Game Changers: Kurdish Women in Peace and War

Ofra Bengio

This article argues that Kurdish society historically enabled the rise of charismatic women. More recently, upheavals brought by the so-called Arab Spring have acted as a catalyst for Kurdish women to improve their social standing. Along with gains made by Kurds in creating new autonomous spaces, the advancement of Kurdish women constitutes a “double revolution” that shows the feminist and nationalist agendas can be complementary, and not in conflict as they have for the greater part of modern history.

Kurdish women have only recently become a subject of scholarly inquiry in the West: books devoted to the topic have only been published since 2001. The reasons for the late “discovery” of this field of study are manifold, but the most important one is that the study of Kurds and Kurdistan in general was quite neglected for the greater part of the 20th century. However, at the turn of the 21st century, there was a sudden explosion of scholarly publications on the Kurds, which came to include Kurdish gender studies as well.

This is not to say that Kurdish women were altogether absent from the writings of missionaries, travelers, or historians. Indeed, among researchers there is a debate regarding the image of women in historical works as well as the role of Kurdish women in society. Some researchers have challenged the notion often present in these writings that Kurdish women have enjoyed far greater freedoms than their Persian, Turkish, and Arab counterparts, viewing it as part of Western observers’ inclination to romanticize Kurdish women. In addition, these researchers accuse Kurdish nationalists of promoting such an image in order to emphasize the uniqueness of the Kurds and thus advance their nationalist agenda. Shahrzad Mojab argued that with “this glorification of difference,” between Kurds and their neighbors, “solidarity among women of different backgrounds disappears and [Kurdish] patriarchal oppression is vindicated.”

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Professor Ofra Bengio is Senior Research Fellow and head of the Kurdish studies program at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and Senior Lecturer (emerita) in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University. Bengio is the author of several books, three of which are on Kurds and Kurdistan. Her latest is The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State (Lynne Rienner, 2012). More recently, she is the editor of Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland (University of Texas Press, 2014). Her book The Kurdish Phoenix is forthcoming. She would like to thank Prof. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman for his illuminating remarks on an early version of this article.


speaking, according to this reading, “nationalism has worked as a major obstacle to the development of feminist movements in the region.” Conversely, Kurdish nationalists were also accused of using the sufferings of Kurdish women to advance their cause. Thus, for example in her book on women survivors of Iraq’s Anfal Campaign against the Kurds (1987–88), Choman Hardi claimed that “Kurdish nationalists feed on the emotional wounds of Kurdish women being raped and abducted by Arab men.”

Contrary to these views, this article advances the following arguments: first, the admittedly idealized image of Kurdish women was not primarily the product of Western travelers’ and writers’ imaginations, but was actually an accurate depiction of the status of certain women of a certain class in certain periods in Kurdish history. Notwithstanding the fact that Kurdish society was male-dominated and patriarchal, it did make room for the rise of certain strong and charismatic women. Second, the story of Kurdish women is not monolithic, but rather part of the broader variegated Kurdish experience in each of the four main countries where Kurds reside: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. There are also huge differences regarding the role and status of Kurdish women between those living in the cities and in the countryside, and between the more modern and more traditional sectors of societies. Third, while during the greater part of modern history there seemed to be a clash of interests between the feminist and nationalist agendas in Kurdish society, the double revolution that Kurdish women have been recently undergoing in certain regions has shown that the two agendas need not necessarily clash, but can actually complement one another. Finally, while the so-called Arab Spring of the last few years has aggravated, rather than improved the situation of Arab women in most of these countries, the concurrent “Kurdish Spring” catalyzed an upgrading of Kurdish women’s status in their societies. As a result, a large number of Kurdish women who do not necessarily belong to the elite class have managed to break through the previously existing glass ceiling and assume leadership roles.

CHARISMATIC WOMEN IN KURDISH HISTORY

Kurdish history is replete with cases of charismatic women assuming leadership roles in the religious, political and even military spheres. Interestingly, these included individual women from across the spectrum of Kurdish religious communities: Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Yarsani, and Yezidi.

One of the first known cases of a woman leader is a Jew, Asenath Barzani (known as Asenat Barzanî in Kurdish and Osnat Barzani in Modern Hebrew), who lived in the 17th century (1590–1670). Asenath was the daughter of prominent Mosul rabbi Samuel (or Shmuel) Barzani who was open-minded to such an extent that he taught his daughter all the branches of Judaism including the secret mysticism of Kabbalah. He also insisted that her marriage contract stipulate that she would not be bothered by housework, but dedicate herself to studying and teaching the Torah. Asenath was renowned

6. For several essays referring to these roles, see Mojab, ed., Women of a Non-State Nation.
in all Kurdistan for her knowledge of the Torah and Jewish law, many believing she had supernatural powers. After her husband’s death she became the first female head of a yeshiva, a religious school where only men studied, and was considered the first and only female rabbi in the entirety of premodern Jewish history.

At about the same time, another Kurdish woman rose to politico-military leadership. This was Khanzad (or Xanzad in modern-day Kurdish), who during the time of the Ottoman sultan Murad IV (1623–40) ruled over two Kurdish districts, Harir and Soran, in the present-day Erbil Governorate. Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi described Khanzad’s military exploits, saying that she performed courageous feats of swordsmanship and that “at the head of 40–50,000 strong army, she several times carried out raids into Iran.” Interestingly enough, hers was not a unique case since, according to Evliya, the prevailing customary law (qanunname) in the autonomous Ottoman province (eyalet) of Shahrizor had a provision allowing women to succeed rulers. That hers was not a unique case was illustrated by another female warrior centuries later, Fatma the Black (Kara Fatma in Turkish and Fata Reş in Kurdish), a tribal chieftain from Mar’ash in Eastern Anatolia (now Kahramanmaraş in Turkey), who led a contingent of horsemen during the Crimean War to prove her loyalty to the Ottomans.

In the realm of literature one should mention Mastureh Ardalan (written Mestûre Erdelan in Kurdish, lived 1805–48), who was born to an aristocratic family in the principality of Ardalan in Iran but was forced to move to Sulaymaniyya when the Iranian Qajars conquered the principality. As in Asenath Barzani’s case, Mastureh’s father played an important role in his daughter’s education. Mastureh was a poet, philosopher, and historian who wrote a book on the history of the Ardalan dynasty.

Another famous Kurdish woman leader is ‘Adela Khanum (or Adile Xanim in Kurdish, 1847–1924), who became head of the powerful Jaf tribe even as her husband ‘Osman was still alive. She ruled in the Halabja region and became famous for her governing capabilities. Among her achievements were the building of a bazaar and gardens in the Persian style and the institution of a court of justice over which she presided. Major E.B. Soane — a British writer who traveled in the Kurdish borderlands in the early 1900s and authored the first English grammars of Kurdish — who met her when ‘Adela ruled Halabja, described her as “a woman unique in Islam, in the power she possesses, and the efficacy with which she uses the weapons in her
During the First World War she helped save the life of a number of British soldiers stationed in Halabja, which earned her the title *Khan Bahadur* or “the princess of the brave.”

The Yezidis also had a famous woman ruler, Mayan Khatun (or Meyan Xatûn in Kurdish), who effectively led the community from 1913 to 1957. The historian Sadiq Damluji described her thusly:

> She is wise, intelligent and is feared and respected by the people. Her power over them is such that none dare oppose her . . . at this time she is the effective ruler who gives and takes away, rewards and withholds, allows and forbids as she deems best.

Her strong personality contrasted sharply with her weak and spoiled son Sa’id Beg, who officially became the emir after the murder of his father, ‘Ali Beg, in 1913. Indeed, Sa’id was politically eclipsed by his mother, the community’s *mira* (i.e., princess) and ruler.

Modern-day Kurdish nationalists take pride in these female historical figures. Adopting Khanzad as a national symbol, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq erected a statue in her honor in the city of Soran, near her former capital, Rawanduz. Mastureh Ardalan has also become a national Kurdish symbol, and the KRG held a festival commemorating what would have been her 200th birthday in 2005. It also erected a statue in her honor in Erbil. In contrast to authorities ruling most Arab and Muslim societies, visits to Iraqi Kurdistan show the KRG has had no qualms regarding the erecting of women’s statues in public places.

This short list of women leaders in Kurdish history was not meant to be inclusive but rather to demonstrate a phenomenon that was unique to the Kurdish experience, while being absent from neighboring Arab, Turkish, and Iranian societies. Moreover, Kurdish women as a whole traditionally enjoyed greater freedom than their neighbors in the sense that they do not have to cover their hair, can wear colorful dresses and dance hand in hand with men. Still, it must be stressed that until quite recently, women leaders in Kurdish society belonged as a rule to the aristocracy and were either the daughters or the wives of a male leader. Such women rose to a leadership role mainly when a male was absent, as in the case of Asenath Barzani, when there was no male child in the family or when the

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16. Van Bruinessen, “From Adela Khanum to Leyla Zana,” p. 95. Van Bruinessen emphasizes that “Most of the authors who wrote about these remarkable women leaders during their lifetime appear, in fact, to have considered them a typically Kurdish phenomenon.”
male was weak or died, as in the cases of ‘Adela Khanum and Mayan Khatun. Needless to say, these women were exceptionally intelligent and had developed leadership capabilities. However, this phenomenon should by no means be mistaken to be a sign of gender equality in the entire society, as the majority of women suffered from all of the typical forms of discrimination inflicted by a traditional and conservative male-dominated society. What is interesting in all these cases is that although Kurdish society was, generally speaking, male-dominated, men did nevertheless accept being led by strong and intelligent women.18

**THE VANGUARD ROLE OF WOMEN IN TURKISH KURDISTAN**

Since the turn of the 21st century, Kurdish societies in the four parts of Kurdistan have been experiencing a quiet revolution to different degrees, and have changed from being silenced and marginalized communities to highly politicized ones. This had its impact on the role of Kurdish women especially among the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, who were undergoing revolutions of their own. In these three regions, the participation of women in social, political, and even military affairs became institutionalized to a certain degree. Women from the lower strata were increasingly taking part in these affairs and the phenomenon ceased to be an exceptional case of one strong individual woman or another. Yet, without the deeply rooted historical tradition of such strong individuals and the mark they left on their society and, conversely, the society’s openness to them, one cannot understand how such a revolution could take place in the geopolitical context of the Middle East.

Kurdish women in Turkey were pioneers in the transformation of Kurdish women’s role in the social, political, and military spheres of the society.19 Cengiz Güneş maintains that “from the 1980s onwards . . . more and more Kurdish women started to engage in politics,” taking an active role both in the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, or PKK), which was established in 1978, and in the legal parties established a few years later.20

One of the PKK’s most important ideological tenets is gender equality. However, the spirit behind this gender revolution is a man, Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK’s leader and chief ideologue. According to Aliza Marcus, Öcalan’s own personal experience was at the root of his groundbreaking views: he witnessed his beloved sister being “sold” to a man whom she did not love, an action that amounted to a kind of death. Hence, Marcus opined, his theory of the need to liberate women from their traditional repressed role in male-dominated society.21 At the same time, Öcalan was influenced by Marxism-Leninism, reinforcing his desire to achieve gender equality in what was a predominantly tribal, feudal, and conservative Kurdish society.

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18. In this regard it is interesting to note that the most “feminist” male writer in Ottoman times, Qasim Amin was of Kurdish origin. Göran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900–2000* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 69.


Öcalan developed a whole theory that blended an idealistic view of women and Communist ideology concerning the role of women in society and the urgent need for a revolution to redress their situation. In one of his writings he stated: “The question of women’s freedom has intrigued me throughout my life . . . The 5000-year-old history of civilization is essentially the history of the enslavement of woman. Consequently, woman’s freedom will only be achieved by waging a struggle against the foundations of this system.”

Writing on the specific case of Kurdish women throughout history, Öcalan maintained that Kurdish women “were quite influential and free” and that “the alertness, strength and courage of the present-day Kurdish women originate from this very old historical tradition.” According to Öcalan, women still had a long way to go to achieve gender equality with men. Hence, he stressed, the 21st century “must be the era of awakening, the era of the liberated, emancipated woman,” where they should assume pivotal leadership roles. True to his ideas, he went as far as to declare the PKK “a women’s party” in 1998.

From the very beginning of the establishment of the PKK, women have played a central role in the movement. In fact, one of its founders was a woman, Sakine Cansız. She was close to Öcalan and became a legendary figure within the PKK. Cansız spent 11 years of her life in prison in Diyarbakir (1980–91), from where she led the Kurdish protest movement. After her release she organized and headed a female PKK squad in Iraqi Kurdistan, where the PKK had its headquarters. In later years she became a PKK representative in Germany and then in France, where she was mysteriously murdered, along with two other Kurdish women activists, in January 2013.

In her book on the PKK, the Kurdish poet and writer Bejan Matur interviewed Kurdish women who explained their motivation for choosing to enroll as fighters. The fighters said that they joined the PKK after witnessing close relatives being imprisoned or killed by the government, because they were not free to speak and sing in their own language, and because they admired Öcalan, whom they regard as a hero for whom they fight as fedayeen (i.e., willing to die in battle). Other more prosaic considerations included the urge to escape from forced marriages or from maltreatment in their families. Initially, men were reluctant to give room to women as fighters but eventually, they had to accept their presence. By the 1990s, women represented 30 percent of the PKK’s fighting force and some of them held command positions.

29. Damon, “Female Fighters.”
Mountains in Iraq and they took part in the actual fighting. Kurdish women also figured prominently in suicide attacks: until the year 2000, 11 out of 15 such attacks were carried out by women.\textsuperscript{31}

The politicization of women did not stop with the PKK, but came to include all other Kurdish organizations in Turkey. According to Nicole Pope, the last 15 years have witnessed the emergence of an active Kurdish women’s movement that was the “offshoot of the human rights movement and the struggle for ethnic Kurdish rights.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, the nationalist struggle did not necessarily contradict the feminist one, and at times even empowered it. The most prominent example is the leading role of women in the legal Kurdish party, which was first established in 1990 but changed names many times, becoming the Peace and Democracy Party (in Turkish, \textit{Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi}, or BDP) in 2008. This party applied a quota of having women represent at least 40 percent at every level. Moreover, women shared with men all the leadership posts. Women were acting as cochairs with men, not only in the BDP but also in other Kurdish organizations. Mary Davis, a British academic and trade unionist, enthused: “what struck me was how many women were in leading positions in the BDP. I thought it was fantastic — so many more than here,” i.e., in Great Britain. Similarly, she commented that “women’s organizations continue to be amongst the most visible of the Kurdish liberation movement.”\textsuperscript{33} In 2012, the BDP partnered with a coalition of leftist movements to form the Peoples’ Democratic Party (\textit{Halkların Demokratik Partisi}, or HDP),\textsuperscript{34} which opened its ranks to non-Kurds as well and applied the same policy of gender equality. Thus, in the general elections of 2015, 50 percent of its candidates were women. Voters elected 32 women from the HDP to the Turkish Grand National Assembly in the June election and 23 in November’s redo election — constituting nearly 40 percent of the party’s elected members in both. By contrast, only 15 percent of those elected from the ruling Justice and Development Party (i.e., \textit{Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi}, AKP) were women.\textsuperscript{35} It seems, therefore, that notwithstanding Turkey’s liberal image, gender equality remains far off.

It is not my intention to list the many Kurdish women who are taking active part in politics in Turkey. Suffice it to say that they are fulfilling the role of cochairs both in the different echelons in the party as well as in around 100 municipalities ruled by the Kurds. Two examples, though, may help to demonstrate this proposition. The first is Gültaş Kışanak, a former BDP cochair who had been imprisoned for two years because of her Kurdish nationalist activities. In the municipal elections of March 2014, she was elected as co-mayor of Diyarbakır, which Kurds call Amed and consider the capital of Northern Kurdistan (i.e., the predominantly Kurdish region in eastern Turkey).


\textsuperscript{32} Pope, “Kurdish Women in Turkey.”


\textsuperscript{34} The BDP continues to function as its own entity on the regional level. However, since 2014 it has been known as the Democratic Regions Party (\textit{Demokratik Bölgesel Partisi}, DBP).

The second is Leyla Zana, who became the symbol of the Kurdish struggle after spending ten years in prison because she dared utter one sentence in Kurdish during her swearing-in ceremony for the Turkish parliament in 1991. Zana may symbolize the continuity and change in the role of women in Kurdish society. On the one hand she reminds us of the strong aristocratic women of older times because of her charismatic personality and because she was somehow introduced to politics through her husband Mehdi, a one-time mayor of Diyarbakir. On the other hand she herself came from a humble background but was able to break through the glass ceiling thanks to her own personality and capabilities. It should be stressed that even though Zana is not a PKK member herself, she did attribute the participation of women and, indirectly, her own involvement in the Kurdish nation-building movement to the incorporation of women into the PKK and to Öcalan’s ideological commitment to gender equality. According to Heidi Basch-Harod, in [Zana’s] view, the PKK-initiated struggle for recognition and rights, with its explicit inclusion of women and vision for Kurdish women to gain women’s rights, not only fortified the national struggle but also propelled Kurdish women into a period of rapid transformation. Prior to this renaissance, she claims, women accepted a fate of servitude, vis-à-vis both their male counterparts and their overall situation in Turkey. However, in the 1980s, when she discovered that Kurdish women were carrying guns, Leyla Zana said, “I was moved to action. This changes everything, I told myself, a woman is also a human being.”

Zana’s fame as a freedom fighter has transcended Kurdistan. To many, she has become an international symbol of the Kurdish struggle, even being referred to as “the uncrowned queen of Kurdistan.” In 1995 she was rewarded the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament “for her courageous defence of human rights and commitment to forging a peaceful, democratic resolution to conflicts between the Turkish Government and its Kurdish population.”

**REVOLUTION WITHIN A REVOLUTION: KURDISH WOMEN IN SYRIAN KURDISTAN**

Of all the Kurdish regions, the most spectacular transformation for women occurred in Syria, where the change was swift, encompassing, and unexpected. Yet, the sudden changes had their historical roots as well. The PKK had a longstanding presence in Syria from the time when Öcalan and the PKK were welcomed by President Hafiz al-Asad in 1980. In addition, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat or PYD), which is the main Kurdish party ruling as of 2015 in Rojava (meaning “the west” in Kurdish, short for Rojavayê Kurdistanê, i.e., “Western Kurdistan”), is an

offshoot of the PKK. Accordingly, the same processes that took place among Kurdish women in Turkey have been taking place among Kurdish women in Rojava, only that in their case this tendency is much more pronounced and accelerated, as it constitutes a revolution within a revolution.

One of the first signs of this revolution came at the beginning of February 2014, when Hêvî İbrahîm, a Kurdish woman of Alevî origin, was appointed to the post of prime minister of the ‘Afrin Canton, one of Rojava’s three autonomous cantons. This was the first case in modern times when a Kurdish woman was appointed to such a high post. Indeed, this move was doubly significant. First, the declaration of ‘Afrin’s autonomy was itself a turning point in the history of Kurds in Syria, who until 2012 were an almost unknown entity to the outside world. Second, unlike in Egypt and Yemen, where women played important roles in the recent upheavals only to be subsequently sidelined by the new regimes, women who took part in the Kurdish revolution in Syria remained at center stage and even continued to reap its fruit politically.

Speaking after her appointment, İbrahîm highlighted the point that being a woman leader is not something exceptional among the Kurds:

> It might be an interesting situation for the Middle East, but it is not for the Kurds. We have many Kurdish women who have led their communities in the past. There are many examples before me. I just follow their path. Especially in Afrin, and throughout the Rojava Region women are leading the revolution.\(^{40}\)

Indeed, in the case of Rojava, many women are assuming leadership roles. For example another woman, Asya Abdullah, is a cochair of the PYD together with Salih Muslim. Abdullah, who has assumed an active role in the Kurdish movement in Rojava for many years, also emphasized that the revolution was led by women.\(^{41}\) Another woman, Remziye Muhammed, who was appointed finance minister in Jazira Canton, stressed that hers was a unique case in the Middle East, emphasizing that “The Rojava Revolution became at the same time a women’s revolution.”\(^{42}\) One Kurdish activist explained that since the revolution, 75 percent of Kurdish women in Rojava have become politically active and joined different organizations, breaking the shackles of traditional society.\(^{43}\)

The gender revolution manifested in the promulgation of new laws as well as in power-sharing practices. Thus, in the Kurdish “liberated area” in Syria, new laws were adopted forbidding polygamy, marriage at a young age, and unilateral divorce. According to these laws, children should be in their mothers’ custody until the age of 15, while there will be equal share of the inheritance for males and females.\(^{44}\) The PYD followed

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in the BDP’s footsteps by adopting the procedure of having a woman sit as cochair alongside every chairman. Indeed, together with youth, women are an important pillar of the “democratic autonomy” which was established there. There are women councils in all the “liberated” Kurdish cities and women have equal representation in the decision-making offices.45 Asked about the role of women in the Kurdish takeover of power in Syria, Asya Abdullah emphasized that “the revolution in West Kurdistan [i.e., Rojava], where self-government is in place since some areas were liberated, is led by women.”46 On another occasion she stated: “Women have become the benchmark. In some sectors women have become so dominant that now men are demanding a quota.”47

Another unique phenomenon of this transformation is that women are also assuming an important role in security and military activities in Rojava. According to philosophy professor Saladdin Ahmed, “Rojava is the only region in the world where women have organized themselves to ideologically and physically fight Islamist forces to protect civilians from fanatic religious rule.” While doing so, he maintained, these resisting women are effectively transforming the entire society of Rojava and setting an inspiring example for the rest of the Islamic world, and wherever women are oppressed.48 In 2012, women from the PYD’s military wing, the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, or YPG), formed an all-women’s militia, the Women’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê, or YPJ). Women constitute an estimated 35 percent of the entire Kurdish forces.49 They have been taking an active part in the fighting against radical Islamists groups like the al-Qa’ida–affiliated Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Indeed, one female Kurdish commander pointed out that jihadists’ repression has led many Kurdish women to take up arms and join the fighting.50

It was in ISIS’s six-month siege of the Syrian-Turkish border town of Kobani where the YPJ’s women fighters gained their greatest fame and worldwide support. Since September 2014 Kurdish women have been playing a leading role in the fight against ISIS there, including YPJ commander Meysa Ebdo who was leading the fighting alongside YPG commander Mehmûd Berxwedan.51 Another female commander asserted: “Women can fight better than men. We remain calm and steadfast. We are usually snipers, or on the fighting fronts.”52 For these female fighters, the social struggle

52. Khalil and Leigh, “Kurdish Female Fighters Take Stand.”
for liberation from the patriarchal norms merged with the national one, as one fighter explained: “Before the revolution most women were staying at home. Since I began fighting for [Kurdistan], these attitudes have been changing.” Men have also had to adapt to the new situation, as one father confessed:

I tried to stop Ameena by all means but I couldn’t. Her decision was final. We are born in a liberated society that respects women and their decision[s]. I never imagined my daughter’s decision would be to be a fighter, but I have become very proud of her. She is braver than I am and stronger than her brothers.

**BETWEEN TRADITION AND REVOLUTION:**
**KURDISH WOMEN IN IRAQI KURDISTAN**

Iraq’s Kurdish women present a different story than that of their counterparts in Turkey and Syria. The causes for these differences might be that Iraqi Kurdish society there is more traditional than in Turkey and that there was no overarching ideology to guide the women’s movement and press for revolutionary changes there.

Nevertheless, in the area controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) there are strong signs of improvement in women’s standing and role in the society. Historically speaking, women from Iraqi Kurdistan began undertaking small scale activity in the women’s movement in the 1920s. Following the establishment of the Turkish republic, Kurdish women activists who played an important role in the Kurdish women’s movement in Istanbul moved to Iraqi Kurdistan and continued their activities there. Thus, the region became a center of Kurdish women’s activities that included, for example, the opening of a school for girls in Sulaymaniyya. Nonetheless, the role of women in this part of Kurdistan followed the overall historical pattern of individual women who rose to play leadership roles while most of the society continued to uphold traditional and patriarchal norms.

Among the most famous women in Iraqi Kurdistan in modern times was Margaret George Shello, an Assyrian from what is now the Dohuk Governorate who was the first female fighter in the *peshmerga* (Kurdish guerrilla forces, from pêş merge, i.e., “facing death”). She joined the *peshmerga* in 1960 when she was 20 years old and assumed leading positions in important battles against the Iraqi army until her murder nine years later. Shello became a symbol of bravery, and people have called to erect a statue to commemorate her actions. Another woman who became a symbol of bravery was Leyla Qasim, a Kurdish student activist, who was executed by the Ba’th regime in 1974 because of her nationalist activities. She was accused of attempting to assassinate strongman Saddam Hussein.

54. “Khalil and Leigh, “Kurdish Female Fighters Take Stand.”
Husayn, and was convicted in a public show trial. Qasim is said to have sung the Kurdish nationalist anthem “Ey Reqîb” as she was marched to her execution. Before her hanging, her final words were: “Kill me! But you must also know that after my death thousands of Kurds will wake up. I feel proud to sacrifice my life for the freedom of Kurdistan.”

On the whole, however, the Kurdish women’s movement in Iraq developed in parallel with the Kurdish national movement. Thus, an important turning point in the role of Kurdish women came in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War and the establishment of the autonomous regional government. As Choman Hardi maintains, it was only after that war “that we can talk about a women’s movement in Iraqi Kurdistan.” Accordingly, since the end of the 1991 Gulf War, Kurdish women have been participating in the state-building project of Kurdistan in Iraq. They have also fulfilled the role of peacemakers, best exemplified by their mobilization to stop the civil war that erupted in 1994 between the two main political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Over time, a plethora of women’s organizations were established in Iraqi Kurdistan, with women from across various social strata taking part in them.

Among the most important achievements of these organizations was the changing of laws that were detrimental to women. A booklet published in 2006 by the Women’s Rights Protection Committee in the Kurdistan National Assembly enumerated the achievements of women in various social and political fields in Iraqi Kurdistan. Covering the 1992–2004 period it shows that in the realm of legislation, the Assembly repudiated a variety of discriminatory laws against women, some of which had been enacted by the previous Ba’thth regime. For example, the new laws forbade husbands from “disciplining” (i.e., physically abusing) their wives and contained stricter provisions on polygamy, as well as honor killings. Similarly, a law enacted in 2008 reversed an earlier law stating that the testimony of two female witnesses in a court of law equaled that of one male. In 2011 a law was issued calling for the establishment of a special court for combating domestic violence. However, the problem was, as Hardi maintained, that these laws were not always honored.

As for the sociopolitical sphere, according to one activist, Kurdish women “participate as voters and candidates and they occupy administrative, governmental and political post[s].” Thus, while only 6 of the 105 members KRG’s first parliament

64. Snawbar Ismail, director of the Communist Party’s Kurdistan Women’s League, quoted in Hardi, “Women’s Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan,” p. 55.
in 1992 were women (5.7%), by 2011 there were 33 out of 111 (29.7%). Women also took part in the political system as ministers (the first one assumed her post in 1996), judges, director generals, prosecutors, and police officers. For example, the director of Erbil’s airport is a woman, Talar Salih, and so are all the department’s members of the “safety management system.” Similarly, Hêro Îbrahîm Ehmed, the wife of former Iraqi president and PUK leader Jalal Talabani, is considered to be the strongest woman in that party. On another level, with the beginning of the fighting between the Peshmerga (now the name of the KRG’s official security force) and ISIS in August 2014, Kurdish women in the KRG also began contributing to the military effort. The 2nd Peshmerga Battalion, formed in 1996 and consisting of 550 women, is said to be taking part in both training and actual fighting. In all probability, this move was influenced by the growing role of Kurdish women in the fighting in Syria but on the whole, Kurdish women’s role in the KRG remained symbolic. All in all, the public standing of women in the KRG’s politics is less pronounced than in the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Syria.

THE DOUBLE OPPRESSION OF KURDISH WOMEN IN IRAN

Historically speaking, it was Kurds in Iran who pioneered the idea of gender equality and women’s participation in the Kurdish nationalist movement. Thus, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (Partiya Demokratîk a Kurdistana Îranê, or PDKI), which was established in Iran in 1945, stated in Article 21 of its constitution that “in all political, economic and social affairs, women should enjoy equal rights with men.” The establishment in January 1946 of the Republic of Kurdistan (better known as the Republic of Mahabad, after its capital city) gave further strength to this new trend, which was certainly influenced by ideas emanating from the Soviet Union, the “patron” of the short-lived republic. The leaders in Mahabad encouraged the participation of women in the political sphere in general, and the national movement in particular. In March 1946, a Kurdish women’s party was formed under the banner of the Union of Democratic Women of Kurdistan. This party, which was in fact a wing of the PDKI, had as its primary aim the mobilization of women “in support of the Republic and the nation.” It also put great emphasis on the education of girls, emphasizing that a liberated Kurdistan needed educated women. However, these activities ceased with the collapse of the Republic at the end of 1946.

65. However, their numbers in the parliament’s different committees were lower than this overall percentage. Hardi, “Women’s Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan,” p. 55. See also Shahrzad Mojab, “Gender, Nation and Diaspora: Kurdish Women in Feminist Transnational Struggles,” in Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture and Identity, ed. Haideh Moghissi (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 123.
70. Mojab, “Women and Nationalism in the Kurdish Republic of 1946,” p. 82.
The sociopolitical experiment of the Mahabad Republic was not to be revived for the next 70 years. Hence, Kurdish women in Iran currently lag behind their counterparts in the other parts of Kurdistan. Indeed, they continue to suffer from double oppression, that of the Islamic Republic on the one hand and chauvinist Kurdish society on the other. In this regard, it should be noted that Iran ranked 130 out of 136 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap index 2013. Similarly, only 9 of the 290 (or 3.1%) members of the Iranian parliament are women.

**COMPARISON WITH ARAB WOMEN IN THE POST–“ARAB SPRING” STATES**

In order to appreciate the depth of the change in Kurdish women’s status in their societies, it is useful to compare their status to Arab women in countries that have experienced the so-called Arab Spring. Individual Arab women did play an important role in these revolutions, the most famous of whom was the Yemeni Tawakkol Karman, who was a corecipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her activities. However, for all their importance, they did not manage to break the glass ceiling for Arab women in their societies as a whole. A study on the role of the democratizing Arab countries showed that there were fewer women in legislatures after the “Arab Spring.”

The most glaring example was Egypt where the number of women in the People’s Assembly dropped from 64 (out of 518, 12.4%) under President Husni Mubarak to mere 10 (out of 508, 2.0%) under Mohamed Morsi. Another study showed that although women played a central role in the “Arab Spring” uprisings, “their hopes [that] the revolts would bring greater freedom and expanded rights for women have been thwarted by entrenched patriarchal structures and the rise of Islamists.” An exception to the rule was Tunisia where women have traditionally enjoyed greater freedom and better political and social status than their counterparts, and managed to preserve their gains in the new constitution. It appears that the difference between Kurdish women and Arab women lies in historically rooted cultural differences, in which indigenous Kurdish culture promoted gender equality. One may indeed argue that prior to the establishment of modern nation-states in the Middle East Kurdish women were much freer in their societies. According to one respondent, Kurdish

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74. Yara Bayoumy, “Analysis: Arab Spring Nations Backtrack on Women’s Rights, Poll Says,” Reuters, November 11, 2013, www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/12/us-arab-women-spring-analysis-idUSBRE9AB00O20131112. The percentage of women in other Arab countries such as Kuwait and Oman is less than two percent. In Qatar and Yemen, women do not have any representation. “Women in National Parliaments, 2014.”
women were freer in Syria, for example, because among the Arabs, the Islamic religion was more dominant. By contrast “for Kurds religion may be is not as important as for them.”

The best illustration for the disparity between Arab and Kurdish women in a democratizing state which is, however, not part of the “Arab Spring” countries, is that between women living in the Arab part of Iraq, and those live in Iraqi Kurdistan. As part of their efforts to construct a new Iraqi society in the aftermath of the 2003 war and ouster of Saddam Husayn’s regime, the United States and its allies placed special emphasis on the status of women, believing it would be impossible to establish democracy in a country that lacked equitable representation for women. Initially women did seem to be well represented in the echelons of power. However, as time went by, the increasing influence of Islamic groups further restricted their participation in the government. For example, in the current Iraqi cabinet, there is only 1 woman out of 23 cabinet ministers: Health Minister ‘Adila Hammud. In daily life, many women were being harassed for not adhering to what was considered a proper Islamic dress code. Acts of violence, including killing, kidnapping, rape, and other sexual harassment increased significantly in post-Saddam Iraq, so much so that some people contend that women were better off under Saddam. Iraqi women’s rights activists were, in turn, accused of trying to impose secularism and foreign values. Thus, women were once again “left outside state supervision, vulnerable to unfavorable interpretations of Islamic and customary laws.” By contrast, as shown above, women play a much more effective role in the Kurdish part of Iraq. Explaining the reason, a KRG blog maintained that “as our friendship and alliance with the United States continues to grow, we are eager to showcase to the world, the vital contribution of Kurdish women, in all aspects of life.”

In the diaspora, too, Kurdish women assume a much more important role than their Arab or other Middle Eastern counterparts, which is also a reflection of the fact that the diaspora has been an important center of Kurdish national activities. The difference might also be due to Kurdish women’s better organizational capabilities, their more secular worldview, and the PKK’s ideology, whose egalitarian stances on women’s issues have strong influence in the diaspora too. According to Shahrzad Mojab and Rachel Gorman, there are Kurdish women in the diaspora, including intellectuals and activists, who frame their struggle in relation to three key areas of oppression: resisting the national oppression of the Kurds, freedom from male violence, and an end to racism in the diaspo-

Kurdish women’s activities encompass a variety of cultural, political, and diplomatic arenas. In the 1990s, for example, four magazines were published in the diaspora that dealt with the struggle for women’s rights. These magazines focused more on women’s struggles against national oppression than against gender oppression. Another initiative, led by Shahrzad Mojab, was the foundation of the International Kurdish Women’s Studies Network, which was the first such association to include women from all parts of Kurdistan. As with the magazines, Mojab’s initiative was short-lived. In 2004, “the Charter for Rights and Freedom of Women in the Kurdish Regions and the Diaspora” was launched. Its importance lay in the fact that it applied to all Kurds and as such had a transnational character. As time passed, more and more Kurdish women became involved in different political activities in the diaspora, side by side with men. Some also took part in diplomatic activities. For example, Bayan Sami ‘Abdul Rahman, who has lived in the United Kingdom since 1976, became the KRG’s representative to that country and now she is the government’s representative to the US. Another woman, Sinam Muhammad, who lived in Saudi Arabia for 20 years is now Rojava’s representative in Europe.

In sum, highly politicized Kurdish women in the diaspora started to claim their rights in their new society and also energized their societies back home and contributed to the national struggle there. Nilüfer Koç, for one, epitomizes all these characteristics. Koç, who was born in Turkey and grew up in Germany, has combined throughout her career the transborder activities in the diaspora and in Kurdistan. From 1990 to 1994, for example, she was active simultaneously in the Student Union in Bremen while pursuing her human rights activities in Turkish Kurdistan. In 1999, she was a founding member of the Kurdistan National Congress (Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê, or KNK), which is an umbrella organization representing all Kurds in the diaspora and headquartered in Brussels. In May 2013 she was elected as a cochair of the KNK, which was another revolutionary move in the integration of women in the upper echelons of the Kurdish organizations in the diaspora. Following her reelection to the post in the 15th KNK general meeting in Brussels in September 2015, Koç declared that the KNK’s goal was to enhance unity among all Kurds and that the plan was to hold the next general meeting in Kurdistan.

CONCLUSION

Writing in 2001, Shahrzad Mojab maintained that the conflict between nationalism and feminism remained unresolved, that this trend was even more pronounced in the nationalist movements of the developing world, and that Kurdish nationalism was not an exception to that rule. However, 15 years on, with the sweeping changes that have been taking place in Kurdish societies, this is no longer axiomatic. True, many Kurdish women continue to suffer from the maltreatment of their patriarchal and traditional societies but there are strong and vibrant Kurdish women’s organizations throughout Kurdistan’s various regions that are active on both fronts: the feminist

82. Mojab and Gorman, “Dispersed Nationalism,” p. 59
and the nationalist. Regarding the struggle on the nationalist front, Kurdish women’s participation in military activities helps promote their feminist agenda and vice versa. Similarly, as with men, women’s activities in the political and military spheres provide a ladder for social mobility. Another important point is that unlike in Arab societies, where after they had fulfilled a significant role in the national movement women were “sent” back to their traditional roles, Kurdish societies’ transformation in the gender equilibrium is deep and authentic enough to not allow for the return to earlier repressive norms. Likewise, the blurring of physical borders between the states which have controlled Kurdistan, due to the weakening of these states, resulted in an increase of trans-border influences between the various Kurdish women’s movements. Kurdish women’s organizations in the diaspora have also proved instrumental for these changes. Lastly, the fact that the Kurds are more secular than their neighbors may guarantee that Kurdish women will not be “rolled” back to the inferior status of older times.

The significance of the latest transformations is far-reaching, not only for Kurdish women but for their societies and polities as a whole. The way is being paved to a more democratic, liberal, and egalitarian environment which could form a strong basis for a democratic Kurdish state, if and when such a state is officially proclaimed. Optimistically, the Kurdish experiment may even come to serve as a role model for neighboring Islamic societies.