacles, and dilemmas that being associated with “Kurdish Studies” poses to scholars.

Researchers on Kurdish topics have recently found new interest in their work, and new opportunities for research, collaboration, and speaking venues. This development is intimately linked to the fact that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been in the limelight in the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the toppling of the Ba‘thist regime led by Saddam Hussein. The stability of Kurdistan compared with the overall debacle that the war in Iraq has caused has brought studies on Kurdistan and/or the Kurds—albeit mostly those that focus on contemporary politics—into the realm of “legitimate topic of study.” Furthermore, the Kurdistan Region, as a quasi-state, has also been interested in promoting Kurdish studies for obvious reasons.<sup>18</sup> As a result, scholars working on Kurdish-related topics have recently found some validation for their efforts. Obstacles, however, do continue, although it should be noted that at least for the time being scholars are working under relatively less constricted conditions. Turkey no longer denies the Kurdish identity (although it still imposes some restrictions on scholarship), and, as I have already mentioned, the fait accompli of Kurdish quasi-statehood in northern Iraq has worked to promote a friendlier environment for scholars, including expanded chances to attend conferences and other venues for speaking. Indeed my most recent visit to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in October 2008 almost convinced me that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq might be a more research-friendly environment for my research on the Village Guards than will Turkey in terms of field research; however, one year later, in October, 2009, I was invited to give a talk on Kurdish women at the first openly held academic conference on Kurds at a state university in Turkey, Hakkari University. It was a very open forum for discussion, which demonstrates that one can continue

18 An example of this effort was the World Congress of Kurdish Studies (Erbil/Hewlêr, Kurdistan Region, Iraq; September 6-9, 2006), which was sponsored by the Institut Kurde de Paris, Salahaddin University, and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The conference, which I attended, was designed to bring together scholars on topics related to the Kurds and/or Kurdistan and especially to bring scholars working in Europe and North America into contact with scholars in the Middle East, in particular Kurdish scholars, who have most often worked in great isolation from the wider scholarly community. The conference also, clearly, was designed to support and publicize Kurdish studies.

to be hopeful that serious scholarship on the Kurds can be conducted—and presented—in Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

In both Turkey and Iraq, scholarship on the Kurds remains, as it has been for nearly a century, intimately linked to politics; a comparison of the two contexts helps to add complexity to the larger issue of scholarship on the Kurds in states where Kurds live. In Turkey, scholars have worked to produce studies on the Kurds under great difficulty as the state has viewed scholars working on the Kurds and Kurdistan with suspicion and has actively worked to thwart their research projects. Although there was an active campaign in official state circles and in academic institutions from the primary-school level all the way to the universities to promote a unified Turkish identity and to deny a unique Kurdish identity from the 1920s until the early 1990s (and some might argue this trend persists today, albeit in less blatant forms), nonetheless, as Yeğen has noted, even those scholars linked to the state have “nevertheless had to ‘think,’ speak,’ and ‘speculate’ on the Kurdish issue.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, there were a number of works on Kurdish society that were produced in Turkey during these “forgotten decades,” even if these works were designed to reinforce the ideals of Turkish nationalism by creating a Kurdish-studies paradigm (under its various euphemisms) that focused on tribes, banditry, separatism, and backwardness,<sup>21</sup> i.e., posing the “mountain Turks” or “easterners” as the “other” to the modern Turk, or simply denying Kurdish identity.<sup>22</sup> The 1990s saw a transformation in scholarship on the Kurds produced in Turkey. While the official “taboo” was lifted,<sup>23</sup> and while scholarship on the Kurds became somewhat

19 There is room for optimism in the “Kurdish/Democratic Opening” in Turkey, but not too much at this point. For a critical view on this process see Marlies Casier, Andy Hilton, and Joost Jongerden, “‘Road Maps’ and Road Blocks in Turkey’s Southeast,” and Kerem Öktem, “Suriçi, Diyarbakır,” both in *MERIP* online (October 30, 2009): <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero103009.html>.

20 Mesut Yeğen, “The Turkish State Discourse and the Exclusion of Kurdish Identity,” in *Turkey: Identity, Democracy, Politics*, ed. Sylvia Kedourie (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 1996), 216.

21 *Ibid.*, 216-17.

22 Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power: Deconstructing Kurdish Studies,” 25-29, trace early scholarship in Turkey on the Kurds that was designed to deny their separate identity.

23 While some mark 1990 as the year that this “taboo” was lifted (see Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power: Deconstructing Kurdish Studies,”

more legitimate (without being entirely acceptable),<sup>24</sup> many of the same constraints have prevailed. While a separate Kurdish identity is no longer generally denied, mainstream or state-sponsored scholarship on the Kurds has continued to advance the rubric of Kurdish backwardness (through discussions of tribalism, separatism, and honor-killings) or has remained within the larger focus of power/control—studying the Kurds (or “easterners”) to obtain data on how the state might better control local societies through the GAP project and other efforts to tie the region more closely to the state.<sup>25</sup> Scholarship on the PKK is acceptable, as long as it is not sympathetic to the Kurdish movement in any way. Having said all this, however, scholars in Turkey have had access to and contributed to the international scholarly community and are very much part of wider academic debates, and have, therefore, begun to produce nuanced scholarship on the topic that engages with the latest debates, trends, and thinking. Many twenty-first century works on the Kurds produced by scholars in Turkey (Kurdish and Turkish alike) draw upon the theoretical literature that problematizes and historicizes national identity, interrogates the production of scholarship in its wider knowledge/power nexuses, and, as such, sits well with larger international (i.e., not national or nationalist) trends in the field of study—minorities, state-building, and identity politics—at large.

In Iraq, by contrast, even in the Kurdistan Region where scholarship on the Kurds is actively promoted and where the regional government’s

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35, on Turgut Özal’s visit to southeastern Turkey in which he “publicly recognized the existence of Kurds and...a Kurdish issue”), others suggest that this “taboo” was never as rigid as often thought; see Nicole Watts, “Silence and Voice: Turkish Policies and Kurdish Resistance in the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, eds. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007), 52-77; and Janet Klein, “Turkish Responses to Kurdish Identity Politics: Recent Developments in Historical Perspective,” in *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, eds. Gareth Stansfield and Robert Lowe (London: Chatham House/Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2010), 79-96.

24 ...although, as van Bruinessen describes it, there was a “veritable boom in Kurdish publishing” within Turkey; Martin van Bruinessen, “Shifting National and Ethnic Identities: The Kurds in Turkey and Europe,” paper presented at the international symposium, *Redefining the Nation, State and Citizen* (Istanbul; March 28-30, 1996), 2, cited in Hirschler, “Defining the Nation: Kurdish Historiography in Turkey in the 1990s,” 149.

25 See Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power: Deconstructing Kurdish Studies,” 30-32.

interest lies—in contrast to the Turkish state—in demonstrating how progressive and unique the Kurds are (and, hence, deserving of more than quasi-statehood or merely autonomy), scholars have historically had less access to these wider debates and trends. While they find that their research is supported and not thwarted by the state, they are further from the wider debates, have engaged in fewer international scholarly conversations, and have, as a result, produced less nuanced work. While the research focus by Kurdish scholars in Iraq (particularly in the Kurdistan Region) does touch upon what might seem to be non-nationalist aspects of Kurdish society, a significant segment of work produced by scholars in Iraq is, like that produced by Kurds in Turkey,<sup>26</sup> overtly political—designed to influence current political projects, particularly the Kurdistan Regional Government’s efforts to add disputed territories to its administration and to gain wider recognition of its quasi-state importance.<sup>27</sup>

Research on the Kurds poses an additional and rather unique situation in the larger world of scholarship on minorities in the Middle East, namely, a great deal of literature on the Kurds has been produced by individuals (in Turkey, Iraq, and the “diaspora”) who are not in the academy and have not been trained in the humanities or social sciences per se. Their works have sometimes been dismissed by scholars outside the field of “Kurdish Studies” because they do not have the same pedigrees and degrees that “scholars” can add to their names. However, while it is true that a number of these works are devoid of theory and are highly positivist in approach, they have added enormous knowledge to the study of the Kurds. And for scholars who have indeed been “properly trained,” no matter how much they try to offer objective, nuanced, and theoretical works that speak to the larger debates in their respective fields, as Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray have put it, “researchers on Kurds are seen as opposing the official ideology and

26 Hirschler has referred to the work by Kurdish (nationalist) scholars in Turkey as, in large part, an attempt to invert the *Türk Tarih Tezi* by positively asserting a competing Kurdish historical thesis; the nationalist paradigm is nonetheless similar, even though the two focus respectively on Turks and Kurds; “Defining the Nation: Kurdish Historiography in Turkey in the 1990s,” 149.

27 See Janet Klein, *A Potential Kurdistan: The Quest for Statehood*, Emirates Occasional Paper (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2009).



policies of the states denying the Kurds and they do much in asserting the role of the Kurds. They play, by their mere existence, a political role.”<sup>28</sup>

Although scholarly trends may be in favor of non-nationalist approaches and focusing on how communities co-existed rather than conflicted, it is nonetheless difficult to expect groups who have suffered from the very oppression that has arisen because of nationalism to take the high road in their struggle. As such, we cannot ask Palestinians (the other major “stateless” group in the Middle East) to deny their identity; and we cannot demand that Kurds put aside identity politics in favor of a wider and vaguer “human emancipation.” But as scholars we need to recognize our own position in this history and historiography, and to negotiate the various boundaries accordingly. Just because “looking beyond the nation-state” is in vogue in academic circles today, we cannot look beyond the nation-state simply for political reasons. However, there are scholarly reasons for doing so, and here is where scholars working on the Kurds might be able to innovate within these confines: Even scholars who adopt non-nationalist approaches can use the example of the Kurds to study identity formation, transnationalism, the construction of statelessness as a by-product of nationalism and statehood, and other issues related to violence, state-society relations, and identity politics, and to use their research to communicate across geographical and disciplinary boundaries in the interest of understanding our world and making it a better place for all. While the demands placed on scholars of Kurdish topics may be greater than those placed on researchers of other groups for the reasons I have outlined above, the potential to forge new paths should nonetheless be inspirational.

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28 Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power: Deconstructing Kurdish Studies,” 21.