

# Transformation of Kurdish Identity and Cultural Rights Since the Regime Change: A Study of Kurds in Iraq

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to understand that how Kurdish identity and cultural rights transformed from one regime to another in Iraq. Since 2003 new regime taken place in Iraq known as K.R.G. therefore paper highlighted the existing conditions of Kurds by analyzing various dimensions of Kurdish life such as socio-economic condition, educational and cultural status of Kurds. Kurds are considered as a largest ethnic group in West Asia with the ethnic background comprising many regions viz. Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. According to the World Bank data (2012), the Kurd constitutes about 5.1 million of the total Iraqi population and is considered as one of the oppressed community in West Asia. The paper argued that how Kurdish people demanded for constructing of national identity and wished for protecting their cultural rights. The study will assist in outlining the existing social and cultural nature of this society through a sociological and critical study of Kurdish people. The study based on qualitative, descriptive and exploratory in nature, data collected by secondary sources and available literature on the topic.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Cultural Rights, Status of Women, Social media, Socio-Cultural and Political Rights

## INTRODUCTION

Kurds are the largest ethnic group in west Asia without an autonomous region, whose ethnic background comprises many regions including Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria (Lawrence, 2009). The estimated population of Kurds in Iraq is 5.1 million, and they constitute about 27 percent of Iraqi population (2012). Bruinessen, (1992) and Sheyholislami, (2011) are of the opinion that, the biggest Kurdish population lives in the modern Turkey followed by Iraq. It is a relevant question that why do Kurds get unrest and why they raise their voices against social injustice? What was the reason of Kurdish struggle in all parts of Kurdistan and what is the role of social Media for national identity and independence of Kurds in Iraq? My paper is all about to answer these questions.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Kurds have fought to obtain greater autonomy within their different regions, while retaining the ultimate vision of an independent Kurdistan. However, the problems they face differ from state to state and they have been unable to develop a cohesive approach. The Kurdish national movement and struggle in Iraq have witnessed a large number of recent changes with clear contrasts in each country and it is considered very important in the Iraqi autonomous Kurdistan region's independence referendum, which was rooted in the long historical will of the Kurdish people in establish a federal state. It was also the result of a violent history of oppression, suppression and social

injustice upon the Iraqi-Kurdish population by various Iraqi nationalist authoritarian regimes.

It is believed that Kurds were oppressed in Saddam Husain regime and faced chemical weapon which is called genocide by many other western media as well Arab. In Iraqi Kurdish region there was always unrest among Kurds to get some autonomy where they can live with their own cultural identity. For this causes time to time they have protested and that is our objective to understand how Kurdish identity and cultural rights transformed from one regime to another in Iraq since 2003, the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 brought about numerous changes for the Kurdistan independent state. This paper also highlighted the fact that, the President George W. Bush confirmed that all Iraqis must have a right to raise their voice in the new government and their rights must have protected (Bayman, 2003). The Kurdish leaders supported and helped American troops against Saddam Hussein with the hope of an independent federal state. Since 2005 election, Kurds got autonomy in three regions (Dohuk, Irbil and Sulaimaniyah) in order to maintain peace and internal security (Katzman, 2010).

This study talked about the future of Iraq after the 2003 American-led invasion and occupation is unsettled, fuelled by rising ethnic and sectarian violence across the Iraq, there is growing talk of dividing the country into three ethnically defined territories, either as separate states or as

**How to cite this paper:** Faizan Haque "Transformation of Kurdish Identity and Cultural Rights Since the Regime Change: A Study of Kurds in Iraq" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-4 | Issue-3, April 2020, pp.1075-1079, URL: [www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd30838.pdf](http://www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd30838.pdf)



IJTSRD30838

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autonomous entities in a highly decentralized Iraq. Popular support for Kurdish independence from across the globe, the division of Iraq would have significant implications for the wider Middle East. The Kurdish people are divided amongst Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria, if Kurds in Iraq move toward independence, this could have a negative result at outside of Iraq, might begin to agitate for separation, thus calling into question the territorial integrity of several states in this already troubled region (Berwari, & Ambrosio, 2008).

This paper examines the area under which the issue of the ethnic identity, cultural rights and nationalist movement of the Kurdish people emerged in Iraq, and investigates its development from an armed guerrilla movement, and studies how the Kurdish identity transform and how the Kurds raise their voices against injustice and social inequality and how they demand for an independent nation with the government in Baghdad. This paper tried to clearly explain the nature and development of the Kurdish effort in Iraq, which has had important implications over regional geopolitics (Voller, 2014).

### **TRANSFORMATION OF KURDISH SOCIETY AFTER AND BEFORE SADDAM HUSSEIN' S REGIME**

In 20<sup>th</sup> century the slogan of national rights, cultural identity and an autonomous region have been started, and the movement of Kurds began. This paper also focuses on the statement which was given by Britain and Iraq, which documented the Kurdish issue and accepted a local Kurdish government within Iraq (Arikanli, 2010). Mahmoud Barzani Revolted against the central government of Baghdad in the 1920s, due to the not fulfilling the agreement which was signed by the Iraqi Government for executing a local government within Iraq in 1922, and it became the symbol of the Kurdish struggle towards their cultural rights and identity. Their aspiration for independence has resulted in a number of civil wars and conflicts between various Kurdish groups and Iraqi governments. From 1986-1989, Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime committed the genocidal Anfal campaign, in which the army of Iraq murdered nearly about 100,000 Kurds, this incidence happened because of the Kurdish people raised their voice against totalitarian government and demanding for the independent region, to protect their cultural identity and rights (Human Watch Report, 1993). Iraqi Kurds played an important role in the 2nd Gulf War. As a result of the dictatorship, the Kurdish people stand against the Saddam Hussein's regime in 1991; many Kurds were forced to flee the country towards Iran and Turkey, and they were compelled to become refugees in bordering regions. Because of this fighting a northern, no-fly zone was established in the first Gulf War in 1991, to make easy returning of the Kurdish refugees. The Kurds continued to fight with government troops and finally Iraqi forces left Kurdistan in October 1991, leaving the region independently (Robson, 1996). After a long struggle, 13% of the Iraqi oil sales were allocated for the Iraqi Kurdistan in 1996, and this led to a golden opportunity to be a prosperous region by uplifting the status of Kurds.

The paper acknowledges that the Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (Gulf War) in 1991, its created an opportunity for the Kurds to have an independent state in Iraq until the American invasion of Iraq in April 2003, and the political changes led to a foundation of new Constitution of Iraq in 2005, when new opportunities were created for the Kurds and they

acquired a strong position in Iraq's politics. Kurdish parties united armed forces against the Iraqi government during the war in spring 2003. Kurdish army, known as peshmarga, played a key role in the overthrowing of the Iraqi government. After that In Iraq, the Kurdish language, cultural identity and notational rights have been freely accepted; the new Iraqi constitution defines Iraqi Kurdistan as a federal entity of Iraq and establishes Arabic and Kurdish as Iraq's joint official languages.

Since 2003, the Kurdish people gradually adopted new technology and advanced their Knowledge by using Social Media, Gazettes and accessing worldwide news, Information and Communication familiarity (Sheyholislami, 2011). The economic and social development of Kurdistan has advanced the life style of Kurdish people by providing various opportunities in the private and public sectors. Recently they are less dependent on the local parties, which show monopoly over the resources of service economy and they are engaged in private services to enhance their family status (Leezenberg, 2003). Meanwhile 2006, the annual budget of Iraq had jumped very high and their growth rate had better due to the booming of oil production. Kurdistan Region of Iraq gained 18% of the total budget from the Iraqi government and it was very helpful in growing people's income, opening employment opportunities and expanding service economy in the region (Bali, 2016).

Indeed, the nationalist movement of Kurds in Iraq is wealthier in its ongoing struggle for Kurdish rights, including autonomy and federalism within Iraq, which has directly or indirectly influenced other parts of Kurdistan. This movement in Iraq has affected that country's politics more than any other country with a Kurdish population, and has become the most important subject matter in modern Iraq.

### **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN TRANSFORMING AND PROTECTING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY AND POLITICAL STATUS OF KURDS**

Social media has been used by the Kurdish people to demand cultural rights and protect ethnic identity by organizing protests and raising awareness of less-covered issues. Social media is well established in Kurdistan and lots of people are connecting with each other through the medium of social networks like Facebook, Twitter and they spread their messages primarily through the new media. They are also active participants on networking sites through electronic gazette, and have received significant coverage in the global media. Social media has also legalized Kurdish people to get their positive message about Iraqi Kurdistan. In Iraq the expression of Kurdish is having more importance than conflict. There were lots of people in Kurdistan who regularly posted and critically commented on central government and express their ideas by using Social Media.

Social networking sites are helpful for discussing the Kurdish issues and talking about Kurdish struggle and having an impact on policymakers. Social media has enhanced Kurdish democracy because it provides unrestricted access to a wide range of news, and platforms. In this response many Kurdish people who often raising awareness about the disruptive policies of the government by giving a harsh statement and focusing on less covered issues via social media for the bright future of Kurds and they are trying to improve the cultural and social status of Iraqi Kurdistan

**REVIEW OF LITRATURE**

Bruinessen (1986) in the paper entitled *the Kurds between Iraq and Iran* explained about violence initiated by central government against Kurds for controlling the Kurdish areas and wiping out peshmargas of the various organizations. In this article the author pointed out that, both Iran and Iraq were willingly to compose their own Kurds, each having its own interest in keeping fighting in bordering regions, in occupying and bringing Kurds under control. Thus, Iran supporting Iraqi KDP gave financial aid to the Islamic group of Iraqi Kurds, while Iraq had given money, logistical supports and arms to the major organizations of Iran.

Bayman (2003) in the article entitled *Constructing a Democratic Iraq: Challenges and opportunities* stated that since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, George w. bush announced that Iraq will be a democratic country and every citizen would be given equal rights and must have their rights protected. The author examined that after changing the government, to the establishment of democracy would be challenged by a weak government, security fear, risk of cohesive identity and tension of bordering countries, the prevailing power can also probably influence Iraqi elite and make them less aggressive, mainly if they commit to continued military presence in the Iraq. Thus possibility of enduring democracy in Iraq will be difficult as long as the dominant power stay in the country.

Katzman (2010) in the report entitled *the Kurds in post-saddam Iraq* explained that since 2003, the Kurds welcomed the U.S. invasion of Iraq and cooperated, by requiring U.S. support for their positions in their various disputes with the other groups in Iraq. The Kurds supported the constitution in the October, 2005 for fulfilling their demands. The constitution of Iraq not only provided autonomy to Kurds but also included the Kurds' affirmation on de-facto state. The constitution recognizes the three Kurdish Provinces of Dohuk, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyah as legal states, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with the power to amend the application of national laws to maintain internal security forces. In order to establish diplomatic mission abroad, Arabic and Kurdish languages were given official status.

Hassanpour (1994) in the article entitled *the Kurdish experience* states that the Kurdish nation with its distinctive society and culture is ethnically-based on nationalist regime. The author emphasized that the conditioning oppression of Kurds is subjected to differences regionally. Some important features of Kurds were examined. First, the Kurdish areas overlap with nation-state borders: They are compelled to interference and manipulation by regional and international powers. Second, mostly Kurds areas are the poorest, there is least development and they have not economic power and they are marginalized by the centre. Third, the dynamics of assimilation, repression and Kurdish resistance in each country have affected the direction and outcome of the Kurdish struggles in the neighboring countries.

Aziz (2011) in the book entitled *The Kurds of Iraq: Ethno nationalism and National identity in Iraq* beginning with 1990s after the establishment of Kurdish regional government (KRG) in 1992. By analyzing facts the author stated that, although ninety years passed, the Kurdish people still living without state, they have lost and they are invisible in this modern Era. The author analyzed that because of

conflict and violence in the Iraq in the wake of Islamic State, the Kurds have central information of state politics and there are new boundaries of Kurdish state and oil underlined due to IS. The author assumed that the young Kurdish people demanded for constructing of national identity and wishing for protecting their cultural identity.

**KURDISH PROBLEMS SINCE THE COLLAPSE OF OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

Since the collapse of Ottoman Empire, Kurds were unable to fulfill their demands and they have been deprived of their minority rights, in each state every where they lived, Kurdish people were suffered different kind of oppression to deny their identity, that is the result of different Kurdish struggle and social movements, they were challenging the suppressive state authority that denied the Kurds, their identity and the basic human rights of the Kurds, as the Kurds lived under the different strata, mainly: linguistic pluralistic, religious, ideological, and tribal differences emerged among Kurdish groups in the West Asia. In terms of religion, the majority populations of the Kurds are Muslim, they belong to different sects of Islam and, thus, they cannot be regarded as a homogenous group with the same connections and goals.

However, the situation of Kurds is still miserable, there are a large number of problems prevailed, which are affecting Kurds in Iraq, for instance, the matter of national identity, autonomy, demands for their rights, an independent nation state, violence against women and number of social, economical and status problems. I would like to discuss some of the important problem and difficulties of Kurds briefly; **Cultural oppression-** the Kurds is deprived of their cultural rights to use its own language in public places in other parts of Iraq, in schools, in publications, and in dealing with the administration, instead of it was giving official status in Iraq. **Socio-economic Problem-**The Kurdistan region of Iraq is facing socio-economic crisis, as a result of the flood of Syrian refugees which began in 2012 and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2014. The population of this province had increased by 28 percent, having pressure on the local economy and access to public services. This study highlights how prices and unemployment have increased, and refugees and Internally Displaced Person (IDPs) entering the labor market are pushing wages down. The ISIS crisis has had a significant effect on trade of goods and services. Transportation routes were disrupted. Foreign direct investment flows have declined and operations of foreign enterprises have been adversely affected.

**Women's suppression-** In Iraqi Kurdistan women are facing different forms of oppression, which make it little difficult to establish a well organize Kurdish movement. Kurdistan Region is a place of contradictions when it comes to women's rights. On the one hand, there are men in the strictly patriarchal nature of Kurdistan who refuse to accept women as equals. On the other hand, Kurdistan has attracted Female entrepreneurs from across the world. Human Rights Watch reported that Female genital cutting is practiced mainly by Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan, reportedly 60% percent of Kurdish women population has undergone this procedure As such, and Kurdistan has been a much more progressive place for women than the rest of Iraq, although there is much that needs to be done.



**Educational problem-**A good education raises awareness, increases tolerance and helps to create broadminded, creative and productive individuals. However, when looking at the Middle East and Iraq in particular, there is neglect of education; it is an observable and sad truth? The most prominent issues of education in Kurdistan, according to critics and teachers, if any, for raising awareness and highlighting the importance of education, there are the generality of violence and harassment against students and teachers. The current process of Kurdish education needs to more concentration, as the most effective means of bringing about responsible and engaged humans, who believe in the values of cultural diversity and the necessity of coexistence.

**Independent State-** It is believed that once independence is achieved, whether it is a unilateral declaration of statehood or is done in negotiations with Baghdad, neighboring countries will start competing over expanding their political and economic influence on Kurdistan. **The oil problem-** About half of the oil Iraq exports annually comes from the oil fields in Kirkuk. The loss of control of the oil fields is a dramatic financial and political setback for the Kurds; the first signs of failure have already appeared. Last Thursday, only 196,000 barrels of oil flowed from the region around Kirkuk into Turkey instead of the usual 600,000. Several international firms that had made advance payments to the Kurdish government are now worried about their money. The Kurds are the losers in this conflict about profits and land. But that doesn't automatically turn their opponents into victors.

Since the crises fall, the Kurdistan region and its autonomous government has been trying to recover a struggling economy by dealing with the loss of Kirkuk and most of its oil fields to the Iraqi government, and coping with the shutting down of two international airports by Baghdad as punishment for the demanding of the independence referendum. In recent years Kurds face economic challenges on account of reducing 17% total budget to 12% by central government by imposing corruption charge on KRG. Hence, KRG claims to its auditing of its gas and oil part through independent audit.

At last the KRG has changed its words, which was given by last year and looking for negotiation with Baghdad. The major problem is that it has not recognized a problem in many of the actions taken by the central government to punish the Kurdish region by snatching airports and Kirkuk.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To visualize the transformation of social and cultural status of the Kurdish population since 2003.
2. To analyze how Kurdish identity taken place in new Regime.
3. To investigate the political status of Kurdish society in Iraq.
4. To assess the efforts at state building and identity creation of Kurds in Iraq.

## METHODOLOGY

Research design stands for advance planning of the methods to be adopted for collecting data and the techniques to be used in data analysis keeping in view the objectives of the research. The present study is descriptive and exploratory in nature. As qualitative approach provides greater richness

and more detailed information, hence this study is a qualitative one. Content analysis is used as a method of data collection. Secondary sources of data and other information have been collected through documentation- like academic research papers, books, governmental and non-governmental reports and news papers.

## CONCLUSION

Kurdish demands for an independent state and national rights since the collapse of Ottoman Empire, constitute many of the democratic and revolutionary movements in the region, Kurdish rights for self-rule is a burning issue of Kurds in Iraq. This paper examined that it is the birth right of Kurdish people to build their own independent nation state and also to protect their national rights. In Iraq, the Kurds have demanded cultural autonomy and ethnic identity from the governments, so they have fought for their cultural rights and even a separate nation state for Kurdish people. In these circumstances of uneven political and economic development, Kurdistan has created valuable opportunities for liberation that goes beyond Kurdistan. A group of young people from the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq are treating as a fashion to challenge different interpretations and promote a positive image of their state. The Iraqi Kurds were the first to get rid of the status of second class, and they stand as a federal entity with national rights and autonomy, was constituted in the new constitution of Iraq. Kurds are now in a better position both in terms of gaining autonomy as well as having a participation in government. The need of the day requires a changing attitude towards Kurds, not just from the domestic constituency in Iraq, but also from the Turkish perspective.

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