“Wherever the memory of the origins of a community remains alive, there exists a very specific
and often extremely powerful sense of ethnic identity.”

Introduction

This book seeks to answer a simple but important question: Why do some ethnic minorities manage to sustain mass-based rebellions over long periods of time, while other, similar groups try but fail to? The question gets to the heart of struggles in the modern world over ethnic self-determination: given a much larger number of ethnic groups than nation-states, why do some of these struggles persist for so long? In the pages that follow, I argue that we ought to focus on the groups themselves, and how their relations to their central governments take shape over long periods of time. The answers to that question promise to unlock the explanation for why it is that in some cases nationalism becomes a sustained, long-range mass phenomenon rather than a periodic elite one.

The question can be reframed as follows: under what conditions does elite nationalism translate into mass-based nationalist mobilization, and under what conditions do such episodes become durable trajectories of rebellion? Its answer speaks to the periodic struggles that harken back to post-World War I aspirations to self-

determination. Moreover, despite a general sense that stasis is the norm in the international system of states, it is not just in the years after World War II that its numbers ballooned but during several periods following and in smaller numbers throughout (see Figure 1.1). Those new states that emerged from self-determination struggles had many counterparts that did not: movements that mobilized but accepted sub-state concessions as well as ones that failed outright. Here I would point to the substantial political accomplishments of Iraq’s Kurdish and Indonesia’s Acehnese minorities. While both remain part of their respective states, they have leveraged many special rights not accorded to other minorities. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that organizations fighting on behalf of Aceh and Kurdish Iraq have achieved more for their people than have their more “successful” counterparts in Eritrea, South Sudan or Timor Leste.

I argue in the pages that follow that it is also a simple question, even though the answer is historically complex and decisions about defining the words that make it up are not easy ones. What is an ethnic group, for example? And how do we decide when one has sustained rebellion for a long period? What makes for “success” in mobilizing against one’s central government? These questions first arose out of a simple observation I made while researching the political histories of Iran and Iraq for my first book (Smith 2007). Iran’s Kurdish Democratic Party made the most ambitious formal
statement possible in 1944 by declaring an independent republic in Mahabad. Following that declaration, Mustafa Barzani, a tribal leader in Kurdish Iraq, traveled to Mahabad to join the Iranian movement. However, the Mahabad republican revolt was crushed within two years and Iran’s Kurds have never again launched anything like it since. On the other hand, Barzani’s successors have established de facto independence in Iraq’s Kurdish regions since 1992 and another Iraqi Kurd, Jalal Talabani, is at the time of this writing Iraq’s president. Iraq’s Kurds, whose Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) very much modeled itself on that Mahabad moment in Iran, by 2005 had virtual sovereignty. Today, the leaders of Iran’s tiny Kurdish movement largely hide out in Kurdish Iraq, unable to mobilize more than a few hundred stalwart recruits or to accomplish more from a safe haven than periodic attacks on Iranian military outposts.

The answer to why it is that the fortunes of Kurdish minorities in Iran and Iraq have diverged so dramatically is the same as the answer to the broader question motivating this book. It is this: long-term nationalist rebellion depends, first, on early elite mobilization and, second, on social change catalyzed by that mobilization. Early rebellions create both macro-historical changes and legacies of resistance. First, they catalyze large-scale social change within ethnic minority groups that, paradoxically, leave them decades later much more capable of mobilizing against states that forcibly imposed those changes in the first place. Second, those legacies make future rebellion a
part of a minority group’s trajectory into the contemporary era by framing future grievances in terms of past resistance and by providing a credible commitment by separatist movements to protecting the group and its members. In addition to providing the credible commitment of sustained struggle, the legacy provides an historical group-level narrative within which to put contemporary experiences. I suggest below that this has import for mobilizing support, and that the mechanisms undergirding it are both demonstrable and well theorized in recent social psychology research. In short, past legacies of separatist rebellion (sometimes going back nearly a century) have effects at both the macro-and micro-levels that strongly increase the viability of contemporary mobilization against central governments.

The 20th century was one during which independent states proliferated, growing the international system from 57 to 192 members. Many of these states emerged during decolonization, of course, but many too gained their independence as a result of fighting winning battles with “new” states. Many more than that have waged or continue to wage movements for self-determination with demands that run the gamut from greater autonomy within their home state to outright secession. Self-determination movements have generally been fought by regional ethnic minorities seeking to carve out a homeland. “Sons of the soil,” “indigenous,” and other such names have been given to groups fighting for essentially the same thing: formal minority rights. This
variation in the nature of demands cuts both across groups and within them. That is to say, demands are rarely constant across time, even within a single organization claiming to speak for an ethnic minority group. Witness for example the myriad demands made of the Iraqi state by the Kurdish Democratic Party over the years, ranging from less restrictive language policy to cultural expression to full statehood.

I argue in this book that hierarchical social structures within ethnic minority groups are crucial to explaining their early rebellions and that, paradoxically, group battles with rulers during state building are crucial to the long-term viability of nationalist mobilization. In short, movements such as the Kurdish ones in Iraq and Turkey, the Acehnese in Indonesia, the Baloch in Pakistan and the Tuareg in Mali succeeded because they were first led by elites with social power over, and subsequently the capacity to mobilize, a mass following. Paradoxically, the modernizing state elites who successfully confronted these founding movements created the potential for a second-generation revival of ethnonationalist rebellion. When the weakening of rural power structures induced urban migration into minority-dominant cities such as Irbil and Sulaymaniya in Iraq and Banda Aceh in Indonesia, a second generation of urban ethnic elites now had access to more proximate information networks as well as a large pool of often underemployed urban migrants. This was the moment at which the micro-foundations of rebellious legacies became so important.
Ethnoregional movements led first by conservative opponents of new states, and later by urban radicals, have been the most successful at sustaining movements over long periods of time and the most likely to win independence. At the same time, the largest wave of separatist movements in the late 20th century took place following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. That same wave has generated by far the most scholarly research on separatism, and in this book I show that that set of movements is in many ways different than prior ones. Moreover, as I discuss below very few of the factors we think shape the duration of violent civil conflicts are useful in understanding this variation. And I suggest that that goes further—we still lack a good broad understanding of why this is.

The in-depth exploration of Aceh (and briefer comparison to other resource-rich provinces in Indonesia), the comparison of four Kurdish minorities across four states, and the broad examination of global trends that comprise the empirical parts of this book provide some support for prevalent explanations. But generally they cast more doubt on them. For instance, one argue that external support for or intervention on behalf of minority groups made the difference in whether movements succeeded or failed.1 This contention runs immediately into empirical trouble across both space and

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1 I do not mean to say about this or other alternative explanations that they explain no cases, simply that they leave much uncovered. External actors figure prominently in some cases, especially those in former Soviet Republics. See Siroky (200X) for close treatment of Russia’s importance in conflicts in Georgia and elsewhere.
time. To take two Kurdish examples, external actors provided little support for Turkish Kurds before the 1990s and yet they were as successful as Iraq’s Kurds. Moreover, the Aceh Independence Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or GAM) received only token support from Libya during the 1980s and virtually none otherwise, yet it persisted for three decades, until the collapse of the New Order autocracy in 1998 provided the exogenous shock that allowed GAM to expand more than it ever had before. Moreover, where external support has been important, it frequently arrives into the picture only after a movement has already accomplished much. In this sense outside actors are more accurately described as engaging in bandwagoning behavior than as catalyzing movement viability.

Mountainous terrain, argue other scholars (Fearon and Laitin 2003), makes separatist and other conflicts more likely by a) weakening the capacity for direct central rule and b) providing rebels a safe geographical haven. Yet as Zürcher (2007) notes, several countries that have suffered separatist wars (notably Azerbaijan and Georgia) are mountainous yet that feature is functionally irrelevant to explaining the wars themselves. We see Iran’s Kurdish minority faring less well in mountainous terrain than across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan. And the heart of Acehnese mobilization has always been along the northeast coastal plains rather than in the mountains. All of these
example suggest that the probabilistic effect of terrain is at best that, a ceteris paribus factor with some importance.

State-centric approaches to separatist mobilization (whether violent or not) also figure centrally in some recent studies. Walter (2006, 2008) finds that separatist wars last longer than other civil wars largely because of the reputation dynamics inherent to multiethnic states. Rulers facing multiple potential separatist minorities have to consider what late comers to the secessionist game might think of concessions to first movers, and as a result are likely to respond with force, catalyzing what are often durable and intractable conflicts. I can see some utility to viewing separatist conflicts through this lens, especially in the sense that relations between states and ethnic minority groups is key to the theory I develop below.

The onset of the Darul Islam rebellion in Indonesia, though, which involved several different provinces, was not strictly speaking a secessionist rebellion but rather one aimed at changing the increasingly secular central government to one based on Islam. However, one region that joined the rebellion—Aceh—came over time to view much the same set of grievances through an ethnic separatist lens rather than a center-focused Islamic one. On the one hand, it arose just one year after Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor and a decade after its annexation of Irian Jaya (now West Papua, the Indonesian eastern half of the island on which Papua New Guinea is located). One
might also argue that Iran’s 1940s experiences with secessionist impulses in the provinces of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan (both of which featured declarations of independence backed by the Soviet Union) powerfully shaped its later responses to both Kurdish and Baluchi mobilization. Simply within the small set of cases I discuss in this chapter, in short, there are good reasons to think that there is much to Walter’s insight about the importance of state reaction to ethnic separatism.

The weakness of state-centric explanations, however, is that they give short shrift to what goes on inside ethnic minorities and the organizations that mobilize on their behalf. They assume that it is state action, not anti-state mobilization, which prolongs these conflicts. And, they tell us little about why it is that some late movers fare better than others if they do rebel, and why it is that some never rebel in the first place. For example, why, after in 2005 the Government of Indonesia (GoI) made substantial concessions to GAM, were there no subsequent demands for similar autonomy or episodes of mobilization in equally resource-rich but disadvantaged provinces like Riau and East Kalimantan (see for instance Aspinall 2007a).

Another state-based factor comes from the voluminous studies of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As I have discussed previously (Smith 2013) the study of separatist conflict since the 1990s has been both regionally and theoretically dominated by a focus on the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. One factor in particular — ethno-
federalism — has taken center stage in much of this research (for example Bunce 1999, Hale 2008, Roeder 2007). As it turns out, ethno-federalism is more than a feature of the post-communist world. It is a significant predictor of separatist activism globally, on one hand. Furthermore, Indonesia’s concessions to the Darul Islam rebels in the late 1950s closely matched what Moscow offered Soviet republics by way of acknowledging its nationalities problem. The GoI invested heavily in local institutions of higher education in Aceh, actively seeking to build an indigenous educated elite not unlike the local bourgeoisie envisioned by Stalin (1913) or described by Gellner (1983). However, while we see analogues to ethno-federalism playing an important role in catalyzing national identity in some places, in others no such policies emerged. In the chapters to come I suggest that ethno-federalism can be as much as a substitute for the historical experiences I argue are central: what happened in some Soviet titular ethnic republics was a top-down variant on what happened elsewhere as a result of sustained resistance bottom-up to the imposition of direct central authority over ethnic minority regions.

Taking History Seriously

At least as early as the Weber passage that opened this essay, scholars of ethnicity have pointed to shared political memories as prime determinants of persistent group identity. I want to set aside for a moment that historical legacy shapes ethnic
identity durably and turn to a consistent finding in research on internal conflicts: past conflicts make current or future ones more likely. I argue below that the two phenomena are inextricably linked, but for now let us simply explore the observation of the past affecting the present.

Recent econometric studies of civil wars largely confirm one thing: a country that has suffered a civil war in the past is more likely to do so again. While I am more concerned here with repeat players, this appears to be true whether or not the same actors are involved. One commonly proposed mechanism for why this happens is that initial conflicts harden identities (Collier and Sambanis 2002, 5; Walter 2004, 372). Given circumstances of violent conflict—in which combatants are often categorized by group membership and in which the conflict itself is discursively cast as one between groups—post-conflict identities are hard to change, especially when settlement options so frequently reify group boundaries in order to make peace between groups. As a result, not just prior violent conflict but subsequent settlement strategies can increase the perceived distance between groups, erode the capacity for trust across groups, and under some circumstances create post-conflict arrangements that increase the likelihood of future conflicts (see Roeder and Rothchild 2005, 37-38).

Walter (2004, 374-75) finds that it is not the traits of prior wars that generate new ones so much as it is lingering problems that helped catalyze war in the first place:
poverty, hardship, and a sense that only a return to violence is likely to address them. In other words, fairly constant conditions across time influence the likelihood of civil wars, not past ones. But a substantial number of recurrent conflicts involve renewed ethnonationalist rebellion. For example, Walter (2004) observes nine cases of recurrent civil wars since 1945 involving the same actors: five involved wars fought over control of the state itself while four were recurrent separatist conflicts in which organizations representing territorial minorities fought for greater autonomy or outright independence.\(^2\) Collier and Sambanis (2002, 5) refer to this unfortunate likelihood as a “conflict trap” with multiple underlying causes.

There are also reasons to think that conflicts involving ethnic minorities and states may have different dynamics than other civil wars (Sambanis 2001). A recent series of articles based on a new dataset shows that ethnonationalist rebellions both have different political determinants from other conflicts and are more likely when such conflicts between groups and the state have occurred before (Cederman, Wimmer and Min 2010; Wimmer, Cederman and Min 2009). One mechanism, as they suggest, is that “rather than constituting historical singularities, political violence often leaves traces that put nationalist politics on a contentious track” (Cederman, Wimmer and Min 2010, 2

\(^2\) In Walter’s dataset, these are (separatists in parentheses): Burma (Karen), Guatemala (indigenous Mayan), the Philippines (Moro Islamic Liberation Front), and Sudan (Southern Sudan). Her original data are available at: [http://irps.ucsd.edu/faculty/faculty-directory/barbara-walter.htm](http://irps.ucsd.edu/faculty/faculty-directory/barbara-walter.htm).
Ethnic minority elites may put glorified spins on past defeats or simply use past conflicts as the foundation of a narrative of “shared fate.” They may also cultivate a sense of group past, coherence, and future through language, symbol and ritual (Anderson 1991; Cornell 2002). Finally, inserting violence into the repertoire of dissent can serve to make its employment less perceptually difficult in later episodes of contention between groups and states (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Laitin 1995). In short, ethnonationalist rebellions may create their own subsequent successors for reasons specific to the group-state conflict or to the effect of early conflicts on later group identity.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, I am convinced that historical legacies of rebellion are at the center of contemporary conflicts over self-determination. The “history” or “conflict trap” variables in these studies are often simply inserted as a control in order to isolate the effects of year-on-year factors, but in this book I demonstrate that they are in fact central to the causal story. It also fits a wide set of observations, rarely explored in depth, namely that shared history is an important bedrock for nationalist elites and potential followers. Many if not most scholars of ethnic rebellion point here and there to strong evidence that a history of past resistance is an important factor in the construction of identity and of the rationale for rebellion.
Finally, a vast number of case studies of individual self-determination conflicts point to the centrality of a notion of shared past in catalyzing identity.

What is missing in our understanding of self-determination conflicts is a systematic effort to take these disparate threads and explore them in a broad comparative setting. That is the major goal of this book: to look both widely and deeply at the role that historical legacies of rebellion play in shaping the viability of contemporary movements. Understanding the historical roots of why, for example, the Aceh Independence Movement persisted through decades of harsh state repression to win substantial concessions from the Government of Indonesia, requires understanding both the material and the symbolic effects of past Acehnese rebellions.

As I see it, historical legacies of rebellion operate at two levels: at the macro-level, by shaping the mobilizing structures and environments available to ethnic minorities, and at the micro-level, by shaping how individuals make decisions about whether or not to join or support separatist movements. In pursuing the answer this way, I draw on multiple levels of analysis. First, building on a macro-social approach pioneered by Charles Tilly, Barrington Moore and others, I argue that early rebellions against state building catalyzed thick and powerful historical trajectories that shape the social structural resources on which ethnic minorities could later draw. At this level, conflicts between groups and states change both, but importantly change the former, creating
new demographic possibilities for mass mobilization. Second, I draw on recent psychological and political research to highlight why it is that those longue durée group rebellion legacies can so strongly influence the decisions of individuals to participate in resistance. Here, when ethnic minority elites can frame current experience—state repression, inequitable treatment, etc.—in terms of both a future goal and a coherent past of resistance to oppression, these frames help to ease the decision to participate. Further, they do so in ways that vary across individual, requiring a more catholic approach to studying motives than has been common to date.

I Macro-historical legacies and Social Change: The Foundations of Rebellion

Social Structure and the Early Capacity to Rebel

Long-term rebellious trajectories are borne of co-ethnic social hierarchies in the countryside. Co-ethnic hierarchies provide a means, early on, before mass political organizations, to overcome collective action problems and mobilize against new central governments. There is good initial reason to think so. Brustein and Levi (1987) found such social structures like this to be central to explaining regional rebellion in early modern Europe. At the level of world regions today, the centrality of vertical co-ethnicity helps to explain the paucity of territorial rebellion in Latin America. One legacy of colonial rule was replacement of indigenous elites with mestizos, a plausible
explanation for why there have been virtually no secessionist wars in Latin America. A powerful reason that sub-Saharan Africa has seen so few separatist conflicts is that very few parts of the region have had such strong social structures tying peasants to land and to elites controlling it. Notably, Ethiopia was one of them, especially Eritrea. So too are the Tuareg minorities of Mali and Niger. On the contrary, the Middle East and North Africa and South and Southeast Asia are widely characterized by such social structures, and in the chapters that follow I hope to convince the reader that this is the reason for such variation in the persistence of self-determination conflicts in the modern world.

The trajectory of rebellion typically begins with efforts by early state rulers to penetrate and exercise social control over their territories—what I call precocious Weberianism. They sought to do what Migdal has theorized in detail: to make state rules the ones that people decide to follow, and to use state survival strategies instead of social ones. Social structures in the groups living in those regions determined much of the likelihood that ethnic minorities could and did resist those efforts. Elite-led rebellions were at the heart of early separatist movements. And they were kept alive as a function of state efforts to crush those hierarchies. Past rebellions led by rural elites against direct rule catalyzed state responses.

Recall that these rebellions were generally led by rural, often feudal or quasi-feudal tribal or religious leaders. These traditional elites, like Sheikh Barzani in Iraq, like
Sheikh Said in Turkey, and like the ulama in Aceh, were not revolutionaries. They could reasonably be described as reactionaries, out to protect their areas of social power. When they resisted, the state reaction was often to respond with as much force as possible, seeking to defeat rural rebellions, and then to transform rural social structures. Paradoxically, when rulers had some success at this, they created the trajectories that led to cross-generational rebellions. The defeat of rural elites led to the weakening (rarely the destruction) of rural social ties. Often hand in hand with it went agrarian commercialization, which in turn led to urban migration. It was at this historical moment that the presence or absence of minority-dominant urban centers became crucially important.

**Minority Cities and the Persistence of Mass Nationalism**

Many scholars find urban population to be a strong determinant of nationalist mobilization (Beissinger 2002; Toft 2003). One reason is that cities provide a close environment with a richer, denser network of social ties capable of facilitating mobilization. And this tracks closely with modernist accounts of the emergence of state-level nationalism (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1991). Here, however, the real question is not whether urbanization but whether *ethnic* urbanization: did ethnic regions have minority-dominated cities? When they did those cities became the loci of second-
generation nationalism, leading to the political importance of urban centers such as Banda Aceh, Sulaymaniya, Diyarbakir, Timbuktu, and others. Once substantial urban migration transformed minority regions, it mattered where those migrants went—was it to majority-dominated cities such as Aleppo and Damascus in Syria or Isfahan and Tehran in Iran? Or was it to urban centers within the minority regions themselves? Where modernist scholars of nationalism suggest that the key is the rise of an educated urban nationalist intelligentsia, I would argue that that is but one necessary but insufficient condition. What determines whether we see ideas or ideas put into action is whether elite nationalism is translated into mass nationalism. And, in order for that transformation to take place, there must be a “mass” to mobilize. This is a self-evident but under-appreciated fact: without a co-ethnic urban population to mobilize, urban intelligentsias remain isolated as they did in Kurdish Iran following the failed Mahabad rebellion.

Where minority migrants could migrate to cities where their co-ethnics were the majority, those cities became the locus of second-generation recruitment efforts. And it helps to make sense of why it is that separatist mobilization often seems to “skip” a generation. That urban growth takes time, as does the emergence of urban networks that be used to mobilize. The 1950s and 1960s were a relatively quiet time for Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, just as the 1960s and early 1970s were such in Aceh. But
that process of urban growth, and with the growth of a urban nationalist elite, helped to provide the leadership for a second generation of mobilization provided that there existed minority-dominant cities in which they could mobilize a following. These second-generation movements did not always replace rural ones. Sometimes they did, as in Aceh; but as often they provided an alternative locus of recruitment, as was the case in Kurdish Iraq. States accustomed to fighting rebels in the countryside suddenly had to deal with them in urban centers as well, so that in one observer’s words cities became a “Trojan horse within towns and townships” in which new ethnic elites could mobilize followers.

II The Micro-Foundations of Rebellious Trajectories

“You have to mention the past, our martyrs.”

Past rebellions help craft a concrete shared history, which is central to creating a coherent identity. The above quote is from Ala Talabani, a member of the Kurdish Regional Government parliament, making a campaign pitch for her party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). She is the daughter of Jalal Talabani, who founded the party in 1976. He did so in direct opposition to the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). Yet here she is speaking precisely of the Barzanis, a family based in the landed elite and whose

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†Quoted in *New York Times*, March 6, 2010.
KDP is the main rival to the PUK. The PUK, a predominantly urban-driven and originally radical movement, stood in contrast to the traditional and rural-based KDP. What matters, though, is the role of those early rebels and rebellions in establishing a concrete narrative into which both current experiences and future goals may be woven. In short, a demonstrable past of resistance provides a set of mobilizing resources that elites can use to recruit both pragmatists and idealists.

One major means by which those pasts can be central to collective action is by activating what Weber (1978) and more recently Ashutosh Varshney (2003) have called value rationality. This careful thought process about the value of both one’s communal identity and the perceived value of participating in its defense is to be distinguished from instrumental rationality, when one would simply think about the cost-to-benefit ratio of joining a rebellion. Value rationality suggests that it is the intrinsic meaning of identity itself that suffices to make participation worthwhile, and this insight is part of why it is that individuals join.

It is also well supported by recent research on the emotional costs of enduring violence. Barber (2008) explored the capacity of young men to cope emotionally with severe violence in Gaza and Sarajevo and found that, whereas the carefully constructed narrative of the Palestinian resistance tied to the future goal of statehood made it substantially easier both to withstand violence and to decide to take part, the lack of
such a narrative contributed to severe dislocation in Bosnian men. In essence, the ability to locate current experience—whether of war or of state repression during war—in a longer narrative highlighting one’s kin predecessors’ sacrifices and one’s own future gains in the group turns out to have a strong impact on decisions to participate. In the chapters that follow I present data from survey and interview research in both Aceh and Iraqi Kurdistan that is strongly supportive of this mechanism linking rebellious narratives to future gains and the decision to join.

However, my interviews with roughly 50 former fighters and political activists and leaders in GAM, and a much broader World Bank survey of 1,200 former members, suggest that there is no empirical reason to force a distinction between emotive or idealist appeals versus pragmatic or instrumental ones. Both seem to operate, with individuals’ reliance on one or the other falling somewhere along a continuum rather than dichotomously. Instrumental rationality, in addition to the unfortunately pejorative moniker of “greed,” can just as accurately capture individuals who, facing a set of uniformly suboptimal choices of which one is joining a rebellion, will decide to join because it offers the best chance of safeguarding their lives and their families’. This is both rational and pragmatic. Further, rather than distinguish between activists and opportunists, I would suggest that it is more fruitful to think of an ideal-type continuum with those motivations at either end, and with pragmatists somewhere in
the middle. Individuals may draw on motives from multiple locations on the continuum. Again, my discussion of the reasons that many fighters gave to me suggests that the concrete legacy of resistance can serve as much as a credible commitment to future protection of a movement’s members as a goal with intrinsic value in defending a group’s dignity.

Anderson’s (1991) study of nationalism, to my mind, often takes unwarranted flack for proposing a concept—the imagined community—that is argued to be insufficiently concrete as an explanatory force. It is probably reasonable to criticize the use of this concept at the macro-level. Conceptually speaking, shared memory has to manifest at the individual and social levels—where individuals reflect on and share such memories. A demonstrable history of past rebellion marks off a group politically and culturally and gives it, to tweak Anderson’s language, both a tangible past and an imaginable future. It both strengthens the appeals of ethnic minority elites and lowers the perceived costs for potential recruits. In short, I argue here that the “belief in common descent” that has been central to defining ethnic identity since Weber (1978, 389) postulated it has concrete causal force. This way of looking at history as a mobilizing resource for ethnic elites also helps to move us beyond a narrower dichotomous focus on greed and grievance, to encompass perceived viability. That is, an ability to imagine a community as encompassing shared history and therefore a
shared future is substantially more feasible—and therefore more rational as a potentially costly choice for individuals—when it can be historically demonstrable. In short, prior rebellions by organizations speaking for an ethnic group give the group’s members not an imagined community but an actual one, and one with a history of demanding political recognition.

[Excerpt from Part 2, Chapters Four to Seven]

The conventional understanding of Kurdistan and of Kurdish separatism—focused mostly on Iraqi and Turkish Kurds—is that it is a uniform phenomenon. Missing from this picture, however, are both Iranian and Syrian Kurds, who have respectively been only periodic and nearly absent actors on the Kurdish political scene. What accounts for this variation across Kurdish minorities in these four countries? I argued above that variations in the persistence and success of ethnic mobilization by Kurdish elites were substantially a function of state responses to early Kurdish rebellions. Rulers in Iraq and Turkey, who were much more successful over time in breaking up Kurdish rural social structures (and weakening traditional elites), unwittingly created the foundation for later waves of Kurdish nationalist rebellion in

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3 I say potentially costly because participation in all rebellions poses likely costs—repression, state attack on one’s village or region, and of course the possibility of death. Kalyvas and Kocher (2007), however, illustrate that the costs of participation in rebellion do not always necessarily exceed those of free-riding.
doing so by creating large urban Kurdish populations that could be mobilized (by Kurdish urban radicals).

Hence it is unsurprising that where Sheikh Said and other Kurdish rebel leaders in early republican Turkey came from the rural elite, the leaders of later, more radical organizations like the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) recruited at least as much in cities as in the countryside (Marcus 2007).

To take the case of Kurdistan, this was particularly true. Rural elites had preeminence, whether religious (Shaykhs) or tribal (Aghas), hence the early rebellions by Shaykh Said in Turkey (1925), Simqu in Iran (1922), Shaykh Mahmud in Iraq (1918-20), and Badr Khan in Syria (1948), all of which drew on traditional power structures as mobilizing resources to construct rebellions manned by rural Kurds. Economic transformation in the Middle East challenged the continued social power of these rural elites, but to varying degrees. During the 1950s and 1960s, all four countries to varying degrees underwent rapid economic transformation, and that transformation affected each Kurdish minority. By the 1970s, Kurds in all four countries had established Kurdish Democratic Parties to represent the interests of new urban elites as well as traditional rural ones. Moreover, rural Kurdish elites had been decisively weakened or co-opted in each of these countries, leaving the future of Kurdish nationalism in the hands of urban leaders. What differed dramatically was the degree to which these new
urban elites had a Kurdish urban population base on which to draw in mobilizing second-generation resistance movements.

In Iraq and Turkey, land reform and the mechanization of agriculture, respectively, were the key mechanisms linking agrarian commercialization to breaking the power that aghas had over Kurdish peasants. Once that power was broken, both the capacity of aghas to hold peasants on the land and the ability of states to stifle Kurdish resistance collapsed too. When it did, a new urban Kurdish populated also emerged, which more radical Kurdish leaders such as Jalal Talabani in Iraq and Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey worked to recruit. In Iran, government land reform policies scarcely touched Kurdistan, as I detail below. Although the first Kurdish Democratic Party was founded in Iran, and although the most ambitious Kurdish movement (the Mahabad Republic of 1946) emerged there, the stark lack of urban growth in Iranian Kurdistan stifled the chances that the movement would successfully cross generations as its Iraqi and Turkish counterparts did. In Kurdish Iran, in other words, history did not matter the way it did in Kurdish Iraq.

Kurdish nationalists in Iraq and Turkey have succeeded where their counterparts in Iran and Syria have failed, the evidence suggests, largely because of propitious demographic circumstances that central governments had unwittingly created. In the former two countries, early nationalist leaders came from the rural elite and remained
autonomous of central state authorities into the 1950s. After that, urbanization—in particular the growth of Kurdish-majority cities in Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan—created the societal “Trojan Horse” that made possible a generational shift in Kurdish leadership from rural to urban, conservative to radical, elites. In short, the ability of Kurdish nationalism to shift gears demographically and spatially was central to its success.

Kurdish nationalist movements in both Iraq and Turkey began in the interwar period as essentially rural, conservative, and aimed at preserving Kurdish social structures against the intrusion of modern state builders. As those states achieved some success at penetrating the Kurdish countryside and (in the case of Turkey) of introducing mechanized agriculture, they broke the social monopoly of power enjoyed by Kurdish elites and induced substantial urban migration. When they did, paradoxically, they catalyzed large Kurdish urban population in cities such as Sulaymaniya and Diyarbakir; those cities began to provide in the 1970s the new locus of Kurdish nationalist mobilization. Reflecting this demographic change, the new Kurdish leaders were urban-based and more political radical than their predecessors: witness Sheikh Said vs. Abdullah Ocalan and Mustafa Barzani vs. Talal Jalabani. There existed urban radicals in both the Iranian and Syrian Kurdish populations, but they still lacked by the 1970s a sizeable urban population base upon which to draw. The result
was that, as states managed to exert control over rural elites, the Kurdish nationalist movements in Iran and Syria had nowhere to hide and no new social base to mobilize, effectively paralyzing them.

In short, the imposition of direct state rule, the commercialization of agriculture and forceful destruction of traditional rural social power structures, and urban migration have largely shaped the prospects for ethnoregional minorities to make and sustain claims for self-determination. In the next section I make the case for viewing modern Kurdish politics as a natural experiment and break the four cases of Kurdish-state relations into paired comparisons of right-nationalist homogenizing vs. Arab socialist state building projects. Following that, I present a structured comparison of Kurdish nationalism in Iran and Iraq.

*Kurds in Four National States: A Natural Experiment*

The visibility of Kurdish nationalist movements in Turkey and Iraq has overshadowed the simple observation that four countries straddle greater Kurdistan—Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. However, only Iraq’s and Turkey’s Kurds have mounted sustained, organized challenges to their central governments. Often described as the largest ethnic group in the world lacking its own national state, Kurdistan merits
interest simply on the basis of the size of its population. Analytically speaking, they also offer scholars a rare opportunity to hold constant myriad important factors in comparing Kurdish movements: a natural historical experiment. From a quite similar historical, economic, political, and demographic past, Kurdish minorities became part of four national states following World War I.

Prior to World War I, Ottoman and Persian rule over Kurdistan carried little in the way of serious distinctions in the pattern of state encroachment. As Hassanpour (1994) has noted, social change in greater Kurdistan produced a flourishing urban commercial and intellectual life overseen by more or less autonomous Kurdish principalities until 1639, when the Ottoman and Persian empires negotiated a border that divided Kurds and imposed on them buffer status. During the next 250 years, the drive to maintain sovereignty provided a powerful incentive for allying with one empire or the other, and the frequency of war on Kurdish soil reversed much of the progress that had preceded the border agreement. By the eve of World War I, Kurdistan had been de-urbanized and had largely reverted to agrarian-tribal political

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4 My sense is that it is necessary to modify this statement to say that the Kurds are the only political relevant ethnic group lacking their own state. The Sundanese minority on the island of Java in Indonesia is larger than the estimated total population of Kurds worldwide, for example.

structures that would define the early modern legacy inherited by 20th-century Kurdish elites.

Another factor that provides a compelling comparison group among these four Kurdish minorities is the variation within the regime types that they confronted. Turkey and Iran were ruled by authoritarian (and later quasi-democratic in Turkey’s case) nationalists who sought to homogenize their populaces into “Turks” and “Iranians” by repressing minority expression. The goal here was national integration and was socially conservative in tone since it did not seek egalitarian ends.6 Iraq and Syria also sought homogenization, but did so with an eye to Arab socialism, nationalist in tone like Iran and Turkey but with an explicit socialist tone that sought to minimize ethnic issues to prioritize class transformation.

Following the first World War, newly independent Turkey embarked on an ethnically homogenizing state project under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk aimed at creating a strong, “modern” Turkey. Across Turkey’s southeast border with Iran, Reza Shah of Iran largely emulated Ataturk’s policies, seeking to build an equally powerful modern Iran. There remained sizeable functional differences in the policies that the two pursued, as I discuss below, but ideologically and in several important state policy

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6 This did not mean that rulers in Iran and Turkey left class structures as they were. On the contrary, both Ataturk and Reza Shah and their successors attempted to confront landed rural elites in an effort to weaken the “local strongmen” that stood to challenge their infrastructural state building projects. For a general discussion of this problem, see Migdal 1988.
arenas—especially language policy and local autonomy vs. central authority—the two regimes largely followed the same trajectory vis-à-vis Kurdish and other minorities. Where they differed, I detail below, is in their success at breaking down rural social structures and inducing urban migration. And, they differed substantially in the degree to which Kurdish parties could sustain rebellions against them.

Much the same could be said of the Ba’athist Republican regimes that took power in Syria and Iraq in 1958. Overthrowing externally installed conservative monarchies, Arab socialist army officers in both countries came to power seeking also to create modern states, but along different lines than in Iran and Turkey. The two Ba’athist regimes were avowedly socialist, and in principle if not in practice dedicated to recognizing the many ethnic groups that made up their respective states. Again, those ideological similarities masked serious differences in the degree to which these states, accomplished real social transformation in the Kurdish countryside. Iraq succeeded where Syria failed, and again the paradox was that this episode of state penetration of Kurdish society left it less capable later of controlling Kurdish mobilization.

Beyond the within-set controls made possible by pairing the state structures that Kurdish nationalists confronted in Iran and Turkey, and in Iraq and Syria, respectively, the four cases also make it possible to set aside several common explanants of civil war.
Terrain and resource wealth are two of the most important structural predictors of civil war (Kocher 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; de Soysa 2000; Elbadawi and Sambanis 2002). But, across the four cases, these indicators track poorly with the success of Kurdish movements. Sizeable oil reserves are located in the Kurdish regions of both Iraq and Syria, and all four Kurdish regions are mountainous. In short, would-be Kurdish rebels have similarly favorable terrain in which to launch challenges to their respective central states in all four of these countries, and in Iraq and Syria ought to have had the most compelling resource-capture rationales for doing so, yet Syrian Kurds have failed to mount any sustained challenge while their counterparts in Turkey have done so despite the region’s relative lack of resource wealth.

Poverty has also been endemic across the Kurdish regions in all four countries, and has been especially so relative to the dominant Arab, Persian, and Turkish ethnic majorities in them. Both overall national poverty and relative deprivation (regional poverty relative to overall national) are more or less constant factors across all four Kurdish regions. Another important factor, and one that Sambanis (2004, 270-71) rightly points to as missing from econometric civil war studies, is external intervention. Given the history of great power support for Kurds at various times in Iran and Iraq,

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7 It is important to note that, in the cases of Iraq and Syria, this statement is provisional rather than definitive. I have found data reported only for the Kurdish provinces in Iran and Turkey (see Koohi-Kamali 2003 and Kocher 2004, respectively) but most accounts of Iraq and Syria are in accord with this conclusion.
and frequent support by one or more of these four countries for Kurdish movements in others, one might argue that it is simply external support that carries the day. It is important to note, however, the near lack of support for Turkey’s Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK), especially relative to the voluminous Soviet support for the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and long-term American, Iranian, and Israeli support for the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq in the 1960s and early 1970s. While Iraq’s Kurds have undoubtedly benefited more from international intervention since 1991 more than any of their counterparts, I would suggest that in most instances, external support arrived only after it became clear that it could make a difference, that is, that the movement was viable enough to warrant the obvious material and potential political costs of aiding separatists in one of these countries.

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*Chapter One: Introduction. History and the Dynamics of Separatist Conflict.*

*Chapter Two: Early Rebellions, Macrosocial Change and Contentious Trajectories.*

*Chapter Three: Early Rebellions as Recruitment Resources: A Micro-Perspective.*

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Part 4: History and Rebellion: Mass Nationalism in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 1946-2010.

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Chapter Twelve: Conclusion