Introduction

In Iran, Kurdish aspirations for independence, economic progress, and cultural expression began to develop as a consequence of the political and economic processes of changing the lifestyle of tribes and nomads implemented by the central government of Reza Shah. This process, which started in the 1920s, included the forced settlement of the nomadic tribes of Kurdistan, and their eventual sedentarization, which, in turn, weakened the traditional social and economic ties of the community. This is not to say that any nomadic community which becomes sedentary also pursues ideas of national identity. In the case of the Kurds in Iran, largely due to the government’s repressive policies, Kurdish national aspirations for self-government, cultural expression, and economic progress have been nourished.

Historically the core of political/nationalist movements of Iranian Kurds have always been in the northern regions, namely the Mahabad (Savouj Bulagh) region. There are different reasons why some other regions of Iranian Kurdistan have developed somewhat different expressions of Kurdish nationalism (based more on class antagonism in Kurdish society as opposed to emphasizing the struggle against the central government as the major conflict) and have not been part of the main Kurdish political organization (KDPI). In the south, particularly in the Kermanshah region, the Kurdish Shi’i population identifies with the central government in Tehran. In the Saqqiz region, where the community is traditionally more agricultural as we will discuss in the economic chapter, the Kurdish nationalist movement has been a movement with emphasis on issues related to class conflict within Kurdish society, rather than the conflicts between the central
government and the Kurds. This is unlike the mainstream of the Kurdish movement as represented by the KDPI, which has much greater influence in the traditionally tribal regions of the west and north of Iranian Kurdistan.

It is for this reason that I will focus on the development of tribal society as it existed, which was predominantly, though not exclusively, in the mountain regions. It should be noted that by mountain regions I mean the general areas of western north and western central Kurdistan, where towns as well as villages do exist.

Earlier, I explained the socio-economic situation of the Kurds at the beginning of the twentieth century and examined the impact of Reza Shah’s tribal policies on the socio-economic life of the Kurds. In this chapter, I shall examine the nature of Kurdish political life during the first quarter of the twentieth century. In this context, I shall discuss the limitations of tribalism vis-à-vis nationalism. My argument will be that these limitations mainly stemmed from the nature of tribal society as a ‘face-to-face’ society and were, by definition, obstacles on the path to the development of Kurdish nationalism. I shall highlight the revolt led by Ismail Agha Simko to illustrate the limitations of Kurdish tribal society of the 1920s in relation to nationalism. However, before analyzing Simko’s revolt I shall discuss the social and political situation of the tribes in Iran during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, explaining the relationship between the tribes and the nation-states around them, and the development of the tribes themselves.

**Tribes and the state in Iran**

The relationship between the tribes and the Iranian state has always been a sensitive one, particularly during periods of weak central government. After the sedentarization of the nomadic tribes and the formation of a relatively cohesive and strong central government by Reza Khan (later Reza Shah), the political/military power of the tribes was greatly reduced. They no longer were able, seriously and continuously, to threaten the state, for now it was the state which controlled them. Before this, for centuries, tribes were instrumental in assisting groups to achieve power, and once in power those groups tended to depend on the continued support of tribal forces. Obviously, such political influence caused great apprehension for the state which wished to control the tribes and reduce their power. Kurdish tribes were no exception to this general role.