



# THE KURDS AND STATE FORMATION

ALAN LEZAN

Kurdistan: A Short Study on the State

This work examines the process of state formation in Kurdistan within the context of colonial division, taking into account historical border delineations, imperial interests, and modern theories of the state. Moving beyond ideological simplifications, it illuminates the interplay between identity, power, and self-governance through an analytical lens. It offers a well-founded perspective for readers seeking to understand the Kurdistan question on a historical and political basis.

## Foreword

**The question of the state has accompanied humanity since its earliest political reflections. It is not merely a theoretical subject; it touches the daily lives of millions of people who live, work, and shape their futures within various political orders. Particularly in regions where self-determination, identity, and political participation are contested, the engagement with the concept of the state acquires special significance.**

This brief study arose from the need to bring clarity to a debate often characterized by emotions, misunderstandings, and ideological oppositions. It is addressed to readers who wish to understand the foundations of state order without losing themselves in partisan political positions. The goal is to present historical developments, theoretical concepts, and contemporary challenges in an accessible manner, thereby creating a foundation for reflected thought.

The Kurdish question forms a focal point of this writing—not because it seeks to commit to a single political solution, but because it aims to demonstrate how diverse the conceptions of statehood can be. Kurdish society is rich in political ideas, historical experiences, and forms of cultural expression. This diversity deserves an objective, respectful, and analytical examination.

# 1 - Introduction

The question of the state is among the oldest and, simultaneously, most current topics of political philosophy. Since antiquity, thinkers have sought to understand why humans form states, what tasks these states should fulfill, and how political order can be legitimized. Despite this long tradition, the term "state" remains misunderstood, emotionally charged, and often ideologically distorted to this day. Especially in regions where political self-determination is disputed, the state is not infrequently either romanticized or demonized, without its actual significance being soberly considered.

This short study pursues the goal of scientifically clarifying the concept of the state and tracing its historical development from classical philosophy to the present. It is aimed at readers who wish to gain a basic yet well-founded understanding of state order. The objective is not political promotion but enlightenment: the understanding of terms, structures, and historical contexts.

A particular emphasis is placed on the so-called "Kurdish question." Hardly any other topic demonstrates so clearly how varied conceptions of statehood can be. While one part of Kurdish society regards the founding of its own state as a necessary prerequisite for security, cultural development, and political self-determination, other groups—including influential political movements—fundamentally reject the idea of a nation-state. This rejection, however, is often based on specific ideological models, historical experiences, or theoretical assumptions that are rarely explained in detail.

The present writing intends to help disentangle these debates. It offers no simple answers, but rather an analytical foundation upon which readers can develop their own conclusions. By illuminating the history of the concept of the state, its theoretical foundations, and its practical significance, it aims to contribute to an objective, informed discussion—both within Kurdish society and beyond.

Before systematic political philosophy emerged, conceptions of order, rule, and social coexistence developed over millennia. However, these early models were not philosophical theories in the modern sense, but practical or religiously justified guidelines for political organization. In Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China, rule and law were legitimized primarily through divine authority, tradition, or moral principles. They provided rules for the conduct of rulers and subjects without, however, theoretically reflecting on the fundamental questions of political order.

4

Only with Greek philosophy did a new phase begin: the question of the state was no longer answered merely practically, but investigated conceptually. Plato was the first to understand the state as a philosophical project and to systematically ask what justice means, how political order arises, and what role the individual plays within it. With him began the tradition of not just describing political rule, but justifying it. Aristotle continued this approach by comparing real constitutions and investigating political structures empirically. Thus, for the first time, a theory of the state emerged that comprised both normative and analytical elements.

This development marks the beginning of actual state theory. It builds upon older political ideas but goes far beyond them

because it philosophically questions the foundations of rule, law, and community. The following chapters build on this origin and trace how the idea of the state has unfolded from classical philosophy to the present day.

## 2 – The Idea of the State in Philosophy

The history of the concept of the state does not begin with modern institutions, but with philosophical reflections on how humans should live together. Even in antiquity, the state was understood not just as a political order, but as a moral and social one. These early theories remain the starting point for every discussion on legitimacy, justice, and political organization to this day.

### 2.1 Plato: *The State as a Moral Order*

In his work *Politeia* (The Republic), Plato developed an ideal-typical conception of the state. For him, the state was a reflection of the human soul: only when reason, courage, and desire are in harmony can a just order arise. The state should therefore be governed by philosophers who, by virtue of their insight into "the Good," are capable of placing the common good above personal interests. Plato's model is not a historical state, but a normative ideal that raises the question of how political power can be legitimized and what role knowledge plays in governance.

### 2.2 Aristotle: *Man as a Political Being*

Aristotle viewed the state less as an ideal and more as a natural form of human community. Man is a *zoon politikon*—a being that finds its purpose only within the community. For

Aristotle, the state arises from smaller units—family, village, polis—and serves the goal of enabling a good and fulfilling life. While Plato emphasized the rule of the wise, Aristotle saw the political order as the result of practical reason and social development. His analysis forms the basis for later reflections on constitutions, citizenship, and political participation.

### *2.3 The Social Contract: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau*

With the dawn of the modern era, the focus shifted from moral ideals to questions of security and individual liberty. Social contract theories assume that humans establish a state from a hypothetical "state of nature" to achieve specific goals.

- **Thomas Hobbes** saw the state of nature as dangerous and chaotic. The state is created to secure peace and is granted a strong monopoly on the use of force in return.
- **John Locke** emphasized the natural rights of the individual. The state is meant to protect these rights and loses its legitimacy if it violates them.
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** placed the "general will" (*volonté générale*) at the center. The state should not restrict freedom but enable it by expressing the will of the people.

These theories continue to shape the discussion on legitimacy, civil rights, and the limits of state power.

### *2.4 Modern Definitions of the State: Weber and Beyond*

In the 20th century, the concept of the state was further refined. Max Weber defined the modern state as that political

entity which possesses the legitimate monopoly on the use of physical force within a given territory. This sober definition detaches the state from moral or metaphysical conceptions and describes it as an institutional structure based on law, administration, and enforcement power.

Later thinkers like Jürgen Habermas emphasized the importance of public communication, democratic legitimacy, and constitutional procedures. The state is no longer understood merely as an apparatus of power, but as a framework in which social conflicts can be resolved peacefully and collective decisions can be made.

### *2.5 Significance for the Present*

The philosophical theories demonstrate that the state is not a phenomenon given by nature, but rather a historically evolved concept that can fulfill various functions: security, justice, liberty, order, or self-determination. This diversity explains why the concept of the state is interpreted so differently in political debates—including the Kurdish question. Whoever speaks of statehood always operates within a field of tension between ideals, interests, and historical experiences.

7

## **3 – The Emergence of Real-World States**

Philosophical ideas about the state provide the theoretical background, yet the actual emergence of political orders was considerably more complex. States are not the result of a single moment or a clear-cut decision, but rather the product of historical processes, social conflicts, and technological

developments. To understand today's political landscape—including the Kurdish question—it is necessary to trace the most important stages of this evolution.

### *3.1 From City-States to Early Empires*

The first political communities that can be considered precursors to the state emerged in the Near East, in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and later in Greece. These city-states possessed administrations, legal systems, and military structures, though usually without clear territorial borders in the modern sense. Their legitimacy was frequently based on religious conceptions, divine rule, or dynastic tradition.

Over time, larger political units formed: empires such as the Assyrian, Persian, or Roman Empires united diverse peoples under a central authority. These empires, however, were less "states" in the modern sense and more structures of dominion based on military control and tributary relationships. Nevertheless, they established vital foundations: administration, infrastructure, legal systems, and the idea of a superior political order.

8

### *3.2 Medieval Forms of Rule*

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, diverse forms of rule emerged in Europe: kingdoms, principalities, city leagues, and ecclesiastical territories. Political power was fragmented, and loyalty was often based on personal ties rather than abstract institutions. The medieval space was therefore not a system of states, but a web of competing authorities.

Simultaneously, however, central elements of modern statehood began to develop: written administration, taxation,

standing armies, and early forms of territorial demarcation. These developments prepared the transition to the early modern period.

### *3.3 The Modern Nation-State*

The decisive transformation took place between the 16th and 19th centuries. With the Reformation, the rise of trade, the development of modern bureaucracies, and the increasing importance of territory, the modern state emerged. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 is often regarded as the symbolic beginning of a system of sovereign states, even if many of its principles were only fully implemented much later.

In the 19th century, the nation-state established itself as the dominant model. The idea that political borders should coincide with cultural or linguistic communities gained prominence. National movements in Europe—including early Kurdish aspirations—aligned themselves with this model. The nation-state became the central reference point for political identity, but also a source of conflict, as many regions were ethnically and culturally more diverse than national ideologies assumed.

9

### *3.4 Colonialism and Post-Colonial States*

With European expansion, new political orders emerged outside of Europe. Colonial empires drew borders that often showed little regard for local structures. After the Second World War, numerous new states emerged whose borders and institutions frequently reflected colonial legacies. Many of these states faced significant challenges: weak institutions, ethnic tensions, economic dependencies, and unclear legitimacy.

The Kurdish question is also closely linked to this era. The partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, the drawing of borders after the First World War, and the interests of external powers resulted in the Kurds living across several states without receiving their own political framework. The consequences of these decisions shape the region to this day.

### *3.5 Federal, Centralized, and Autonomous Models*

Modern states differ greatly in their internal structure. Some are highly centralized, while others rely on federal or autonomous models to account for regional diversity. Federalism can defuse conflicts by enabling local self-governance, whereas centralized systems often prioritize uniformity and control.

## **4 – What Defines a State?**

10

Although the term "state" is used in everyday language, there is often lack of clarity regarding what actually constitutes a state in a scientific sense. Many political discussions—including those within Kurdish society—are based on misunderstandings or imprecise conceptions. To make these debates more objective, it is necessary to clearly define the fundamental characteristics of a state. In political science, four central elements have emerged that together form the core of modern statehood.

### *4.1 Territory*

A state exists within a clearly demarcated geographical space. This territory includes land areas, bodies of water, and airspace. Borders may have evolved historically, been established by treaty, or resulted from conflict. The crucial factor is that they are generally recognized or, at the very

least, enforceable. Without a defined territory, no stable political order can emerge, as it remains unclear where state authority begins and ends.

## ***4.2 Population***

A state requires a permanent population living within its territory. This population does not have to be ethnically homogeneous; on the contrary, most modern states are culturally and linguistically diverse. The decisive factor is that the people stand in a legal relationship to the state—whether through citizenship, residency status, or other forms of political belonging. The population forms the basis for political legitimacy, economic activity, and social development.

## ***4.3 Monopoly on the Use of Force***

11

A central feature of the modern state is the monopoly on the use of force. This means that only the state has the right to employ physical force to enforce law and order. This monopoly is not absolute; it is legally bound and institutionally controlled. The police, military, and judiciary are the primary agents of this monopoly. Without a functioning monopoly on force, power vacuums, insecurity, and competing authorities arise—a condition frequently observed in civil wars or failing states.

## ***4.4 Institutions and Administration***

Statehood presupposes stable institutions: government, parliament, courts, administration, and public services. These structures make it possible to reach decisions, implement laws, and organize social processes. Institutions create continuity, regardless of which individuals currently hold

political office. A state is therefore more than just a government; it is a permanent framework of rules, procedures, and organizations.

#### *4.5 Legitimacy*

Alongside formal characteristics, legitimacy plays a crucial role. A state can only endure in the long term if a significant portion of the population accepts its authority. Legitimacy can stem from various sources: democratic participation, tradition, religious authority, economic success, or international recognition. If this legitimacy is lacking, tensions, resistance, or secessionist movements emerge.

#### *4.6 Statehood as a Dynamic Concept*

The aforementioned characteristics define the state in the modern sense, but they are not static. States can change, reform, or develop new forms of political organization. Federal systems, autonomous regions, supranational structures, or shared sovereignty demonstrate that statehood is flexible. This dynamism is particularly relevant for regions in which differing conceptions where differing conceptions of political order collide—as is the case in the Kurdish context.

12

#### *4.7 Significance for the Kurdish Debate*

Many misunderstandings in the Kurdish discussion regarding statehood arise from unclear or ideologically distorted conceptions of what a state is and which functions it fulfills. Some movements reject the state entirely, failing to distinguish between authoritarian regimes and democratic, constitutional models. Others idealize the state without considering the institutional prerequisites necessary for stability and legitimacy.

A sober analysis, however, reveals that statehood is not a myth but a practical instrument for the organization of security, rights, and political participation. Whether an independent state is necessary or meaningful can only be judged based on a clear understanding of these characteristics.

## 5 – Statehood and Self-Determination

The terms "statehood" and "self-determination" are frequently conflated in political debates, although they possess different meanings. While statehood describes the existence of a political community, self-determination refers to the right of a people or a community to decide upon its own political, cultural, and social affairs. To understand the Kurdish question objectively, it is necessary to clearly separate both concepts and analyze their relationship to one another.

13

### *5.1 The Principle of Self-Determination in International Law*

Modern international law recognizes the right to self-determination as a fundamental principle. It was strengthened following the Second World War and in the course of decolonization, establishing that peoples may freely determine their political status. This right encompasses various forms of political organization, including:

- Independence
- Autonomy
- Federal solutions

- Democratic self-governance within an existing state

International law does not favor any specific form. However, it obligates states to respect the political participation and cultural identity of population groups.

## ***5.2 Self-Determination Does Not Automatically Mean Statehood***

A widespread misunderstanding equates self-determination with the founding of one's own state. Historically and legally, this is incorrect. Many communities exercise self-determination within existing states—for example, through regional parliaments, cultural rights, or federal structures. The founding of a new state is only one of several possible forms—and often the most conflict-ridden.

14

Self-determination is therefore a flexible concept that allows for different political solutions. The decisive factor is that the affected community can freely articulate its interests and shape its own future. For Kurdistan, self-determination does not mean the acceptance of externally imposed autonomy or federation, but rather the free choice of political status—including the option of independence.

## ***5.3 The Role of Legitimacy and Political Feasibility***

Whether the founding of a state is realistic depends not only on the will of a community but also on political, economic, and geopolitical factors. International recognition, institutional stability, economic viability, and regional security interests play a central role. Many independence movements failed not due to a lack of identity, but due to a lack of international support or internal structural

weaknesses. Self-determination must therefore always be viewed within the field of tension between ideal conceptions and *Realpolitik* conditions.

### ***5.4 Self-Determination as a Collective and Individual Right***

Self-determination possesses two dimensions:

- **Collective:** The right of a people to determine its political order.
- **Individual:** The political rights of every single person within a state.

A state that protects individual rights, enables democratic participation, and respects cultural diversity fulfills essential elements of self-determination, even if it does not possess an ethnically homogeneous structure. Conversely, an ethnically defined state can violate self-determination if it governs authoritatively or oppresses minorities. 15

### ***5.5 Significance for the Kurdish Question***

Kurdish society is politically and ideologically diverse. While one part of the Kurds views their own state as a necessary form of self-determination, other movements—including influential political organizations—advocate alternative models such as democratic autonomy or confederal structures. These positions are based on differing historical experiences, theoretical assumptions, and political strategies.

A factual analysis shows: Self-determination is not an "either-or" between state and non-state. It is a spectrum of political possibilities ranging from cultural autonomy to full

independence. Which form is meaningful depends on concrete conditions—security, institutions, the international situation, and the will of the population.

### *5.6 Self-Determination as a Process*

Self-determination is not a one-time act, but an ongoing process. It arises through political participation, social organization, education, cultural development, and institutional stability. A state can promote or hinder this process. Likewise, a movement for self-determination can act constructively or destructively depending on how it pursues its political goals. For the Kurdish question, this means that long-term perspectives are more important than short-term slogans. Self-determination requires political maturity, institutional competence, and social unity—regardless of whether the goal is an independent state or another form of political order.

16

## **6 – The Kurdish Question in Historical Context**

The Kurdish question is not an isolated phenomenon, but the result of a long historical development shaped by imperial structures, geopolitical interests, and internal social dynamics. To understand today's political positions and conflicts, it is necessary to trace the most important historical stages. This reveals that the Kurdish question arose less from cultural or ethnic differences and more from political decisions and power constellations that operated over centuries.

## *6.1 Kurdish Identity and Early Political Structures*

The Kurds are a historically evolved community with their own language, culture, and regional roots. In pre-modern times, Kurdish principalities, tribes, and autonomous regions existed, maintaining shifting relationships with larger empires. These political structures, however, were not comparable to modern states. Loyalty was based on tribal ties, religious networks, and local authorities, rather than national identity in the modern sense. Despite this diversity, a common cultural consciousness developed over time, bolstered by language, traditions, and geographical proximity. This consciousness later formed the basis for political demands for self-determination.

## *6.2 The Role of the Ottoman and Persian Empires*

17

For centuries, most Kurds lived in the borderlands between the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Both empires frequently granted Kurdish regions limited autonomy as long as they fulfilled military and fiscal obligations. This pragmatic policy meant that while Kurdish territories were part of large empires, they nonetheless preserved their own local structures.

With the centralization policies of the 19th century, this situation changed. The Ottoman government attempted to weaken local authorities and establish direct control. This led to conflicts, uprisings, and an increasing politicization of Kurdish identity.

### *6.3 The First World War and the Reordering of the Middle East*

The decisive turning point for the Kurdish question was the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War. In the negotiations over the regional reorganization, various models were discussed, including the possibility of a Kurdish state. The **Treaty of Sèvres (1920)** theoretically provided for a Kurdish referendum; however, this treaty was never implemented.

Instead, the **Treaty of Lausanne (1923)** prevailed, which established the modern borders of Turkey and distributed the Kurds across several states: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. These border delineations were carried out without the participation of the Kurdish population and without regard for regional structures. The consequences of these decisions continue to shape the political landscape to this day. 18

### *6.4 Kurds in the Nation-States of the 20th Century*

With the emergence of modern nation-states, the Kurds became part of political systems that were often oriented toward ethnic homogeneity. In many of these states, Kurdish language, culture, and political organization were restricted or suppressed. This led to recurring uprisings, repressions, and political movements pursuing diverse goals—ranging from cultural rights to full independence.

At the same time, regional differences developed:

- In **Iraq (South Kurdistan)**, an autonomous region with its own institutions emerged after 1991.

- In **Iran (East Kurdistan)** and **Syria (West Kurdistan)**, Kurdish areas remained marginalized for a long time.
- In **Turkey (North Kurdistan)**, a powerful political movement developed, representing various ideological models.
- The Kurdish presence in the **Caucasus** or the **Red Kurdistan (Kurdistana Sor)** from 1923–1929.

This diversity shows that the Kurdish question is not uniform, but rather took on different forms depending on the respective state.

### *6.5 Ideological Currents and Political Movements*

During the 20th century, various Kurdish organizations emerged, developing different conceptions of statehood and self-determination. Some movements oriented themselves toward the classical model of the nation-state, while others—particularly since the 1990s—emphasized alternative concepts such as democratic autonomy or confederal structures.

These ideological differences are not merely theoretical in nature; they influence political strategies, social organization, and relationships with existing states. they explain why diverse positions regarding the question of an independent state exist within Kurdish society.

### *6.6 International Interests and Geopolitical Dynamics*

The Kurdish question is closely linked to regional and international interests. Great powers and neighboring states have repeatedly used Kurdish groups as political allies or adversaries, depending on their own strategic objectives.

These shifting alliances meant that Kurdish movements frequently fluctuated between support and isolation.

The geopolitical situation continues to complicate stable solutions to this day. State sovereignty, regional security interests, and international power politics significantly influence which forms of self-determination are realistic.

### *6.7 Significance for the Present*

Historical development shows that the Kurdish question did not arise from cultural conflicts but from political decisions, border-making, and configurations of power. It is the result of a complex interplay of identity, statehood, and geopolitical interests. Anyone who wants to understand the present situation must take these historical lines into account.

20

## **7 – Enlightenment Instead of Polarization**

Debate about statehood is rarely purely theoretical. It touches on identity, history, power, and visions of the future. The Kurdish question in particular demonstrates how quickly political debates can become emotionally charged. Different historical experiences, ideological convictions, and personal expectations lead to the term “state” being either idealized or rejected without a sober reflection on its actual meaning. This chapter shows how enlightenment can help overcome polarization and enable constructive discussions.

## 7.1 Common Misunderstandings about Statehood

Many conflicts arise from unclear or distorted ideas about what a state is and what functions it performs. The most common misunderstandings include:

- **The state as an apparatus of oppression:** Negative historical experiences often lead to a blanket rejection of state structures without distinguishing between authoritarian and democratic, rule-of-law models.
- **The state as the guarantor of all problems:** Some movements idealize the state as the solution to all political and social challenges without considering the institutional prerequisites.
- **Statehood as ethnic homogeneity:** The notion that a state must be ethnically uniform contradicts the reality of modern, pluralistic societies.
- **Self-determination equals independence:** As already shown, self-determination is a broad spectrum of political possibilities, not only the founding of a new state.

21

These misunderstandings hinder objective discussion and create unnecessary ideological frontlines.

## 7.2 Ideology versus Reality

Political movements—even within Kurdish society—often develop comprehensive ideological models that favor or reject particular forms of political order. These models can be inspiring, but they do not replace analysis of real conditions.

Ideology can provide orientation, yet it must not take the place of facts.

An enlightened debate distinguishes between:

- **normative ideas** (“How should the world be?”)
- **empirical conditions** (“How is the world actually?”)
- **real-political possibilities** (“What is achievable under the given circumstances?”)

Only when these levels are clearly separated can a constructive discussion emerge.

### *7.3 The Importance of Knowledge and Historical Perspective*

22

Enlightenment means approaching political questions on the basis of knowledge, analysis, and historical experience. Those who know the history of the concept of the state, the emergence of modern states, and the development of the Kurdish question can better classify and evaluate political positions. Historical knowledge protects against simplifications and prevents complex problems from being reduced to slogans.

An informed debate recognizes that:

- statehood is a historically grown concept;
- political solutions are always context-dependent;
- different Kurdish regions have had different experiences;
- no single movement represents the entire Kurdish society.

These insights enable a differentiated assessment of the present.

### *7.4 Why Polarization Is Harmful*

Polarization causes political positions to harden and makes compromise appear impossible. It prevents different perspectives from being heard and complicates the development of realistic solutions. In the Kurdish question, polarization can lead movements to work against one another instead of pursuing common interests.

An enlightened stance acknowledges that:

- political diversity is not a sign of weakness;
- different models of self-determination can coexist;
- long-term solutions require cooperation;
- ideological purity often prevents practical progress.

23

Enlightenment therefore does not mean neutrality but the ability to understand complex relationships and act constructively.

### *7.5 The Value of Objective Analysis*

Objectivity is not a lack of passion, but a prerequisite for political effectiveness. Those who view political questions without ideological distortion can more clearly recognize which steps are realistic and which risks exist. This applies particularly to questions of statehood, which have profound institutional, economic, and geopolitical consequences.

An enlightened debate on the Kurdish question is based on:

- **Clear terminology**
- **Historical knowledge**
- **Realpolitik assessment**
- **Respect for diverse perspectives**
- **The awareness that political solutions require time and stability**

Enlightenment thus creates the foundation for a factual, constructive, and future-oriented discussion.

## **8 – Conclusion: A Sober Look Ahead**

The question of the state is as old as political philosophy itself and, at the same time, more relevant than ever. From Plato's early reflections to modern debates on self-determination and political order, it is evident that statehood is not a rigid concept but a historically evolved instrument for organizing coexistence. States emerge, change, decay, or develop new forms—always within the field of tension between power, legitimacy, and social needs.

24

The Kurdish question is an example of how complex this field of tension can be. It is the result of historical border drawings, imperial interests, nation-state ideologies, and internal societal developments. Simultaneously, it shows how diverse political conceptions can be within a single community. While some Kurds view their own state as a necessary form of self-determination, other movements prefer alternative models based on autonomy, democracy, or confederal structures.

This diversity is not a sign of weakness, but an expression of political maturity. It shows that there is no simple or universal solution. Statehood is not an end in itself, but a means to guarantee security, rights, and political participation. What form this means should take depends on concrete conditions: institutional stability, social unity, the international situation, and long-term perspectives.

An enlightened discussion about the Kurdish question therefore requires more than slogans or ideological certainties. It demands knowledge of the history of the concept of the state, an understanding of the emergence of modern political orders, and sensitivity toward the diverse experiences of Kurdish communities. Only on this basis can realistic and sustainable solutions be developed.

Looking ahead soberly means acknowledging complexity without being paralyzed by it. It means connecting political goals with institutional responsibility and linking historical experiences with future perspectives. It also means that self-determination is a process that grows through education, political participation, social organization, and constructive dialogue—regardless of whether it is realized in an independent state or within existing structures.

This work understands itself as a contribution to such an enlightened debate. It offers no final answers, but rather a foundation for reflected thought. The future of the Kurdish question will not be decided by ideologies or geopolitical interests alone, but by the ability to combine knowledge, experience, and political reason. In this sense, the question of the state remains not only a political challenge but also an intellectual and moral one—for Kurdish society and the international community alike.

## 9 – Is the Era of the Nation-State Over?

### *The Nation-State as a Model*

The nation-state is the most defining political structure of modernity. Since the French Revolution, the right of peoples to self-determination has been closely linked to the nation-state model. Today, however, this model is increasingly questioned by globalization, digital networks, and multiple identities. The question "Is the era of the nation-state over?" is not mere theory—for stateless peoples like the Kurds, it is existential.

### *Historical Origins of the Modern State*

The modern idea of the state emerged at the end of the 18th century with the American and French Revolutions. At that time:

- **Sovereignty** was based on the will of the people.
- **National identity** was linked to territorial borders.
- **Central institutions** such as administration, law, and the military were established.

In the 19th and 20th centuries:

- National movements in Europe gained strength.
- Colonies declared their independence.
- New states emerged through the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

Today, 195 nation-states exist worldwide—proof that the model remains relevant.

## *The Role of the Nation-State Today*

Nation-states remain central actors in the global system. Border controls, security policy, and diplomatic representation continue to be conducted by states. At the same time, new developments are changing the role of the state:

- **Supranational structures** such as the EU.
- **Digital citizenship** and migratory identities.
- **Multicultural societies.**

This transformation, however, does not mean the end of the nation-state—but rather its adaptation.

## *Why is Statehood Existential for the Kurds?*

27

Kurds live in four states without possessing full political representation in any of them. For them, statehood is not just a political goal, but a historical necessity to ensure survival.

## *Historical Ruptures*

In the 20th century, Kurds were repeatedly subjected to massive violence:

- **The Anfal campaign** in Iraq (1988).
- **Dersim and Zilan** in Turkey.
- **Denationalization policies** in Syria.

These examples show: Statelessness means structural vulnerability.

## *Advantages of an Independent State*

1. **International Recognition and Legitimacy:** A state is a subject of international law with borders, institutions, and the right of representation—and enjoys diplomatic protection.
2. **Collective Security Mechanisms:** A state can build regular armed forces and defense structures—and thus deter arbitrary violence.
3. **Protection Against Genocide and Mass Atrocities:** Both Jews and Armenians were particularly endangered without a state—and better protected with one.
4. **Economic Independence and Resource Management:** A state manages its own raw materials, taxes, and trade—and directly influences the prosperity of the population.
5. **Cultural and Linguistic Safeguarding:** A state institutionalizes language, education, and culture—and protects against assimilation.
6. **Strong Ties to the Diaspora:** A state organizes, represents, and protects its diaspora—similar to Israel for the Jewish people.
7. **International Support in Times of Crisis:** States receive military, economic, and diplomatic aid when attacked—stateless communities do not.

## *The Nation-State Remains Relevant*

The nation-state continues to be the primary framework for political representation, security, and cultural existence. For the Kurds, statehood is not an ideological option, but a historical necessity and an existential need. A state institutionally guarantees the security, culture, future, and international presence of a people. Therefore, the Kurdish

demand for statehood is not merely political, but profoundly human.

### *State Transformations Since 1945*

Since 1945, over **120** new states have emerged.

Simultaneously, several have disappeared:

- **Yugoslavia** → 7 states
- **Czechoslovakia** → 2 states
- **GDR (East Germany)** → united with the FRG (West Germany)
- **Soviet Union** → 15 states
- **Zaire** → Democratic Republic of the Congo
- **Ottoman Empire** → completely dissolved
- **Austria-Hungary** → disintegrated

29

These states disappeared—but their place did not remain vacant.

### *Are there lands without a state?*

No. Every territory is under state sovereignty. However, there are peoples without their own state.

### *Stateless Peoples Today*

In addition to the Kurds:

- **Palestinians** (partially recognized)
- **Sahrawis** (under Moroccan control)
- **Tibetans** (under Chinese rule)
- **Uyghurs** (under Chinese rule)
- **Rohingya** (stateless in Myanmar and Bangladesh)

- **Tamils** (failed statehood attempt in Sri Lanka)

These peoples do not possess their own state—but live under foreign control.

### *Why are the Kurds a special case?*

- **Largest stateless population** in the world.
- **Settlement area** distributed and occupied across four states.
- **Repeated collective violence.**
- **Systematic suppression** of language, culture, and identity.

Therefore, the Kurdish demand for statehood is not an ordinary political wish, but an existential security requirement. In international law, statelessness signifies a lack of protection, missing representation, and security deficits. Friedrich Hegel did not say without reason: 30

*"The State is the march of God in the world."*

## Afterword

The engagement with statehood and self-determination is both an intellectual and a political challenge. It demands the ability to understand historical developments, categorize theoretical concepts, and view current realities with sobriety. This work has attempted to facilitate such an approach without providing simple answers or oversimplifying complex relationships.

The Kurdish question demonstrates how closely political identity, historical experience, and state order are interwoven. It makes clear that self-determination can take different forms, even if not all models share the same origin or objective. In many historical contexts, autonomy and federal solutions were proposed by external powers as compromise models to preserve existing state structures and limit the demands of oppressed populations. In this sense, they can be understood as transitional forms that enable political participation without, however, realizing full independence. Simultaneously, such models—depending on their design—can serve as a precursor to further self-determination. The decisive factor remains that political decisions must be based on knowledge, analysis, and the free will of the affected community, rather than the mandates of external actors.

The future of the Kurdish question will not be determined by geopolitical forces or ideological models alone, but by the ability to integrate diverse perspectives, build institutional structures, and combine long-term goals with *Realpolitik* responsibility. Enlightenment can support this process by helping to clarify terms, understand historical experiences, and bring objectivity to political debates. If this work contributes to making the discussion on statehood and self-determination a bit clearer, calmer, and more reflective, it has fulfilled its purpose.

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Autonomy:** A form of political self-governance within an existing state. Autonomous regions possess their own institutions, parliaments, or cultural rights but remain part of the state as a whole.
- **Citizenship:** The legal relationship between the individual and the state. It encompasses rights (e.g., political participation) and duties (e.g., adherence to the law).
- **Democracy:** A political order in which power is legitimized through elections, the rule of law, and public participation. Democracy is a procedure, not an ethnic or cultural characteristic.
- **Federalism:** A political system in which power is shared between a central government and regional units. Regions possess their own competencies but remain part of a common state.
- **Monopoly on the Use of Force:** The right of the state to employ physical force to enforce law and order. It is bound by law and institutionally controlled.
- **Identity (Collective):** The shared cultural, linguistic, or historical consciousness of a group. Collective identity is fluid and arises through social processes, not biological traits.
- **Empire:** A major realm that unites diverse peoples and regions under a central rule. Empires are often based on military control and tributary relationships.
- **Institutions:** Permanent structures such as parliaments, courts, administrations, or authorities that reach and implement political decisions. Institutions ensure stability and continuity.

- **Confederalism:** A model of political organization in which local units possess extensive self-governance and cooperate loosely. The central level is weak or symbolic.
- **Legitimacy:** The social recognition of state authority. Legitimacy can stem from democratic participation, tradition, economic success, or international recognition.
- **Nation-State**  
A state based on the idea that political borders should coincide with a cultural or linguistic community. In reality, most nation-states are ethnically diverse.
- **State of Nature**  
A theoretical concept in political philosophy (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) describing how humans would live without a state order. It serves as the starting point for social contract theories.
- **Self-Determination**  
The right of a people or a community to decide upon its own political, cultural, and social affairs. Self-determination can encompass independence, autonomy, or other forms of political participation.
- **Sovereignty**  
The highest political authority within a territory. A sovereign state decides independently on its internal and external affairs.
- **State**  
A political entity with a territory, population, a monopoly on the use of force, and stable institutions. The state is a historically evolved instrument for organizing coexistence.
- **State Formation**  
The process through which political structures emerge, stabilize, or are reformed. State formation

encompasses administration, legal systems, institutions, and legitimacy.

- **Territory**

The geographically demarcated space in which a state exercises its authority. Territory is a central element of modern statehood.

- **International Law**

The legal system governing the relations between states. It includes principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the right to self-determination.

- **People (Demos/Populus)**

A political term referring to a community that understands itself as the bearer of political sovereignty. It is not identical to ethnic affiliation.