

RESOLVING THE SITUATION IN KURDISTAN: SETTING A PRECEDENT FOR THE MIDDLE EASTERN CRISIS

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Abstract

Kurdistan refers to the region and nationality of the Kurds, a multiethnic community. Spread between modern day Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, the Kurdistan Crisis refers to the Kurdish demands for an independent nation-state. The situation is steeped in implications arising out of International Relations theory, straddling our understanding of the evolution from nation to nation-state, the Heartland and Clash of Civilization theories to the 21st century geo-political landscape. This paper attempts to reassess the issue through these key theoretical perspectives, and highlights the obstacles to, and possible solutions, for advancement of the Kurdish cause. In sync with normative social science, this paper attempts to instigate thought on the implications of a new Kurdish state in the volatile Middle East.

Keywords:- Kurdistan, Arabization, Burzani

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The Pillar Model for Kurdistan: The various fronts of the Kurdistan issue

The situation in Kurdistan refers to the two fronts of the Kurdish people's struggle – the fight to redefine and preserve a collective identity in a 21st century regional complex in the Middle East and to combat the Kurdish Refugee crisis, which has been exacerbating since the first Iraqi-Kurdish war and continues to deteriorate in the light of the Syrian Civil War and the more recent Iraqi crisis. The first front is intricately linked to the larger aspiration of Kurdistan – a transition from *de facto* nation to a *de facto* and *de jure* nation-state.

The boundaries of a possible Greater Kurdistan extend from Turkey in the north to Iraq in the South crossing Syria and Iran on the sides. The earliest formal call for a Kurdish state can be traced back to the San Francisco Peace Conference at the end of WWII, in 1945. We would like to understand the formation and sustained existence of Kurdistan by putting forth the concept of a '**Five Pillar Model**'. The first facet of this model examines the relations between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Iraqi Kurdistan is governed by the KRG, from the regional capital of Erbil. From 1961-70, two Iraqi-Kurdish wars were fought which were led by Mustafa Burzani. The wars ended in a stalemate due to the rising casualties and by the end of 1970, an Autonomy Agreement was signed to establish a Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR) for a period of 4 years. In 1973, a secret agreement between the US and the Shah of Iran was signed to fund the rebels and help the cause of the Kurds. Following major rebellion from the Kurds, Iraq struck a deal with Tehran to fulfill its other demands if they withdrew their aid to the Kurds. This was known as the Algiers Accord of 1975 which led Tehran to cut its supplies with the Kurdish government. Without the Iranian aid, The Iraqi government managed to slow down the Kurdish movement by starting an intense Arabization of the oil rich regions within the Kurdish stronghold. However, the uprising against the Saddam Hussein regime in 1992 brought the Shi'as and the Kurds together and the government was forced to accept the

demand for an Iraqi Kurdistan. The current structure of this pillar was shaped in 2005, when the new Iraqi constitution was passed following the US invasion of 2003. Iraqi Kurdistan is a parliamentary democracy. It has its own regional assembly with 111 seats, and is a federal entity of Iraq.

The Iranian Kurdistan Pillar or the Tehran-KDP (I) relations is the second facet of the Pillar Model. Iranian Kurdistan has been a victim of a religion-inspired nationalist mobilization from the times of Ayatollah Khomeini's ascent to power. The Ayatollah was just as unsympathetic as the Shah to the Kurdish separatist movement and started a jihad against it in 1979. The change of leadership in Iran brought President Khatami to power in 1997. During his tenure, the Kurds gradually trickled up into the national legislature. Their main demands – freedom of language, and representation – were accommodated. This pillar currently stands frayed amidst allegations of violating the Geneva Convention, later proven. The Tehran administration in the first decade of the 21st century has been discriminative against the Iranian Kurds and has been accused of arresting, holding captive and even torturing several members of the Kurdish domestic enclave. The situation worsened, when in 2010, the Canadian Free Press and New York times, several Kurdish political prisoners and teachers were executed, after being forcefully separated from their families, tortured and forced to confess to colluding with the PJAK. Iranian Kurdistan is merely an amorphous body of Kurdish nationals.

The Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan Pillar is the third facet of the Pillar Model. Rojava is a de facto autonomous region in north and northeastern Syria. The Syrian Kurds have been victims of ethnic discrimination since decades and have been subjected to widespread government led propaganda. Kurds were legally prohibited to own land or property. Kurdish language education was not permitted, and healthcare facilities were primitive at best. To protect the Kurds in Syria during the Syrian Civil War, the Kurdish Supreme Committee (DBK) was established in 2012 to govern Rojava. In response; Assad's forces withdrew completely from three major Kurdish posts. The DBK marshalled local militia into protection units. With the emergence of the ISIL in the latter half of 2013, the Kurds were forced to evacuate and/or were killed. They were finally liberated in late 2014 by joint missions of the Free Syrian Army and the US Air Force. Though the Syrian pillar had a shaky foundation, stability seems to be returning with DBK's efforts to mobilize the region. The policies are based on the principles of inclusive growth and the new system puts emphasizes on voluntary service.

The integration of Kurdish lands into Turkey saw widespread opposition, resulting in many Kurdish rebellions. As a response to it, the Kurds were outlawed by the Turkish government. Martial law was imposed in 1983 in several Turkish provinces to counter the activities of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – a militant separatist group operating out

of Turkey. The PKK, a declared NSMO-Terrorist entity, was engaged by the Turkish armed forces. By 1993, it had become the most grandiose war against terror in the Middle East. The situation eased out after their leader; Abdullah Ocalan was captured in 1999. . Subsequently, the EU intervened to promote greater tolerance for Kurdish culture in Turkey. Historically, Turkish policy towards Kurdish demands for an independent state has been negative. Their stance is motivated by fear of a movement by the Turkish Kurds if Iraqi Kurdistan is declared a state. On the other hand, Turkey has offered tremendous support to Kurdish refugees since the US invasion of Iraq. Even today, Turkey is cooperating with Syrian and Iraqi Kurds fleeing across the border.

The second decade of the 21st century is seeing the mobilization of the Kurds in response to external occurrences like the rise of ISIS. Along with fighting the ISIS; the Kurds used the vulnerable position of the Baghdad administration to press for statehood. Furthermore, Turkish solidarity with the Kurds has helped further their cause for better treatment and more tolerance in Iran. The Kurdish involvement with the Free Syrian Army in the fight against Assad's government has ensured the steady influx of refugees. This has caused the United States, which had carefully avoided involvement with the Kurdish struggle, to initiate relations with energy investments.

The Nation vs. Nation-state Debate

A nation is defined as a collective or a mobilization of people with common characteristics, backgrounds, and/or beliefs such as ethnicity, religion, language, traditions & customs or even habits. Historically, nations have failed to prescribe to this definition due to its rigidity. For instance, multiethnic communities may well form a nation with shared ideals. They speak a common tongue – Kurdish – which resembles Persian. The Kurds have interspersed among them Arabs, Jews, Ossetians, Armenians, Azeris, Assyrians and other such ethnic communities and they follow Judaism, Christianity, and the faith of the Yazidis, Yarsanism (which originated from ethnic Kurds themselves), the faith of the Alevi and several other indigenous faiths with Islam being the most prominent one.

A nation-state is defined as a geographical area serving as a sovereign nation, from which it derives its political legitimacy. As opposed to a nation, which is a cultural and ethnic entity before being a political one, a state is first a political and geopolitical entity. The evolution of the nation-state is well defined, having originated with the Westphalian order. An important question in International Relations, thus, is what came first – the nation or the nation-state? We believe, in accordance to the above definitions, that the nation came first for the simple reason that communities probably came into existence before they began to demarcate boundaries. Extending that line of reasoning, it would so seem that when a nation, after recognizing its unity and reconciling with its mobilization, attempts to legitimize its sovereignty and territory is when the nation tries to evolve into a nation-

state. A nation-state must comprise of a permanent population, defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states.

Kurdistan is a nation of the Kurds which is struggling for the status of a nation-state. There is the individual struggle for statehood within the four external pillars along with the demand of a common Kurdish state that encompasses all of Kurdistan. Kurdistan holds a permanent population. It has a government in the form of the KRG – Kurdish Regional Government. Although there are other political parties representing Kurdistan, it can be considered to be a multi-party system for the time being. Kurdistan is already in relations with other states independently with regards to oil trade, thus fulfilling the above mentioned characteristics of a nation-state. Two important questions arise here: 1) the identity of the Kurdish nation is dependent on the region they are located in. Thus, would a legitimate nation-state be a Greater Kurdistan or four individual Kurdish states? And 2) A nation-state differs from a nation in terms of geopolitical boundaries, which are defined for Greater Kurdistan to a considerable extent, not considering binding legal agreements. Thus, will a collective and successful struggle for absolute sovereignty lead to the formation of a Kurdish nation-state that is recognized and legitimized by the international community and not just the Kurdish nationals?

The Status Quo state vs. Revisionist State Debate

The Power Transition Theory classifies states as Status Quo states or Revisionist states. A status quo state is one that views certain aspects of the international spectrum – such as international law, power configurations, the international system of states etc. – as sacrosanct and resists change to these spheres. Revisionist states are states that are dissatisfied with the international system and support change and/or challenge the existing order. The norm dictates that powerful states – states with a wide sphere of influence, like USA – are usually status quo states, and states which are rising in power and influence, like India, are revisionist states. States are largely shifting from being status quo to adopting revisionist policies as , unlikely alliances need to be forged keeping in mind the changing power dynamic. No state is entirely status quo or revisionist anymore. It may be either at a given point in time or both in different overlapping spheres of influence. In the context of Turkish Kurdistan, historically Kurds were opposed to the idea of settling in that specific region but today there is maximum influx of refugees there. Despite the tribulations of the PKK, Istanbul is in support of Kurdish autonomy (although no extent has been discussed). The KRG's economic ploy in Iraq is classic revisionist – increased representation, strengthening their own constituency for an enhanced role in national politics and independent oil trade and drilling may well be deceptive politics while they attempt to mobilize bias against Baghdad for statehood vs. the current autonomy they

enjoy, already the most powerful in Greater Kurdistan. Iraq too looks to the KRG for support in its fight against ISIS even the Kurds were considered a recalcitrant entity after the two Iraqi wars. This can be further substantiated by two instances of revisionism – Iraq's deal with Tehran on returning disputed territory during the second Iraqi-Kurdish war as an act opposed to their Foreign Policy, and the recent offers to further ease the oil profit sharing agreement in return for enhanced help against the ISIS. Duality can be seen in the case of Iran too which is infamously status quoist in its stand against the west on its perception of Islam while it is revisionist in its challenge of Israel's sphere of influence. A history of ethnic discrimination backed by successive power figures continues till day, with the least chance of any autonomy being in Iranian Kurdistan suggests its status quoist stand on the Kurdistan issue.

The Buffer State Paradox

Buffer states are states that lie between two stronger rival powers and provide a buffer zone to avoid confrontation between them. Often, they are demarcated by the conflicting powers such as the DMZ between the Koreans. Belgium serves as an example of a nation-state which has been legitimized as a nation-state over time. After WWII, Kurdistan acted as a buffer state between the Iraq and Iran. Today, Greater Kurdistan can be considered a buffer on two levels: the frequent small-scale conflicts between the four countries, and sub-conventional warfare proliferated by the Syrian Civil War, ISIS etc. . However, the real and underlying solution is au contraire to the concept of a Buffer State. On some level, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey are in collusion to avoid the creation of a Kurdish state. Therefore, Kurdistan is the subject of a Buffer State Paradox wherein four more powerful and rival powers share a collective national interest at the expense of the buffer state.

Greater Kurdistan: The pivot within the Pivot?

According to Harold Mackinder's Heartland Theory, the world inclines towards a region with abundant resources which is called the Geographical Pivot. He predicted that the controlling entity over this region would control the resources of the rest of the world and influence the global eco-political landscape significantly. The modern pivot should be one characterized by an internal power struggle, invitation and penetration by major external and superpowers to control the power configuration, rapid economic growth without development due to resource exploitation. Thus, the Middle East fits the description of the modern Geographical Pivot. The Greater Kurdish region consists of four of the most prominent players in the region. Firstly, Turkey is the fastest growing economy

in the region – a MINT state, and the link between Europe and Asia (the erstwhile and modern pivots). Secondly, Syria is the proverbial troubled kid in the neighborhood. The Syrian crisis has kept any semblance of regional stability at bay since 2011. Use of chemical weapons, increased tensions between the west and Russia due to bloc formation saw a return to proxy conflict on diplomatic tables, Human Rights violations against Bashar Al Assad has rightly placed Syria at the top of the turmoil pyramid. Successive regime changes and the ISIS threat threw Iraq in disarray. The spill-over effect is being faced by the rest of the world by countries as far as Iceland due to the refugee situation. Moreover, the global oil markets came under threat, with price volatility during the confrontation period at an all-time high. Iran, on the other hand, has been offering an interesting turn of events. Evolving US-Iran relations has upset the configuration in the region by antagonizing Israel. The impact of the Iraqi crisis can be felt by other Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia which has been accused by the US of funding the ISIS for its own revisionist agenda.

In terms of resources, Greater Kurdistan is home to areas of extremely fertile plains, with the potential to produce massive quantities of crops. The presence of 28 great permanent rivers and 32000 inlets, mouthpieces of streams etc. help support a flourish fishery industry as well as holds the potential to solve the Middle Eastern water crisis. The region is also immensely rich in reserves of gold, iron, copper, marble and limestone. KRG controlled areas alone make up the world's 6th largest petroleum reserve. On the military front, as of September 2015, USA plans to set up a military base in Iraqi Kurdistan with equal representation of Iraqi, Kurdish and American troops. Any power whose sphere of influence extends over all of Greater Kurdistan will be able to manipulate the Middle Eastern regional security complex to suit its hegemonic interest. Currently, the US has a stronghold over the region while the People's Republic of China is lagging behind. Poised to control the pivot within the Pivot, the geopolitics of the region could undergo unprecedented change.

The following important questions need to be asked to forecast a roadmap for Kurdistan, and the region: How will the power configuration within the Middle East be impacted if demands of a Kurdish state are met? Will the state's paradoxical buffer state status be tested? How shall resource sharing occur in the absence of any codified legislation on the same? Will the independent Kurdish nation-state be equipped to deal with extreme external pressure right at the threshold of its new freedom?

The Clash of Civilizations

Samuel P. Huntington put forth the Clash of Civilizations theory in 1996 which predicted that the conflicts in the post-Cold War era would be based not on ideological grounds but on ethnic and cultural fault lines. When understanding the Kurdish issue in this context, it

is important to note that various representative parties in the same faction are in conflict with each other and this has hindered the efforts for a single, consolidated freedom movement. Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed higher levels of autonomy and tolerance while the situation in Syria and Turkey has not seen much progress. No movement has ever originated from Iran which has been accused of being the harshest to the Kurds. The lack of internal solidarity and a well-defined collective sense of identity have indirectly led to an inner Clash of Civilizations.

Secondly, Greater Kurdistan is a minimalistic representation of the larger Middle East. Multi ethnic and linguistic communities within Kurdistan are further divided by the faction of Greater Kurdistan they are located in, each faction being influenced by a different country which has its own ethnic, cultural and religious background and national interest. Thus, there are innumerable fault lines based on cultural background, religious background, linguistic background, and sub-regional background. While this may or may not lead to intensifying of some conflicts, it makes the task of understanding the conflicts and resolving them extremely difficult. Conflict remediation in the 21st century has advanced, and begins with isolating the source of dispute. According to Clash of Civilizations, the source of dispute is untraceable in Kurdistan (Middle East) due to the presence of multiple, equally likely sources.

This begets the asking of a fundamental question: how will the creation of an independent Kurdish state influence the existent fault lines in the Middle East? Even if the newly created fault lines are indigenous, it is the sheer number and variety of fault lines that are an obstacle to regional stability. Considering Clash of Civilizations, how will an independent Kurdish state reshape the Middle Eastern order, if at all?

The Roadmap Ahead

There exists a research gap with respect to Kurdistan, the Middle East, and the former being a minimalistic model of the latter. Research with respect to the ME is always too vast, considering the number of players excluding non-state actors. Also, the ME crisis is a nuanced crisis. Research on ME resolution is based on changing political climate, foreign policy analysis and an area studies perspective based around the Regional (in)Security Complex. However, current research on Kurdistan fails to account for either internal conflict or inter-play between external actors or both. Lastly, the two conflicts are not analyzed from a theoretical framework, which leads to eclipsing of motives of external actors. To move towards a permanent solution to the Kurdish problem, some pre-conditions need to be set. It is important for Kurdistan to appoint a representative entity who has experience in governance, legislature, liaison and good relations with the governments of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Kurdish Regional Government fits the bill

on all accounts, unless a new entity emerges. Also, the Kurds are a substantial minority in each of the individual countries that make up the Greater Kurdistan. Hence, it is unlikely for these states to crack according to Huntington's theory along ethnic fault lines. In these states the Kurds are further divided on sub-regional fault lines, making the formation of a separate state difficult. It has been seen since the establishment of the Westphalian Order that the formation of a nation-state from a nation requires a strong, mobilized national movement which is considered legitimate by the international community. The Kurdish community is now spread out with its diaspora living in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Only strong support from them can help to mobilize and legitimize the effort. A stark contrast can also be seen in the levels of socio-economic development and the political freedom.

Firstly, Kurdistan needs, above all, a leader to unite the various peoples of the nation to overcome these issues. Like all great mobilizations of history, an iconic leader like Gandhi in India, Martin Luther King Jr. in the American Civil War, Mandela in the fight against Apartheid etc., a common leader is essential to a national liberation struggle. **Secondly**, soft power is the definitive tool in new age diplomacy. The absence of a common Kurdish language prevents education and dissemination of knowledge in the language, which in turn creates a vicious cycle – poor education, lack of identity leading to lack of sense of belongingness with a nationalist movement. **Thirdly**, the Kurds lack a common political party to represent the demands and woes of the entire nation. Fragmented political units in different factions which lack synergy act as a deterrent to Kurdish liberation. **Fourthly**, once a common political party and language are established, it must be ensured that the different regions within the proposed Kurdish state reach the same level of socio-economic development. With increased levels of socio-economic development, productivity of both Kurdish labor and capital shall increase, leading to greater contribution to the GDP of the constituent country. This will make way for the next step - the fight for equal political rights as the citizens of the constituent country, like the Iraqi Kurds. **Fifthly**, strong institutional framework is another pre-condition for evolution from nation into a nation-state. The Iraqi Kurds must pioneer the growth of the Kurdish population, financially and institutionally by extrapolating the result of the Iraqi Kurdistan's struggle to the entire Kurdish population. **Sixthly**, it is necessary for the representative Kurdish political party to marshal external support for its demands for nation state-hood. One way of achieving this is riding the flag of democracy to garner the backing of western powers such as USA, UK and France. **Lastly**, the Kurds must reconcile themselves with the fact that a Kurdish nation-state is still a considerable time away. The changes proposed above require years for proper implementation, and are flow changes

rather than spot changes. A Kurdish state cannot be created all at once, but in stages of linear progress.

Kurdistan must play its part in working towards a stable neighborhood – the Middle East. This, in turn, shall lead to progress with respect to a united Kurdish front for independent nation-statehood.

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