Repression, Memory, and Globalization: Imagining Kurdish Nationalism

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Abstract. This project involves the examination of Kurdish nationalism in regard to the formation, transmission, and materialization of political memory. Focusing on developments of the 20th and 21st century, this analysis contextualizes the mobilization of Kurdish political consciousness within the modern forces of globalization, digital technology, mass media, and international governance. Substantial attention is paid to the role of radio, TV, and the Internet in the processes of national imagining and political discourse. NGOs and superstate institutions like the UN are also examined, as they play a fundamental role in integrating human rights language and sub-national movements like the Kurds. Additionally, the ways in which these developments are manifested through public spaces of memory provide insight into the parameters and aspirations undergirding Kurdish national identity. This project seeks to claim that traditional definitions and typologies of nationalism are insufficient, and that the nation, seen as a community of memory, provides better access points to understand how nations are created in the modern age.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Political Memory and the Nation

On April 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2017 I meandered through the streets of Istanbul on the eve of what would come to be a painful memory for millions of Kurdish people living in Turkey. Up above, the stolid eyes of authoritarian Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan peered over the crowded thoroughfares along with the words, “\textit{Evet söz de Karar da Milletin.}” (Yes. The Verdict Is the Nation) Much less prominent, and limited to just a few streets near Taksim Square—where in 2013 Turkish citizens staged the largest anti-government protest in a generation—smaller banners, some with the face of a child, hung between the buildings and read a single word: \textit{Hayir} (No). The city had been decorated over the course of the preceding weeks in posters and banners in anticipation for a national referendum that would consolidate vast power in the hands of one man, now both head-of-state and leader of the parliamentary majority party, the AKP.

![Figure 1: (Left) AKP poster of Pro-Erdogan slogan. (Right) Banners hung by opposition party CHP.](image)

Along with President Erdogan’s plan to elevate the Turkish Republic on the world stage is a drive to remake Turkish culture. This past December, Ankara announced it would replace the main opera house in Istanbul, created in memory of secularist Turkish
founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, with a new structure. The previous building was called the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) and symbolized the great leap towards modernization undertaken by Kemal in the infancy of a political entity carved out of the defunct Ottoman Empire. Though the AKM remained a cultural staple of the Turkish Republic for nearly 50 years, the construction of a new opera house reflects state-directed cultural battles over the secularization project implemented at the Republic’s founding.

For many, this is a shrewd move by Erdogan to reorient Turkish culture away from the “secular-elite” and encourage conservative Islamic values within his increasingly authoritarian presidential system of “democracy.” In response to the few remaining critics of the regime that are not either in jail, missing, or in exile, Erdogan stated, “the mentality opposed to building the AKM anew is the same that tries to obstruct Turkey’s fight against terrorist organizations.” Undoubtedly, he is referring to the PKK, a Kurdish militant political party that waged war against the Turkish state in the 1980s and 90s and has intermittently been involved in violent confrontations ever since. The 2015 scuttling of peace negotiations between the PKK and Erdogan, coupled with the continued state of emergency declared after a failed July 2016 coup, has resulted in the dismissal and arrest of many Kurdish parliamentary deputies and mayors, particularly those that represent the heavily Kurdish populated areas in eastern Anatolia. As the

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1 The Committee to Protect Journalists now counts that Turkey handily outpaces China in the detention of journalists. In 2017 alone, seventy-three journalists were detained which account for over a quarter of all journalists arrested worldwide. [https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2017/?status=Imprisoned&end_year=2017&group_by=location]
battle between Turkey’s secular and religious elements rage on, Erdoğan sees the state as an indispensible tool in fighting a national culture war, of which the Kurds are a major combatant. The conflation of political dissent with separatism, treason, and terrorism is a prominent feature of Turkish state discourse and effectively illegalizes Kurdish identity. The current political crisis will not abruptly end with the cessation of violence (which I do not believe is anywhere in sight), but will endure through the crises and confrontations of memory between various groups within and outside the Turkish Republic. As the Kurdish people are no stranger to oppression, Erdoğan’s crack down is just another iteration of violence that animates the burgeoning collective memory of Kurds spread over four different states—each with their own troubled history.

Benedict Anderson claimed in 1983 “‘the end of the era of nationalism’, so long prophesized, is not remotely in sight.” The events of the last 30 years would serve to corroborate, but he additionally identified a major challenge for our time, one that has persisted and will have profound implications reaching every corner of the globe—that of the political struggles between the nation-state and sub-nationalities. Communities that—whether in established democracies, transitional regimes, or authoritarian states—“dream of shedding this sub-ness one day.” They may demand cultural freedom, political autonomy or independence, international protection or recognition, or economic redress for systematic exclusion, whether political or economic or social or cultural. The memory of the nation building process in any country is fraught with controversial heroes, dubious or wholly fabricated historical narratives, and unsavory policies. While

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5 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 1991, p. 3
6 The term sub-nationality can denote a distinctly ethnic, linguistic, or cultural minority within the borders of an internationally recognized nation state.
7 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 1991, p. 3
some believe these to be justifiable—often on the grounds of saving the nation—sub-national political movements are inextricably tied and arguably born from resentment harbored from such questionable events. It is the manner in which these resentments are expressed, through the formation of sub (versive) historical narratives, that aspiring nations stylize their imagined community.

The creation of sub-national movements is uniquely tied to the living presence of the dead—to the memory of struggle, atrocity, and heroes whose actions ripple through time, through history, refusing to “remain in the past, insisting on [their] presence.” Frictions between the nation-state and sub-nationalities are, in the words of Elizabeth Jelin, “issues that entail coming to terms with a past that goes back several decades.… Those directly affected by repression bear the suffering and pain, which they translate into political action.”

Here, German provides better access to conceptualizing the doggedness of a painful past. What we are concerned with can be enclosed in two words: \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung} and \textit{Geschichtsaufarbeit}. The gist of these terms is ‘coming to terms with the past,’ but alternate translations are ‘overcoming, facing, confronting, treating, and working over’ the past. Transitional or even established democracies with difficult pasts, as in the case of Germany and the United States, are plagued by the problem of integrating memories of major injustices sanctioned under state auspices into historical narratives. The difficulty in addressing these failures includes, “\textit{whether} to treat the past at all, in any of the diverse available ways, or simply to try to forget and look to

\begin{footnotes}
\item \footnotesize{Jelin, \textit{State Repression and the Labors of Memory}, 2003, p. xiv}
\item \footnotesize{Ibid, p. xv}
\end{footnotes}
the future; *when* to address it, if it is to be addressed; *who* should do it; and last but not least, *how*?"  

For authoritarian regimes, however, the rigidity of national history resists and even criminalizes revisions of state-sponsored narratives. As George Orwell astutely observed, “*who* controls the past, controls the future…*who* controls the present, controls the past.”  

Orwell was writing about the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, yet we still find ourselves facing, both in liberal democracies and illiberal regimes parading as democracies, a return to the past as a means of social control.  

The exertion of state power over memory can manifest in the creation of national monuments, commemorative holidays, the commissioning of historical studies, and the infiltration of mass media by the state. As authoritarian regimes prop up historical narratives for the purpose of ‘national unity’ or ‘national pride,’ they necessarily disavow any memories that challenge that construction. When repressed memories come from ethnically, linguistically, or culturally homogenous groups, a “segregated memory contributes to a segregated polity.”  

This mnemonic segregation is not only a segregation of who gets to say what happened, to whom, and in what way; it carries implications in the present by preventing peoples from anchoring their own identities in their experiences. It poses a serious threat to individual liberty when a nation-state meddles in the propagation and dissemination of an official historical experience.

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11 George Orwell 1984  
12 In *Foreign Affairs* magazine’s first volume of 2018, they chose to address “The Undead Past: How Nations Confront the Evils of History.” Particularly startling is the blatant construction of bogus historical narratives and reorientation towards the past by backsliding democracies—particularly Russia, Turkey, Hungary, and Poland.  
13 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, 2014, p. 4
“The heart of any individual or group identity is linked to a sense of permanence,”\textsuperscript{14} and this link is always a connection to the past. Identity is partly, if not predominantly, generated and preserved through the recording of memories. Yet in the case of illiberal regimes, state functionaries can maintain legitimacy through the elevation of specific memories that justify privilege and inequality, or wholly denounce memories contradictory to the states needs or claims. Instances such as these often arise when the state employs force on its own citizenry while publically claiming innocence. As Jelin notes, “Periods of international crisis or external threats are usually preceded, accompanied, or succeeded by crises in the sense of collective identity and in memories.”\textsuperscript{15}

In the context of sub-national movements, the recording and dissemination of memories—often those of violence and oppression at the hands of the state and the tyrants who wield them—is an inherently subversive political act. This act is what P.J. Brendese calls a \textit{radical act of remembrance}.\textsuperscript{16} The commitment to preserve, through memory, stories of resistance and struggle can inspire present generations to resist oppression and strive for the impossible. These memories are often recollections of the heroic dead and their noble actions, or moments of endurance experienced by a specific group of people. Brendese sees radical remembrance as, “a way to cultivate solidarity with democrats gone and those not yet born.”\textsuperscript{17} Nationalist projects, particularly ones born of political struggle against totalitarian nation-states, are concerned with achieving

\textsuperscript{14} Jelin, \textit{State Repression and the Labors of Memory}, 2003, p. 14
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 15
\textsuperscript{16} Brendese, \textit{The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics}, 2014, p. 15
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p. 132
continuity and justice between the honorable dead and the hopeful living. As Avishai Margalit wrote:

“I believe that… a community of memory is a community not only based on thick relations\textsuperscript{18} to the living but also on thick relations to the dead… It is a community that is concerned with the issue of survival through memory.”\textsuperscript{19}

Thus for aspiring nations, the issue of remembrance, of political memory, is a central element of maintaining collective identity and inspiring sacrifice. Anderson observes: “Ultimately, it is fraternity that makes it possible… for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such… imaginings (nations).”\textsuperscript{20} As modern history has brought about an anthropological revolution uncovering “peoples without a history”, it becomes clear that these communities primarily exist through private memories of the dead—stories of people not yet incorporated into the official canons of history. How these stories are recorded, exported, and transmitted are of significant importance to the formation of national identities, particularly sub-nations within or across internationally recognized nation states.

The Kurds represent such a community whose struggle over the last century has precipitated a substantial memory explosion. As the Kurds are fragmented across four nation-states in the Middle East, their experience with state violence and repression is primarily preserved through the formation of counter memory narratives, which are unique to each political space they inhabit. Yet underlying these narratives are consistent themes of struggle, endurance, and hope. Studying Kurdish memory in its entirety would entail looking back hundreds of years, but for the purposes of this project I will limit my

\textsuperscript{18} Margalit marks a difference between thick and thin—ethical and moral—relations between humans. The former carries the connotation of a specific relation to oneself—such as family, community, and nation—while thin encompasses relations to groups like the poor, the sick, or some other general category.

\textsuperscript{19} Margalit, \textit{The Ethics of Memory}, 2004, p. 69

\textsuperscript{20} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 1991, p. 7
inquiry to the landscape of memory politics and its effect on Kurdish political discourse in contemporary life—which I roughly define as the period spanning from the 1950s to the present. The formation and expression of Kurdish memory differs considerably among age cohorts; institutional and state boundaries; and many other local religious, tribal, and cultural identities that exist below the prevailing Kurdayeti. As a result, an inquiry into Kurdish memory generally would be far too lengthy and outside the parameters of this project. Rather, I will focus on how modernity has structurally changed the process of national imagining with respect to collective memory.

Chapter two provides the theoretical context of memory politics, and I argue that the modern nation is primarily a community of memory whose function is to assert sovereignty. Subsequently, comparisons between those nations whose memories are formulated from the top-down and bottom-up provide a jumping off point to investigate the effects of globalization and technology on the formation of collective memory.

Chapter three outlines a brief historical background of the Kurds in order to frame the following analysis. In the fourth chapter, I will focus primarily on the evolution of Kurdish memory discourse in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran in relationship to three topics: (1) globalized technologies such as TV, radio, the Internet, and transportation; (2) international discourse concerning human rights, economic development, and political liberalization, as well as the institutions and actors involved; (3) and how these themes coalesce in public spaces. The extent to which these narratives can be leveraged for democracy and freedom remains to be seen, but perhaps, through memory, the Kurds can come to terms with the past and construct a nation oriented towards a better future.

21 Kurdayeti denotes the singular concept of ‘Kurdish national identity’, which is by no means reflective of subjective consensus. It varies between individuals and groups and across time, and the lens of memory provides a jumping off point for understanding and tracing various expressions.
Chapter 2

The Nation as a Community of Memory

Defining the Nation

Numerous studies have shown that the nation can be manifested in many different forms and contexts making a singular definition difficult to pin down. This dilemma has plagued social scientists as early as the 1930s, and in the time since, “all attempts to develop terminological consensus around nation [have] resulted in grand failure.”¹ Among these difficulties are: the (1) objective modernity of the nation as a political organization in contrast to the subjective antiquity of the nation espoused by leading nationalists; and (2) the formal universality of the nation as a fundamental element of personal identity while each nation remains distinct and particular. Rather than remain entangled in these anomalies, social scientists have shifted focus towards categorizing different nationalisms within the sociopolitical and economic contexts of a particular time and region. In order to refine a definition of the nation, I begin with the following typology common in scholarship, and then return to the two aforementioned peculiarities.

The most common categorical distinction is made between civic and ethnic nations. The former, often described as rational and voluntaristic, are ostensibly rooted in a shared set of principles and institutions where membership is based on choice. The latter, ethnic nations, are based on shared history and common ancestry, which often assert legitimacy based on the ‘subjective antiquity’ animating the first dilemma. These terms often carry normative connotation: to be civic is to be liberal democratic and good;

¹ Croucher, Perpetual Imagining: Nationhood in a Global Era, 2003, p. 2
to be ethnic is to be illiberal and bad. This binary, however, is insufficient. Shared heritage and common culture are relevant to all national groups, albeit in varying degrees. While the justifications of national belonging can change over time and in response to different political contexts, citizens of the same nation can have radically different criterion for national membership. As Anthony Smith argues in *Nationalism and Modernism*, “very few national states possess only one form of nationalism.”\(^2\) This lack of standardization in national identity makes binary distinctions, as well as universal definitions, rather unhelpful and often misleading.

The United States is cited as the preeminent example of a civic nation, yet as Bernand Yack remarks, the characterization of such nations as rational and voluntaristic is “a mixture of self-congratulations and wishful thinking.”\(^3\) At closer inspection, even civic nations are underpinned by the cultural expectations of the majority ethnic or linguistic group. Social factors such as race, religion, and language are inseparable to the formation of national belonging, and just as ethnic nations may be exclusionary, civic nations may require radical assimilation to national culture and even employ the same exclusionary policies expected of ethnically defined nation-states. Studies of immigration policy in the United States provide numerous examples in which ethnicity and language have been integral to nationalism and American citizenship. Though I will not delve further into the topic, scholars such as Benjamin Schwarz and Phillip Gleason have cast doubt on the exclusively civic foundations of American citizenship.\(^4\)

\(^2\) Quoted from Croucher, *Perpetual Imagining*, 2003, pp. 5 See also Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, 1998, p. 212
\(^3\) Ibid, p. 5
\(^4\) Benjamin Schwarz’s *The Diversity Myth: America’s Leading Export* was published in *The Atlantic* in May 1995 and focuses on the process of assimilation into American life, whereby minority ethnic groups are “cleansed” of their previous ethnic identity. Additionally, Phillip Gleason’s *Speaking of Diversity*
Returning to Anthony Smith’s claim reveals another conceptual difficulty in defining the nation: the misguided confounding of the nation and the state. The term *nation-state* is often used as the unit of analysis when creating typologies of nationalism, yet it disregards many modern political identities that exist largely separate from territorially defined states. While states can be quantitatively defined by geographical location and identifiable institutions, national belonging emanates from evolving subjective sociological criteria. In contrast to the relatively stable borders of states, national identity is a phenomenon with porous boundaries. Nations that have no state of their own and are spread out across the borders of multiple states further complicate analysis of nationalism. Moreover, many states contain multiple nations who nonetheless participate in the same state electoral and political institutions. Traditional classifications and universal definitions are increasingly untenable within the modern manifestations of national belonging, and new lenses are needed to conceptualize this political identity.

Each national styling is highly dependent on the cultural roots of a community that define the expressions of, or justifications for “horizontal comradeship.”5 For Benedict Anderson, the nation finds its cultural roots in the integration of state structures and vernacular languages coalesced by the proliferation of print capitalism. Print vernaculars allowed exchange and interaction between persons who would come to see all others in their language-field as a part of the national community. Poems, plays, and novels written in a particular linguistic community provided the cultural connections between members of a distinct language group. Anderson writes, “[the nation] is imagined because even the members of the smallest nations will never know most of their


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provides an interesting inspection of the ‘Melting Pot’ symbolism in American discourse and its various meanings in relation to ethno/linguistic national belonging in American political life.
fellow-members.” This imagining is inherently exclusionary, as no nation is constructed conterminously with all mankind, and sovereign, as it implies political self-determination. The distillation of nationalism, in Anderson’s view, is inherently tied to the cultural roots of modernity. He posits the nation as a necessary outgrowth of industrialization, increased literacy, urbanization, and the consolidation of the modern bureaucratic state. In this respect, the nation is more an instrument for achieving economic or political development rather than an organic community. As such, the nation can be better defined as “a community with a distinctive consciousness and a shared sense of mission.”

For any community, membership is founded upon knowledge of the group’s history, language, major struggles, romanticized heroes, and customs. To become a distinct cultural entity—an imagined community—groups must define themselves in relation to others by creating a shared history or collective memory. The glue that binds individuals together within a nation is a wellspring of shared experiences and stories—transmitted across generations—that justify the consciousness of the particular group and orient political, economic, or social goals. Nationalist projects, in order to form ties between persons who will likely never meet or know one another personally, are necessarily mnemonic projects. Communities of memory can exist within and across state borders, but what distinguishes national communities of memory from other religious or institutional communities is the demand of political self-determination or group sovereignty.

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7 Communities of memory can exist on both micro and macro level. Institutions such as local churches, police and fire departments, and schools can constitute their own micro communities of memory.
Identities, in this light, are preserved through the creation of group memories, which define national belonging and express the specifics of a shared mission. Teresa de Leuretis defines identity as, “an active construction and a discursively mediated political interpretation of one’s history.” This interpretation is precisely what undergirds Anderson’s imagined communities, and as a result, the nation should be defined as a particular community of memory whose mission is to assert some level of sovereignty. By adding the memory lens to the definition of the nation, one can better analyze the raw materials with which nations are constructed. As Anderson’s focus in Imagined Communities is the cultural forces that precipitated nationalism, this thesis aims to investigate the memory work inherent to such imaginings.

When talking about the study of political or cultural memory, social scientists are generally referring to shared communal practices and beliefs as distinguished from individual recollection. Though cultural memory is built upon the recollection individual experiences, they are mediated by various institutions, social practices, and groups. Collective memory thus serves as a metaphor for the process by which groups organize many different individual recollections into a communal narrative of historical events. Studies of political memory may start with the individual, but the process and implications of the collectivization of memory is paramount.

Collective memory is also distinct from common memory, or, the aggregate memories of individuals who experienced some specific episode. When people ask the question, “Where were you on 9/11?” they are inquiring about individual recollection within a temporally constrained experience —by whether you were actually there to

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8 Assmann, Cultural Memory and Western Civilization, 2013, p. 53
witness the event. Collective or cultural memory on the other hand, is not so constrained by time, and in fact it specializes is traversing generational barriers.

Cultural memory is a process reliant on communication and transmission, meaning that those who did not directly experience an event can be “plugged in… through channels of description.” Rather than restricted to those who have first-hand memories, it is passed on as cultural knowledge essential to formulating group identity. It has implications for the ways we act, how we ascribe meaning to events, and prompts us to feel. Though there are many names for it, they all denote the mechanism by which bodies of people come to see themselves as a single cultural, political, or unique community. “Memory…incorporates knowledge, beliefs, behavior patterns, feelings, and emotions conveyed and received in social interaction, in processes of socialization, and in the cultural practices of a group.” It is expressed and performed in traditions, holidays, gestures, language, and nearly everything that one counts as an element of identity, and is best understood using the following two-pronged classification.

**Inhabited or functional memory**, serves to connect the past, present, and future through value-laden knowledge. Functional memory places value on events meaning that it creates narratives of group identity—including articulation of origin stories, interpretations of historical events, and goals for the future. It acts as a guiding force for personal behavior and political action by incorporating the individual into the narrative that it creates. Functional memories are inhabited by those that remember. In contrast, **uninhabited memory or storage memory** disconnects the present and past through information collected under the suspension of behavioral norms and values. It is

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9 Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 2004, p. 52
10 Similar terms include: shared memory, national history, political memory, cultural memory, collective memory, and collective history.
dissociated from any carrier, meaning that it does not bestow identity or transmit moral knowledge; it collects all information on the basis of equality. Primarily, it is for the purposes of storage. “It contains what is unusable, obsolete, or dated; it has no vital ties to the present and no bearing on the future.”\textsuperscript{11} These two memory types correspond to collective memory and historical data respectively.

Storage memory, once collected, “is the amorphous mass of unused and uninhabited memories that surround functional memory like a halo.”\textsuperscript{12} These uninhabited pieces of information are relics of past civilizations, the writings and documents of persons dead and regimes overtaken, among other historical data. They exist in physical and digital archives waiting to be discovered and brought to light. Functional memories on the other hand carry with them essential lessons from the past, and provide continuity to normative values. They can come from contemporary events or stories unearthed in archives and archeological sites—essentially from banks of storage memories. This includes stories of leaders, heroes, martyrs, struggles, and successes, often manifested in publically accessible ways including literature, monuments, and media. Aleida Assman identifies the two central functions of this type of memory knowledge: “those of affect and of identity, that is, as a motivation force and formative self-image.”\textsuperscript{13}

The modern nation is perhaps the foremost legitimate source of functional memories in contemporary life, and when we are talking about national collective memory, we are talking about the memories that nations choose to inhabit in order to construct identity and formulate collective interest. Consequentially, a nation is a

\textsuperscript{11} Assman \textit{Cultural Memory and Western Civilization}, 2013, p. 127
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, p. 125
\textsuperscript{13} Assman, \textit{Cultural Memory and Western Civilization}, 2013, p. 120
community of functional memory that asserts political sovereignty. This memory definition of the nation solves the anomalies mentioned earlier. Regarding the first, a national community of memory can be formed in modernity, but assimilate cultural knowledge from antiquity into its own narrative. Though its consciousness is born in modernity, its memories may reach further back in time. On the second, all national memories are unique and differentiable from every other, but all nations exist for the purpose of claiming sovereignty. What differentiates nations, along this memory definition, is the extent to which narratives are created and perpetuated by the state or public discourse.

Top-Down v. Bottom-Up National Communities of Memory

It is in the realm of memories, and the weaving of these into historical narratives, that the nation becomes a nation. Yet this process is not the same for every national community. Collective memories constantly evolve and update, involving the placement of emphasis on some memories over others for explicitly political reasons. “The outcome is not a chaotic disorder, because there is some structure shaped by cultural codes and some social organization—where some voices are stronger than others because they have greater access to resources and to public stages.”

A common typology to the study of nationalism is the distinction between those formed from the top-down and from the bottom-up, and this classification is more useful in examining the nation as a community of memory than the civic/ethnic distinction.

14 Common examples of this nationalism are Indian, Chinese, and Greek, which often consider themselves the inheritors of historically important ancient civilizations.
15 Jelin, p. 12
The nation relies on various conduits of memory in order to create its historical narratives. Margalit notes that because shared memory involves the transmission of experiences that many were not personally witnesses, communities of memory rely on a ‘division of mnemonic labor,’ where multiple different members of society—including family members, teachers, artists, journalists, and politicians—all work to perpetuate or create certain cultural knowledge. Transmission of shared memories additionally travels through institutions, both public and private. These can include schools, private associations, interest groups, political parties, religious organizations, and most importantly, mass media. Not only does a community of memory share cultural knowledge, but requires a “responsibility to see to it that memory is kept alive [and] may require some minimal measure of memory by each in the community.” I argue that the extent to which national memories are constructed by a diverse public or a select few corresponds to the bottom-up process and top-down process respectively, and additionally corresponds to a positive and negative normative value.

Top-down communities of memory are often formed and perpetuated using state institutions and power to disseminate historical narratives. Karl Deutsch depicts this process of nation building as a result of modern state structures constructing political communities of their own by directing cultural knowledge. In this argument, the nation is portrayed as the “ideological alibi of the state” with the state existing prior to collective memory. Sheila Croucher writes, “States have long relied on nations as their raison d’être and in a period of threatened sovereignty tend to use and to fortify the nation as an

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16 Margalit, 2004, p. 52
17 Ibid, 2004, p. 58
18 Croucher, *Perpetual Imagining*, 2003, p. 10
These alibis, particularly in authoritarian nations, present narratives that justify actions taken by the state, often with the military presented as the ‘savior’ of the nation. Elizabeth Jelin calls these state-sponsored master narratives ‘official memories.’ They are official in that they are disseminated for the purpose of reinforcing the legitimacy of the state and its interests.

Anderson also conflates top-down national projects with what he calls “official nationalism.” Above all, “the one persistent feature of this style of nationalism was, and is, that it is official—i.e. something emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost.” Official nationalism, as defined by Anderson, necessitates a marriage between the state and a hegemonic identity. As the narratives are imposed and command adherence to values and customs, when the state creates memories to define and promote national culture group identity takes on exclusivity—often in the form of ethnicity, language, or religion. As Sheldin Wolin writes, “The danger is that the identity given to the collectivity by those who exercise power will reflect the needs of power rather than the political possibilities of a complex collectivity.” State-led cultural projects necessarily subjugate individual identity to the needs of political interest. In this top-down process, “states respond to encroachments upon their sovereignty…by clarifying the boundaries and significance of belonging to a nation.” These boundaries are solidified and reinforced by driving out “any unofficial remembrance that might present itself as a critically subversive functional memory.”

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19 Ibid, 2003, p. 14
20 Anderson, 1991, p. 157
21 Brendese, 2014, p. 49
22 Ibid, 2003, p. 16
23 Assmann, 2013 p. 128
In contrast, the bottom-up process of cultural memory formation occurs predominantly without the assistance of a state, and often in response to state-led nation building projects or political oppression/crises generally. These communities of memory claim their own nationhood as the most readily available and productive pathway towards creating a state of their own; achieving political independence or autonomy; or asserting cultural rights of expression. Where states exist prior to national communities of memory in top-down nationalist movements, the bottom-up process begins with a community of memory that expresses itself as a distinct nation, often for the purpose of creating a state. This expression is hardly uniform, and as Jelin notes, “multiple social and political actors come to the scene, and they craft narratives of the past that confront each other’s, and in so doing, they also convey their projects and political expectation of the future.”24 Echoing Margalit’s division of mnemonic labor, the bottom-up process of national identity formation is a much more pluralistic and liberal process through which communities of memory exert sovereignty over their own identities.

Bottom-up national memories often arise during political transitions when government archives are opened, individuals feel they can publicly express their memories, and political actors openly confront official narratives. In these settings, “both functional and storage memory interact in a dialectical relationship that is to be found in liberal literate cultures; and their future is to a large extent dependent on this ongoing intercourse.”25 National communities of memory created from the bottom-up are often preceded by political injustice or a traumatic past, and their memories are often

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24 Jelin, 2003, p 29-30  
25 Assmann, 2013, p. 131
synonymous with calls for political change, greater equality, or establishment of
democratic institutions.

“The problem with official memory is that it depends on censorship and coerced
rites of commemoration.”26 In contrast, what Margalit calls a proper community of
memory is a group that creates its own parameters, values, and narratives. Often, the
byproduct of oppression, violence, and forced cultural assimilation toward a group—
whether defined by ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or class—is the formation of proper
communities of memory. These communities, in response to violence or marginalization,
are people “who share a set of historical opportunities and limitations that provide
them…with a ‘shared destiny.’”27 The use of memory for such national communities is to
“recapture those few moments in the past which show the possibility of a better way of
life than that which has dominated the earth thus far.”28 In this way, memories can
emphasize the possibilities of new beginnings when the present feels, as if at every
moment, it is the completion of historical inevitability. When injustice seems an
irrevocable fact of existence, “the past suggests what can be, not what must be.”29

In this light, repression and marginalization at the hands of the state can create
communities of memory demarcated along racial lines, and as Margalit asks, “is it not
injustice that hurts us into politics?”30 Enduring memories of trauma and political
repression may animate shared memory as a narrative of collective struggle. Therefore,
the definition of group boundaries along ethnic lines may be a political response to
violence, disenfranchisement, or oppression. Associating ethnic nationalism with ‘bad’

26 Assmann, 2013, p. 127
27 Jelin, 2003, p. 91
29 Ibid, 1971, p. 282
30 Margalit, 2004, p. 111
nationalism obscures legitimate demands for political change by marginalized ethnic 
groups. Instead, applying the distinction between nations built from the bottom-up or top-
down—which does not exist in a clear binary but rather a continuous scale—should yield 
a positive normative value to those communities of memory constructed outside the 
levers of state power. Margalit remarks, “The relation between a community of memory 
and a nation is such that a proper community of memory may help shape a nation, rather 
than the nation shaping the community of memory.”31 In this sense, proper communities of 
memory exist prior to political organizations. Yet when the nation—or rather the nation-
state—creates a community of memory from the top-down, the nation is presented as 
existing prior to individual, becoming the sole proprietor of collective memory. 
Regardless of the civic or ethnic distinction of national belonging, state control over 
historical memory creates a crisis for individuality and the possibility of cultural 
innovation and political change. The traditional normative distinction between civic and 
ethno-linguistic nationalism is insufficient, as it does not account for the extent to which 
ethnic groups may invoke nation-ness to combat oppressive state-policies. 

Sub-national movements are directly engaged in this type of subversive memory. 
Assmann calls this ‘counter-memory,’ and it is a constitutive feature of political 
movements that aim to delegitimize power constellations controlling identity and culture 
through the use of force. “The motif underlying counter-memory, whose bearers are the 
conquered and the oppressed, is the delegitimation of power experienced as tyrannical. It 
is as political as the official memory, because in both instances it is linked with a claim to 
power.”32 These claims to power, however, do not emanate from the state, but rather boil

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31 Margalit, 2004, p. 101
32 Assmann, 2013, p. 129
up from localized memories gaining collective meaning when connected with the common experiences of those who also endured violence.

Counter narratives conceived in such a manner take on two functions in relation to official memory. Firstly, they aim to reconfigure public discourse around their “true” version of history, often debunking official narratives through the invocation of localized memories. Secondly, they carry with it demands of justice and political change in order to devolve narrative power from the state towards the individual. “In such moments, memory, truth, and justice blend into each other, because the meaning of the past that is being fought about is, in fact, part and parcel of the demand for justice in the present.”33

In order to combat state power, the “potential power of resistance through the memory of the demos”34 directly subverts attempts to control political memory—and thereby the political actions invoked by those memories—by oppressive power structures. The process of democratization and the pursuit of greater individual rights and liberty must involve “both an ongoing tending to local memories… and a contestation of how certain pasts and futures are invoked and disavowed.”35 The interplay between greater political freedom, democracy, and sovereignty over memory undergird the development of subnational movements responding to state violence.

The construction of counter-narratives and the elevation of repressed memories are symptoms of sub-national movements that demand a state of their own, autonomy, or cultural rights generally. Once these goals are realized, however, leaders of such revolutions run the risk of reverting to the same policies previously employed by the state. As Hans Kohn writes:

33 Jelin, 2003, p. 29
34 Brendese, 2014, p. 15
“The former ‘oppressed’ ones become sometimes worse ‘oppressors,’ not only to their former ‘oppressors’ but of innocent third peoples… The recognition of the equality of all human beings, and their right to emancipation, promised by democratic revolution…is more often in deeds than words repudiated.”36

Benedict Anderson saw this as the tendency for revolutionary leaderships to revert to the policies of old regimes, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the inheritance of state files, dossiers, archives, laws, financial records and other storage memories. He emphasizes that this occurs at a leadership level, because it is the leaders, not the people, “who inherit old switch boards and palaces.”37 Continuation of cultural freedom and persistent democratic opening is essential to enervating this impulse, and sub-national movements demanding autonomy, cultural rights, or independence are much more suited to employ memory in the service of freedom before they achieve their goals than they are after major political battles are won. For this reason, top-down nationalism poses a threat to individual liberty even when it comes from formerly oppressed peoples—or rather, former bottom-up nationalist movements. Where shared memory can be a rallying point for groups determined to achieve political freedom, it can also be a useful tool to perpetuate oppressive regimes or justify political acts of revenge.

National Memory and Modern Technology

The possibility of achieving justice for those victims of tyranny is uniquely tied to our conception of duty to the past, how we choose to remember the dead, what historical enmities we carry with us, the values that our memories communicate, and most importantly, what our memories compel us to do. Today, official national memory is threatened in a time of rapid exchange between nations and individuals. This new age of

36 Kohn, 1968, p. 27
37 Anderson, 1991, p. 161
globalization can be characterized as a period of “fragmentation and cultural hybridity amidst which the notions of cultural homogeneity forming the basis for nationhood have been thoroughly delegitimized.”

The proliferation of sub-national movements is tied to inability of states to maintain legitimacy and simultaneously direct cultural memory. The advent of digital technology, mass media communication, and increased human mobility have structurally changed the way memories are transmitted and formed, and widened the areas of interaction between groups whose memories have remained distinct for centuries. The dynamics of this intercourse—including the use of television, computer technology, international organizations, and social media—have shaped the evolution of national and sub-national movements alike, fundamentally altering the way communities of memory form and enter politics. The prospect of such unprecedented global discourse sets the stage for a plurality of different voices and narratives that will either justify the nation as a peaceful and prosperous political community, or foment instability and violence.

The modern nation now exists in global community characterized by increased access to information, the proliferation of communication and transportation technology, and rapid cultural exchanges between places holding no contiguous land or historical interaction. Present in these exchanges are not only material goods, but also transmissions of human experience. As the entry price for ideological competition has been reduced through the advent of social media and other digital infrastructures, the ability of a person to export their perspective on a sequence of events creates a crisis for the traditional sources of collective memory.

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38 Croucher, 2003, p. 11
“There is an evolving global digital infrastructure that will increasingly connect
everyone to everyone, but not on equal terms nor at equal density… The most
obvious, but also the most important change, is simply that governments and other
official sources of information are no longer the key brokers of credibility (if they
ever really were)… Just about everyone on the planet has, or will soon have, easy
access to a cacophony of voices, a multiplicity of narratives, all starting from a
more or less equal place when it comes to their ability to reach an audience.”39

In this increasingly anarchic and competitive landscape, the struggle to write
history includes the participation of actors who have traditionally been silenced—whether
through economic, social, or political means—and democratizes the process through
which personal memories are transmitted into national and global narratives. The
proliferation of global digital infrastructure hastens structural changes to collective
memory, and new avenues through which information is exchanged erode the monopoly
that states maintain over communication and information. As a result, the formation of
sub-national identity is more immediate, more easily exported, and more influenced by
global discourse. Underlying this structural change is the increasing importance of
images, media, and digital writing; the growing influence of the global human rights
discourse through international media, NGOs, and other transnational actors; and finally,
increased human mobility that emphasizes the importance of diaspora communities and
further corrodes the relevance of state borders.

Benedict Anderson’s print-language nationalisms are becoming superseded by the
importance of global exchange through mass media and computer technology. Territorial
boundaries underpinned and justified by the imagining of national print languages are
anachronistic in an age where information can be instantaneously translated and
transmitted to every corner of the globe. While print still maintains substantial

39 Weber and Jentleson, 2010, p. 43
importance for unifying nations containing groups that speak distinct dialects, public
discourse is increasingly bent towards new mediums that change the opportunities for
imagining nations while increasing the interconnectedness of communities that would
otherwise remain insulated.

“Because globalization has been propelled by advances in technology, including
Internet, satellites, fax machines, and cell phones as well as the increased sophistication
of and spread of existing technologies such as television, it offers new and more effective
opportunities for imagining nations.”

This transition from traditional sources of written communication towards digital writing and images, movies, and television fundamentally alters the way cultural boundaries are overcome and marks a significant break with
traditional mediums of political deliberation. As more and more voices are engaged in a
global political discourse, images have come to replace words as the primary vehicle for
engagement. The ability of individuals to capture and record information through pictures
taken on cell phones and hand-held devices profoundly limits the ability of states to
create official narratives. Using the example of photos taken in the Abu Ghraib prison
during the American invasion of Iraq, Steven Webber and Bruce Jentleson show that
information sharing through images and the Internet gives individuals an unprecedented
power to combat and transform political memory. In their words, “how does one argue or
change the mind of someone who believes in the meaning behind the Abu Ghraib

40 Croucher, 2003, p. 17
41 The United States Army and Central Intelligence Agency ran the Abu Ghraib prison, also known as the
Baghdad Central Prison. Photos first obtained by CBS in 2004 chronicled numerous human rights
violations of detainees, including torture, sexual abuse, and murder. These photos changed the “liberator”
This transition is a radical democratization of mnemonic power, not through political means, but through technological advancement.

“The problem of cultural memory has become more acute under pressure of new media… Increasingly dense communication networks bring the most distant regions into direct contact, including radio and television that transmit their programs… thanks to satellites circling the globe. The storage capacity of new data-carriers and archives has shattered the confines of cultural memory.”

These new mediums constitute “mechanisms that enhance our capacity for constructing, imagining, and maintaining nations.” Particularly, the proliferation of television and satellite technology has played a substantial role in the formation of national identity, much in the same way that print previously held cultural dominance. Though states and trans-state entities like the European Union have found television an impressive tool in building national identities, “television could also offer opportunities to stateless nations or ethnic groups to subvert the control of a state… Through this and various other forms of globalizing technology—cell phones, email, and World Wide Web—individuals and groups within and across states can resist state-led efforts at nation building or pursue alternative forms of national community.” The potentiality of a more democratic memory is afforded new possibilities through the advent of such technologies, and through them, the state and identity are experiencing substantial dislocation.

While groups are able to assert more sovereignty in the construction of their own identities, this technology invariably brings together local and global currents. Along with the shift from print towards digital and communication technology, national movements in the late 20th and 21st century have formed in close contact with

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42 Weber and Jentleson, 2010, p. 45
43 Assmann, 2013, p. 202
44 Croucher, 2003, p. 17
international actors and institutions. These nations are influenced by global discourse on human rights and liberal democracy, and as such, their communities of memory are shaped within the context of a cosmopolitan exchange. This bottom-up thrust of nationalism, particularly for nations suffering under authoritarian governments or currently in democratic transition, is intertwined with global actors committed toward liberalization.

Elizabeth Jelin, in her study of the memory projects accompanying transitional democracy in Latin American, notes the importance of global actors and ideas in the formation of new, post-dictatorial narratives for national identity. “The human rights movement has been and continues to be a privileged actor in the political enterprise of memory… In all cases, the human rights movement is a heterogeneous actor that encompasses…diverse experiences and multiple horizons of expectations.”46 The political globalization of ideas and governance has brought with it a functional relationship between sub-national movements and claims for human rights and political liberalization. The transnational torchbearers of these political projects are actors and institutions that operate outside, around, and in opposition to states. They include Amnesty International, Oxfam, Doctors without Borders, Transparency International, the Unification Church and many others. These NGOs, along with supra-national organizations like the WTO, IMF, and UN all facilitate a global discussion centered on economic modernization and political liberalism. As Amy Sodarno notes, “there is in fact a cosmopolitan or transnational memory culture that transcends national borders and connects people and groups from widely divergent backgrounds… [It] transcends… other

46 Jelin, 2003, p. 34
hegemonic narrators of the past and works toward a...more peaceful democratic future."

Collective memory of past violence and transitional justice lie at the center of contemporary international politics, and as technology turns continents into neighborhoods, “various forms of international governance systems have superseded states.” This shift in global governance has reoriented global politics in a way that sovereignty is more diffuse and involves more actors from different parts of the world. The global discourse on human rights, greater liberality equality, and transnational solidarity provides the atmosphere in which modern sub-national movements have formed.

In addition to global information sharing and international institutions, the new possibilities of human mobility have challenged traditional notions of national belonging, and facilitated further the global exchange of ideas. Experiences that become globalized by diaspora communities play a central role in internationalizing sub-nationalist movements. Transnational identities play a central role in connecting different areas of the globe, and with the proliferation of transportation technology, “geographic borders are now less significant and territory less determinant than they once were; crossing...is a much less permanent, unidirectional, or irreversible process.”

The emergent importance of transnational identities and the persistence of national movements that traverse borders indicate that state boundaries and claims to nation-state sovereignty are less constitutive of group identity than in the past. Though it

48 Croucher, 2003, p. 11
49 Ibid, 2003, p. 7
can be argued that the existence of nations that are dispersed across state borders supports the primordialist view of nationalism, it is clear that the technological and political changes of the modern era have fomented the emergence of new nations and new identities, constructed along notions of belonging within the context of a global discourse. In this view, nations are extremely malleable and responsive to information as well as global interactions, and the construction of these identities coincides with the mnemonic democratization that globalized technology entails.

Though sub-national movements seeking greater political freedom or guarantees of human rights have globalized their projects, the importance of local memory plays an integral role in constructing nationalized histories. Global discourse has shaped the connections between national liberation movements and their demands for political freedom, but liberating the local memory of struggle from silence and preserving those memories through public recollection is the central feature of sub-national politics. The connections between democratization, nationalism, and memory are readily visible through the politics of memory spaces. These include museums, monuments, graves, parks, and street signs, among others. They reflect the concurrent relationship between the opening of memory discourse within the globalization of technology and politics, while also revealing importance of death and space in national consciousness.

*National Memory Spaces: Where the Local and Global Meet*

The creation of national monuments, cenotaphs, and other commemoration dates or sites are universal to all nationalist projects. This type of public remembrance, a sort of secular afterlife, provides continuity between the past and present and utilizes physical
space where memory is both learned and experienced. The nation, in the words of Avishai Margalit, “is a community that deals with life after death, where the element of commemoration verging on revivification is stronger than in a community based merely on communication. It is a community that is concerned with the issue of survival through memory.”

Memory spaces are commemorative of stories particularly important to group history, chronicling the deeds of national heroes in what Margalit calls the ‘civic cult of great men.’ As these sites can be a result of local and national deliberation on the one hand, and state indoctrination on the other, memory spaces are an integral aspect of discourse and national identity. Stories that are chosen for commemoration underpin the construction of identity, and the right of remembering the honorable dead lays at the foundation of national belonging. No matter who or what is remembered, memory spaces provide an interactive environment where memory and discourse go hand in hand, and “they are no longer directed towards posterity so much as they constitute a means of influencing contemporary society.” At the foundations of cultural memory is the collective remembrance of the dead inhabited through physical space.

When public memory spaces are inhabited by counter memory, they constitute what P.J. Brendese calls radical acts of remembrance. “These are memories that preserve a memory of agonizing efforts of the intellect and restate the possibilities and threats posed by political dilemmas.” The use of a public space for rebellious memory spatializes subversion from what the state deems available for public recollection. As Brendese states, “the polis as a community of memory is…the place where shared memories are fashioned, animated, recorded, revised, forgotten, and remembered…It is

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50 Margalit, 2004, p. 69
51 Assmann, 2013, p. 39
52 Brendese, 2014, p. 23
also the venue where collective memories become politically salient, mobilized, invoked, or repressed."53 These venues, when occupied by memories of death, oppression, and endurance, form the bedrock of sub-national struggles. As they can be graves, places of trauma, museums, libraries, and a myriad of other physical markers, subversive memory spaces can be leveraged to encourage open public discourse. The power of memories to motivate action makes these spaces all the more important for democratic possibilities.

Though this section emphasizes the connection between memory spaces and transitional justice, it is important to note that radical changes in physical space are indicative of all ruptures in cultural identity, not just democratic memory projects. “A reconstruction of identity always entails a reconstruction of memory, which applies as much to communities as it does to individuals. It takes place through the rewriting of history books, the demolition of monuments, and the renaming of official buildings, streets, and squares.”54 The creation, maintenance, demolition, and transformation of memory spaces correspond to animation, continuity, rupture, and revision of political and cultural life respectively. These physical transformations of space embody the simultaneous currents of remembering and forgetting at a cultural level, and just as they can be leveraged for the recovering of repressed memories, they can also become a tool for perpetuating power inequalities.

Simultaneously paradoxical and inspirational is the endurance of private memories in an atmosphere of repression. Jelin denotes this phenomenon as ‘evasive memory loss,’ and it involves the private transmission, often through the family or clandestine social groups, that aim to perpetuate the memory of those who succumb to

54 Assmann, 2013, p. 54
violence. “Indeed, could it be that the silence and oblivion that are sought for by repressing commemorations have the paradoxical effect of multiplying memories, of maintaining alive the questions of debate about the recent past?”\textsuperscript{55} These private memories are the ingredients of public discourse once political spaces open. Deliberation on the naming of streets, squares, parks, and other public spaces becomes animated by such stories, providing the recovery of once evaded memories. In line with the goals of memory democrats like Jelin and Brendese, this deliberation can integrate diverse interpretations of major historical persons, dates, and experiences, where “facts fall into place and gain a new (dis) order, preexisting models and blue prints break down, [and] the voices of new and old generations…create new intersubjective spaces of dialogue.”\textsuperscript{56} Such plural discourse is highly representative of nations and states experiencing democratic transition, but the transformation of physical space under top-down cultural projects subverts this discourse in favor of narrative consensus. In this regard, the process of creating memory spaces is often more indicative of political freedom than the stories themselves.

Graves of civic heroes or victims of violence, particularly when they are transformed from burial site to monument, “stabilize and authenticate [cultural memory] by giving it a concrete setting.”\textsuperscript{57} Yet these spaces do not constitute memory outright, but require human interaction and discourse to become collectively significant. They are physical markers that prompt recollection, and what is recollected are stories whose meaning varies according to each individual. Rather than signifying a narrative consensus, they serve as memory reference points in which various actors and

\textsuperscript{55} Jelin, 2003, p. 40
\textsuperscript{56} Jelin, 2003, p. 37
\textsuperscript{57} Assmann, 2013, p. 282
participants can communicate their own interpretations. Functioning as public spaces of discourse rather than unified symbols, they “are charged with mysterious and unspecified significance”\(^5^8\) that can only be interpreted by those who remember.

Monuments, memorials, cenotaphs, commemorative plaques, and official buildings all constitute various spaces in which cultural memory, the presence of the dead, and democratic possibilities intersect. But the proliferation of national and local museums across the world signifies an ongoing trend that blends history, memory, and national identity in spaces of a rather modern flare. The collection of one’s national history in museums transforms time into physical space, where all the remnants of a collective past are put in display for national delight. Though this model still persists today, the integration of the museum with human rights dialogue has given way to a new form of memory space: the memorial museum.

What was once a space for the tourism of the nation’s glorious past has become a social setting where people come to terms with the legacy of a troubled past. Modern memorial museums “are not like their predecessors that dot the landscape of the late 19\(^{th}\) century—[which were] triumphant reminders of the glories of the nation-state.”\(^5^9\) They aim to preserve the memory of violence rather than the memory of golden ages. “Not only are they able to collect and display the physical remnants of the past, preserving it for posterity, but they can also tell the story of the past, imparting knowledge and understanding.”\(^6^0\) These spaces integrate national history, victimhood, and hope in order to create meaning out of suffering. “The emergent strength of victims, who today increasingly ‘write the history’ in their demands for recognition and reparation, is clearly

\(^{58}\) Ibid, 2013, p. 284  
\(^{59}\) Sodaro, 2018, p. 13  
\(^{60}\) Ibid, 2018, p. 23
due to the growing emphasis on human rights throughout the 20th century.⁶¹

International organizations and institutions provide generous expertise and assistance in the creation of such spaces, making global discourse a central element of their function.

Underlying the connections between spaces of memory, democratization, and nationalism is the ability to freely express political opinions and individual identity. Spaces of memory offer such public sites where previously repressed feelings, ideas, and stories can be told. The politics of memory, in many ways, is the project of overcoming silence. Parks, monuments, museums, and many other spaces offer an avenue to make public those private memories previously resigned to oblivion. Any contentious transition toward democracy is predicated upon the ability of societies to “find ways to handle the tension…in democratic public spaces and institutional settings that recognize the plurality of voices and the unavoidable presence of the past.”⁶² The integration of local memory and global discourse further complicates this tension, as more individuals of more diverse backgrounds encounter each other on a daily basis, widening the opportunity for conflict.

For sub-national movements, memory spaces evidence to what end the nation exists. Do they desire democratization, human rights, territorial expansion, a state of their own, or vengeance? By tracking the development of national memory with respect to process and content, one can better understand a community and their opportunities and limitations. In the following section, I will examine the development of Kurdish nationalism in light if the previous theoretical analysis.

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⁶¹ Ibid, 2018, p. 17
⁶² Jelin, 2003, p. 104
Chapter 3

A Brief Overview of Kurdish History

Memory as a subject of inquiry cannot be studied, nor provide any beneficial conclusions without some historical contextualization. As memories are highly subjective, dynamic, and susceptible to embellishment or distortion, providing a historical background to frame the mnemonic foreground is necessary to conceptualize how nationalism and collective memory concurrently develop. A brief historical account will provide the relevant context in which Kurds find themselves today.

The specific origin of the Kurds is often disputed, but it can be safely asserted that they have existed as a distinct, identifiable group for over 2000 years. They have inhabited an area that encompasses the border regions of modern day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, primarily around the Zagros Mountains and the surrounding plains and valleys. Though some trace the etymology of the word ‘Kurd’ back to the ancient Sumerian languages over 5,000 years ago, it is generally agreed by historians, anthropologists, and nationalists alike that the Kurds are descended from Indo-European tribes that crossed what is modern Iran in the second millennium B.C. These tribes coexisted for centuries with other distinct tribal groups until the Arab invasions in the 7th century in which they were subsumed by various empires. The Kurdish tribes enjoyed relative autonomy throughout this period, developing distinct linguistic dialects of which four main varieties remain. The most common, Kurmaji, is primarily spoken in northern Kurdistan, while second most common, Surani, is primarily spoken in the south. The other two dialects, Gurani and Zaza, are spoken by small enclaves in southern and north-western regions.

1 Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan*, 2017, p. 4
respectively. The overwhelming majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim (75%), yet many Kurds living in Iran practice Shia. Other small enclaves practice Alevi Shia and Yezidi, which are heavily influenced by the Zoroastrianism of the pre-Islamic period.²

![Map of Kurdistan](image)

**Figure 2: Historically inhabited Kurdish area of the Middle East**

Though estimates of Kurdish populations are difficult to attain due the reluctance of states to determine exact figures, the general consensus is that roughly 25-30 million Kurds live across the Middle East and in diaspora communities throughout the world (predominantly in Europe including Sweden, England, German, and France). There are roughly 6 million Kurds in Iraq, amounting to over 15% of the population; 2 million in Syria (roughly 10%); 7 million in Iran (8%); and almost half of all Kurds live in Turkey, amounting to 13 million and constituting just over 15% of the Turkish population. An additional population of roughly 800,000-1,000,000 Kurds lives outside the Middle East.³

Today, the Kurds represent the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of their own.

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³ Multiple sources consulted: Kimberly Segall *Performing Democracy in Iraq and South Africa* p. 4; Mary O’Neil *Linguistic Human Rights and the Rights of the Kurds* p. 74; McDowall p. 3
Kurdish groups exercised relative independence for most of their history under the organization of emirates (principalities) that lied between the Ottoman and Persian empires. These political structures remained independent until the 16\textsuperscript{th} century when Sunni Kurdish emirates were persuaded to ally against the Shia Iranians making most of Kurdistan subject to the Ottoman Empire. Shia Kurds also became subjects of the Safavid and Qajar dynasties. Kurds functioned as a buffer between the two powers, often warring with each other as proxies.\textsuperscript{4} There, until the mid 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the Kurds retained relative autonomy under the decentralized Ottoman and Persian systems. Beginning in 1839, administration reforms under Sultan Abdulmejid I aimed to centralize the Ottoman bureaucratic system. The era of reform destroyed the autonomy of the Kurdish emirates and eliminated them as meaningful entities.\textsuperscript{5} In the absence of the emirates, tribal fragmentation led to violent confrontations between Kurds making governance by Ottoman officials difficult. “The failure of central power in reconstituting ‘order’ in

\textsuperscript{4} Romano \textit{Divided Nations and European Migration}, 2013, p. 193
\textsuperscript{5} Ahmadzadeh and Standfield, \textit{The Political, Cultural, and Military Re-Awakening of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iran}, 2010, p. 12
Kurdistan resulted in the appearance of new actors called: the sheikhs. These religious leaders were the only Kurdish individuals that had the legitimacy to intermediate between warring tribes in the increasingly anarchic Kurdistan region.

The sheikhs became the central leaders of what would be a series of revolts against the Ottoman and Persian Empires, and later the Turkish Republic, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Important rebellions include the revolts of Sheikh Ubeydullah in the 1870s and Sheikh Said in 1925. Other notable revolts include the Simko revolt in Iran and those in Agri (1930) and Dersim (1937). Between the years 1925 and 1980 around 20 Kurdish rebellions were waged against the Turkish Republic alone. The late 19th and 20th century revolts constitute a considerable theme in Kurdish history. Though the reasons, motivations, and justifications of such revolts are disputed between the Kurds and their respective states, they are often major touchstones of collective memory and historical narratives.

Following WWI and the partition of the Ottoman Empire among the Allied governments, the Kurds were briefly ensured autonomy and sovereignty under the Treaty of Sevres (1920). However, the resistance of the remaining Ottoman armies under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk prevented this plan from coming to fruition. The victory of Kemal over the allied forces resulted in a negotiated peace under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which settled the current borders of the Turkish Republic.

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6 Yugen, *Turkish State Discourse and the Exclusion of Kurdish Identity*, 2007, p. 219
7 Guvenç, *Constructive Narratives of Kurdish Nationalism in the Urban Space of Diyarbakır, Turkey*, 2011, p. 27
8 The dimensions of such debates usually center on whether they were motivated by nationalist, religious, or reactionary reasons. I will not add to the debate, as it is largely irrelevant to this study. Rather than attempt to discover the historical reasons for rebellion, my interest lies in how these stories are incorporated into historical narratives today.
The conclusion of WWI brought the splintering of Kurdish groups along the four states mentioned earlier: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. This fragmentation would stunt Kurdish nationalism, preventing the formation of transportation and communication networks between Kurds in different states.

Whereas the process of creating national print languages occurred in Europe throughout the 18th and 19th century, the Kurds did not begin this process until the mid 1900s. The fragmentation of the Kurds into minority groups within four Middle Eastern states “greatly exacerbated Kurdish cultural and linguistic diversities” in an already diverse and largely illiterate population. The mountainous topography and undeveloped transportation networks of the Kurdish region meant that individual tribes further developed their own oral traditions and dialects putting the Kurds at a structural disadvantage vis-à-vis their Turkish, Persian, and Arab nationalist counterparts.

“Kurdish nationalism therefore lagged behind competing nascent…nationalisms. Combined with the economic underdevelopment of Kurdish regions and the emerging, strongly centralizing…state bureaucracies in Istanbul (later Ankara), Esfahan (later Tehran), Baghdad, and Damascus, Kurdish nationalism remained peripheral.”

Following the end of WWI and the creation of the Turkish Republic, Kurmanji speaking Turkish Kurds were educated in state schools using the Latin script. In Iraq, Syria, and Iran, however, state education was conducted in either Arabic or Persian, meaning that a Kurmanji speaking Kurd in Turkey could not read something written by a Kurmanji speaking Kurd in Syria, Iran, or Iraq. As the Kurdish language already had sharp divisions between local dialects, the added cleavage between Latin and Arabic script posed a major obstacle for intra-Kurdish group communication. Though the first

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9 Romano, *Modern Communications Technology in Ethnic Nationalist Hands: The Case of the Kurds*, 2002 p. 131
10 Romano, 2013, p. 194
Kurdish newspaper, *Kurdistan*, was published in Cairo in 1898, its effect was marginal to the predominantly illiterate Kurdish population. “It played a profound role in fostering national awakening among the literati…However, the literati of the time were no more than small circles; they could hardly form a ‘reading public’ as it had emerged in Europe.”\(^\text{11}\)

The experience of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran during the first half of the 20\(^{th}\) century further stunted nationalist aspirations. Centralization policies in Turkey and Iran dissolved tribal structures and aggressively attempted to assimilate the Kurdish populations. The failed revolt of Sheikh Said in Turkey in 1925 prompted forced resettlement and land reform programs that relocated Kurds to Turkish speaking urban areas, resulting in substantial assimilation to Turkish culture and language. The Turkish Republic passed such laws as the Settlement Law of 1934, which evacuated Kurdish speaking villages and urban areas into Turkish Western Anatolia.\(^\text{12}\) Numerous failed uprisings resulted in forced resettlement, massacres, and the suppression of Kurdish language. Little organized resistance in Turkey appeared again until the 1960s.

While Turkish Kurds were experiencing harsh repression, the relatively open political space under the British mandate in Iraq gave Kurds equal status with Arabs. Kurdish language rights and tribal structures were respected, meaning that for the most part national aspirations went unimagined. Though the open space allowed for some Kurdish tribal leaders to advocate nationalist aspirations, “the political space that favored

\(^{11}\) Romano, 2002, p. 132  
the traditional stratum encouraged fragmentation, not unification, of Kurdish communities.\textsuperscript{13}

Kurds in Iran experienced centralization policies similar to Turkey, and in 1946 the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) established the independent Kurdish Mahabad Republic in western Iran. The Republic lasted for only eleven short months when the Shah of Iran overthrew the regime by December 1946, leaving Kurdish nationalists without much of their former leadership.

In the 1950s through the early 1990s various developments across the Kurdish region fomented the development of Kurdish national consciousness. The resettlement programs in Turkey and mass rural exodus brought many Kurds to urban areas where they entered into the skilled artisan and professional work force “swelling the numbers of Kurdish mechanics, printers, electricians, lawyers, doctors, and journalists.”\textsuperscript{14} As the Kurdish working class and bourgeoisie began to grow, previously tribal and rural Kurds gained greater access to education and participation in Turkish political life. Additionally, Kurdish migration to Europe began the creation of a large diaspora population outside the Middle East with estimates ranging up to 800,000.\textsuperscript{15} The more liberal Turkish constitution of 1960 allowed somewhat greater freedoms in publishing and cultural rights, though Kurdish publications were still often banned. Importation of Kurdish literature published in Europe was a central feature of breaking the state monopoly on information, and the development of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey was largely within the discourse of a European diaspora population. Subsequent 1967 and 1980 constitutional changes in Turkey cracked down on expressions of Kurdish identity. The

\textsuperscript{13} Natali, 2005, p. 32
\textsuperscript{14} Romano, 2002, p. 135
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 2002, p. 137
government changed names of cities, parks, and streets from Kurdish to Turkish, while adding strict bans on all publications in Kurdish or even those that mentioned the existence of the Kurds. “This violent suppression was accompanied by the disappearance of the word ‘Kurd’ from the lexicon, the ban of the Kurdish language… and the denial of the right of parents to give Kurdish names to their children.”\textsuperscript{16}

The simultaneous currents of Kurdish urban diaspora communities, increased literacy, and creation of a working class Kurdish bourgeoisie coincided with substantial cultural repression. Rather than hinder Kurdish nationalism, the atmosphere of repression in Turkey would serve to politicize Kurds and provide much of the justification for Kurdish political consciousness. As David Romano writes, “If people come to feel that they suffer repression due to ethnic or religious discrimination, they often come to identify more strongly with their ascribed ethnicities, using such identities as tools of resistance and community mobilization.”\textsuperscript{17} Repressive Turkish policies, particularly in the 1980s, led to widespread exodus to European countries. “Kurdish asylum seekers in Europe led to an increase of publications in Kurdish in the eighties,”\textsuperscript{18} which served to rapidly promote the standardization of the Kurdish language. “Kurmanji texts originally published in Sweden and France, ranging from grammars and dictionaries to novels and journalistic work”\textsuperscript{19} were smuggled into the Turkey, Iraq, and Iran through new actors on the political scene.

The emergence of the PKK, a Kurdish militant political party in Turkey, facilitated the exchange of literature between Kurds in Europe and other Middle Eastern

\textsuperscript{16} Gocek, \textit{Through a Glass Darkly: Consequences of a Politicized Past in Contemporary Turkey}, 2008, p. 93
\textsuperscript{17} Romano, 2013, p. 197
\textsuperscript{18} Phillips, \textit{Cyberkurs and Cyberkinetics: Pilgrimage in the Age of Virtual Mobility}, 2007, p. 10
\textsuperscript{19} Romano, 2002, p. 138
states. A civil war between the Turkish state and the PKK throughout the 80s and 90s further politicized Kurdish identity increasing the importance of European publications. The London based Kurdish journal *Ronahi* published the following anecdote by a Kurdish student in the 1980s:

“Several months ago, with a friend, I went to the British Library… to look for a book written by Ahmadi Khani (1650-1706)… The manuscript… (a metrical Arabic-Kurdish dictionary for children) was written in the beginning of the 1700s and while we were looking through the faded pages I was lost in thought... After almost three hundred years, two students from different parts of Kurdistan were for the first time coming across a book of a leading Kurdish poet and scholar in a library in London. If there is a disgrace for the Kurds, is this not enough?”

Kurdish repression in Iraq and Iran during this period was far less tied to linguistic and cultural rights, but rather political expression. The expulsion of the British from Iraq in 1958 began a decades long period of state-led Arab nationalism that would highly centralize Iraqi bureaucratic structures and the economy, spurring the development of Kurdish political consciousness. The nationalization of Iraqi oil reserves in 1971 and the subsequent quadrupling of oil prices in the 1973 oil crisis made predominantly Kurdish inhabited, oil-rich areas in the north essential for the increasingly powerful Baghdad. Between the 1970s and 1990s, Iraqi state policy—led by the Arab nationalist Ba’thic party—destroyed what remained of the autonomous Kurdish tribal authority. “They destroyed Kurdish villages and forced Kurdish families to resettle in alternative governorates, southern desert areas, or collective towns.” The regime of Saddam Hussein, in the same vain of Turkish policy, went to great lengths to de-ethnicize the Kurdish population. Though government texts were printed in Kurdish, “Hussein’s multibillion dollar rewriting of history project…and the Mosul spring festivals

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21 Natali, 2005, p. 58
22 Ibid, 2005, p. 58
highlighted the Mesopotamian role in Iraqi history and called for ethnic minorities to view themselves as Iraqis first.”23 By 1984, there were over 225 textbook titles available in Kurdish, yet they contained “no mention of the [term] ‘Kurd’… anywhere in Iraqi history.”24 Between 1987 and 1988, Hussein directed the infamous Anfal campaigns as a part of larger “Arabization” policies.25 Over 4,000 Kurdish villages were attacked resulting in the death of 150,000 people and the disappearance of another 180,000. The most egregious of these attacks was in the village of Halabja, where roughly 5,000 people were killed instantly by poison gas in March of 1988.26 This site remains a flashpoint for Kurdish political memory and will be revisited later.

Iraqi assimilation policy worked similarly to Turkish policy in that it heightened a sense of Kurdishness in response to violence. Much like the Kurds situated between the Ottoman and Persian empires, the 1970s and 1980s was a time of intra-Kurdish fighting—often as proxies for the Iranian and Iraqi governments. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) were the predominant political institutions representing the Kurds in Iraq and Iran. The leaders Mullah Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani respectively, had orchestrated numerous failed revolts and attacks on the Iraqi regime throughout the mid 20th century, particularly in the 70s and 80s. The KDP in Iran (KDPI) had long been exiled into Iraq under the Iranian Shah following the failed Mahabad Republic. However, at the outset of the Iranian Revolution, the KDP returned to Iran and declared it would fight against the Iraqi

23 Ibid, 2005, p. 59
24 Kirmanj, Kurdish History Textbooks: Building a Nation-State within a Nation-State, 2014, p. 370
25 Arabization in Iraq was a policy of forced relocation and cultural “arabization” of ethnic minorities in the country. They were implemented by the Ba’thist Party of Iraq from roughly 1960-2000. The al-Anfal campaign was an example of such policies, where in 1988 the Iraqi government chemically attacked Kurdish villages in the north. See footnote 26 for sources.
state in return for autonomy. The Iranian government ignored this request and intensified attacks on the Kurdish population even further. Kurds in Iran and Iraq moved back and forth across state borders as a result of attacks on villages and military confrontations during the Iran-Iraq War.

The cessation of violence between Iraq and Iran in 1988, and the political transition following the American invasion of the Gulf War in the early 1990s brought about substantial opening in Iraqi political space. Furthermore, Turkey’s bid in the late 1980s for EU accession prompted marginal openings in Kurdish policy in 1991, which would have a profound effects on liberalizing Kurdish communication within and across state borders. Though Iran would not see such political openings, the proliferation of modern communication technology would connect them to nationalist Kurds in other states.

Looking back at the 20th century, Turkish Kurds have generally resisted state-centralization efforts through many revolts and in a civil war during the 1980s and 1990s led by the PKK. Kurds in Iraq lagged behind their Turkish counterparts due to the more open political space prior to the late 1960s, but have since become politically mobilized. Since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurds have gained political recognition through the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—a democratic autonomous region within the Federal State of Iraq. In Iran, the Kurds have had little success following the Mahabad Republic. Yet as state borders become more easily crossed through transportation and communication technology, Kurds in Iran are exposed to the developments across state lines. Until recently, Kurdish identity largely developed in distinct ways in relation to state policies and political space. Ample scholarship has

27 Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, p. 20
examined Kurdish national identity formation within individual state boundaries, as well as comparatively. Most studies highlight the ways in which these identities are differentiated by the prevailing cultural and political space of each state (Vali 2011; Natali 2005; Entessar 1992; O’Ballance 1996). As Denise Natali writes:

“Kurds have tried to protect their identity by differentiating themselves from the dominant ethnic group. Kurds are Kurds because they are not Arabs, Persians, or Turks… Although Kurdish communities have maintained some shared sense of nationalism, Kurdayeti has become a part of a larger repertoire of identities based on the nature of the political space in each state.”

The central focus of my inquiry into Kurdish nationalism is the ways in which their collective memory has been expressed and formed—exclusively in an era in which ideas, information, and people can more easily cross state borders. As a result, I am much less concerned in identifying what differentiates Kurdish identity, but rather how this “shared sense of nationalism” is expressed through cultural memory, spaces, and narratives. The integration of globalized technology and Kurdish nationalism has led the charge in facilitating such dialogue. Radio and television would come to define the landscape of national consciousness, promoting the creation of and identification with Kurdish collective memory during the final decades of the 20th century. Subsequently, the Internet has come to play a substantial role in connecting various Kurdish groups across state borders and further integrating diaspora nationalism with local nationalism. As a result, communication technology rather than print language is the defining medium for the intensification of Kurdish national memory and consciousness.

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Chapter 4

Kurdish Memory: Technology, Globalization, and Space

Introduction

The politics of sub-national movements, as has been argued, is uniquely tied to collective memory. The Kurdish struggle—analyzed through the recovery of repressed, forgotten, or disavowed memories—reveals the extent to which democracy, trauma, and nationalism have evolved together under the penetrating forces of globalization and international governance. The ongoing discourse surrounding Kurdish memory signifies that the past remains salient in the minds of those who experienced—and still experience—political violence. Kurdish identity, though many argue spans back millennia, is still, and in my opinion perpetually being (re) imagined. As Abdul Aziz Said wrote, “much of the literature of the Kurds seems to be written by uncritical lovers or unloving critics,”¹ and I must admit that I am neither. Far from an encomium to the Kurdish plight, I hope to highlight how coming to terms with the past, vergangenheitsbewältigung, is at the center of contemporary Kurdish political consciousness across the Middle East.

The manner in which this is done, the parameters of its discourse, and the goals that collective memory communicates are hardly uniform in Kurdish life. However, by examining the varying contexts and expression of Kurdish memory, one can elucidate some overarching themes to their identity while simultaneously revealing persistent difficulties in transitioning from a community of struggle to a community that values democracy, freedom, and peace.

¹ Said, Perspective of Abdul Aziz Said, Director, Center for Global Peace, American University, 2007 p. 30
This section will begin by tracing the formation of Kurdish memory with respect to globalized technologies such as radio, TV, and the Internet. As these forces have brought together local and global currents, the role of international organizations and actors will be subsequently analyzed. The final element of this section will look at Kurdish memory spaces and their role in the development of political consciousness.

Radio Songs, Stories, and TV: New Avenues for Discourse and Subversion

In the early 1990s, communication technology began to take on a central role in Kurdish discourse, the standardization of language, and the dissemination of modern Kurdish culture. Though radio expanded its role considerably following Turkish political opening and the creation of the democratic Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq—1991 and 1992 respectively—the Iranian and Iraqi governments had previously leveraged public broadcasting in Kurdish in order to foment instability in each other’s territory. Echoing the common phrase, “you love all the Kurds except your own,” radio was a formative tool in state foreign policy. KDP broadcasting in Iran around the late 1950s, with the help of the Soviet Union, exemplifies how even limited radio inspired national consciousness well before its widespread adoption. During the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in Iran, songs, anthems, and poetry animated Kurdish radio programming in the ephemeral Republic. The revival of those anthems and songs through radio broadcasting in the late 1950s rekindled national consciousness in many Iranian Kurds. In an interview conducted by Zohreh Sullivan, Iranian Kurd Rebwar Kurdi (pseudo.) explained one of his first ‘nationalist’ memories:

“Let me tell you about another memory, a radio memory of nationalism. This was Radio Cairo. For the first time after the Republic, there was a radio station that
aired the Kurdish national anthem, Kurdish revolutionary songs, and Kurdish literature and poetry—all of which had been illegal. It began in 1957 with a daily half hour program in Kurdish—so important to the life of the Kurds. Everyone went home to listen to this program.”

As the Kurds continued to urbanize, migrate to Europe, and integrate into their respective economies throughout the latter half of the 20th century, radio took on a greater role in constructing counter narratives. By 1991, radio—and soon satellite TV—normalized the use of Kurdish among populations who had previously experienced intense assimilation into the broader Arab, Turkish, and Persian majorities. Radio continued to be an integral source of anti-state discourse, though mostly mediated through Iranian Kurdish political parties, which were under considerable threat of state violence. For example, the KDPI established Voice of Kurdistan in 1980, and by 1995 it had been relocated five times due to security issues.

By the 1990s, Iranians slowly began to use satellite TV as a substitution for Iranian official information; by 2006, Kurdish parties in Iran set up their own television channels that increased national consciousness and mobilized Kurds against the state. “Iranian Kurds followed satellite TV channels, and these contributed to the formation of a new national discourse… Previously, the Kurdish parties reached the public through…limited radio…based in Iraqi Kurdistan…. Now the arrival of digital satellite TV broadcasting has revolutionized the parties’ ability to communicate with their public.”3 These capabilities allowed Kurdish groups to publicize evidence of state violence and more quickly mobilize people to protest the state. One of these instances occurred in 2005 when the Iranian state murdered a Kurdish activist in Mahabad. Images of his lynched and tortured body led to immediate protests and riots throughout the

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2 Sullivan, Exiled Memories, 2001, p. 100
3 Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, pp. 23-24
Middle East. Various TV broadcasting networks including Tishk TV (based in Paris), the Kurd Channel (based in London), Rojhelat TV (based in Sweden), which are closely connected with specific Iranian Kurdish parties, broadcast the images in an effort to challenge Iranian state authority. The impact of these networks is difficult to understate, as they constitute direct challenges to official narratives and provide avenues through which Kurdish consciousness can develop divorced from state interference.

The establishment of the KRG in Iraq in 1992, followed by intra-party violence between the PUK and the KDP meant that radio was predominantly used to mobilize Kurds for partisan purposes. From 1992 to 1997, the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War proved divisive for the Kurdish masses, yet stories and songs on the radio began to address the preceding decades, helping to forge collective memory and alleviate intra-Kurdish animosity. The democratic KRG created relative stability compared to the violent campaigns of the 1980s, and economic aid to the Kurds following the Gulf War, though marginal, facilitated the proliferation of radio and satellite TV technology. This technology would introduce Iraqi Kurds to Kurds from Turkey, Iran, and Syria, while creating public forms of collective catharsis.

Shivan Perwer, a Turkish Kurd and musician who fled Diyarbakir in 1976, mourned the deaths of those chemically attacked in Halabja in 1988. His song, a popular tune across state lines, signifies the trans-state national discourse that increasingly energizes Kurdish collective memory.4

**Disa dîrok xwe nû ve di ke, we ke çarek dinê ji çaran e.** Again history repeats itself, a time like those of the past

**We ke Diyarbekir, we ke Palo û Gênç,** Like (the time in) Diyarbekir (Amed), like Palo and Genj

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4 Translation from https://medyamagazine.com/genocide-lyrics-music-death/
Like Agiri, Dersim, like Mahabad and Barzan.

The passage encapsulates the grief of an era, suspending temporal and spatial boundaries, equating the suffering of those in Halabja with the victims of violence in Diyarbakir, Turkey, and Mahabad, Iran. “Popular songs—as embodied memories—offer an alternative to cognition, an important mechanism amidst trauma.”\(^5\) Kurdish radio, though it triggers traumatic memory, does so for the purpose of building group solidarity and connoting the determination of the Kurds to survive. One of the final sections of the song prompts Kurdish unity, though not for the sake of revenge or violence.\(^6\)

Hawar Kurdno, hûnê bi kin? Bi lezînin!

Hûnê kaxiz û pênûsekê bi bînin, bi nîvsînîn dunya alemê pê bi hesînin!

Serok û rêberên Kurda li hev bînin.

Bila yek bi yek bin, ji halê me Kurda re tiştekî ji dînyayê re bi nîvsînîn!

\(^6\) https://medyamagazine.com/genocide-lyrics-music-death/
\(^7\) Segall, 2013, pp. 18
Under the internationally supported no fly zones in Kurdistan during the mid 1990s, the KDP and PUK waged a civil war under economic isolation from Baghdad. While division between Kurdish groups was exacerbated, TV and radio became a platform for reconciliation once peace arrived. Following the cessation of intra-Kurd violence in 1997 and the resultant peace agreement between the PUK and the KDP, Kurdish media opportunities additionally expanded to TV and the Internet. The relative stability of Kurdish party relations in Iraq under the democratic KRG transformed media from a partisan tool into collective national medium. Stories, poems, and songs disseminated through radio and TV recalled ancient and modern Kurdish memories—one of which has emerged as formative Kurdish narrative. The story of Salahaddin, still a common Kurdish name, evokes the memory of the ancient Kurdish King’s conquest of Jerusalem. As the story goes, Salahadin let King Richard go free after arresting him upon capturing the city. As the European Crusaders were known to kill Jews and Muslims alike, the story invokes a Kurdish tradition of forgiveness and reconciliation through memory.\footnote{Ibid, 2013, pp. 25} By selectively forgetting recent animosity, and remembering the myth of reconciliation, Kurdish memory provides collective conciliatory patterns, which are translated into tolerance and acceptance of former enemies. Though tensions still exists between Kurds in Iraq—mainly regarding the destruction of villages by Kurdish political parties and the desire of families to return—Kurdish collective memory narrates a story of forgiveness and solidarity which has come to stabilize their ongoing democratic project.

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by American forces in 2003 and the numerous international development programs aiming to assist the economy of Iraqi
Kurdistan, satellite dishes, radios, and TV became essential purchases for Kurdish families. Songs were a crucial force in establishing solidarity among the Kurds against Hussein, and the following radio song exemplifies such a media project: “But Saddam Hussein, go and build your castles, but you will not stay there! You have tried to build castles where Alexander the Great failed!”9 Helping forge a collective memory, these songs played on radio and TV for hours during the American invasion and after Saddam’s capture.

While Iraqi Kurds utilized TV to overthrow the Ba’thist regime, Kurdish television broadcasting began nearly a decade earlier with MED-TV, a London and Belgium based program known as the arm of the PKK in Turkey. Political opening in Turkey in the early 90s only allowed for state approved media programming in Kurdish—which was limited to 45 minutes per day, 4 hours per week on radio and 30 minutes per day, two hours a week on television. Furthermore, the same programs translated in Turkish had to follow radio programs broadcasted in the Kurdish language, and TV programs in other languages were legally required to have Turkish subtitles.10 This marginal opening, likely a conciliatory gesture under the pressure of EU accession, hardly satisfied Kurdish thirst for information on national culture and consciousness. Instead, broadcasts from Europe operated under greater freedom of political expression, meaning that diaspora populations took over a central role in media campaigns against the Turkish state. MED-TV served as the primary tool to fight the Turkish monopoly on information and media.

“For the first time in their divided history, the Kurdish people can see their own lives, their own reality, reflected on the television screen across the world. Iranian

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9 Ibid, 2013, pp. 21
10 O’Neil, 2007, pp. 78
Kurds can speak to Turkish Kurds in phone-ins, and Iraqi Kurds can see how fellow Kurds live in Europe. For a few hours every night, the world’s largest stateless nation has a home.\textsuperscript{11}

The medium of TV provided integration of all Kurdish groups, no matter if you were tuning in from Iran, Turkey, Germany, or Iraq. Furthermore, the name ‘MED’-TV ostensibly referred to the Turkish word ‘medya’ (meaning media), but there is no doubt that in the minds of the Kurds watching, MED referenced the ancient Medes civilization from which the Kurds imagined themselves descendents.

MED-TV broadcasts a “plethora of news and political programs to children shows, music, drama, and documentaries.”\textsuperscript{12} Though they predominantly broadcast in Kurmanji, they have programs in Surani, Turkish, Zaza, Persian, Aramaic, and Arabic. In direct violation of Turkish law, they challenge official government interpretation of events and as a result MED-TV’s license has been revoked in Europe numerous times due to pressure from the Turkish government. With even more power than radio or print media, MED-TV has broken down barriers of Kurdish society and played an integral role in the formation of national consciousness. As one Turkish Kurd stated, “The station got Kurds to understand each other. It also started to bridge dialects. People got used to different dialects and religious sects.”\textsuperscript{13} No doubt MED-TV gets some of the credit when anthropologist Diane King observed the following exchange on a flight from Germany to Iraqi Kurdistan: “An older Surani-speaking couple greeted [a] young family who answered in Kurmanji…In the shuttle was Kurdistan, reconnecting.”\textsuperscript{14}

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\textsuperscript{12} Romano, 2002, pp. 141
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 2002, pp. 144
\textsuperscript{14} King, \textit{Kurdistan on the Global Stage}, 2014, pp. 206
\end{flushleft}
During the Turkish Civil War with the PKK in the mid-1990s, a new memory surfaced in Diyarbakir, the most populated Kurdish city in the world. Located in the Southern Kurdish region of Turkey, Diyarbakir is home to both 1.5 million Kurds and some of their most salient memories. The Revolt of Sheikh Said in 1925 resulted in the execution of the Kurdish leaders by hanging in Dagkapi Square, a central location in the middle of the city. Not only was the rebellion summarily crushed, but also the Sheikh and his followers were thrown into a ditch, covered with concrete, and denied an identifiable burial site. The whereabouts of his body remain unknown. Nearly one hundred years later, Kurdish activists attempted to organize a memorial ceremony in order to press the government for the location of the Sheikh’s body. The governor banned the ceremony and ordered police to forcibly disperse anyone who congregated in the square.

The Sheikh’s memory regained significance in the early 1990s as a symbol of protests against the Turkish state. Though many scholars debate the motivations of the revolt—whether religious, tribal, or nationalist—modern Kurdish memory discourse has fashioned the Sheikh within the narrative of struggle against Turkish repression. The refusal of the Turkish Republic to grant him a proper burial, rather than erase his memory, has actually contributed to his mythic story. The missing grave symbolizes the brutality of a state that extends into the afterlife, and a “messianic story of struggle” that serves as a building block of Kurdish collective memory. In the absence of evidence of his body, Kurdish memory has filled the oblivion with miraculous stories passed down from generation to generation and disseminated through media. “Many believe that the rope that the executioner used to hang him broke. Some say three times…. The Sheikh’s

execution was possible only when he ordered the rope to break.”¹⁶ This myth, and I feel confident in calling it that, demonstrates how major historical events become transformed and updated through collective memory to serve the present. The symbol of a man who is sovereign over his own death challenges the sovereignty of the Turkish state, symbolized by the executioner. This memory’s emergence in the midst of a decades-long civil war with the PKK is no coincidence. The PKK’s involvement with diaspora communities in Europe and MED-TV gave them a platform to create national symbols, one of which was the image of Sheikh Said. “The images of Sheikh Said and other past Kurdish leaders were repeatedly used in the opening and closing scenes of the movement’s Brussels based…satellite station.”¹⁷

Violence throughout the late 1980s and 1990s heavily securitized the southeast region of Anatolia (OHAL) under a federal state of emergency in Turkey spanning from 1987-2002. Under founding leader Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK was known for targeting Turks and Kurds alike, calling assimilated Kurds the greatest threat to the national liberation movement. Though the PKK mobilized tens of thousands of supporters in Turkey and in Europe, it failed to garner widespread popular support in Anatolia. What it did do, through MED-TV and other platforms, was politicize Kurdish consciousness after decades of Kurdish assimilation in Turkey. “The human cost of the PKK terror also included a new generation whose image [was] shaped by OHAL terror conditions. Sources of livelihood in the region… were destroyed…and approximately 1 million people were relocated to big cities for security reasons.”¹⁸ As forced relocation of Kurds had done decades earlier, urbanization and the destruction of Kurdish rural villages

¹⁶ Ibid, 2013, pp. 204
¹⁷ Ibid, 2013, pp. 213
¹⁸ Yavuz, Five Stages of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey, 2007, pp. 67-68
further integrated Turkish and Kurdish political discourse. It was in the midst of such circumstances that the memory of Sheikh Said developed—and even Kurdish critics of PKK terror tactics began to discuss Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights.

“Television images have emerged as the most powerful communication medium, able to reach the population instantaneously, even the illiterate, and proving more capable of stirring up emotion than print and oral communications alone.”\(^\text{19}\) By 1999, according to BBC news, MED-TV had nearly 10 million daily viewers.\(^\text{20}\) In typical collective memory fashion, the symbol of Sheikh Said temporally blended two distinct resistance movements, abstracting the essence of 1925 to 1995. As MED-TV programming usually began with an image of the Sheikh, they “typically ended with Öcalan’s photo, completing the historical chain of Kurdish leadership and turning Öcalan into the last Kurdish leader.”\(^\text{21}\) Despite the PKK’s lack of support from the Kurdish masses, MED-TV plugged previously fragmented and depoliticized Kurds into a nationalist discourse.

The capture and arrest of Öcalan in 1999 fomented widespread outcry from both PKK supporters and non-violent Kurds. He was put on a plane in Nairobi, Kenya at roughly 2:00 AM, and by 5:00 AM protests by Kurds around the world began at the behest of television broadcasting in Europe. The dimension of these protests was both international and simultaneous. “It is significant that not only Turkish Kurds demonstrated in solidarity with Öcalan. Major Kurdish protests erupted in Iraq and

\(^{19}\) Romano, 2002, pp. 146
\(^{20}\) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/280616.stm
\(^{21}\) Oszoy, 2013, pp. 213
Iranian Kurdistan as well… This points to the catalyzing effect that television images of Öcalan’s capture had on most Kurds, including non-supporters of the PKK.”

Since the 1980s, Iraqi Kurds had become politicized and increasingly connected with Turkish and Iranian discourses through communication technology. Radio and TV facilitated the destruction of linguistic and mnemonic barriers between Kurdish dialect communities, different religious sects, and classes. The proliferation of digital and Internet technology in the late 1990s and early 2000s would further propel the integration of Kurdish discourse within the Middle East, as well as with the Kurdish experience in Europe. Digital technology, even more so than radio and TV, has globalized the Kurdish issue and connected Kurds with audiences around the world. As radio and television gives Kurds the chance to broadcast their experience to an audience, the Internet provides a space where information and dialogue can go back and forth creating a virtual forum for the exchange of ideas and memories.

The Internet: Public Information and Globalized Memory

In 1952, Rebwar Kurdi—the same interviewee who recalled his memory of Radio Cairo—went to the National Assembly library in Iran after lobbying his high school administration for a note to apply for a membership card. After receiving the card, he perused the shelves until he saw an Encyclopedia Britannica, which was not available at his school.

“I remember my excitement. I still remember when I asked for the volume J to K, which was volume 13. And when I opened it, I still remember the feeling of being overjoyed with seeing an article in English about the Kurds, their history and geography… From that moment on, this library was my place.”

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22 Romano, 2002, pp. 145-147
23 Sullivan, 2001, pp. 102
Rebwar’s struggle to access basic information is somewhat anachronistic in an age characterized by an explosion of information. Access to public knowledge is an essential element of performing democracy, and the Kurds have employed Internet technology’s potential for exactly that purpose. The global connections between Kurds in America, Europe, and Kurdistan are an essential feature of the continuously developing Kurdish political space. Much in the same way as radio and television—though at much faster speeds and in more complex networks—the Internet is a primary tool for subverting state control over information. In this virtual space, Kurdish people can exchange memories, stories, and information not only with other Kurds, but also with an increasingly interested global community. “New communications technology does not only erode the concept of sovereignty but also offers a new space for marginalized groups to overcome their arbitrary divisions by nation-states.”

In the era of globalization, exporting documents, photos, videos, and personal narratives of state violence to the global community through the Internet has come to form the landscape of Kurdish resistance in the last two decades. Collective memory of the Kurds is forming on a number of websites that garner support of fellow nationalists and populations of states that are friendly or sympathetic to the Kurdish struggle. “Before 1995, the number of Kurdish websites numbered less than 20; in January 2001, an AltaVista keyword search of ‘Kurd’ drew 29,463 references—75 of the first 100 of which were referred to either news articles on the Kurds or to Kurdish websites.” Today, if you search ‘Kurd’ on Google, over 19 million sources are available in the blink of an eye. The first page yields links to YouTube videos documenting the history of the Kurds and

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24 Yavuz, A Preamble to the Kurdish Question, pp. 20
25 Romano, 2002, pp. 138
personal video blogs of Kurdish people around the world; websites of institutions devoted to collective information on Kurdish history, politics, and language; and sites where entire lists of high traffic Kurdish websites, radio stations, and TV programs are compiled for digital inquiry.

Sites like ‘historyofkurd.com’ transports the digital tourist through Kurdistan’s history using images, videos, blog posts, online music, and interviews with leading Kurdish intellectuals. One of the most interesting of these websites belongs to the Kurdish Project, a collaborative effort between Kurdish-American entrepreneur Farhad Khosravi and numerous non-profit digital agencies. The website features tabs to news articles, history lessons, Kurdish fun-fact quizzes, and numerous other cultural education tools. The most prominent feature of the website is the section that focuses on personal stories and experiences of Kurdish people around the world. Clicking on the ‘People and Stories’ tab brings you to the following mission:

“We believe that one of the best ways to improve cross cultural understanding is by getting to know real people and hearing their personal stories. We aim to show the cultural similarities and differences between Kurds and other countries through personal stories, photo essays, interviews, videos, and art projects. We hope that you can learn more about what it means to be Kurdish, by reading the following stories and insights. This blog is curated by The Kurdish Project, and contains stories and insights written about Kurds, user generated content, and interviews with Kurds that we’ve conducted. Please share your own Kurdish story today!”

The website is filled with hyperlinks to submission pages where Kurds can upload photos of themselves, their family, and their homes, as well as submit personally written stories.

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26 The Kurdish Institute in Paris is one such organization. Founded in 1983, it is “an independent, non-political, secular organization, embracing Kurdish intellectuals and artists from different horizons as well as Western specialists on Kurdish Studies.” Numerous Kurdish organizations dot the European digital landscape as diaspora communities have leveraged their political freedom to institutionalize the study of the Kurds. https://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/

27 One such site is http://www.koord.com/, which compiles over 2000 other Kurdish websites.

28 https://thekurdishproject.org/stories-from-kurdistan/
stories. It additionally compiles published articles from major media news outlets on the Kurds. The personal stories are individual memories and narratives that generate user comments and facilitate exchange between Kurds interested in connecting to the outside world, diaspora Kurds yearning for information of the homeland, and non-Kurds interested in learning more about a group increasingly referenced in Western media. There is a section called “Women in Kurdistan” devoted to telling the stories of female fighters engaged in struggle against ISIS and the Syrian Regime, the experience of women in Iraqi Kurdistan, and many other vignettes into Kurdish life. Recurrently referencing human rights discourse, these sights overtly aim to simultaneously export the image of Kurdistan’s traumatic history and incipient modernity.

As Martin Van Bruinessen notes, “The Kurdistan on the ground has been supplemented with a Kurdistan of the airwaves and in cyberspace, and much of the Kurdish nationalist struggle is going on in the latter.”29 A major difference between the potentialities of Internet discourse and radio or TV is that cyberspace is a structurally decentralized space. Whereas tuning into a Kurdish TV broadcast or radio station gives you access to one narrative at a time, the Internet provides a space that integrates

29 Van Bruinessen, 1999, pp. 13
numerous different perspectives into one forum. Rather than a space of a single narrative, it is a space of debate and discourse where memories can be discussed and worked over. ‘Halabjavictimssociety.org’ is one of these sites where Kurdish collective memory is made. The site, which provides links to documentaries like Halabja’s Lost Son and personal stories of the victims, is one of many platforms where Kurds and non-Kurds “are affected by the images, becoming witnesses and creating a collective memory of shared experience for all those Internet users who have visited such Halabja sites.”

For both Kurds and non-Kurds living outside of the Middle East, the Internet is a kind of virtual pilgrimage where Kurdish nationalism simultaneously forms and reacts to discourse from all over the world. The concentration on documenting and exchanging personal stories and photos helps to preserve Kurdish memories in the digital world, often in places far outside the reach of state power, and divorced from party affiliation.

“Whereas many offline gatherings are grouped in political party affiliations, or other distinguishing categories,” the Internet provides a domain where people “protest, learn, develop common opinions, take action, disagree—but most importantly, become a part of a connected network.” The implications of such connectivity and pluralistic discourse radically transform the Kurdish national memory space into something wholly different than national movements of the past. Abdul Aziz Said wrote:

“A sustained dialogue… is needed among the Kurds themselves… Cultural differences needed to be appreciated by all. New visions of pluralistic societies beyond the nation-state are needed. Globalization and supernaturalism must provide for the survival of pluralistic societies. The collapse of distance has resulted in the domestication of international politics and the internationalization of domestic politics. What is needed is valuing the other’s identity at the group level as well as at the individual level.”

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30 Phillips, 2007, pp. 23
32 Said, 2007, pp. 31
The Internet has provided such a medium for sustained dialogue. In the Iraq under the KRG, ongoing transition to, and consolidation of, democracy has elevated the region to a cultural hub of Kurdish nationalism. Since the end of the Kurd Civil War between the PUK and KDP, persistent violence in Syria, Iran, and Turkey has prompted many to relocate to Iraqi Kurdistan. In this new political space, “satellite television, significant flows of people and goods, mobile phones and the Internet are all features of daily life.”

In this sustained dialogue, diaspora nationalism and homeland nationalism continue to blend through physical and virtual mobility, a trend that “facilitates imagining an inclusive Kurdish nationhood.” This inclusivity is not, however, predicated on homogeneity. Digital networks are “much more polyphonic, offering space for dissenting opinions to be aired, shared, and contested.” Personal blogs animate much of the Kurdish Internet presence, making flows of information much more individualized and unofficial. The global export of Kurdish narratives through sites like ‘kurdishblogger.com’ integrate Kurdish Turks, Iranian, Iraqis, Syrians, Yezidi, foreign nationals, and non-Kurdish activists for the purpose of internationalizing the Kurdish issue. As the website states:

“‘kurdishblogger.com’ is a comment and analysis space which focuses on the Kurdish region and Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Our team also assists international news organizations who cover the region. Our research has...been used by human rights organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan and the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre.”

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33 King, 2014, pp. 205
34 Phillips, 2007, pp.21
36 https://www.kurdishblogger.com/about
Hundreds of these blogs and forums function as individual media outlets, ensuring that all Kurdish voices are heard, and more importantly, are exported to the global stage. With the Internet comes “new options for gender and kin relations, new institutional forms, and new citizenship possibilities.”\textsuperscript{37} Even though the Kurdish people do not constitute a cohesive, homogenous nation, online activity defies the primacy of state power through “a multi-local platform for interaction and social transformation that is equipped to include difference and dissent.”\textsuperscript{38} Particularly in the KRG, the Kurdistan region is beginning to look more and more like the Western democracies that it connects with through TV, radio, and the Internet.

\textit{International Organizations and Kurdish National Discourse}

Along with these media connections, international organizations and actors have influenced Kurdish national consciousness and memory politics. Denise Natali wrote in 2005, “Transnational space has also helped institutionalize Kurdayeti at an international level. [This] space offers Kurdish nationalists access to a larger political arena to make their nationalist claims without fear of repression and for a relatively continuous amount of time.”\textsuperscript{39} International connections, both through media and institutional collaboration, have altered political space in Kurdistan. Emphasis on human rights and economic development has become central to Kurdish memory dialogue across state boundaries. With the help of international governance institutions, Kurdish political discourse “takes place in a zone of high global attention paid by the United Nations, NGOs… and rights

\textsuperscript{37} King, 2014, pp. 205
\textsuperscript{38} Phillips, 2007, pp. 27
\textsuperscript{39} Natali, 2005, pp. 161
groups such as Amnesty International. These connections remain asymmetrical across state boundaries, with the KRG as the leading global participant. Yet due to the trans-state reach of communication technology, international discourse has come to influence all regions of Kurdistan.

In the wake of resettlement laws and cultural repression in Turkey during the 1930s, tribal chiefs sent a letter to the secretary-general of the League of Nations describing their struggle for ‘human rights’ in the city of Dersim, later renamed by the Turkish Republic to Tunceli. Though the plea for assistance brought no relief, the Kurdish struggle would find allies in international institutions nearly 70 years later as Turkey’s bid for EU accession necessitated the resolution of Kurdish cultural and linguistic human rights violations. This influence, coinciding with increased international humanitarian and development efforts in Iraq following the Gulf War, has given Kurdish nationalists allies outside of state boundaries that shape political opportunity and expression.

British playwright Harold Pinter traveled with Arthur Miller to Turkey in 1985 on behalf of International PEN, an organization that advocates for greater freedom in the realm of journalism and publishing. Appalled at the state of Kurdish rights in Turkey, Pinter began to write the play Mountain Language. Set in an unspecified nation-state where a minority ethnic group has had their language banned, Pinter connected the struggle of the Irish, Basque, Kurds, and other groups whose language rights were violated by oppressive states. Published in 1988, Mountain Language wouldn’t open until

40 King, 2014, pp. 206
41 O’Neil, 2007, pp. 76
42 Ankara formally applied to join the European Union in 1987.
1996—during the zenith of the Turkish-PKK civil war. In the plays first scene, capital police accost an elderly woman who cannot speak the language of the state.\textsuperscript{43} 

OFFICER: Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden… Do you understand? It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak your mountain language. This is a military decree. Your language no longer exists. Any questions?

SERGEANT: What language do you speak? What Language do you speak with your arses?

London-based Kurdish actors would produce the play in 1996 at the Yeni Yasam theater, nearly 3 years after the EU released the Copenhagen Criteria—which defined democratization policies for Turkey to administer before accession—and 5 years after Turkish President Tugut Özal legalized the private use of Kurdish.\textsuperscript{44} Organizations like the Kurdish Human Rights Association in London (founded in 1992) began to collaborate with international human rights monitors, the European Parliament, and other international courts, linking the Kurdish “nationalist project to the…human rights agenda and its European-backed political institutions.”\textsuperscript{45} Turkey’s friction with NGOs and international advocacy groups would define Kurdish national consciousness through the end of the 1990s and 2000s, where marginal openings in publication, broadcasting, and individual rights were coupled with mass arrests of Kurdish activists. In the last scene of

\textsuperscript{43} Pinter, \textit{Mountain Language}, 1988, pp. 8-9
\textsuperscript{44} O’Neil, 2007, pp. 77; and Natali, 2005, pp. 169
\textsuperscript{45} Natali, 2005, pp. 170-171
Pinter’s play, an exchange between a prisoner and capital guards capture the uncertain political space where nominal opening is coupled with persecution:46

GUARD: Oh, I forgot to tell you. They’ve changed the rules. She can speak. She can speak in her own language. Until further notice.

PRISONER: She can speak?


PRISONER: Mother, you can speak. (Pause.) Mother, I’m speaking to you. You see?

We can speak. You can speak to me in our own language. (She is still.)

Can’t you hear me? Do you hear me? (She does not respond.) Mother?

SEARGANT: (To Guard.) Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up.

(Blackout.)

The tactics of Kurdish Human Rights groups and communication networks with Europe would contrast sharply with the violent methods of the PKK in Turkey. The atmosphere of civil war was animated by PKK demands for succession and armed struggle, but the ongoing internationalization of the Kurdish issue would cause a tectonic shift in national consciousness.

PKK leader Abduallah Öcalan’s arrest in 1999 would signify the end of party advocacy for succession, and prioritize the internationalization of the Kurdish issue. Though sentenced to death, Öcalan appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (to which Turkey belongs) and won a request for Ankara to postpone his execution. He then issued an order to the PKK to give up arms and began a months long process of PKK

46 Pinter, 1988, pp. 14
leaders within Turkey and in Europe surrendering to the Turkish police. M. Hakan Yavuz stated, “Öcalan’s arrest robs the PKK of a charismatic yet brutal leader, but allows it to refashion itself in a more civilized, democratic, and peaceful manner.”⁴⁷ PKK de-escalation, adoption of human rights language, and Kurdish discourse across state lines would alter Kurdish narratives in Turkey from succession and armed struggle to autonomy and human rights.

Prior to Öcalan’s arrest, Kurdish national narratives emphasized the belief that, “Kurd[s] did not have any choice other than rebellion in the face of an… increasingly despotic regime… This assumption served to justify claims for independence through armed struggle.”⁴⁸ Following the events of 1999, Öcalan repeatedly emphasized, “maintaining the spirit of 1925,” of Sheikh Said’s rebellion, but for the purpose of democracy and Kurdish rights. “According to him, the twenty first century would be one of democracy and human rights in which there was no place for violence or rebellion.”⁴⁹ Backed by new international allies, Kurdish political narratives adopted human rights language in order to gain legitimacy internally and externally. Öcalan’s shift in narrative, though violently condemned by some PKK militants, aligned Kurdish political leadership with the majority of Kurds who believed succession impossible. In the words of a neighborhood organizer in Diyarbakir, “Leader Öcalan and Sheikh Said are the same for us; they both fought and suffered for us. The rest is unimportant.”⁵⁰

Access to Western media and the solidification of trans-state communication networks united Kurdish people across the region in solidarity following the arrest of

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⁴⁷ Yavuz, 2007, pp. 70  
⁴⁸ Oszoy, 2013, pp. 214  
⁴⁹ Ibid, 2013, pp. 215  
⁵⁰ Ibid, 2013, pp. 216
Öcalan. Television images of Öcalan captured, blindfolded, and handcuffed resonated with the Kurds who were more and more influenced by trans-national discourse. Mass protests around the world called his capture a defeat, but the new international space for Kurdish politics turned “a defeat into an opportunity and a catalyst for further politicization and mobilization of the Kurdish masses.”

Fatma Göcek identified this event as the beginning of a new political movement in Turkey that divorces the Kurdish issue from violence—and international organizations lie at the center of this change. As former Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz declared, “the road to EU accession passes through Diyarbakir.”

By 2002, The Turkish Republic began adopting constitutional reforms aiming to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria, and in 2004 Turkey passed an amendment that asserted the primacy “of international human rights law over Turkish regulation when the two came into conflict.”

Despite Turkey’s consistent jailing of Kurdish activists and PKK party members, refashioning major collective memories as a struggle for democracy rather than a struggle for independence has given the Kurdish national movement many more allies, both in the Middle East and abroad.

These changes in narratives have certainly crossed state borders. In Iran, Kurdish political parties—more and more connected to Kurdish political spaces in Iraq, Turkey, and Europe—also adopted new language. Rather than secession, political parties founded in the 1990s, like the Revolutionaries’ Union of Kurdistan, have outlined platforms centered on self-determination and democracy. This organization, as well as the Kurdish United Front in Tehran, has proposed democracy as the solution to persistent ethnic

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51 Romano, 2002, pp. 147
52 Romano, 2013, pp. 199
53 Ibid, 2013, pp. 198
conflict in Iran. While Iran largely remains unconnected to the international institutions that were active in Turkey and Iraq, the changing discourse no doubt entered Iranian Kurdish political consciousness through communication technology. Despite insulation, even Kurds in Iran have access to these new developments.

In 2017, Öcalan published *War and Peace in Kurdistan: Perspectives on a Political Solution to the Kurdish Question*. Written from prison, his perspective in the book reflects ongoing trends in Kurdish discourse that are explicitly framed within international human rights language and a democratic ethos. Though Öcalan has abdicated his leadership of the PKK, he nonetheless constitutes a major force in Kurdish politics—both abroad and in the Middle East. His critiques of PKK tactics during the civil war, namely the initiation of violence outside of self-defense and the hierarchical structure of institutional power, focus on recasting the Kurdish issue in opposition to demands for a new state. In his new strategic model he outlines various approaches that reflect political developments across Kurdistan.

“We regard this right [of self-determination] as the basis for the establishment of grassroots democracies without seeking new political borders… The countries that presently exist here need democratic reforms going beyond mere lip-service to democracy… Such a model allows a more adequate implementation of basic values like freedom and equality than traditional administrative models… However, women may also be regarded as an oppressed class or nation… Women’s liberation must assume a key strategic role in the democratic struggle for freedom in Kurdistan.”

He additionally outlines reforms for political parties that must be divorced from economic clientelism, the inclusion of minorities within Kurdistan in the political process, the need for an independent media, transition away from all forms of tribal authority, environmental protection, and the illegalization of female ‘honor killings.’

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54 Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010, pp. 25-26
55 Öcalan, 2017, pp. 20-21
these approaches have become adopted into Kurdish political discourse, international governance has largely aided local organization. Kurdish women play a unique role, not only in Turkish women’s rights organization, but in the Kurdish national movement. “Kurdish women also offer differentiated readings of violence against women, often demanding that WROs’ working definition be expanded to include violent experienced by Kurdish women who are subject to multiple violations.”

Not only is the call for democracy a radical shift in Kurdish discourse, but also the incorporation of female narratives in national discourse exemplifies the influence that international organizations have on political mobilization. Kurds, once known for honor killings and female repression under tribal authority, are slowly opening up to new values of women’s rights. Important organizations include the Kurdish Women’s Rights Watch (KWRK), Kurdish Women Against Honor Killing (KWAHK), and Kamer.

Though Turkish state policy has resisted, and in recent years abandoned, democratic opening, Kurdish nationalism in Turkey is indisputably guided by human rights and international discourse. Political space in Turkey, with the assistance of NGOs, has largely developed Kurdish demands for linguistic and cultural rights. Yet opportunities for democratic reform and the rebuilding of war torn regions have remained severely limited. On the other side of the Turkish border, Iraqi Kurdistan has had the most opportunity to rebuild, in addition to (re) narrating Kurdish nationalism. While Kurds in Turkey have become integrated into the human rights agenda, Iraqi Kurds have been able to leverage globalization to rebuild.

Coinciding with political opening in Turkey in 1991, Iraqi Kurds in the wake of the Gulf War “have accessed a large transnational space that has encouraged the

56 Onar and Parker, Towards Cosmopolitan Citizenship? Women’s Rights in Divided Turkey, 2012, pp. 388
economic and political development of Kurdistan.” This space has facilitated major discourse changes that recast Kurdish nationalism from a primarily ethnic movement, to a democratic one. Though the revitalization of Kurdish ethnicity is central to the project of the KRG, space has been opened for other identities to coexist under the democratic project begun in 1992. By 2005, following the American invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein, the KRG became an internationally legitimized entity that represents nearly 6 million Kurdish people, as well as many Turks, Persians, and Arabs.

At the outset of the 1990s, Iraqi Kurdistan remained a largely rural society. American and French supported no-fly zones following the Gulf War allowed for international aid programs to administer humanitarian resources in the region and bolster the regional economy.

“INGOs helped pay teacher salaries, implement school feeding programs rebuild access roads, reconstruct villages and resettle…nearly 2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)… Kurdish officials developed a strategy of cooperating with the INGOs as a means of rehabilitating the region and advancing their nationalist project.”

Lingering outrage over Hussein’s Anfal campaigns and the increasing international clout leveraged by Kurdish professionals in Europe resulted in substantial global attention to the nascent democracy. The period from 1992-1996 can be characterized as a period of dependency, where control of aid resources was in the hands of warring PUK and KDP factions. “Where traditional loyalties to local leaders and their political parties remained salient, the aid programme has the unintended consequence of encouraging conflict.”

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57 Natali, 2005, pp. 163
58 Natali, The Spoils of Peace in Iraqi Kurdistan, 2007, pp. 1111
59 Ibid, 2007, pp. 1113
60 Ibid, 2007, pp. 1115
1996, the international community continued to support the Kurds as victims of the Hussein regime.

Following the peace agreement between Talabani (leader of the PUK) and Barzani (leader of the KDP) in 1997, aid was eschewed for development projects that aimed at funding local entrepreneurs, civil society developments, and manufacturing through the oil-for-food program (OFFP). “Indeed, the program was rampant with accountability problems… However, it provided Iraqi Kurdistan with about four billion dollars worth of humanitarian good and services, further encouraging reconstruction and rehabilitation programs in Kurdistan.”\textsuperscript{61} Many of these projects were aimed at building manufacturing plants—of which 100 were built between 1995 and 2000—and training civil society as well as local entrepreneurs. The creation of a new professional class in Iraqi Kurdistan, much like Kurds in Turkey, devolved political and economic power away from traditional leaders and political parties. Additionally, the participation of UN officials in training programs for KRG representatives aimed at imparting principles of good governance and negotiation. “Kurdish officials that liaised with the UN gained professional experience, administrative and language skills, and learned about the policies and protocols of international organizations.”\textsuperscript{62} Though economic dependency of the KRG on external sources of food and capital remained, the period from 1992-2003 marked a period of substantial opening to international political governance and other parts of Kurdistan in a way that Iraqi Kurds had not experienced before. “The creation of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Natali2005} Natali, 2005, pp. 163
\bibitem{Natali2007} Natali, 2007, pp. 1118
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a protected, autonomous region encouraged the transfer of people, ideas, and resources to
Iraqi Kurdistan, all of which helped advance the notion of Kurdish self-rule.”\textsuperscript{63}

International development in Iraqi Kurdistan since 2003 has further promoted
good governance and liberalization. An oil revenue sharing agreement between the KRG
and the central Iraqi government in Baghdad has given Iraqi Kurds stable income to
promote the building of roads and water treatment facilities, breaking with economic
centralization policies in favor of public and private collaboration on development
strategies. This tactic, pursued in close contact with foreign governments and
international organizations, has paved the way for economic liberalization and
decentralization. In roughly ten years, Iraqi Kurdistan made the transition out of an
agrarian region into a project of modernization. “Access to international markets,
democratizing political institutions and government investment initiatives has helped
increase the standard of living and a create more diversified work force.”\textsuperscript{64}

Employing Kurds from all over the Middle East, businesses within the KRG are becoming a major
factor in opening the labor market to the entire Kurdish community. New entrepreneurial
Kurdish political elite, largely influenced by international policies and economic
discourse, “have compromised their nationalist agenda for the Iraqi federalist project.”\textsuperscript{65}

Kurdish nationalism as a result, is becoming a proxy for demands for modernity
and freedom. The project of ‘building a nation-state within a nation-state’ in Iraq has
situated the KRG as a hub for Kurdish culture and freedom. “Iraqi Kurdistan displays a
kind of globalized modern… that takes place in a zone of high global attention by the
United Nations, NGOs, nonlocal media, world powers such as the United States and

\textsuperscript{63} Natali, 2005, pp. 165
\textsuperscript{64} Natali, 2007, pp. 1121
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 2007, pp. 1123
Europe, major industry, and rights groups such as Amnesty International.”66 Diasporans are returning from Europe, setting up social fields and local entrepreneurial projects that bring significant capital into the hands of KRG citizens. These changes, though still confronting inherited tribal and political loyalties, are pushing the boundaries of Kurdish national identity in concert with the human and cultural rights movement in Turkey.

“Now, girls and women are starting to consider, and a few are starting to practice, mobility on occasions other than marriage.”67 Females in the KRG report being able, for the first time, to go in sit in public parks alone without fear of sexual harassment.68 Additionally, once caustically considered national dress for men, Iraqi Kurds no longer feel the necessity of carrying rifles with them into public. As Diane King noted, “In this respect, the Kurdistan Region is starting to feel much more like the Western countries than are in many ways its model.”69

The KRG has also sought to develop public education programs, increasing literacy throughout the region. Subtle developments in Kurdish language through history textbooks provide a sterling example of how Kurdish ethno-nationalism, with all its victories in the last two decades, is downplaying its own ethnic dimension. KRG textbooks frequently refer to the “Kurdish nation” when referring to the victims of genocide campaigns or repressive state policies—a term that denotes those who are ethnically Kurdish. Yet, “since the establishment of the KRG in 1992, the term ‘Kurdistani nation’ has emerged as a substitute for ‘Kurdish nation.’”70 Kurdistani, though inclusive of ethnic Kurds, denotes anyone holding KRG citizenship. This new

66 King, 2014, pp. 206
67 Ibid, 2014, pp. 208
68 Ibid, 2014, pp. 218
69 Ibid, 2014, pp. 221
70 Kurmanj, 2014, pp. 375
terminology, not itself an outright revolutionary change, signals significant opening of Kurdish national identity. Even outside KRG textbooks, “official correspondence and speeches,” by Iraqi Kurd leaders, “replaced the term ‘Kurdish people’ with ‘Kurdistani people,’ creating a more inclusive notion of citizenship that extends beyond ethnicity.”  

Considering that only a few years prior assimilated Kurds in Turkey were murdered by the PKK, and Kurds in Iraq waged a divisive civil war, de-emphasis on the ethnic dimension of Kurdish nationalism is an impressive step toward liberal democracy.

The blending of diaspora nationalism—which has developed within the political culture of European democracies—with various nationalisms maintained by Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian Kurds relocated to the KRG has substantially de-ethnicized Kurdish nationalism in favor of inclusivity. The focus on human rights has been propelled in Iraqi Kurdistan by democratic stability and economic modernization. As Turkey’s political opening and the KRG development process occurred simultaneously, changes in political discourse across the two states have manifested in the materialization of Kurdish memories. In the following section, the forces of technology, globalization, and international governance are distilled in various public sites where Kurds have expressed their new freedoms through the recovery of memory. These public spaces are animated by a dialectic between international human rights discourse and localized trauma, signaling strong currents in Kurdish nationalism that largely forgo revanchist claims and hold entrenched parties/leaders accountable.

71 Natali, 2007, pp. 1123
*Public Memory Spaces: Distilling Globalization and Local Trauma*

Denise Natali wrote in 2005, “Even if Kurdish nationalism is reconstructed on a transnational scale, it is less certain as to how transnationalism has affected Kurdayeti in different homelands.”\(^{72}\) As the previous section showed, international political discourse and the human rights agenda has freely traveled across the Kurdish region of the Middle East through communication technology, increased human mobility, and international organizations. Though Kurdish identity and national consciousness widely varies according to religion, class, party, and state of origin, transnationalism has left a mark on the Kurdish community as whole in readily identifiable ways. Greater Kurdish political freedom in the late 90s and throughout the 2000s has opened a chasm of memories that employ the language of international human rights for the purpose of a trans-state national push for democratization. Despite a long-standing agenda of independence, new political parties and the broader Kurdish public express preference for democracy, individual freedom, and economic development through public sites inhabited by traumatic memories. Discourse surrounding such sites varies across state borders, but what is common is a fundamental reorientation toward democracy as a solution to the Kurdish issue.

**Diyarbakir: An Urban Memory Project**

On the corner of Dagkapi Square, where in 1925 Sheikh Said was hanged and surreptitiously buried, a ten-meter high mural of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk peers from a white, ten-story Army House. Common myth is that the Turkish Republic installed the mural to eternally surveil the Sheikh, keeping a close eye on the legendary Kurdish hero

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\(^{72}\) Natali, 2005, pp. 162
even in the afterlife. Public spaces of memory dot the political landscape of Diyarbakir, the most populated Kurdish urban city in the world. Though memory spaces of Kurdish suffering exist throughout the Turkish republic, the old city of Diyarbakir offers insight into how Kurdish citizens have empowered themselves through creating public sites where Kurdish history can be inhabited, discussed, and transformed on a local level. The persistent restrictions of Kurdish expression in Turkey inhibit political parties from making lasting democratic reforms at the national stage, but localized efforts to remake urban space into symbolically powerful memory sites mobilizes Kurdish political consciousness in impressive ways.

Beginning in the 1990s, Diyarbakir experienced substantial urbanization, bringing over 1.5 million Kurdish citizens into close contact. The disintegration of rural life through forced relocation and insurgency warfare from the PKK left most Kurds with dead family members, destroyed homes, and an uncertain future. They carried with them, along with their belongings, traumatic stories of friends, neighbors, and relatives lost in the violence. These stories would form the basis of local movements to rename streets, parks, and squares—often with the explicit aim of staging symbolic revolts, rather than actual ones, against the Turkish Republic. The collective memory of Sheikh Said, which was popularized in this time, would transform the city of Diyarbakir—and Dagkapi Square—into an environment of memory.73 Within this city, urban space has been transformed by local Kurdish citizens, mayors, and parties who are building Kurdish nationalism by building public sites of memory. “Rather than through top-down

73 Environment of memory, or, ‘milieux de mémoire’ is a borrowed term from Pierre Nora. This type of public space encompasses general environments like cities, whereas sites of memory are individually constructed—like monuments, graves, etc.
interventions, this has involved everyday practices of residents that recall a traumatic past and imagine a common future.”

In line with EU accession efforts, Kurdish political parties were granted the ability to participate in federal elections. Though the PKK was outlawed as a terrorist organization, other Kurdish political parties throughout the 1990s and 2000s would play a central role in remaking public space for Kurdish national discourse. The first of such parties was the People’s Labor Party (HEP), and it gained 22 seats in federal parliament in 1991. It subsequently changed its name to the Democracy Party (DEP) and was banned in 1993. In its place emerged the People’s Democracy Party (HADEP), until it was banned in 2003. Kurdish political parties would materialize in such a manner throughout the rest of the 2000s. When one party closed, another opened in its place. These parties, particularly in eastern Anatolia, leveraged local mayoral seats to remake urban space as a flashpoint for Kurdish national discourse. In Diyarbakir, party structures “have established a vast network between different civil-society organizations (i.e. human rights organizations and various NGOs)”, and “played a pivotal role in setting the new Kurdish nationalist vocabulary.”

Building parks, erecting statues and murals, and renaming squares and other public spaces are at the center of these local party movements. Even in the face of arrests and other forms of bureaucratic pressure, local Kurdish mayors have continued to rebuild Diyarbakir, constituting the “grounds for social uprising, mobilization, and, more particularly, the makings of national attachments, as a main site of contestation and

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74 Guvenc, 2011, pp. 26
75 Ibid, 2011, pp. 28
meaning-production for Kurdish identity.”  

Dagkapi Square is one of these spaces that has been the center of Kurdish memory politics. As one elderly Kurd said in 2013:

“Whenever you pass through this area, you should button your jackets and show your respect. One day this Dagkapi will be named the ‘Sheikh Said Square.’ When this happens, come and visit me in my grave to tell me that you did it. This is [my] last wish.”

On April 15th, 2011, Kurds gathered into the Dagkapi Square for a public prayer service. There, party leaders discussed the vision of one day putting murals of their historical figures over the murals of Atatürk. As one prayer service attendee remarked, “We are planning to install the sculpture of Sheikh Said right in the middle of the square, and there is another project for Salahaddin, pride of our nation.”

Though these efforts were prevented by Turkish governors, Dagkapi Square continues to evoke emotional response from Kurds who have inhabited a public space that previously represented the power of the Turks over Kurdish leaders. With new memories comes new meaning, and the space has transformed into a place of Kurdishness and prayer, two direct challenges to the Turkish government. Though murals of Atatürk still preside over the square, “living memories and stories of the past resiliently struggle to enchant, sanctify and reclaim the Sheikh’s grave, the Dagkapi Square and Diyarbakir, into politico-symbolically meaningful places—places the Turkish state has tried to violently disenchant, homogenize, and empty of their cultural, historical, and political referents.”

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76 Ibid, 2011, pp. 29  
77 Ozsoy, 2013, pp. 201  
78 Guvenc, 2011, pp. 30  
79 Ozsoy, 2013, pp. 220
In the areas surrounding the square, city streets, parks, and boulevards have been renamed to honor famous Kurdish individuals. These efforts memorialize singers, poets, and particularly, activists fallen victim to state violence during the civil war. One such Kurdish activist is Musa Anter, who was killed by an unidentified gunman in 1992. As an author of Kurdish dictionaries, op-eds in international media, and a playwright, Anter’s commemoration on a prominent boulevard reclaims public space for the construction of national identity. 80 Ahmet Arif Boulevard, named after famed Kurdish poet, and Ayse San Park, named after renowned Kurdish singer, are some of the many examples of such urban transformations. 81

Public parks have provided the most essential site for Kurdish political discourse. Today, there are over 200 public parks in Diyarbakir—80 percent of which were built since the beginning of the 1990s, and 43 between 2004 and 2010 alone. “In the everyday life of Diyarbakir, urban parks are sites of political debate, where issues of identity, the

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80 https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-musa-anter-1553124.html
81 Guvenc, 2011, pp. 29
‘Kurdish question,’ and culture can be negotiated.” As these places are only significant insofar as people inhabit them, the naming and creation of such sites provides a memory reference point where Kurdish citizens can shape narratives and political goals in discursive fashion. Kosuyolo Park lies in the middle of a shantytown on the outskirts of Diyarbakir where many Kurds were forced to relocate from their rural villages during the early 1990s. The park, which was completed in 1999, contains a large stone tablet inscribed with the Declaration of Human Rights—erected in 2002. In 2008, another monument was installed that memorialized the death of 7 Kurdish children killed just outside the park’s vicinity. The monument’s title: The Right to Life. It was installed at the exact site of the bomb blast, representing “an explicit narrative of death,” and embodying “a critical memory that helps to establish a sense of (collective) traumatic history.”

These sites function as venues for political organization and mobility, as well as general social interaction. While the parks have traumatic significance, acknowledgment of violence and death helps to alleviate anxiety. The park named after Ayse San, a dengbej Kurdish singer, was opened in 2008 twelve years after her death. Dengbej in Kurdish culture refers to meetings where people can sing about love of the homeland, trauma, and aspiration. The park signifies the remaking and transformation of a once underground phenomenon into a public expression. This project, commenced by the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), has appeal to Kurds within and outside party politics. “The park prominently embraces all visitors with its ‘Kurdish’ environment… In fact, the ‘Kurdish culture’ injected into the park… is a critical factor” in bringing together

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82 Ibid, 2011, pp. 31
83 Ibid, 2011, pp. 34
84 Ibid, 2011, pp. 34
politicized and non-politicized Kurds in the same space.\textsuperscript{85} Narratives negotiated by locals and party affiliates inhabit these parks drawing on various memories—whether national Kurdish celebrities or local heroes—and become sites where government protests are staged and organized.

![Figure 6: Medya Park is a Kurdish space invoking the memory of MED-TV and Medes.](image)

Constructing Kurdish nationalism through urban space has been a formative feature of political opening in Turkey. These parks have gained cultural significance as places of refuge and organization, despite their close relationship with the memory of death and oppression. However, just as these spaces can be marked with Kurdish political symbolism, street signs and parks can be renamed; and monuments more easily destroyed than created. Democratic regression in Turkey under the policies of Erdogan has included the conquest of such political spaces. \textit{Ahval}, a Kurdish democratic media outlet, reports that the Turkish government has abolished 93 local Kurdish administrations and begun

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 2011, pp. 35
re-Turkifying street names previously given to Kurdish figures. Additionally, Kurdish monuments erected to victims of state violence, as well as other local official buildings, have been torn down and replaced by clock towers and other neutralized structures.

Figure 7: Workers remove Kurdish signage on Diyarbakir city hall.

_The Middle East Eye_ dubs this policy a “memorycide” and reports that over 80 Kurdish mayors have been jailed since the beginning of 2017. Despite this, Kurds still view these spaces, and the city in general, as an environment of memory that has given Kurds the ability to “bring different segments of the ‘social’ together, and give coherence to the Kurdish national movement.” Though Turkey is reverting back to old tendencies, communication and transportation technology is making it more and more difficult to erase the scars of memory. “Given the existence of diaspora communities and easy access to communications technology in a globalized world…such repressive efforts on the part

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86 [https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-kurds/kurdish-language-signs-removed-diyarbakir-streets](https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-kurds/kurdish-language-signs-removed-diyarbakir-streets)
89 Guvenc, 2011, pp. 38
of states is unlikely to bear fruit.” Kurdish memory, despite repression in Turkey, increasingly finds its southern neighbor a helpful ally.

Public Sites of Memory in Iraqi Kurdistan: Catharsis, Conflict, Kitsch

The democratic space in Iraq has been and continues to be an outlet for Kurdish stories that would otherwise remain in oblivion. To begin looking at Kurdish memory in Iraq, one has to begin with Zakia Alkan. Alkan was a female Turkish citizen who self-immolated on the Kurdish New Year celebration of New Roz. Her protest against human rights violations in Turkey cemented her legacy in Kurdish memory as a national hero. However, her monument lies in Al-Sulaymaniya, an Iraqi town near the Iranian border. “This statue of protest would be torn down if resurrected on Turkish soil,” and its placement signifies how the Kurdistan region of Iraq has become a hub of broader Kurdish nationalism. The freedom accompanying the KRGs democratic project has not only given Kurds from Turkey, Syria, and Iran a place to materialize their own memories, but also a space where Kurds can exchange stories and create social connections.

Figure 8: Statue of Alkan (Left) and the Halabja memorial site (Right) featuring museum and statue.

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90 Romano, 2002, pp. 147
91 King, 2014, pp. 211
Integrating stories of Kurds from all over the Middle East, Iraqi Kurdistan has provided a safe haven for Kurds fleeing Turkish, Iranian, and Syrian political violence. In the mid-90s, the stabilization of the KRG allowed for individuals to hold public commemorations for family members killed in the Anfal campaigns and in the civil war in Turkey. This form of catharsis recasts the deaths of individuals as a public loss, making personal trauma a collective memory. These funerals emphasized group dancing and singing, collectivizing the mourning process and making every Kurdish death ‘their own.’ “In stark contrast to the helplessness of the experience of torture or severe oppression, public commemorations can break through the individual’s traumatized alienation,” giving the mourner control and stability in participation with the community.\(^{92}\) While many women and children were victims of state oppression, the commemorations of male Kurdish soldiers gave primacy to their mother’s right to mourn. Echoing the radical act of remembrance by Antigone, “it was often to the role of women to publically lament the dead and to engage the community” through songs and dancing in order to embrace “a common history that solidified female bonds.”\(^{93}\) These public recognitions of traumatic memory would connect Kurdish women from Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran under the banner of communal suffering. Under the monument of Zakia Alkan, women began to assert a formative place in Kurdish national consciousness.

The traumatic events at Halabja have also been transformed from personal trauma to public commemoration. On the suggestion of then Iraqi Federal President Jalal Talabani, and under supervision of former KRG Prime Minister Barham Salim, the Halabja memorial museum opened in 2003. Currently home to 50,000 Kurds who have

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\(^{92}\) Segall, 2013, pp. 8  
\(^{93}\) Ibid, 2013, pp. 15
returned under the stability of the KRG, “the town’s major landmark is a stark white monument to the dead. Inside is a plaster tableau of lifelike victims frozen as they fell, covered in chemical ash and cradling their children for protection."

On the inside, the names of 5,000 victims are inscribed on the marble rotunda. The International Network of Museums for Peace has played an integral role in connecting artists, architects, NGOs, and other necessary resources with Iraq to build not only the Halabja museum, but also the Directorate of Anfal Museum in 2012.

Figure 9: Proposed plans for the Directorate of Anfal Museum

The Halabja Museum is a poignant collaboration between international organizations and local memory politics. While the museum is expressly aimed at enshrining the memory of violence as to prevent its repetition, it has also been a place of public protest against KRG corruption. In 2006, during reports of widespread misuse of international humanitarian funds, locals and student protestors decried the lack of development in the region and blamed the PUK and KDP, who largely controlled the distribution of humanitarian aid funds. Shane Donovan reported the statement of a Halabja protester: “We are demonstrating because the government says we are martyrs,

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94 https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/08/07/cloud-over-halabja-begins-to-dissipate/dfa67fc9-67cd-45ba-a784-a5953b17d7d4/?utm_term=.ff0d865e3a3a
but does nothing for us. We do not even have streets in Halabja, only laneways of mud.” These protests were met with violence, and the *Independent Post* reported 8 wounded by PUK peshmerga forces.

In Turkey, Kurdish political parties that oversaw public memory spaces did so in support of democratization and in a position of political and economic exclusion from the federal government. In the KRG, however, Iraqi Kurds are utilizing such memory spaces against traditional Kurdish parties in order to hold them accountable. Though encouraging for the prospect of a responsive public ready to hold power to its word, it highlights the persistent difficulties for the KRG in overcoming institutional party control over economic resources. Even as international aid to the KRG has stopped, the PUK and KDP still maintain substantial influence in the economy. Today, Iraqi Kurdistan’s largest development company, the Middle Eastern Consortium for Reconstruction and Investment (MECRI), has significant KRG ownership. The protest at Halabja reveals how memory spaces can be utilized in different ways in response to political circumstance. Leveraging that site to critique the corruption of KRG officials is a shrewd use of memory to check state power.

While memorial museums play a significant role in the KRG memory landscape, the Sipan Museum—or Kurdish Textile Museum—represents the integration of kitsch and cultural memory in its modern form. Perhaps the most visited museum in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Sipan museum displays goat-hair tents, carpets, and clothing—a Kurdish tradition over a thousand years old. “Once seen dotted across the landscape of Kurdistan

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and neighboring areas of the Middle East,”97 Kurdish textile tradition is on display for “Western-style dressed” locals who come to experience a bit of their history. Kurdish cultural memory, through a modern entrepreneurial ethos, is displayed in innocuous form.

Figure 10: Inside view of Sipan Museum

Where Turkey’s memory spaces are largely tied to new political parties with goals of democratization and human rights—contextualized within local initiatives and discourse—KRG monument building emanates from the top down, and unlike its counterparts in Turkey, is not absent elements of irredentism. While mild spaces like the Sipan Museum are local initiatives, the KRG authority largely oversees the construction of public memory spaces in Iraqi Kurdistan. As Diane King notes:

“The regional government is very busy building monuments and holding commemorations, very much on its own terms. It seeks to communicate to its populace and to outside observers that the people of Kurdistan have suffered and do not deserve further suffering, and it seeks to promote the heroic deeds of its fighters and nation builders.”98

Sites like the Halabja Museum and the Statue of Zakia Alkan exemplify empowering narratives that aim to alleviate lingering trauma from years of violence, but

97 King, 2014, pp. 217
98 King, 2014, pp. 218
when creating narratives for future aspirations the KRG is less emphatic on human rights or democracy. Underpinning the formation of nascent Kurdish political identity, memory spaces can also divide as strongly as they can unite.

After Federal Iraqi forces fled the region of Kirkuk upon the invasion of ISIS in 2014, peshmerga forces from the Kurdistan region—under the direction of the KDP and PUK—retook control of the territory, which is legally under the administration of the Iraqi Federal government. Within months of occupying the region, the KRG created and implemented a plan to build the largest military statue in the Middle East. The project, which was completed in early 2017, stands 21 meters tall and 14 wide.

![Map of Autonomus Region (Left) and Kirkuk Peshmerga statue (Right).](image)

Kirkuk is majority Kurdish populated area that experienced substantial forced relocation under the Hussein regime. Containing nearly 50% of Iraqi oil reserves, the region is both economically important to the Iraqi Federal government, and an environment of memory for thousands of Kurdish families. Now populated by a diverse citizenry, including Arabs, Turks, Kurds, and Persians, the completion of the statue signifies not only a memorial of Kurdish peshmerga fighters, but also an explicit territorial claim by the KRG. Where irredentism is mostly absent from Kurdish space in Turkey, the use of state power through the KRG in Iraq risks destabilizing democracy in
Iraq in favor of territorial claims. In effect, the KRG is beginning to make memory official.

Shortly after the completion of the statue in Kirkuk, the KRG scheduled a referendum for independence on September 25th, 2017, which would include the area of Kirkuk—still legally under administration of the Iraqi federal government. It resulted in an overwhelming ‘Yes’ from inhabitants, but within weeks Federal Iraqi troops wrested the region from PUK and KDP control and imposed economic sanctions on the region. The effects of sanctions have hit the KRG hard, resulting in public salary cuts and reports of widespread patronage at the hand of the KDP and PUK.

While issues of party patronage, secession, and revanchism are largely absent from Kurdish political discourse in Turkey, the KRG’s significant control over constructing monuments and public political spaces has been less successful at facilitating discussion around democratic solutions to political issues as it has been in addressing painful collective memory. The memory space projects of ephemeral parties like the BDP in Dayarbakir have integrated the healing powers of public commemoration with peaceful and explicitly democratic aspirations. In Iraq, however, Kurdistan has largely been able to come to terms with a traumatic past, but the PUK and KDP have yet to adjust to the new democratic environment.

Under the nose of the peshmerga statue in Kirkuk, Kurdish and non-Kurdish citizens have experienced memory to be healing, yet potentially divisive in a political space increasingly critical of the parties that founded the KRG. Echoing the 2006 protests at the Halabja memorial site, persistent reports of KDP and PUK patronage continues to strain democracy in Iraq. As a result of the sanctions incurred by the ill-fated referendum,
traditional Kurdish parties stand to lose considerable power due to public demonstrations against public salary cuts and persistent party patronage networks. *Yerepouni Daily News* in Beirut reported on April 26th, 2018:

“...In Erbil and Dohuk dozens of journalists, activists, civil servants, and other government employees such as teachers were arrested and assaulted in a violent crackdown by members of security forces affiliated with the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Protesters were met with an overwhelming and violent crackdown that saw tanks in streets, five killed and over two hundred injured in what was a new and unusual response by Sulaimaniya political elites and security forces, which have mostly allowed protests over the past several years, barring several instances of violence and intimidation.***

Just as monuments can be built to move past conflict and encourage collective solidarity, political spaces of memory can often breed conflict. While the KDP declared a boycott of the May 2018 national elections in Kirkuk, due to the “occupying Iraqi force,” new political parties are sprouting up right next to monuments like Zakia Akhan. Whether these parties will respond with further confrontation or non-military solutions remains to be seen. Whether memory can lead to democracy or foment conflict in Iraq is a story still unfolding.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The boundaries of the national identity in official nationalism were and are reliant on the ability of states to control information, communication, and transportation. The forces of globalization and information technology have provided avenues through which this control can be subverted and narratives can be challenged. The resulting discourse is not solely a venue for the counterclaims of victims, but also a caucus where multiple truths can confront one another, and where conflicting perspectives on the past can be assimilated into the identity of a person, a people, or a nation. "Information itself has boundaries of nationality, religious affiliation, or other separating characteristics that segregate communities to create distinct bodies of knowledge, claims of truth, and calls to action."¹ These boundaries, in the age of almost instant communication, are extremely porous; those communities that are, for whatever reason, segregated or oppressed, no longer exist in historical silence, but can more easily export their narratives to a global discussion. "The quiet acceptance of conquest and murder in the name of progress…is only one aspect of a certain approach to history, in which the past is told from the point of view of governments, conquerors, diplomats, leaders."² In a sense, the victor no longer exclusively tells history.

Because collective memory is in the process of separation from the levers of state power, the coming years will be fraught with contentious interpretations of historical events, conflicting narratives of in-groups and out-groups, and enduring mnemonic

¹ Weber and Jentleson, 2010, p. 48
² Zinn, 2017, p. 9
battles over the best way to integrate troublesome pasts into a national or global history. This process of assimilating disputed histories is particularly acute for post-dictatorial regimes, where the legacies of violence, distrust, and fear must either be forgotten, or reconciled for progress to ensue.

For the Kurds, coming to terms with trauma is the central feature of their national consciousness. In the last century, the Kurds have integrated linguistically, politically, and socially through various forces of modernity that facilitate the creation of collective memories. Since 1950, the proliferation of radio, TV, and the Internet has prompted the political mobilization of millions of Kurds who now share a common narrative of struggle against state violence. In this way, “memory is… a revolutionary force that ‘brings to the fore the blood of forgotten ancestors’ together with residual, unresolved issues from the past. This act of revolutionary remembering is the most passionate objection to the suffering and injustice of history.”

The details of this narrative comprise a plaited experience of individuals across four different states and around the world, who nonetheless share a distinctive consciousness and a common mission.

Kurdish memory is a colorful mosaic of songs, stories, and public spaces that continue to gain new meanings and uses in the face of unfamiliar challenges. These memories, however, would unlikely become collective without the aid of globalized technology and international actors. As the Kurds have and continue to experience significant persecution within their respective states, mass political mobilization without such modern forces would be unthinkable, and Kurdish consciousness is but one example of a nation born with the aid of modern technology and mass media. These new modes of communication and virtual mobility create a unique situation in which national identity

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3 Assmann, 2013, p. 321
can develop within communities living across state borders, oceans, and continents. While national memory tends to local conflict, trauma, and discourse, it is not and cannot develop entirely insulated from the rest of the globe.

International institutions and actors have come to serve as intermediaries between states and the people who claim their rights have been violated. The example of the Right to Life monument in Turkey, as well as Medya and Ayse San park, show how Kurdish political mobilization simultaneously distills local memory and international rights discourse. Though the Turkish state has reclaimed such public spaces under the policies of Erdogan, cities like Diyarbakir continue to evoke the memory of Sheikh Said, Musa Anter, and numerous other Kurdish heroes despite democratic regression. Recalling again David Romano’s statement, in an era where information can travel around the globe in the blink of an eye, when new forms of national imagining are accessible through TV, radio, and the Internet, “such repressive efforts on the part of states is unlikely to bear fruit.”

While myths like the story of King Salahaddin communicate narratives of peace and reconciliation, statues like the pershmerga fighter in Kirkuk signify the danger of memory in the hands of entrenched political power. In the small territory of the KRG, Kurds have leveraged public memory spaces for the purpose of catharsis, protest, and even genial cultural promotion. Many of these sites and stories have offered unique ways for Kurds to mobilize toward democracy and modernization. However, as Kurds in Iraq continue to experiment with democracy, corruption and territorial claims emanating from the PUK and KDP have created crises for Kurdish autonomy. Despite the efforts to de-ethnicize Kurdish nationalism in textbooks and public written records, the ill-fated

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4 Romano, 2002, pp. 147
referendum in September of 2017, only months of after the peshmerga statue was erected in Kirkuk, reveals persistent difficulties for Kurds in Iraq. While Kurdish political parties in Turkey operate in estrangement from Ankara, the parties controlling the KRG are beginning to experience the temptations that come along with occupying the state. While Kurdish memory has been predominantly constructed along narratives of peace, democracy, and human rights, Hans Kohn’s warning that the “former oppressed” may renege on their goals of democratization is the foremost concern for Kurds living in Iraq.

The resolution of the Kurdish issue is far from over, and the fate of 25 million stateless people will largely be decided asymmetrically in each respective country containing a sizable Kurdish population. However, this thesis has highlighted the ways in which Kurds in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey have begun to imagine themselves as single community of memory. Though the statue in Kirkuk and the memory of Kurdish revolts highlight the role of armed resistance, most of the examples of memory provided in this work have been of victims, artists, and non-military heroes. Inspirational figures like Zakia Alkan provide, in my opinion, the best tactical narrative for resolution to the centuries old “Kurdish question.”

The fate of the Kurds is largely in the hands of a global community of nations who desire the enlargement of the democratic community. Though the chances of democratization in Turkey, Iran, and Syria are rather bleak, the emergence of the KRG as a cultural and political hub of Kurdish nationalism puts immense pressure on the 6 million Kurds living in Iraq to sustain and export democratic culture throughout the region. Kurdish people not only embody a mnemonic community of struggle, but also the most readily capable community of consolidating a democracy in the Middle East. While
the KRG is plagued by party clientelism and irredentist impulses, perhaps they can learn from their fellow Kurds in Turkey that democracy, human rights, and open discourse must be at the forefront of national memory.
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