

**MIDDLE EAST PhD STUDENTS  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

**STATE, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST**

**BRUNEI GALLERY LECTURE THEATRE, SOAS, LONDON**

**07-08 MAY 2011**

**THE FUTURE OF RISING KURDISH NATIONALISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE  
EAST: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF TURKEY, ISRAEL AND IRAN**

**DRAFT VERSION:**  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Nationalism, a contingent phenomenon produced by the unique conditions of the modern era, is generally regarded as a recent development in the Middle East. Prior to the nineteenth century, concepts of collective identity and allegiance appear to have been defined primarily on the basis of lineage, locality, or religion—communities of sentiment and solidarity either smaller or larger than the subsequently emerged nationalisms. The nineteenth century was the seedtime of nationalism in the Middle East. The region's geographic, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity has provided the basis for numerous and competing nationalist movements. Turkish and Arab ethnic nationalism became active movements only in the early twentieth century, specifically in the "Young Turks" era. Similar organizational and intellectual trends occurred in the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Fertile Crescent: new Arab societies with a political agenda emerged; demands for Arab autonomy. Modern Jewish nationalism did not require a similar process of the rediscovery of national distinctiveness. A sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity existed among Jews well before the nineteenth century. In Iran, distinct geographical areas existing as autonomous polities with their own ruling structure since the sixteenth century led Westernized Iranian intellectuals to assert the existence of historically unique Iranian "nation" by the later decades of the century. Active nationalist activity in Iran dates back the 1890s and was produced by much the same combination of dynastic incompetence and foreign economic penetration; in the Iranian case it generated a formally successful Iranian constitutional movement in the early years of the twentieth century.

Being aware of themselves as a distinct people and community for well over a thousand years, Kurds, who constitute the largest ethnic bloc after the Arabs, Persian and Turks in the Middle East, have been relatively late in developing a modern nationalist movement. The Kurds'

delay in developing a strong nationalist movement is due to several factors such as religion, geography, nomadic way of life and political division between Persian and Ottoman Empire for five hundred years and they have been yet further divided among the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria for the past seventy years. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Kurds of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey have, at various times, agitated for their local or national rights. Today, faced with a combination of dramatic domestic political changes and profound international developments, the Kurds of Turkey (as well as Iraq and Iran) have entered a new phase of national awareness. Domestic assertiveness has emerged in the context of a modern world of nation states, the spread of democratization and human rights, the increased communication among all Kurds themselves, and raised political expectations. With the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and its 'de facto' political power, Kurdish nationalism in the Modern Middle East went a step further.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Self-construction and self-evolution of Kurdish national identity from the last period of the Ottoman Empire to present day is an important development in the Middle East. Kurds are the only community having no nation-state among nationalist movements in the Middle East. Kurdish nationalism had not yet reached its maturity period in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. There are undoubtedly several reasons for this delay in the development of the Kurdish national movement. These reasons being out of the purpose of this study have been corroded by various global and local elements especially in the 20th century. The first echoes of Kurdish nationalism in the modern Middle East emerged at the end of 1910s. Society for the Rise of Kurdistan was founded in January 10, 1918. Kurds living in Iraq led by Mahmoud Barzanji rebelled with nationalist demands in 1919 and Kurds living in the newly established Republic of Turkey rebelled with nationalist demands in the early 1920s. These first

rebellions in Turkey and Iraq were suppressed by force. However, the geography in which Kurdish nationalism was the most active in the first half of the 20th century is Turkey. The number of Kurdish rebellions which took place in Turkey in the period starting from 1920s till 1940s is 24. Outside of Turkey, several nationalist activities took place in Iraq and Iran, but none of them reached its goal.

The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad which was established in Iran in 1946 is an important milestone in the modern Kurdish history and understanding of Kurdish nationalism. The de facto government started in 1942 was officially declared as the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, but it could not preserve its entity due to several national and international reasons. Kurdish nationalism was especially more active in Iraqi Kurdistan in the second half of the twentieth century. Kurdish opposition mainly developing under the leadership of Barzani family during this period made a significant achievement by gaining autonomy. Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 was supported by Iranian Kurdistan, and Kurds in Iran gained some basic rights. However, in the following period these rights were not implemented by the Iranian regime. 1990s have witnessed a new dynamism for Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East. Two important factors played an important role in this dynamism. The first factor was the creation of a no-fly zone in Iraqi Kurdistan by the UN Security Council resolution after the Gulf War and Kurds' gaining de facto autonomy and ability to manage themselves. The second important factor was the activities carried out by PKK in Turkey. These factors have led to the discussion of Kurdish nationalism along with the existence and rights of Kurds by the international community.

Kurdish nationalism showed a significant rise during the 2000s. The most important reason for this rise was the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which was formed in the Kurdish region of Iraq. KRG's gaining an international qualification and its becoming a subject in the

regional affairs was the most important achievements of Kurdish political movement during the 2000s. Regarding KRG's existence and the mission it undertook, Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Syria started to think the perception of a different option for themselves. This perception is of course regarded as a source of threat by the nation-states in which Kurds live. Kurds finding a place as an actor in the international politics and the role played by KRG in the Middle East's international policies has become a source of inspiration for the Kurdish communities living in other countries. While several universities have been founded in the region since 2003, five state universities provide Kurdish education in the region as of 2005. The progress on many elements of the Kurdish culture in Iraqi Kurdistan produced significant results for the Kurds living in other countries.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Kurds preserved their identities by differentiating it from the dominant ethnic identity even after the split of Kurdish lands between Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq following the collapse of the Ottoman and Persian empires. Kurdish nationalism found new opportunities for itself at the beginning of 20th century which witnessed a transition from the imperial system to nation-state system. A shift from the religion to the ethnicity occurred in defining the big group identity in the Middle East during the post-imperial period. A political arena in which Kurdish nationalism could find a place was formed in this new formation based on ethnicity. However, this arena could not be taken advantage of due to several internal and external factors.

Great transformations occurring in the Middle East after the First World War also greatly influenced the Kurds and their nationalist movement. Kurdish nationalism emerged as a reaction and opposing actions against the political structure of the states in which Kurds live

in the period between the two world wars. In this period, nationalist tendencies in Turkey, Iran and Iraq highly affected the Kurds trying to find a place in these new state systems. Launching of their nation-building processes by Turkish, Persian and Arab nations and their initiation of political, military and cultural project in this direction created a discriminating situation for the Kurds who saw the national identity as we and they. However, a portion of the Kurds was able to fully integrate to the four states in which they live by denying some of their ethnic identity and adapting to the assimilation as politician, businessman, and so on in Turkey; by taking positions such as a cleric in Iran.

Historical development of the Kurdish nationalism is undoubtedly more than just a process affected only by the internal dynamics of the geography in which the Kurds live. Globalization trends and opportunities presented by them in the international arena increased the mobilization and efficiency of this late nationalist movement. Kurdish immigration to Europe which started in the 1980s and gained momentum during the 1990s created a substantial Kurdish Diaspora in the continental Europe. The Kurdish Diaspora, benefitting from wide democratic-legal opportunities and economic assistance in Europe, caused the attainment of a transboundary character for the Kurdish national demands. These benefits gained by the Kurds in the international arena also prepared the ground for the institutionalization of the Kurdish nationalism in the international arena. During this period, many international associations and organizations mainly in the Continental Europe and UK were organized, and these institutions undertook significant roles in delivering Kurdish national demands to the Kurds living in Europe and European governments.

The trend of the Kurdish nationalism followed in the modern Middle East can not be addressed in a holistic way for sure. It won't be surprising that a phenomenon such as nationalism which was affected by social and economic dynamics follows a different trend in different political regimes, social structures and even in geographies where international

interaction differs. The approach against ethnic-nationalist demands in legal regulations and the political regimes of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq is different from each other. While there is a growing field for these demands in Turkey effected by its being in the EU negotiation process, more than three hundred thousand Kurds in Syria does not even have citizenship. While Kurds in Iraq enjoy a federal parliament, an autonomous regional government and the ability of governing themselves by a de facto self-government, national demands of the Kurds of Iran are doomed to remain within the boundaries of the theocratic political system. Naturally, development of national demands and their outcomes shows a difference in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Europe (4+1) in which the Kurds live.

The future of the rise of Kurdish nationalism is extremely important not only for the Kurds but also regional and global actors. The consequences of the Kurdish national demands have the power to influence every equation in the modern Middle East. Kurdish nationalism has the capacity to create risks and opportunities which can not be ignored both by a global actor such as USA and 4+1. Transformation of Kurdish nationalism to a structure based on nation-state in the Middle East will not only change the borders of the modern Middle East, it will also change regional and global power structures in the region. The futures of the four countries which loose their Kurdish population and their Kurdish populated lands as well as the future of Kurds being squeezed among these countries and the roles to be played by them in the modern Middle East's international relations will change. The rise of Kurdish nationalism and the increase in the awareness of Kurds for their national identities is an undeniable reality. The question is how these demands and awareness can be managed in a peaceful way.

## **REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

Naturally, rising national consciousness between Kurdish people is an important development for regional powers such as Turkey, Israel and Iran. Kurdish issue is a delicate subject for Turkey, Iran and also for Israel. Turkey, Israel and Iran come to the foreground in every respect as the most important powers of the modern Middle East. Turkey became the rising star of the modern Middle East due to its economic capacity, pro-active foreign policy recently followed by her and its historical heritage. Israel holds the status of the greatest military power in the Middle East despite its short history. As for Iran, it is an important actor having a determinant power in the international relations as an important player not only in the Shiite world but also in the entire Islamic world with its historical and current position.

Turkey is the most affected regional power by the rising nationalism in the modern Middle East. Turkey is the country having the biggest Kurdish population in the Middle East. Apart from the fact that the Kurds in Turkey constitute the biggest majority among the Kurds in the entire world, they possess the highest national consciousness and enjoy their higher position in making their demands politicized. Turkey also holds the critical importance for the proper management of the Kurdish nationalism. The Kurdish problem among Turkey's current problems is on the top of the agenda in the statements of the Mr. Abdullah Gul, President of Turkey. The question whether Turkey would be able to manage the rising Kurdish nationalism in the right way will not only affect Turkey's own development but also determine the path to be followed by the Kurdish nationalism at the regional level. Finding of solutions by Turkey suitable for the Kurdish nationalism will form a model for Iran, Syria and Iraq. This will also function for increasing the pressure by Turkey on these countries for finding peaceful solutions to the problem.

Being one of the major powers of the modern Middle East, Israel is one of the countries to be effected in the first degree from any development occurring in the region. Israel's response to

the rising Kurdish nationalism has been especially exaggerated by many observers and academics in Turkey. Current perception is that Israel supports the rising Kurdish nationalism substantially, and it is the most important supporter of a possible Kurdistan in the modern Middle East. However, the available data shows that Israel follows a highly cautious path against the rising Kurdish nationalism. Israel assesses the rising Kurdish nationalism in the region from a realistic perspective, and especially it does not want to jeopardize its historical relations with Turkey. The recent negative developments in Turkey-Israel relations and their long term implications are on a level to change Israel's interest to the rising Kurdish nationalism in the region. Israel will not take risk on this matter until being sure that success rate for the rising Kurdish nationalism in the region exceeds 50%. However, Israel's interest and effectiveness on this issue will increase in parallel with the increase for the success rate of the Kurdish nationalism as a model nation-state project.

In the short term, Iran holds the possibility of being affected mostly from the rising Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East. Iran carries the most likelihood for the usage of rising Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East for manipulative purposes considering the international pressure applied against her. Iran's failure to manage rising Kurdish demands within its borders does in fact support these manipulative efforts. The chance of Iran to manage rising Kurdish nationalism does not seem likely within the current theocratic structure. Because, Iran's current political system is based on Shiite theocracy, and it perceives all the social demands as US and Europe originated efforts aiming to disturb Iran's integrity. In this framework, Iran is the country carrying the possibility of being affected most by the Kurdish demands among the subject countries. However, Iran's positive responses to KRG, who is the most concrete embodiment of the Kurdish nationalism, increases the likelihood of its making a pragmatist turn against its Kurdish nationalism.

The responses of Turkey, Israel and Iran against rising Kurdish nationalism in the modern Middle East carry the capacity of determining the direction of this movement. Turkey and Iran share a critical importance as a two imperial heir in the Middle East for guiding the course of Kurdish nationalism. Current perspective of Israel reflects itself as if Israel is a country outside the region. Israel has still not taken an open position on Kurdish nationalism. Regional future of Kurdish nationalism will not be formed only by the internal demands and attitudes of the Kurds; it will also be shaped by the reactions of the regional countries. In this context, reactions shown by Turkey, Israel and Iran on national and international level will determine how the Kurdish nationalism will evolve.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main argument of this study is that an answer to the demands of the Kurdish nationalism can not be found with a solution based on nation-state in the current political and international conjuncture. This outcome is a result of the current regional composition as well as the Kurds' ethnical demands not having reached yet the level of an independent and sovereign Kurdistan nation-state project. The most positive picture for the Kurds and of course for the 4+1 is the meeting of joint Kurdish demands such as education in Kurdish, self-government within the state, cultural opportunities, legal status and so on within these four countries' respective political, social, cultural and legal framework. Moreover, both these four countries and the Kurds are faced with an international process of transformation facilitating and supporting such a solution. Federal structure and model in Iraq is the first step to facilitate this situation. Turkey's EU process and its regional-global foreign policy targets necessitate such a transformation. Popular uprisings in the Middle East and new risks facing Iran and Syria put pressure on both countries to find a new answer to Kurdish nationalism. Kurds' finding a chance to live within these countries while maintaining their own languages, flags and

anthems will both result in meeting the national demands of the Kurds and help the democratic culture of these countries gain a pluralistic character. The rise of Kurdish nationalism in the modern Middle East can only be managed by this structure which can be defined as "Living together in the Union".