

POLITICS OF ETHNICITY AND THE KURDISH QUAGMIRE

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Abstract:

At the international arena, ethnic groups and their demand for a separate homeland are often taken as a struggle for the right of self-determination. However, the history is full of examples which indicate that ethnicity alone is rarely the primary aspect mobilising any ethnic group which apparently struggles to achieve independence because they are 'distinct'. Significantly, usually ethnic groups demanding independence are 'political actors' having certain concrete eco-political goals to achieve. Moreover, it is not the whole ethnic group indulging in independence struggle rather the political parties and organisations within the ethnic group. Within this context, the focus of this qualitative study is to understand Kurd's politics of ethnicity and the subsequent impact of this 'politicised ethnicity' at the regional level. To this end, this article takes the example of Kurds generally and Iraqi Kurds particularly and tries to assess the extent to which the age-old Kurdish demand for independence generally and from Iraq particularly is a byproduct of politics of ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Ethnic conflicts have become a significant issue in international relations. For, such conflicts often impinge on bordering states; threaten both regional and global security and stability. Moreover, ethnic clashes often turn out to be a key concern for politicians and policymakers. Given their increased relevance in the international arena, ethnic conflicts are now considered to be the domain of high politics for immovability of boundaries and territorial integrity. These types of conflicts fundamentally affect the integrity of the states that build up the international system of sovereign states.

Significantly, ethnic conflicts have affected both the developed and developing world equally. Nonetheless, given the already weak state apparatus of majority of the developing countries, such ethnic struggles have proved to be more detrimental and injurious to the developing world. In verity, it is only a recent phenomenon that ethnic groups or political actors have started mitigating their political demands or rights in the name of ethnicity or nationalism. However, historically political legitimacy was solely derived from religion. This

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fundamental difference lies in the transformation that occurred from supernatural political authenticity to ethics of right of self-determination for all the nations.¹

In the broader Middle Eastern context, the question of Kurdish nationalism, autonomy/independence or democratic rights as a marginal group has affected primarily four Middle Eastern states—Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria—where the vast majority of Kurds dwell. The nature of Kurdish conflict is multifaceted and dynamic encompassing four different states making the conflict more composite to resolve. Moreover, in each state, they have to face state nationalist discourse that attempts to either Turkify, Persianise or Arabise them and a different set of challenges and opportunities that shapes their strategies to accomplish their goals. Particularly, in the case of Iraq, this unending conflict has created a semi-independent region which maintains independent trade relations with Turkey. Despite this, Iraqi Kurds seem determined, more than ever to gain an independent state from Iraq.

Within this context, the Iraqi Kurdish referendum has created a new dimension in an already intricate Middle Eastern dynamics. On 25 September 2017, Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq undertook a referendum regarding the question of Kurdish independence.² An overwhelming portion of Kurds population cast their vote despite the strong domestic, regional, and international opposition against the referendum. The results of Kurdish referendum have revealed that majority of the population is in favour of Kurdish independence. It is important to remember that the head of KRG, Massoud Barzani, repeatedly dismissed the concerns of regional and international actors that utterly disapproved the referendum and its timing as well.

Nevertheless, now as the referendum has been carried out, what really Iraqi Kurds have gained from it, given that virtually no state has shown approval towards it except Israel. Interestingly, it is not the first time that Iraqi Kurds have shown a keen interest in the ballot. Almost 12 years ago, in 2005 KRG carried out an unofficial referendum. The majority votes, as expected, were in favour of Kurd's accession from Iraq.³ In the tumultuous region, where great

¹ A. Maxwell and T. Smith, "Positing 'Not-yet-Nationalism': Limits to the Impact of Nationalism Theory on Kurdish Historiography," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 43, No. 5, 2015, pp. 1–2.

² "Iraqi Kurds Vote in Controversial Referendum," available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/iraqi-kurds-vote-independence-referendum-170925032733525.html?xif=.>> (accessed on 28 February 2018).

³ K. Collin, "The Kurdish Referendum Won't Deliver Independence—here's Why It Matters Anyway," available at: <[https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/09/19/the-kurdish-referendum-wont-deliver-independence-heres-why-it-matters-anyway/.](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/09/19/the-kurdish-referendum-wont-deliver-independence-heres-why-it-matters-anyway/)> (accessed on 28 February 2018).

powers have always struggled to keep the balance of power, it is important to evaluate the significance this referendum holds for the entire region and beyond. The main question is that Why the KRG desires for separation, despite having an already ‘semi-autonomous’ region in Iraq? This will be addressed by adopting an inside-out approach and with the help of qualitative data.

To understand complex subtleties of the age-old Kurdish conflict generally and Iraqi Kurdish demand for independence from Iraq particularly, it is important to conceptualise history of Kurds ethno-politics and their in-group dynamics. Also, a light needs to be shed on how their ethno-politics particularly the recent referendum has been received by Iraq and other regional actors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present research has utilised two conceptual frameworks in order to generate an in-depth understanding of Kurds ethno-politics. The two perspectives that are used in the paper are ‘politics of ethnicity’ and ‘imagined community’.

POLITICS OF ETHNICITY

Paul Richard Brass has given a comprehensive theoretical perspective on politics of ethnicity.⁴ The standpoint in politics of ethnicity entails that ethnic groups are not some distinct cultural or linguistic factions but rather they are political actors having some concrete political goals. In other words, culture or language does not automatically lead to conflict between the ethnic group and state. Furthermore, political and economic conditions play a major role in sowing the seeds of ethno-politics at a specific point in time.⁵

More to the point, ethnic groups struggle to gain their rights and objectives which they perceive they are deliberately deprived of by the state. These rights could range from acquiring increased representation in the mainstream politics or use of their mother tongue officially or even independence. In order to materialise their goals, ethnic groups establish political organisations or parties and at this moment ethnicity becomes politicised.

Applying this perspective to Kurds, it can be analysed that Kurd’s despondent politico-economic circumstances led them to mobilise politically. Likewise, Kurds have established many independent political organisations in order to achieve their long-standing objectives. Furthermore, the common Kurdish population or Kurdish nation as a whole is not indulging in conflict

⁴ P. R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991, pp. 13–17.

⁵ F. H. Siddiqi, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Pakistan: The Baloch, Sindhi and Mohajir Ethnic Movements*, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 14–15.