Cartographically constructing Kurdistan within geopolitical and orientalist discourses

Karen Culcasi

Syracuse University, Geography Department, 144 Eggers Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA

Abstract

Maps are powerful geopolitical tools, which are widely used to represent conflicts over territory, boundaries, citizens, and resources. But maps do more than represent. They are also discursive tools, which reflect, express, and help create geographic knowledge, political agendas, and social stereotypes. Through a longitudinal study of American journalistic cartography of Kurdistan — an ambiguously defined region that has often been in the midst of geopolitical conflict — this paper argues that maps reflect and recreate dominant geopolitical discourses, which are often intricately linked to orientalist discourses. A critical analysis of the design elements of place names, map text, border demarcation, and symbology revealed that these representations not only reflected the political and social narratives of the time and space in which they were created, but also constructed and communicated subtle and blatant positions towards the Kurds and Kurdistan. More specifically, these maps frequently marginalized the Kurds by questioning their geopolitical territorial claims, and also portrayed them in typical orientalist discourse as violent rebels or backward victims depending on the U.S. agenda in the region at the time. This paper will show how these interrelated discourses worked together in the cartographic image to portray the Kurds in a manner that generally supported and legitimated the dominant U.S. geopolitical position of a particular event.

© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Geopolitics; Journalistic cartography; Maps and politics; Orientalism; Kurdistan

E-mail address: klculcas@maxwell.syr.edu

0962-6298/$ - see front matter © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.05.008
Introduction

In a 1975 interview with Newsweek, Kurdish political leader Mulla Mustafa Barazani opined “the [Iraqi] regime has decided that the best way to deal with us is to wipe us off the map”.\(^1\) Barazani’s remark reflects not only the enduring geopolitical and territorial contentiousness of the Kurdish region in Iraq, but also metaphorically recognizes the influential role maps have in geopolitical disputes.

Geopolitical mapping is inherently political, yet the competing narratives regarding the existence and location of ‘Kurdistan’ render the mapping of this ambiguously defined and contentious region especially problematic (see Fig. 1).\(^2\) Although the term literally means ‘land of the Kurds,’ the location, extent, and orientation of the region vary markedly according to when and where a map was created. As O’Shea (1994: 179) shows in her examination of Kurdish identity, cartographic representations are innately divisive simply because “there is no agreed upon reality to represent.”

Broadly, the goal of this paper is to critically examine how and why U.S. journalistic cartography represents geopolitical conflict in Kurdistan. More specifically, I utilize both critical geopolitics and postcolonial studies to focus on the discourses embedded in maps in order to scrutinize the manner in which these maps reflected U.S. political agendas and created particular interrelated images and narratives of the Kurds and Kurdistan. Since Harley’s (1988, 1989, 1990) influential pieces on cartography, many scholars have framed maps as cultural and political discursive formations (see Crampton, 2001; Pickles, 1992; Wood, 1992).\(^3\) Harley (1988: 278) defined cartographic discourse as “those aspects of a text [map] which are appraisive, evaluative, persuasive, or rhetorical. As apposed to those which simple name, locate, and recount” (1988: 278). Wintle (1999) similarly discussed that as a form of discourse, “maps represent viewpoints, opinions, aspirations and statements to their readers” (137). With a perspective that maps are a form of discourse, which produce and reproduce geographical knowledge, I examined how maps discursively constructed Kurdistan by focusing on the interrelationship of geopolitical and orientalist discourses in maps. To pursue this goal I conducted a longitudinal study to examine how the American print media reported on specific events that erupted in Kurdistan between 1945 and 2002.\(^4\) Though there was some variation in the 448 maps I examined, I argue that they continually reflected and recreated dominant U.S. geopolitical discourses, which were often intricately linked to and supported by orientalist discourses. As Little (2002: 10) described in American Orientalism, “Orientalism seems subconsciously to have shaped U.S. popular attitudes and foreign policies toward the Middle East (2002: 10).” Yet the discourses underlying these representations are not new, but are part of the familiar and

---

\(^1\) Willey (1975). “The Kurds Lose a Friend,” Newsweek 3/24/75, 46. The translation from the Arabic to Latin script of Barzani is often seen as Barzani; and Mulla is often Mullah.

\(^2\) The maps used in the Fig. 1 are cited in the references. These three maps were digitized into ArcMap using ‘heads-up’ digitizing. The 1992 CIA map of Kurdistan was used as the base map, in which the other two outlines of Kurdistan were matched to. The final output consists of superimposed outlines of Kurdistan as represented in each individual map which were geo-referenced using real world coordinates, on top of the digitized 1992 map. However, this map is not to scale due to some difficulty in geo-referencing it.

\(^3\) Though many scholars of cartography have adopted Harley’s ‘deconstructionist’ approach, there have been several critics, for example see Andrews (2001), Belyea (1992), Edney (1996), and Monmonier (2004).

\(^4\) Although I sampled from 1919 when the Allies began negotiating the division of the Ottoman Empire, the first map I found (and thus the first map in my sample) was published in 1945. The end date of my sample is December 31, 2002.
pervasive theme of the ‘civilized and modern western world’ dominating the ‘backward and savage other’ (see O’Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 199).

The majority of this paper will present the findings of this case study of 448 maps from major American print media. But first I discuss the difficulty of defining a Kurdish nation, which is followed by a contextual overview of the geopolitical history of Kurdistan. These two background sections on the Kurds precede a discussion of intersection of geopolitical and orientalist discourses within cartography, which provides a conceptual framework for the analysis that follows. Also included is a section on the role of the media in perpetuating geopolitical agendas and ‘American Orientalism.’

Locating Kurdistan and a Kurdish national identity

Spanning portions of where the nation-states of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria converge, Kurdistan is an ambiguously defined and contested region where approximately 25 million Kurds reside. It is commonly argued that they are the largest stateless ‘nation’ in the world (McDowell, 2000; Vali, 1998). From a pre-modernist or ‘primordialist’ (Gertz, 1968) perspective the Kurds comprise a nation that is claimed as far back as 7th century B.C. (Van Bruinessen, 1992; Chaliand, 1994; Olson, 1996). Since that time, they have generally resided as nomads in a contiguous homeland in the Zagros and Taurus mountains, and this stretch of land was pivotal in maintaining a sense of Kurdish identity and community (Olson, 1996: 85). The majority of Kurds speak one of several dialects of Kurdish, which is an Indo-European language, distinct
from Arabic, Farsi, or Turkish. Even though most Kurds converted to Islam during the Islamic invasions, of the numerous invaders that conquered the region most were of minor influence on the Kurds. Yet numerous scholars disregard defining nations as historically and ethnically natural categories, and argue instead that a nation is a construction of modernity based on imagined and fabricated concepts of racial, ethnic, and national identity (Agnew, 2003; Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1997; Murphy, 1993). From this perspective, national identity, as well as ethnicity and race, is a social construction that does not have legitimacy as a primitive or natural category (Jackson & Penrose, 1994).  

However, as the Kurdish example demonstrates, though all identities are constructed to some degree, these constructions often have material bases and quite real and viable manifestations. With the post-WWI emergence of nation-states as the dominant world order, which has theoretically attempted to unite political and administrative boundaries with racially and ethnically defined homogeneous populations (Bowman, 1921), some Kurds have struggled and fought for unity and independence. These modern struggles for autonomy eventually facilitated the emergence of nationalistic ideas that were partly based upon vague concepts of a primitive national unity (Smith, 1993). However, even though there have been many national movements and Kurdish political organizations, Kurdish nationalism has never been a strong or cohesive political force, and the Kurds remain socially and politically fragmented (Vali, 1998: 82).

The Kurdish struggle for autonomy and the interstate dynamics of the states in which the Kurds live have been labeled the ‘Kurdish question’ (Olson, 1996: 84). The Kurdish question is deeply embedded in the politics of identity (Agnew, 1997), and begs the question of how a Kurdish nation or transnational identity was constructed. However, there is no simple answer to such a question, and like all identities, the concept of ‘Kurdish-ness’ and a Kurdish national identity is ambiguous, fluid, and contested (see Van Bruinessen, 1992). Obviously a Kurdish nation does not exist as a sovereign nation-state recognized by the international community, but it is a region (see Agnew, 2003) and it does exist in the abstract — in the minds of Kurds and non-Kurds, and in the discourse of those who support Kurdish autonomy, those who reject it, and even those who are ambivalent about it (O’Shea, 1994).

**Geopolitical history of Kurdistan and the Kurdish National Movement, through 1923**

In the early 16th century, the vast Kurdish region in the Zagros and Taurus Mountains was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire and a portion of their territory became the Ottoman province of Kurdistan. As with many distant Ottoman provinces, Kurdistan maintained relative autonomy. However, by the end of the century the Kurds were caught between the feuding Ottoman and Safavid (of Persia) Empires; their land was devastated, and many were forced to relocate. According to Kurdish historian Izady (1992), these hardships facilitated the emergence of Kurdish nationalism, which was manifested in 1596 when the first work on Kurdish history was written by Kurdish Prince sharaf al-Din of Bitlis. The Shahnama not only referred to a Kurdish homeland, but called for political unification of the Kurds and the elimination of

---

5 See also Peckham (2000) and Winslow (2001) for discussions on the construction of race and nationalism, respectively, and its relations to cartography.
6 Olson (1996) also argues that since the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurdish question has spread beyond the Kurdish regions to include the U.S. and Great Britain.
7 See Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 222–223) for a discussion of the relationship of ‘nomads’ and ‘migrant barbarians’ to empires (and the state).
invaders from their land (Izady, 1992: 52). But the 1639 peace treaty between the Safavid and Ottoman Empires created a border that divided the Kurdish homeland between the two Empires. As a result, the Kurds were fragmented and burgeoning ideas of nationalism waned. Not until the mid-19th century did Kurdish nationalism re-emerge. When the weakening Ottoman Empire attempted to regain control of its failing Empire by abolishing autonomous regions, some Kurds revolted. Then in 1880, Kurdish leader Shaykh Ubayd Allah led a revolt in the name of the Kurdish nation (McDowall, 2000: 53) as well as in the name of Islam against the secularizing Ottoman Empire (Olson, 1998). After this revolt, the nationalist Kurdish League was organized. The league sought independence from the Ottomans, Persians, and Armenians and attempted to instill a sense of Kurdish identity and unity. However, this experiment in modern nationalism weakened Kurdish traditional tribal ruling houses, which had generally provided leadership and maintained order within Ottoman Kurdistan (Izady, 1992: 56).

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI the Kurds would lose their greatest opportunity for independence (Izady, 1992: 58). In 1920, the Treaty of Sevres partitioned the Ottoman Empire so that an autonomous Kurdish plebiscite would be established in a small region in the Taurus Mountains—east of the Euphrates river, south of Armenia (whose border was not yet determined), and north of Syria and Mesopotamia. It was stipulated that after one year the Kurds would be able to elect for complete independence and create their own state. However, the Treaty of Sevres was never ratified. Its terms were re-negotiated to accommodate Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s, the new leader of the Turkish National Movement, demands for control over non-Arab lands, which included retaining the Kurdish plebiscite. Then in 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, and approximately 200,000 square miles of Kurdish territory was partitioned into the state of Turkey, the British mandate of Iraq, and the French mandate of Syria—making the Kurds minorities in each of the newly formed states (Izady, 1992: 3).9

During the WWI peace conferences, Kurdish claims for autonomy were easily disregarded greatly because the Kurds lacked a powerful Western patron or strong Kurdish leadership that was able to speak effectively on their behalf (Macmillan, 2002: 455).10 But the ‘peacemakers’ also considered the Kurds unimportant in the new world order, and they often framed the Kurds in an orientalist view as weak, yet also violent and uncivilized (Macmillan, 2002: 456). Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, wrote in his diary that “no Kurd seemed to represent anything more than his own particular clan” (Macmillan, 2002: 458). Bowman’s (1921) account of The New World echoes George’s sentiment that “the Kurds are devotedly attached to their sheiks, who are responsible for occasional outbursts of fanaticism” (448). Bowman also summarized the general beliefs of the Western decision makers that “self-government among the

---

8 This border is still contested between Iraq and Iran, particularly in the Shatt al-Arab which provides access the Persian Gulf.

9 Concluded in 1923, these negotiations were largely predetermined in 1916. The secret Sykes–Picot agreement signed by British diplomat Mark Sykes and French diplomat George Picot on May 16, 1916 divided the Ottoman Empire so that at the conclusion of the war the Arabs would have some autonomy in the Arabian Peninsula, but France and Britain would acquire most of the former Ottoman territories, which included Kurdish territories outside of Persia. This premature and secret agreement was altered during the San Remo (Italy) Conference of 1920 to give Britain more of the land initially promised to France; and with the exception of the Hejaz, it stripped the Arabs of any independence. It granted Atatürk more non-Arab lands, including the Kurdish plebiscite suggested in the Treaty of Sevres. Kurdish territory within Persia remained unaltered. A small portion was also divided into Armenia.

10 Serif Pasa was the Kurdish representative at Versailles, but his presence had little affect in promoting Kurdish territorial claims (Olson, 1998: 22).
Kurds seems out of the question, owing to their deterioration under the Turkish regime, their habit of plundering, and their general inability to read and write, as well as their tribal mode of life” (447).

After the Western decision makers decided in 1923 that an independent Kurdish state would not exist, Kurdish revolts sparked in the name of nationalism and self-determination — and arguably Islam too (Olson, 1998: 153). Though a Kurdish national identity began to emerge in pockets throughout the divided territory, it never culminated into politically unifying the Kurds (Macmillan, 2002: 419), and the Kurds remained partitioned in other national states. Kurdish experiences have differed in each state, but in general most Kurds have been oppressed, force-fully assimilated and relocated, socio-economically deprived, and some have been the victims of genocide. As Kurdish historian Chaliand (1994: 3) argued, they have been one of the most numerous and heavily repressed minorities in the world.

While the Kurds have mobilized and sought independence, and achieved partial autonomy in northern Iraq, the states that hold claim to Kurdish territory are unlikely to grant the Kurds independence. If a state was to grant the Kurds autonomy, not only would it mean losing geo-strategically important land rich in oil and water, but it would also question the legitimacy of that state’s own international borders. Such an action would raise concerns in surrounding states that they might also be forced to relinquish control of their portions of Kurdistan.

The geopolitics of Kurdistan have their roots in the division of the Ottoman Empire, but have also been greatly affected by more recent American geopolitical interests in the Middle East, such as Cold War containment policies, anti-Khomeini policies after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Hostage Crisis, support for Iraq during the Iraq—Iran War, as well as the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq Invasion in which U.S. policy was reversed and Iraq became the enemy. Each of these formative events will be discussed in more detail as they directly relate their cartographic representation.

Geopolitical discourses in maps

As expressions of socially constructed geographical knowledge, maps have an inherent power to shape people’s images of the world in a manner in which text alone falls short (Gil-martin, 1982, 1985; Wintle, 1999). As Henrikson (1994) wrote “it is through the lens of the map … that we see, know, and even create the larger world” (52). Map historians and other social scientists generally agree that a map’s power relies on the myth that a map is an objective, scientific representation of reality (Black, 1997; Edney, 1997; Harley, 1988, 1989; Mon-monier, 1996). Cartographic historian Edney (1993: 55) observed that “while it is a logical absurdity for maps to be ideally correct, they are nonetheless held to replicate the world’s es-sential order and structure.” Because maps have this privileged status, they provide one of the most “intellectually powerful” ways to naturalize the socially constructed ideas about the world (Agnew, Livingston, & Rogers, 1996: 422). Moreover, maps are pervasive and ubiquitous, which means much of the influence that maps have on our imagined geographies is sub-liminal, and we often unconsciously accept the ideas presented to us (Vujakovic, 2002: 188).11

11 See Gregory (1994, 1995) for a discussion on geographical imagination, which draws on Said (1978). Hagen (2003) defines imagined geographies as “a way of perceiving spaces and places, and the relationships between them, as complex sets of cultural and political practices and ideas defined spatially, rather than regarding them as static, discrete ter-ritorial units” (490).
Maps can also be powerful geopolitical tools (Black, 1997; Harley, 1988; Heffernan, 2002; Henrikson, 1994; Herb, 1997) in producing geographical knowledge. Though nearly every map reflects and asserts social, political, and cultural assumptions, geopolitical maps (maps that represent geopolitical disputes or issues) are inherently embedded in the discourse of politics and power (Heffernan, 2002). Thus, geopolitical maps are occasionally manipulated to propagate political agendas and interests (Gilmartin, 1985; Henrikson, 1994; Schulten, 2001), but more often they subtly reinforce and engage in established geopolitical discourses.

Maps and propaganda

Maps that intentionally promote particular agendas or attempt to influence public opinions rather than reveal ‘information’ or ‘facts’ are often construed as propaganda (Quam, 1943). In his examination of German and Nazi map propaganda, Herb (1997: 8) defined map propaganda as a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions and behavior. Monmonier (1996) summarized that “the propagandist molds the map’s message by emphasizing supporting features, suppressing contradictory information, and choosing provocative, dramatic symbols” (87). Through the use of projections, action symbols and arrows, color, pictorial images, dramatic symbols, and even juxtaposed maps, map propaganda often attempts to invoke emotional responses, such as fear of international invasion or national unity. Yet the difference between propagandistic and non-propagandistic mapping is difficult to discern, simply because map propaganda can be subtle or blatant, and have either negative or positive intentions.

Numerous studies have examined the links between map propaganda and geopolitics (Davis, 1985; Herb, 1997; Monmonier, 1996; Pickles, 1992; Quam, 1943) generally asserting that maps are often manipulated to assert particular political positions and geopolitical discourses while suppressing others. However, map propaganda as a category has wide and varied meanings. Specific studies on map propaganda and geopolitics include Zeigler’s (2002) examination of constructions of an Eastern European regional identity through the use of map propaganda, which he often refers to as persuasive mapping.\(^\text{12}\) Davis (1985) argues that map propaganda has been used to assert territorial claims on postage stamps during the British and Argentinean dispute over the Falkland Islands. And Herb (1997) details the role of Nazi map propaganda in the early and mid-20th century, which portrayed Germany as a small and vulnerable nation. Yet not all studies on cartographic representations of geopolitical situations and interventions directly refer to the maps as propagandistic, even though these maps express political agendas and goals, and commonly use unconventional and dramatic designs. For example, Atkinson (1995), Edney (1997), Godlewska (1995), and Harley (1990) have examined how maps had been used for imperial geopolitical endeavors, not only to map new territories and rule them, but to construct or propagate the idea of the new colonial nation with its imperial center. Several geographers have focused on the media’s cartographic representations of current geopolitical situations and interventions, such as Vujakovic’s (2002) study of the U.K.’s press cartographic coverage of the wars in Kosovo and the Balkans, and national missile defenses; Gilmartin’s (1985) cartographic examination of the 1983 Soviet–Korean conflict; or Kosonen’s (1999) examination of national and geopolitical mapping in the Finnish press. Churchill and

\(^{12}\) Tyner’s (1982) article *Persuasive Mapping* creates the even broader category of ‘persuasive’ maps, which includes maps in advertising, teaching, theology, political cartoons, and ‘propaganda’ (140). This further demonstrates the difficulty in defining propaganda.
Slarsky (2004) examined the narratives contained in post-9/11 journalistic cartography, which ultimately supported intervention in Afghanistan, and Ristow (1957) examined Cold War geopolitics and map propaganda in the media as early as 1957.

Though only a few maps in these studies mentioned above were blatantly propagandistic, and the authors refrained from referring to them as propaganda, nearly every map reflected a level of values, ideas, and politics. Regardless of whether a cartographer or publisher intended to influence public opinion or not, banal geographical messages and pre-existing stereotypes are asserted. Even when a map seems a straightforward locator map, it still reflects social and cultural biases and stereotypes (Ormeling, 1997). As Pickles (1992) stated, “the map conveys not merely fact but also and always the author’s intention, and all the acknowledged and unacknowledged conditions and values any author (and his/her profession, time and culture) bring to a work” (210–211). While overt propaganda is generally discernable to the lay reader, who is likely to view it cautiously, it is also essential to understand maps as cultural, social, and political objects that assert subtle messages. These messages help shape our geographic imaginations and can even affect public opinion and policy.

Thus, I am cautious to use the term ‘propaganda’ to refer to all maps concerning geopolitical issues such as national identity, territorial disputes, or military interventions because this all-encompassing category muddles the varied levels of intent to influence or persuade the map reader. As Henrikson (1994) summarized, maps are purposeful and persuasive, but to different degrees and at different levels (58).

The map’s role in helping to legitimate territorial claims and asserting the boundaries that constitute a nation-state provides an example of how geopolitical maps are not necessarily overtly propagandistic, but nevertheless powerful geopolitical tools (Harley, 1989). Through the use and manipulation of place names, borders, and symbology a map can narrate, invent, or sustain a nation’s history and unity (Black, 1997; Herb, 1997; Kashani-Sabet, 1999; Kosonen, 1999; Monmonier, 1997; Winichakul, 1994). As tenuous as defining a nation may be, maps are common and powerful tools, which are used to succinctly define and legitimate the existence of nations by placing borders around imagined communities (Anderson, 1991: 173). The map serves as a marker of state sovereignty whilst facilitating the construction of national identities distinct from those on the other side of the border. Place names, like borders, also inscribe geopolitics on maps. Not only do place names help shape our imagined geographies (Hagen, 2003: 491), but they are also powerful geopolitical tools in asserting territorial claims and legitimizing geographical identities (Hagen, 2003; Kadmon, 2004; Monmonier, 1996: 110).

Intersection of cartography and critical geopolitics

As powerful geopolitical and discursive tools that can shape our imagined geographies of the world, maps warrant detailed and critical examination. Specifically, I use critical geopolitics as a framework to examine the geopolitical discourses embedded in maps. The field of critical geopolitics investigates geopolitics as a social, cultural, and political practice and attempts to

---

13 This paper is not focused on the relationship of maps and the construction of nation (see Kashani-Sabet, 1999; Winichakul, 1994 for two excellent examples of such studies). A study concerned with the relationship between maps and nation, or nation building, would require an examination of maps produced by the Kurds who are contesting and constructing a Kurdish nation. Instead the focus here is on the U.S. or outsider representations of this region and how these representations reflect geopolitical and orientalist discourses.
‘deconstruct’ and reveal the representations, hidden messages, and power relations that underlie the construction of geographic knowledge (O’Tuathail, 1996; O’Tuathail & Dalby, 1998; Vujakovic, 1999). Critical geopolitics explores not only the meanings and forms of representation, but also the discourses that support the production and reproduction of geographical knowledge (Johnston, 2000). Employing critical geopolitics to cartography can help reveal embedded meanings and politics in maps by delving beneath the surface of the map to read between the lines (Harley, 1988, 1989). Though several scholars within cartography have utilized a critical approach (Crampton, 2002; Harley, 1988, 1989, 1990; Vujakovic, 1999, 2002; Wood, 1992), a ‘critical cartography’ is still developing. Harvey (2001), in *Spaces of Capital*, dedicated a chapter to discussing the importance of examining cartography critically because he considers cartography a “central pillar of all forms of geographical knowledge” (222), which has not been explored to the fullest. But even today and within human geography, maps are sometimes still read uncritically. As Perkins reported in 2004, most human geographers still perceive maps as “techniques, not as central geographical practices,” as well as understanding maps as a “method and tool rather than discourse” (384). By applying critical geopolitics to cartography, both Harvey’s and Perkins’ concerns over the lack of a ‘critical cartography’ can be addressed.

**Orientalist discourses in maps**

In 1978, in his acclaimed critical account of Orientalism, Edward Said brought to attention the biases, slanted interpretations, and often-uninformed generalizations of the ‘Orient’ that exist in the Western geographical imagination. His main critique was that Westerners oversimplified, reduced, and stereotyped people of the East as primordial, violent, and tribal nomads; as mysterious and sexual; and whose lives are timeless, static, and primitive. During this process, the West defined itself by creating West/East, us/other, and Occident/Orient binaries. Imaginative geographies of ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’ spaces then facilitated arbitrary distinctions of difference between what is close and known, with what is far and unknown (Said, 1978: 54–55). These imaginative geographies perpetuated generalizations of the entire Orient, and the diverse cultural, social, political, economic, and historical distinctions of the Near and Middle East were ignored and reduced to oversimplified images. This stereotyping and intellectual subordination of the Orient created justification in the Western mind to treat the Orient as inferior and therefore subject to Western cultural domination and imperialist rule.

Said’s critique was key to the rise of postcolonial theory in literary and cultural studies. Broadly construed, postcolonial theory examines the effects of colonialism and its various social, economic, and political processes on the colonized and the colonizer both during the heyday of colonialism and currently. It is a critical project that attempts to de-center Europe (or the West). Numerous geographers draw on and have helped develop postcolonial theory (see for example Blaut, 1993; Gregory, 1995, 2004; Nash, 2002; Sidaway, 2000; Winders, 2005). But cartographers, in great part, have not engaged with postcolonial theory; and those that have (see for example Atkinson, 1995; Godlewska, 1995; Stone, 1995) have generally focused on the cartography created by imperialists during the heyday of colonialism. Yet imperialist

---

14 See also Lemann (2001) for a broad discussion of a critical approach to cartography.

15 For further discussion of postcolonial theory see McClintock (1992), Kennedy (1996), and Loomba (1998).

16 Sparke (1998) is a notable exception of the focus postcolonial theory and cartography on contemporary issues.
intentions are embedded not only in traditional imperialist cartography, but also in popular geopolitical material; and these messages have pervaded straight through the 20th century and into the 21st as well as across the Atlantic to create an American style of Orientalism (Little, 2002).

My examination of popular discourse on Kurdistan demonstrates how orientalist notions not only pervade the texts, speeches, and rhetoric typically addressed by postcolonial scholars, but also in journalistic cartography.17 The maps in my study generally reflected geopolitical agendas such as Cold War containment or anti-Khomeinism, but there were also orientalist biases and stereotypes embedded in these maps.18 I argue that by ‘othering’ the Kurds as tribal, primitive, and violent, U.S. geopolitical and imperialist endeavors in the region were supported and justified.

Geopolitics and the popular media

Maps published in the print media are particularly powerful because the media is the public’s — including policy makers — predominant resource for geographic information and society’s most significant ‘cartographic gatekeeper’ (Monmonier, 1989). As Gilmartin (1985) noted in her essay on journalistic maps, “maps which appear in the mass media are seen by more people today than any other type of map” (1). Although some news maps are functionally decorative, or used simply to attract attention, the print media helps produce geographical knowledge (Sharp, 1996; Sidaway, 1998: 226–227) and can thus influence conceptualizations and opinions of distant places — conceptualizations that are often framed in orientalist discourses (Myers, Klak, & Koehl, 1996; Said, 1997).19

The relationship between the media, public opinion, and U.S. foreign policy is difficult to ascertain, but the media not only presumably has the power to influence public opinion and U.S. foreign policy (Soroka, 2003: 27), but it also has the ability to create and perpetuate geographical imaginations (Myers et al., 1996).20 But overwhelmingly, and not surprisingly, the geographical ideas that the media disseminate are largely reflective of dominant worldviews. Parenti (1989) found that the media continually recreated views of the world supportive of the existing ideologies and power structures. He argued that

The basic distortions in the press are not innocent errors, for they are not random; rather they move in the same overall direction again and again, favoring management over labor, corporatism over anticorporatism, the affluent over the poor, private enterprise over socialism, whites over blacks, and other minorities, males over females, officialdom over protestors, conventional politics over dissidence, anticommunism and military build-ups over disarmament, national chauvinism over internationalism, and U.S. dominance of the Third World over revolutionary change (257).

17 See also also Sharp (2000) and Sidaway (1998) for discussion on the relevance of examining popular geopolitical material.
18 See Myers et al. (1996) for a textual analysis of U.S. papers’ coverage of the civil wars in Bosnia and Rwanda. The authors found that the media continually depicted these similar civil wars differently, so that Rwanda (and Africa by default) was portrayed in typical orientalist discourse as tribal and timeless, while there is an absence of this type of language in reference to Bosnians.
19 For a discussion on map consumption see Schulten (2001) and for discussion on the map making process inside the newsroom see Monmonier (1989).
20 See Allen and Seaton (1999) and McCombs (1991) for further discussion on media and public opinion.
Similarly, Chomsky and Herman (1988) in *Manufacturing Consent* consider the media a profit seeking business that has ‘overlapping interests’ with the government. Herman (2000: 102) continued to argue in a retrospective article that the media are “constrained by the dominant ideology, which heavily featured anti-communism before and during the Cold War era, and was often mobilized to induce the media to support (or refrain from criticizing) U.S. attacks in small states that were labeled communist.” Kellner (1992: 1) also argues that during the 1991 Gulf War media and government interests were intertwined, he writes that

…in an attempt to manage public opinion, the Bush administration and the Pentagon produced a barrage of propaganda, disinformation, and outright lies that covered over the unsavory aspects of the Gulf War and that legitimized U.S. policies. The mainstream media helped to mobilize public support for the U.S. war policy (1992: 1).

The majority of U.S. media similarly supported the most recent intervention in Iraq, even though disinformation and lies were seemingly apparent (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003).

The relationship between the media and foreign policy is complex and the media and foreign policy are not always in agreement. Government and corporate funding interests, editorial policies, and the less tangible influence of social and political values shape what is presented on the map (Churchill & Slarsky, 2004). Nevertheless, the stories being told in mainstream mass media are not greatly different from one media source to another, nor are they often counter to current political discourses, military actions, and social stereotypes. Maps in the media, not surprisingly, re-assert the same stereotypes and geopolitical positions that the storylines do (Churchill & Slarsky, 2004; Kosonen, 1999; Myers et al., 1996; Vujakovic, 2002). The media’s power to communicate geographical information and influence perceptions of the world to such a vast readership — whether lay people or policy makers — coupled with the assumption that maps are factual representations, makes it imperative to critically examine the manner in which journalistic cartography represents geopolitical issues.

**Research methods and broad trends**

In order to locate the geopolitical and orientalist discourses embedded in journalistic cartography of Kurdistan, I critically examined the maps of Kurdistan published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek*. Using the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*, Lexis—Nexis, and online database, I compiled a comprehensive list of cartographically illustrated articles on Kurdistan from 1945 through 2002. A total of 28 maps from the newsweekly magazines and 420 from the newspapers were then retrieved from archives, microfilm, microfiche, and current publications to comprise a total sample of 448 maps. Table 1 lists the total number of mapped articles on Kurdistan and the dates of the earliest and most recent map for each newspaper and weekly magazine. For instance, the *New York Times* was sampled from 1945 — when the first cartographically illustrated article with a focus on Kurdistan was published — through 2002. There were a total of

---

21 These publications were chosen primarily because each publication has maintained a strong reputation in the United States for its international news coverage, its longevity, and its wide circulation. I also sampled the British print media including the *Times of London*, the *Guardian*, and the *Economist* (see Culcasi, 2003). The first map in my sample was published in 1945, although I sampled from 1919 when the Allies began negotiating the division of the Ottoman Empire.
250 maps collected from the *New York Times* for an average rate of 4.4 maps a year. A separate average, computed for all years except 1991 (the year of the Gulf War), was markedly lower at 3.0.

Increased mapping over time reflected improved technological capabilities, the emergence of computers, and competition between news agencies in the 1980s. But as the time-series graph (Fig. 2) of yearly totals suggests, the use of media maps is, predictably, event driven. The perceived magnitude and importance of events greatly influenced what was covered and resulted in increased mapping in the years of major Kurdish geopolitical events. These major events include the Soviet assisted establishment of Mahabad in Iran in 1945; the attacks on the Kurds at Halabja after the Iraq-Iran War in 1988; the 1991 Gulf War; the incursions between the PKK (Partya Karkari Kurdistan, or Kurdish Workers Party) and Turkish forces in the mid and late 1990s; and the precursor of the 2003 Iraq invasion. Using these five geopolitical events as a foundation, this paper will illustrate that geopolitical agendas are embedded in the mapping of Kurdistan, and loaded imagery and subtle orientalist messages support the geopolitical positions.

To locate the embedded discourses in the mapping of Kurdistan, I focused on the use and misuse of place names, text (which includes the titles of the articles and maps, text which directly referred to the maps, and any map captions), border demarcations, and the use of color and symbology. Though I discuss in detail only a small portion of the 448 maps, this discussion is representative of my entire sample. The discussion that follows is illustrated with maps that could be construed as propagandistic and maps that are seemingly straightforward and simple — such as maps that located oil fields or places where fighting had occurred. However, I argue that these maps are in some ways similar because they all engaged in geopolitical discourses.

### The journalistic cartography of Kurdistan

For each of the five major geopolitical events mentioned above, I provide a brief overview of the event before discussing the representations of it. The results are presented in a format that discusses a publication’s representations of a particular event. This is not to tease out the nuances of individual publication styles (see Culcasi, 2003), but a simple and systematic manner.

---

22 The averages for each publication were calculated with the denominator of years from the date of the first mapped article to 2002.
to distill and discuss the 448 maps I analyzed. I have also attempted to present these results chronologically, but occasionally sacrifice chronology for the sake of keeping discussion of each event together.

**Cold War fears and Mahabad**

The first geopolitical event in this study to be covered by the American print media was the Soviet assisted establishment of the Kurdish controlled Republic of Mahabad in northwestern Iran in 1945. Just one year after the inception of Mahabad, the Soviets withdrew their support and troops, and Iranian forces aggressively regained control of the region. This event was well covered in the media and maps occasionally supplemented the text. Generally, media maps of this event figured the Soviet Union prominently in the map’s graphic hierarchy, emphasized the Soviet Union’s proximity to Kurdistan, and frequently exaggerated the Soviet Union’s size through atypical projections. The Kurds were considered allies to the Soviets and consequently as threats to Iran, an U.S. ally that was geostrategically pivotal in halting the spread of communism into the Middle East.

*Newsweek*’s reporting on the establishment of Mahabad contained multiple geopolitical and orientalist messages that worked together to perpetuate fears that communism was spreading throughout the Middle East, and that the Kurds were a conduit. A map from 1946 (Fig. 3) delineates a simplified area inhabited by the Kurds and labels the region ‘Kurds’.23

Flags of the surrounding nation-states dominate the map and *seemingly* convey the image of the Kurds being entrapped by powerful and opposing nations. However, the caption below the map asserts that “Kurds in revolt worry four small nations”. The Kurds are *actually* portrayed as a danger to these ‘small’ non-communist nations, an implausible interpretation of the Kurdish situation, even in 1946. Additionally, the use of the flag as a common nationalist symbol helps to legitimize the burgeoning nationalist identities in the region. Yet the Kurds are

---

23 *Newsweek*, “History’s Goad,” 4/1/46, 42.
excluded from asserting a nationalist identity symbolically (by not including their flag) since they do not conform to the modern definition of a nation-state. Further, the title of the map, “Lost Tribe” typifies orientalist perspectives that the Kurds are not only tribal and uncivilized, but also a group that does not have legitimate claims to the region.

Also focused on the Kurdish alliance with the Soviet Union, a 1952 *Time Magazine* article included a fascinating propaganda map by cartographer R. M. Chapin (Fig. 4) that demarcates a rough outline of Kurdistan in the shape of a large blade or sickle. The text describes the geography of Kurdistan as

…a great clumsy sickle over the Middle East, the handle anchored in the mountains near the Persian Gulf, the top of the blade resting in Russia and the cutting edge facing the oil fields and fertile valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris.

With bold, red, and strikingly violent symbolism, the map’s message is powerful. The Soviet nationalistic symbol of a sickle has definitive connotations to the tenuous relationship of the Kurds to the Soviet Union.

The boundaries, in the undefined form of a blade, denote the ambiguity of defining the region, but clearly it is Soviet affiliated. And the oil field symbols indicate the strategic economic potential of the region. This map not only represents Kurdistan as an oil-rich geostrategically region pivotal in halting the spread of communism, but the Kurds become implicated as dangerous interlopers.

---

The perceived Kurdish threat to the U.S. geopolitical goal of halting the spread of communism was also a topic in a 1946 New York Times article, in which a map was used to locate the towns that the “Red Army” had occupied in the Kurdish area of Mahabad. In 1950, a map titled “Kurds Eye Soviets for Independence” showed where fighting had occurred, and again demonstrated that communism could spread through Kurdistan.26 By the 1960s, Cold War geopolitics were less prevalent, but even as late as March 1991 they permeated the Washington Post’s mapping (Fig. 5).27 Through the use of an oblique perspective the Soviet Union is made to look massive and looming ominously above Kurdistan, perhaps suggesting that Kurdistan is under the control of the geographically massive Soviet Union. Yet the oddly defined circular ‘Kurdistan’ centered in the map, could also be suggesting that the region is a potential buffer state between the Soviet Union and the Middle East.

In general, maps produced during the Cold War conveyed the spatial proximity of Kurdistan to the Soviet Union in a way which text alone could not. By portraying them as violent fighters and homeless nomads, the Kurds were constructed as threats to Western democracy and as potential allies to Soviet Communism, which further justified the U.S. agenda of communist containment strategies.

The Iraq–Iran War and attacks on Halabja

In September 1980, Iraqi forces led by Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, and began their devastating eight-year war. The Kurds were caught both geographically and politically between these two states, and as a result the two major Kurdish political groups in Iraqi Kurdistan, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), were

---

engaged in the war. Though the KDP sided with Teheran and the PUK initially supported Baghdad, by 1987 the PUK and KDP joined Iranian forces, and together they controlled most of northern Iraq. When Iranian forces quickly withdrew from Iraq at the end of the war, the Kurds were left vulnerable to Baghdad’s retaliation. An Iraqi campaign against the ‘unloyal’ Kurds in northern Iraq was unleashed in 1988 and turned to genocide as the Kurds’ military forces were squashed, towns and villages were annihilated, and an estimated that 150,000 to 200,000 Kurds were killed (McDowall, 2000: 359). Included in this campaign was the infamous March 17, 1988 chemical and biological attack on Halabja, a small town near the Iranian border. These devastating attacks killed at least 17,000 Kurds and Iranians and prompted a mass exodus into Turkey and Iran. The media’s reporting and mapping of the attacks varied, but generally they reflected the U.S. geopolitical position, which after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iranian Hostage Crisis, ushered in a reversal of U.S. geopolitical position that situated Iran and Kohmeni as a foe and Iraq and Saddam as an ally (Khalidi, 2004; O’Tuathail, 1993). Since the Kurds were allies with Iran and the U.S. now supported Iraq, the Kurds were too generally depicted as an American enemy. Though there was sparse reporting on the Iraq–Iran War in the U.S. media, the maps that were published generally portrayed the Kurds as violent rebels fighting alongside Iran. After the attacks on Halabja, the media increased their coverage. Though the Kurds were briefly portrayed as victims of Saddam, this perspective was soon reversed and the reality and severity of the attacks came into question.

A map published in Newsweek in 1988 confirmed the atrocities at Halabja by using large obscure star formations to indicate where ‘Iraqi attacks against the Kurds’ occurred within the ‘Kurdish Area’. The title “Fatal Fumes” hovers above the map and further recognizes the attacks. However, the map’s caption informed the reader that “chemical weapons used against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq are part of a growing worldwide arsenal” (italic added).28 There are two important issues to discuss here. First, Newsweek’s primary concern

was the proliferation of chemical weapons worldwide, and to the right of the map two industrial steel barrels used as text boxes list the countries that have chemical weapons. The image-laden map seemingly invoked emotions of the threat of chemical attacks occurring elsewhere and others suffering the same fate as the Kurds. Second, as the caption states, the attacks were on “Kurdish rebels”. All Kurds are all reduced to rebels, even though thousands of Kurds not engaged in warfare were also victims of these attacks.

The *New York Times* published little on the Iraq–Iran War, but in 1988 they too used maps to report on Iranian and Kurdish *claims* of the use of chemical weapons at Halabja. These maps were primarily locator maps that pointed out either the city of Halabja or the Turkish towns to which the Kurds fled. However, these representations conveyed skepticism. Four maps published in the months immediately following the attack used captions to assert that Iran “accused” or “reported that” Iraq used chemical and biological weapons in the vicinity of Halabja. In September (six months after the attacks), a title of an article with a map showing an undefined and borderless Kurdistan asked the question: “Kurds’ Symptoms: Gas or Poor Diet?,” and the following day another article title posed the question: “What Drove the Kurds Out of Iraq?”

The *Christian Science Monitor* published several maps on the Iraq–Iran War, which generally located geostrategically important resources of oil refineries and pipelines. After the 1988 Halabja attacks, four locator maps were published showing Kurdistan as a small but unified ‘Area of Kurdish Concentration’ or ‘Area Where Kurds Live.’ Oddly, these maps neglected to indicate the towns that were attacked, perhaps subduing the geographic legitimacy of the attacks. Like the representations in other media, these images conveyed an aura of skepticism around the chemical attacks. An article titled “U.S. in bind over Iraqi use of poison gas against Kurds, goal to maintain ties while decrying chemical weapons” referred to the U.S.’ position of maintaining a healthy relationship with Iraq, while also recognizing the atrocities that were committed.

The mapping of the genocide at Halabja reflected U.S. geopolitics that supported the Iraqi government over the Islamic Republic of Iran, who was primarily making the ‘claims’ of the chemical attacks. Though there was some acknowledgement of the atrocities, as *Guardian* journalist Hiro (2002) recapitulated, “the images of men, women, and children, frozen in instant death, relayed by the Iranian media, shocked the world. Yet no condemnation came from Washington”. Official U.S. foreign policy of these attacks first condemned Saddam by threatening sanctions on Iraq, but this position quickly changed and the sanctions were never passed into law, and thus Iraq remained as a strong buffer against Iran (O’Tuathail, 1993). Despite the poor response from the U.S. and the slanted perception of these attacks being illegitimate claims made by the Kurds and Iranians, the Bush Administration used this same massacre in late 2002 and 2003 to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

### 1991 Gulf War

On August 2, 1990, less than two years after the Iraq–Iran War, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. In January 1991, after a reversal of U.S. geopolitical positions that no longer held the Iraqi regime as

---


an important ally against Iran, as well as an increased desire for Kuwaiti oil, the U.S.-led coalition intervened (O’Tuathail, 1993). Led by the U.S., the Allied forces successfully persuaded the Iraqi Kurds to align with them and revolt against Baghdad. However, when the Allies withdrew from the region at the end of the war they ceased to support the Kurdish revolt. The Iraqi army retaliated (again) against the weakened Kurds causing as many as 1.5 million Kurds to flee to Turkey and Iran (McDowall, 2000: 373). The international media transmitted horrific images of Kurdish refugees starving and dying, and ultimately created sympathy for the Kurds’ suffering. Since the Kurds were for the first time aligned with the U.S., these images arguably encouraged politicians to create the safe-haven (a de facto state) north of the 36th parallel in northern Iraq to protect the now allied Kurds from further attacks from Saddam (Minear, Scott, & Weiss, 1996: 50).

Unlike the earlier representations of the Kurds as rebels and fighters, with the onset of the 1991 Gulf War the media generally portrayed the Kurds as backward victims and suffering refugees. For example, Time Magazine altered its stereotype of the Kurds as violent in an article titled, “A Kiss Before Dying?”, which refers to the betrayal and brutality experienced by Iraqi Kurds. The map acknowledged the territorial struggles of the Kurds by locating the disputed area around the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, and highlighting the region of the ‘proposed Kurdish autonomous region’.

The use and alteration of place names during the 1991 war are indicative of U.S. geostrategic influence in the region, as well as the continued contentiousness of the territorial claims of the region. The place names used in maps during the Gulf War emphasized American presence in Iraq. For example, the only two maps in Time Magazine that used the label ‘Kurdish Region’ instead of ‘Kurdistan’ are the same two maps that show American occupation of the area after the war. Similarly, Newsweek’s articles and maps in 1991 focused on Kurdish refugees fleeing Baghdad’s attacks, as well as the location of the Allied forces, but only one of the seven maps from 1991 labeled ‘Kurdistan’. A Gulf War commemorative issue published in Newsweek in the summer of 1991 contained a small-scale map of the Middle East that neglected any label to indicate Kurdistan, even though Mesopotamia is clearly labeled.

The New York Times’ and the Washington Post’s Gulf War maps also emphasized American presence and control in northern and southern Iraq while compromising the Kurds’ ties to the region. The New York Times favored using the U.S. centric labels ‘Protected Kurdish Zone,’ ‘Allied Controlled Area,’ or ‘Allied established safe haven,’ and omitted any label that recognized ‘Kurdistan’. By October 1991, the label ‘Kurdish Region’ was implemented by the New York Times and used almost exclusively in all subsequent maps that recognized Kurdish presence in the region.

The Washington Post also used simple locator maps during the war to assert American military presence in the ‘safe-haven’. The Washington Post used the label ‘Kurdistan’ to recognize the region until April 18, 1991, the same day that Allied troops entered Iraqi Kurdistan. During the occupation of northern Iraq, the labels ‘safe haven’ or ‘protected region’ were used almost exclusively when referring to the Kurdish region. By July 7, 1995 the Washington Post stopped using ‘Kurdistan’ entirely and substituted a key designating the shaded area as ‘Kurdish-inhabited areas,’ this remained the common strategy through 2002.

Even though the Kurds were recognized with varied place names and borders in all these maps, by the mid-1990s their claims to autonomous territory and an independent “Kurdistan” vanished from the map. The maps that recognized “Kurdistan” varied in size, orientation, and configuration of the region. Some maps only showed Iraqi Kurdistan, marginalizing other areas, while other maps used the Euphrates River in Turkey as the western boundary, and still other maps represented a more detailed and larger Kurdistan that penetrated further eastward into Turkey. Though the alteration of place names and borders during the Gulf War reflects the ambiguity of defining this region, it also compromised Kurdish claims to territory and produced space for the U.S. as protectors and liberators of Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the restructured world order of the post-Cold War years, Kurdistan (and more generally the Middle East) was no longer important in halting communist expansion. New geostrategic interest such as oil and the construction of “new enemies” to replace Soviets (O’Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 201–202) became the new geopolitical discourses of the region. Yet the Kurds were still depicted and constructed with many of the same geographical imaginings that were created during the Cold War (Sidaway, 1998: 234). Though the U.S.’ relationship with Kurdistan (and again the Middle East) had changed after the end of the Cold War, the ‘east’ was still being orientalized to legitimize U.S. primacy and interventions.

Turkey and the PKK

Most of the cartographic coverage of the Kurds thus far has pertained to issues occurring in Iraq and Iran; but the Kurds in Turkey took the front page for nearly a decade. The Kurds of Turkey were the victims of government policies that suppressed any expression of Kurdish identity. These policies eventually created conditions for the formation of Kurdish separatist groups seeking independence. In 1984 Abdallah Ocalan formed the PKK, a Kurdish separatist group that gained a reputation as ruthless revolutionaries (McDowall, 2000: 421). Ankara retaliated against the PKK, and warfare ensued in the Turkish Kurdistan in the late 1980s, then off and on throughout the 1990s, culminating in 1995 when Turkish troops aggressively retaliated by penetrating into Iraq in pursuit of PKK fighters. In the early 1990s, Ankara elicited the help of the KDP of northern Iraq in order to destroy the PKK bases and halt the PKK’s attacks against Turkey. However, this quickly turned into internal Kurdish fighting between the PKK and the KDP. Then in 1998 the PKK called for a ceasefire, and a year later Ocalan was captured. There has been relative peace in Turkish Kurdistan for several years; however, many Turkish Kurds are still vying for social and economic equality and basic human and cultural rights. The reports of the warfare between Turkish troops and the PKK in U.S. media were sparse and erratic. Perhaps the lack of reporting and thus the lack of condemning Turkish oppressive policies were reflections of the strategic U.S. alliance with Turkey. In fact, the New York Times and the Washington Post did not report on the turmoil between the PKK and Turkish forces until the Turks invaded northern Iraq in 1995 and threatened the Allied established safe haven. Though a few maps (and articles) in this sample acknowledged the oppression of Turkish Kurds, more often the Kurds were portrayed as violent and threatening.

35 This is an abbreviated account of a complex and enduring feud. It is estimated that by 1997 some 3000 Kurdish villages were ransacked, and thousands of people were displaced; by 1999 some 5000 Kurds had died. See McDowall (2000: 440, 442), Izady for a more thorough discussion.
In a 1987 Newsweek article, a map indicated the territory that the Kurds inhabited, but the article title “A Remote But Bitter War, Kurds and Turks fight out in the Wild East”, not only reinforced the view of warfare in the barbarian or ‘wild east’ or ‘other’ part of the world, but it also conveyed the image of the Kurd’s remoteness from our globalized news media in the West. In 1992, Newsweek reported that the PKK was fighting another Kurdish faction, the KDP, in northern Iraq. The loaded title “Brother vs. Brother” may evoke an emotional response from the reader of the tragedy and barbarian-ness of such a conflict. But this title also alludes to the quite obvious disunity of the Kurds. The included map shaded the ‘Kurdish area’ and used a large balloon to pinpoint where the ‘clashes’ between the two ‘brothers,’ or Kurdish factions, had occurred.

The Christian Science Monitor aligned itself with Ankara in reporting the conflict between the Kurds and Turkey. An August 25, 1989 map concerned with ‘Turkey’s Kurdish Problem’ did not recognize Kurdistan, but highlighted an area in Southeast Kurdistan as the location of the ‘problem’. In 1991, when most news sources were covering the Gulf War, the Christian Science Monitor published only four maps that related to the Kurds, yet these maps pertained not to the war in Iraq, but to the terrorist-labeled PKK in Turkey. A map from August 13, 1991 (Fig. 6) is sufficiently small in scale to show both the Bekaa Valley where the ‘Kurd Extremist Train’ and the ‘Area where Kurds live’. Bound with sparse lines, the latter region is a modest size Kurdistan, barely penetrating into Turkey. The Euphrates River in Turkey is also indicated on this map; and it is interesting to note that while this feature has been commonly used as the western boundary of Kurdistan, here Kurdistan does not even approach the river. In another map accompanying a July 12, 1995 (Fig. 7) article about the PKK, the Christian Science Monitor made an appalling design decision that makes the size and extent of the ‘Kurdish Area’ appear as though it exists only in Iraq and Iran.

Although subsequent maps included southeastern Turkey as a part of the ‘Kurdish Area,’ the westward extent of Kurdistan into Turkey was markedly less than most conventional understanding of the extent of the region. This trend of using borders that rarely penetrated westwards, whether purposeful or accidental, persistently denied the Kurd’s concentration and territorial claims.

The coverage of the Turkish and PKK warfare was sparse in all news sources and the oppressive Turkish policies were rarely criticized. Frequently, maps favored Turkish interests by neglecting to recognize the Kurds cartographically. These cartographic silences might reflect either the news source’s complacent attitude toward Turkish politics of ethnic assimilation, or more generally of the maintenance of a strong American strategic alliance with Turkey.

2003 Iraqi invasion

The U.S.-led Iraq invasion in April 2003 had powerful effects on Iraqi Kurds’ claims to territory and representation. Generally, the Kurds have been wary about their role in the ongoing restructuring of Iraq, but they won 75 seats in the January 2005 elections for the transitional

36 Newsweek, 3/30/87.
39 The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which was never ratified, granted the Kurds autonomy and the Euphrates River was its western border.
40 Christian Science Monitor, “Turkey’s Pursuit of the Kurds Disturbs Neighbors,” 7/12/95.
national assembly, and PUK leader Jalal Talibani was appointed president. While the demand for a sovereign Kurdish region within an Iraqi federation that includes the oil-rich city of Kirkuk has dissipated, the future of Iraqi Kurdistan remains uncertain. However, its future may be influenced by the Turkish government’s staunch opposition to the creation of an independent Kurdistan. As political guru Chomsky (2002: 1) stated “it is clear that even if the US gives a green light to federation from time to time, it will oppose such a solution as far as its relations with Turkey are concerned” (2002: 1).

The cartographic coverage of the pending war in 2002 was sparse, yet in each case it reinforced the dominant U.S. geopolitical arguments poised to attack Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power. In *Time Magazine*, the anticipated war with Iraq was the impetus for image-laden maps that represented Iraq and Kurdistan within eye-catching, decorative, and powerful images. Though these maps primarily communicated that Saddam was a threat that warranted American intervention, Kurdistan was implicated in the process. A September 2, 2002 map of Iraq contains larger-than-life image of Saddam with his right hand over his heart drawing attention to the map with the recognizable image of the man despised as the ruthless dictator of Iraq.41 The map shows the proximity of the Kurdish controlled territory in northern Iraq (as well as the ‘Kurdish-inhabited areas’ in Iran, Turkey, and Syria) to the suspected location of Al-Qaeda refugees, who were portrayed as infiltrating Iraq with possible connections to Saddam. The title of the article “Iraq and Al Qaeda: is there a link?,” clearly demonstrates the map’s aim. An October 21, 2002 map used textboxes to indicate where Saddam’s armies were located, and a massive ‘conventional bomb’ penetrated Iraq from the northeast clearly suggesting the presence of weapons in Iraq.42

The maps published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as the 2003 war against Iraq was pending represented Kurdistan as a strategically important region for the Allies, and

---

41 *Time Magazine*, “Iraq and Al Qaeda: is there a link?” 9/2/02.
42 *Time Magazine*, “The Tool of War Expecting a Rerun of Gulf War I,” 10/21/02.
occasionally labeled it the ‘Kurdish Region’ or the ‘Kurdish Controlled Region’, but these areas never extended outside of Iraq, nor included the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk.43

In general, the maps produced in late 2002 demonstrate that Kurdistan is a geostrategically important yet undefinable region, which contains valuable territory and oil. But they also cartographically supported the claims that there were chemical weapons in Iraq, that Iraq was linked to Al-Qaeda, and of Saddam’s authoritative control of the region.44 These three factors helped to justify U.S. invasion of Iraq, which also further facilitated U.S. primacy and control in the Middle East.

Conclusions

U.S. geopolitical discourses changed several times between 1945 and 2002 (Bulut, 1997: 53), and the journalistic cartography of Kurdistan continually reflected and supported these politics. The variations and omissions of ‘Kurdistan’ are a likely reflection of the ambiguity of determining the location and even the existence of Kurdistan, as well as the unity of the Kurds. Yet in several instances the cartographic marginalization of the Kurds helped to support broader U.S. geopolitical agendas. As discussed above, some maps silenced Kurdish claims in Turkey and therefore may have helped the U.S. to maintain strong strategic relations with the Turkish government. The Kurds were also marginalized by the place names that were used to stress American presence as liberators in Iraqi Kurdistan after the Gulf War.

Yet maps reflect the values and norms of a society, and therefore it is not surprising that geopolitical discourses are embedded in maps. However, because maps are often deemed objective and scientific representations of the world, the messages in maps and the geographical

43 *Washington Post*, “US Forces in the Persian Gulf,” 12/2/02. The *Christian Science Monitor* did not use maps in late 2002, when war with Iraq was looming; marking the second time the *Monitor* chose to offer little cartographic coverage of an American war in Iraq.

knowledge they produce often go unquestioned. It is precisely this complacency that makes maps persuasive and powerful.

A critical reading of the cartographic representations of Kurdistan revealed not only the dominant geopolitics of specific events, but also a more subtle narrative. Readily noticeable in boundary demarcations, place names, text, titles, and the use of symbols were ‘our’ stereotypes of the ‘other’ (Said, 1978: 12). However subtle or blatant, the maps examined in this research often reflected a superficial and oversimplified political perspective. By portraying the Kurds as violent rebels (when the Kurds were seen as enemies to the U.S. during the Cold War and also after the Islamic Revolution in Iran) or backward victims (as with the Gulf War), the Kurds were constructed within various orientalizing discourses and dominant U.S. geopolitical positions were supported. Yet the media’s slanted interpretation and oversimplified writing of conflict in Kurdistan does not exist in a vacuum, but is part of larger discourses that create and re-create images, stereotypes, and politics. Underlying these geopolitical imaginings is the pervasive Western centrism of primacy and modernity. The intersections of geopolitical and orientalist discourses in these maps support and perpetuate one another, and together

Fig. 8. *Time Magazine*, “Iraq and Al Qaeda: is there a link?,” 9/2/02.
produce and reproduce the geopolitical imagination of the backward ‘other’ and the U.S.’ primacy over it (Agnew, 1999: 5).

In sum, the maps in this study are socially constructed expressions of space that reflect geopolitical agendas. Given the pervasiveness of media maps and the ability of maps to influence our geographical imaginations, the subtleties of maps and the discourses embedded in them become an important avenue to explore. As the re-construction of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan continues under the close supervision of the U.S. government, the Kurds are seen positively as key players in rebuilding and uniting Iraq. However, long term Kurdish national demands may diverge from U.S. interests (Viviano, 2006), thus the U.S.’ orientalizing discourses on the Kurds may yet again change.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on research conducted at Syracuse University from 2001 to 2003. With the continued support and advice from Mark Monmonier my original research and this article were completed, but any shortcomings remain my own. I also want to thank Mia Feldbaum, Brenden McNeil, Alison Mountz, John Western, Anne Mosher, Mehrzad Boroujerdi, and three anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts; and Chelsea Teale for cartographic assistance.

References


Lemann, N. (2001, April 9). Atlas shrugs, the new geography argues that maps have shaped the world. The New Yorker.


