

Iraqi Kurdistan

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The Kurds are a group of people who inhabit the mountainous border region between Southern Turkey, Northern Iraq, and Western Iran, as well as parts of Syria, Azerbaijan and Armenia. This region possessing a Kurdish majority is generally referred to as Kurdistan (land of the Kurds), although this term has a highly contentious history, particularly in Iraq and Turkey.¹ Large numbers of Kurds have relocated from their traditional heartland to major cities in Turkey and Iran, and there is a significant Kurdish diaspora population in Western Europe. Numbering some twenty five million in total, the Kurds are frequently called the largest ethnic group or nation without its own independent state. Nationality and ethnicity are two concepts that are similar and overlapping in some respects, but distinct. Michael Keating has written widely on the subject of nationality and particularly stateless nations, and following his definitional criteria,² the Kurdish people possess a nationality in that 'Kurdishness' is based on a shared ethnic identity and tied to claims to a specific territory. While they possess this collective identity, the Kurds are nonetheless a heterogeneous people with great linguistic, religious, and political diversity.

I believe there is significant value to be derived from analyzing the Kurdish experience from the vantage point of the "political process" literature dominated by Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly, and Sidney Tarrow. I believe this body of theoretical literature, particularly the contributions of Tarrow,³ provides a useful framework for analyzing and comparing Kurdish nation-

building in different states. Assertions of Kurdish national identity have both collective and contentious dimensions, and Tarrow provides a structure that is well suited to explaining the forces shaping Kurdish national expression. I have limited myself to examining the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq because space constraints prohibit any analysis dealing with more than one country. I have chosen to discuss the Kurdish nationalist experience in Iraq rather than Turkey, Iran, or elsewhere because its history offers a number of pronounced shifts in the political opportunity structure which the Kurds faced than in other locations, making it a particularly good subject of analysis using Tarrow's model.

The collective Kurdish identity in Iraq has been shaped by oppression by the Iraqi state, and the Kurds have responded through armed resistance. The major resistance groups have been militarized parties founded along ostensibly nationalist lines, although many of their supporters appear to prioritize tribal loyalties above any Kurdish national identity they may feel they possess. I will discuss the problematic nature of Kurdish nationalism with direct reference to Tarrow's three key factors of contentious action: political opportunity; framing processes; and mobilizing structures. My analysis is concerned primarily with the historical development of Kurdish national identity since Iraqi independence, and I have avoided extensively discussing the political situation following the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime by the American-led coalition. In order to set

the stage for a discussion of Iraqi-Kurdish nationalism I now provide some general background information about the Kurds and the land they inhabit, and a brief overview of the major forms of collective identity relevant to the discussion.

Kurdistan and the Kurds

People identified as Kurds have lived in the region now known as Kurdistan for at least 2500 years,⁴ but most scholars agree that Kurdish nationalist sentiments did not develop until the twentieth century, as the Middle East was reorganized into European-style nation-states.⁵ In the previous centuries, Kurdistan was nominally divided between the Ottoman Turkish and Qajar Persian empires, although the region enjoyed considerable autonomy and acted as a buffer zone between the two empires.⁶ In the aftermath of World War One and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres promised autonomy to the majority-Kurdish region, and the possibility of statehood in the future.⁷ However, neither autonomy nor statehood for the Kurdish people was in the interests of the Allied powers or Kemal Atatürk's new Turkish republic, and Ottoman Kurdistan was divided among the new states created from the carcass of the empire.⁸ The territory of what is now modern Iraq, including the mainly Kurdish regions in the north, came under the influence of the British, who continued to exert influence over the newly created state until the revolution of 1958.⁹

As indicated above, the Kurds are a diverse people. There are two major dialects of the Kurdish language (Kurmanji and Surani) and several minor ones, and the language is further divided by the fact that Kurds in Turkey have adopted a Roman script for their written language, while Kurds in Iraq and Iran use an adapted Arabic script.¹⁰ The majority of Kurds practice Sunni Islam, but there are

Shi'a, Christian, Jewish, and Alevi Kurds, and practitioners of other regional religious minorities. Political organizations among the Kurds vary from communist guerilla groups to radical Islamic groups, with a great deal of variation in between. Furthermore, the primary form of social organization in rural Kurdistan continues to be the tribe, a fact that has placed its stamp on Kurdish nationalism. Likewise, Kurdistan, while possessing a Kurdish majority, also encompasses Armenian, Turkoman, Assyrian, Persian, Arab, and Turkish populations.¹¹ In response to this diversity, some Kurdish nationalist groups have tried to promote their nationalism as civic and territorially based rather than ethnically based.¹² For clarity purposes I use the term 'Greater Kurdistan' to refer to this area, while portion lying within the Iraqi national border is referred to as 'Iraqi-Kurdistan'.

Despite the diversity of the Kurdish nation, one of its unifying characteristics is the oppression its people have suffered in the twentieth century by the nation-states that control the territory of Kurdistan. In particular, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey have the most pronounced history of Kurdish repression, and the vast majority of Kurds inhabit these three states. The Kurds have responded to this repression through various forms of contention, including violent resistance. Being split among several states the Kurdish nation is thus inherently transnational in character, while at the same time being stateless. These two characteristics have important implications for the construction of Kurdish nationalism.

Overall, the division of Kurdistan (and its consequent statelessness) has produced a division of the nation-building project, as each state-constrained Kurdish population has responded to and defined its identity in relation to local circumstances in their respective nation-

states. The Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe and elsewhere represents a countercurrent to this trend in that it is attempting to create a unified Kurdish national identity,¹³ but ironically this contributes yet another competing version of Kurdish nationalism. While each group identifies itself as Kurdish and recognizes there are other groups in near by states that identify themselves as Kurds, each is essentially defining Kurdishness on its own terms.

Even within particular states there is competition among Kurdish nationalist groups over what form the Kurdish nation should take. One notable example of this phenomenon is the open conflict in the Iraqi Kurdish Autonomous Region between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), a relatively conservative built upon tribal coalitions, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by urban intellectuals, that occurred from 1994 to 1998,¹⁴ and divided Iraqi Kurdistan until the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Nation, State, Tribe & Ethnicity

Keating, in his exploration of non-state nationalisms, argues for the need to separate the nation, the state, and ethnicity as analytical categories, noting that ethnic groups do not necessarily make the territorially based claims characteristic of nations, while the state does not possess a monopoly on nationalism.¹⁵ Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller caution against identifying the nation and the state as “two separate objects of inquiry,” with the state as a neutral set of governing institutions.¹⁶ Keating’s analytical separation does not fall prey to this risk of naturalizing the nation-state, but instead emphasizes that state and nation cannot be conflated, while acknowledging that a national identity is very much a necessary component of any state.

The exact relationship between ethnicity and nationality is more difficult to establish. This is because it is very difficult to define either concept in a precise manner. Benedict Anderson’s famous characterization of nations as sovereign and limited “imagined communities” merely elaborates some of the most salient aspects of the term rather than providing an expansive definition.¹⁷ Keating similarly avoids constructing elaborate definitions and instead concentrates on highlighting some of the differences between the two. Both are forms collective identity, and Keating describes ethnicity as a “fluid and instrumental” form of identity that is contextually based.¹⁸ Nationalism always contains a dimension of territoriality, although this does not necessarily entail claims to an independent sovereign state. Examples such as Quebec or Scotland demonstrate that nations can exist within and potentially across larger state boundaries. Nationalism can be framed along ethnic lines, essentially fusing an ethnic identity with a claim to autonomy over or simply identification with a given territory. Alternately, civic nationalism rests not on belief in common ancestry but on shared values and expectations of the state.¹⁹ Most nationalisms contain a mix of these two ideal types, and Kurdish nationalism is no exception.

Another form of collective identification relevant to the discussion of the Kurdish experience is tribalism, as most rural inhabitants still identify primarily in terms of kinship ties, rather than as Kurds or as Iraqis. Tribes have their own authority figures and have historically provided a significant challenge to nationalists, be they Iraqi or Kurdish, attempting to foster a broader sense of collective identity.²⁰

Political Opportunities

The last fifteen years has seen the publication of a number of histories of the experience of the Kurds in the different nation-states they inhabit,²¹ but these have tended to be descriptive historical accounts lacking the analytical frameworks necessary to adequately explain how and why the Kurdish nationalist movements have emerged. These texts contain essential historical details and I have relied especially on McDowall's incredibly detailed account, but they are not equipped with the theoretical apparatus necessary to adequately explain the processes of nationalism. Other texts, such as Ofra Bengio's analysis of political discourse in Ba'th Iraq,²² or Andreas Wimmer's *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict*,²³ provide valuable insights into the issue of Kurdish nationalism, but only in the process of explaining their respective theses rather than exploring the issue for its own sake. Michael Gunter's 2004 article "The Kurdish Question in Perspective" offers an explanation of the history of Kurdish nationalist contention,²⁴ but it is unsatisfactory as described below. In response to the lack of theoretical analysis of Kurdish nationalism, I have borrowed Tarrow's 'contentious politics' model to better explain the subject.

According to McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, there are three main factors used by so-called 'movement scholars' in analyzing the development of contentious action: political opportunities; mobilizing structures; and framing processes.²⁵ Tarrow describes these factors at length in *Power and Movement*. First, 'political opportunities' are the changes in the set opportunities and constraints imposed upon social groups that encourage contentious action.²⁶ One of Tarrow's key points is that objective conditions such as deprivation of resources, denial of identity,

and so forth are not in themselves sufficient to produce contentious political action, and that action will only occur if a catalyst in the form of a change in opportunities is provided.²⁷

Gunter makes the argument that the prevalence of revolt and uprising among the Iraqi-Kurds is the product of the proportionately higher Kurdish population in Iraq compared to Turkey or Iran, the supposedly artificial nature of the Iraqi state, and the division of the Arab population along Sunni/Shi'a lines.²⁸ This interpretation is overly simplistic and fails to explain why Kurdish revolt has been more pronounced at some times than others: these factors are objective conditions that have been consistent since the formation of the Iraqi state. According to Tarrow, they are thus insufficient to produce contentious action (i.e. uprisings) on their own. It was the shifts in the opportunity structure of the Iraqi political system that enabled the contentious outbursts that have been critical in the formation of Iraqi Kurdish identity. The politically unstable period from 1958 to 1975 saw the leadership of the Iraqi state change with great frequency, and often the new regimes courted Kurdish support in order to solidify their positions, but just as quickly would turn against the Kurds if they were seen as a threat.²⁹ The prominent Kurdish tribal leader Mustafa Barzani received arms and funding in return for supporting Brigadier Qasim, the leader of Iraq following a republican coup in 1958, and was thus able to gain a great deal of power in Iraqi-Kurdistan,³⁰ but Qasim was soon unnerved by Barzani's influence and moved against him. In response to the republican government's indiscriminate violence in the Kurdish regions, Barzani was able to muster a broad-based coalition Kurdish groups that was able to resist the government and gain control of Iraqi Kurdistan and set up a "shadow state",

although admittedly with Iranian patronage.³¹

In 1974 conflict once again erupted between the Kurdish coalition led by Barzani and the Iraqi government, at that time under the control of the Ba'th party. As with Qasim's republican regime the Ba'th was initially conciliatory towards the Kurds,³² but soon moved to extend its authority over Iraqi-Kurdistan. Again a broad coalition comprised of a wide spectrum of Kurdish society was organized under Barzani to resist Iraqi forces, and the armed resistance lasted until 1975, when Iran withdrew its support for the Kurds.³³ This period from 1958 to 1975 saw the strengthening of unity and commonality of purpose among Kurdish groups as a result of their participation in resistance against the various governments in Baghdad. Was this unity an expression of nationalism or merely a reaction to aggression by an outside party? This question has been debated by scholars and will be discussed in more detail below in the analysis of the approaches used by Kurdish leaders to frame their contention.

Although Kurdish groups occasionally worked together to provide a unified front against Iraqi aggression, they were just as often in conflict with each other. In particular, there was an ideological rift between the Barzani and his relatively conservative tribal supporters and the urban leftist ideologues such as Jalal Talabani who sought the creation of a Kurdish national identity along Euro-American lines.³⁴ While allied to one another within the KDP for several years, in the early 1960s Barzani expelled the leftists, who would later become the leadership of the PUK. Both parties were heavily militarized by the 1980s and were often in conflict with one another during the Iran-Iraq War, despite their mutual antagonism towards the Iraqi government, now led by Saddam Hussein. A united front

emerged towards the end of the war, primarily because the two Kurdish parties shared Iranian patronage.³⁵ In this case, contentious action against the Iraqi government was not sufficient to bring the Kurds together, in part because of the significant difference in the frames used by Kurdish elites to encourage contention.

Competing Frames

Framing processes are the manner in which actors 'package' their grievances and offer ways to redress these grievances.³⁶ Tarrow suggests that nationalism, along with religion, provides "ready-made symbols, rituals, and solidarities that can be accessed and appropriated by movement leaders".³⁷ This is true, but only up to a point. When the issue at stake is the nation's identity itself, and there is no acknowledged 'national' (i.e. state) authority, competing groups of actors will attempt to frame the identity of the nation along lines that are in accord with their own ideological, religious, class, and intellectual, and other viewpoints. In the Kurdish case, this phenomenon is manifested in the multiplicity of Kurdish nationalist movements with significantly different approaches: Marxists, tribal coalitionists, Islamic fundamentalists, et cetera.

Framing Kurdish nationalism in Iraq has proved difficult. While educated urban Kurds have thought in nationalist terms since the partition of Greater Kurdistan, the rural population has continued to organize along tribal lines, dominated politically by landlords (*aghas*) and religious shaykhs. The Kurdish national project in Iraq has depended on the mobilizing of these 'traditionalist' elements for nationalist causes.³⁸ There were a number of Kurdish revolts from 1920 to 1946, but these were all essentially expressions of tribal grievances towards the central government's negligence of

regional socioeconomic issues.³⁹ The most notable of these early revolts was that of Mustafa Barzani, who enjoyed prestige both as a notable tribal leader and as a religious authority. In 1943 he escaped detention (having been put there by the Baghdad government for his participation in an earlier revolt) and returned to his base of power in Barzan, in the far north of Iraq. His personal dispute with the central government provided a focal point for broader regional dissatisfaction with inadequate government response to a famine in the Kurdish regions, allowing Barzani to create a broad coalition of Kurdish tribes opposing the government.⁴⁰

The broad base of rural support Barzani enjoyed made him a natural focal point for the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq.⁴¹ 1946 saw the formation of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which incorporated both modernizing nationalists and tribal leaders. Some particularly left-leaning nationalists, unwilling to cooperate with 'traditional' or 'feudal' elements, allied themselves instead with the Iraqi Communist Party. The issue of cooperation with the landlords and shaykhs was only one of many contentious issues facing the actors attempting to promote Kurdish nationalism. Another dilemma was whether to promote a nationalism that encompassed Greater Kurdistan or one that merely applied to Kurds living in Iraq. The creation of a specifically Iraqi KDP appeared to support the latter approach.⁴²

The KDP reframed its approach slightly in 1953, changing its name to the Kurdistan Democratic Party. This implied a civic approach to the nationalism, centred on territory rather than Kurdish ethnicity, and was intended to draw in support of non-Kurdish groups. The party also attempted to tie nationalism to the improvement of socioeconomic conditions among the tribal peasantry, although

actual progress on this front was limited by the KDP's dependence on tribal authorities.⁴³ Wimmer argues that attempts to infuse a sense of national loyalty among the "rank-and-file" tribe members was unsuccessful, and their participation in the nationalist movement was (and remains) a product of their loyalty to established tribal leaders.⁴⁴ McDowall suggests that the alignment of most Iraqi Kurds to either the KDP or PUK after 1991 represented not success in instilling nationalist ideas in the Kurdish populace, but the replacement of the old tribal systems that were largely wiped out in the decades of violence and repression with a 'neo-tribalism' that features the nationalist parties as the new centre of allegiance and loyalty.⁴⁵ The division of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan into two separate PUK- and KDP-administered regions and subsequent conflict beginning in 1994 appeared to reinforce McDowall's suspicion, although the reunification of the autonomous Kurdish parliament in 2002 could equally be presented as evidence of a commitment to democratic governance.⁴⁶ Wimmer makes a strong case for the relationship between democratic representation and national self-determination.⁴⁷ Since the overthrow of the Ba'th regime, the Kurds have shown a great willingness to engage in Iraqi politics, if election turnout numbers or Jalal Talabani's position as Iraqi president can be used as indicators.⁴⁸

Generally speaking, there was a sense of common national identity among Iraqi Kurds (at least educated urban Kurds), but there was little consensus regarding the content of that national identity. Different nationalist groups offered competing ways of framing the national struggle (coalition-based vs. leftist, ethnic vs. civic, et cetera) and frames changed over time in response to new political opportunities and constraints.

Mobilizing Structures

The third major category of analysis for Tarrow and other social movement theorists is mobilizing structures: the networks, organizations, and other vehicles through which actors engage in collective action.⁴⁹ The characteristic organizational expression of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq proved to be the militant party, a fusion of urban-bred nationalist ideology relying on a 'traditional' tribal power bases to engage in nationalist contention. The KDP under Mustafa Barzani was the prototype for this model, which was later replicated by the more progressive and intellectual PUK because the recurring governmental threats to the very survival of Kurdish nationalism radicalized and militarized the movement.

As mentioned above, the militarized nationalist parties often formed networks and connections with governing elites in order to secure resources such as funding, arms and legitimacy not otherwise available. A similar process of network formation can be observed at various periods between Kurdish nationalists and Iraq's external rivals, particularly Iran. This generally occurred when the nationalist movements could not access the resources of the state, and thus felt compelled to look elsewhere.

The creation of the Kurdish Regional Government in the early 1990s saw the incorporation of an additional role for the militarized parties: component of a representative governing assembly. Both the PUK and KDP appear to have taken on characteristics familiar to a political party in a typical representative democracy. This role is likely to become more salient in the future as the two parties have formed an alliance representing the Kurdish nationalist movement on the state level.⁵⁰

The three factors (political opportunities, framing processes, and mobilizing structures) are all interrelated,

and changes in one can alter the others. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 and subsequent reorganization of the Iraqi state was a huge shift in the political opportunities available to Iraqi Kurds. Both the KDP and the PUK reframed their approaches, moving from policies of each running their own essentially independent quasi-states in Northern Iraq to participating in the creation of the new Iraqi state, in which the Kurds enjoy significant autonomy but are still a part of the broader nation-state. In response to these changes in political opportunity and framing approaches, the two organizations have also moved from a competitive and antagonistic stance towards one another to forming an alliance with each other and other Kurdish groups, and representing Kurdish interests in the Iraqi assembly.

Conclusion

Like any form of collective activism, nationalist movements can be understood through studying the political opportunities that enable their existence, the frames they construct in defining themselves, and the structures they adopt to mobilize support. The case of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq is an example of a highly contentious stateless and transnational form of nationalism that was largely reterritorialized within state boundaries. The ideal of Kurdish nationalism has been forced to compromise with tribal reality and the fact that the regional and great powers have no interest in the statehood of Greater Kurdistan, while Iraqi nationalists have struggled with incorporating the Kurdish identity into a broader Iraqi national identity. The resulting years of conflict between the Kurds of Iraq and the state have indeed fostered a Kurdish nationalism, but it is a specifically *Iraqi*-Kurdish nationalism, a

product of a particular Iraqi-Kurdish experience.

The problematic state of Kurdish collective identity has unclear implications for the 'new' Iraq. While Kurds appear to be among the most enthusiastic participants in the Iraqi electoral system, their participation seems contingent on the retention of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq. It could be argued that the participation of Kurds in the Iraqi democratic system as Kurds (i.e. voting for political parties specifically claiming to represent Kurdish interests in the state legislature) will reinforce Iraqi Kurdish national identity by offering an expression of collective identity that is not influenced by tribal relationships. However, such an argument could not be sustained without first undertaking a detailed study of Iraqi electoral politics and particularly Kurdish voting patterns in the recent elections. The

political opportunities and constraints facing the Kurds have changed frequently since the American occupation began, as have the framing processes and organizational structures used by Kurdish leaders. The speed and complexity of these recent developments makes it difficult to assess their ramifications for Kurdish nationalism, especially as the instability of the circumstances in Iraq suggests even more change in the near future. Despite the complexity of the situation, the occupation of Iraq has also raised the profile of Kurdish issues, which will hopefully encourage more scholarship on the subject in the future, and a raised awareness of the condition of Kurdish identity not only in Iraq, but in other countries with Kurdish minorities as well.

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