
Ethno-confessional problems in Iraq on the example of the Kurds

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Abstract: *There are various ethno-confessional minorities living in Iraq. Kurds are among them, who stand out from others not only by their abundance, but also by their activity.*

Iraqi Kurds have been striving for independence since the 20s of the last century, that is, after this country gained independence. Because of this, the Iraqi authorities often resort to harsh measures against the Kurds.

In this regard, the period of Ba'ath Party rule was particularly distinguished. In particular, Saddam Hussein. The attitude towards the Kurds has changed significantly since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. Their aspiration for independence remained unchanged.

When we talk about this issue, it should be noted that there is often resistance and disagreement among the Kurdish leaders themselves, which seriously harms their movement. It should be mentioned the referendum held in Iraqi Kurdistan, which did not bring the expected result. The results of this referendum did not bring much support to the region either internally or from outside the region.

Key words: *Iraq, Kurds, Kurdistan, region, independence, leaders.*

I. Introduction

Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Iraq. Most of them live in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region of Iraq. The mentioned region includes 4 provinces. These are: Erbil, Dahuk, Sulaymaniyah and Halabja. Apart from this region, they are also settled in Kirkuk, which is a disputed area between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs.

Ethno-confessional minorities in Iraq. The territory of Iraq has never been monotonous from an ethnic, confessional and linguistic point of view. In 1942, after Iraq gained independence, the country's earlier ethno-confessional diversity was preserved.

In the first year of independence, the population of Iraq consisted of Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Sunni Kurds, non-Muslim Arabs, Sunni Turkmen, Jews, and Assyrian-speaking Christians of various denominations.¹

¹Wimmer, Andreas. "Democracy and ethno-religious conflict in Iraq." Working Paper, Discussion Papers on Development Policy, Center for Development Research (ZEF), Bonn, 2003.p. 6.

Iraq's ethno-confessional and linguistic diverse mosaic created the basis for the escalation of conflict between Arab nationalists and ethno-confessional minorities in the country. Pan-Arab nationalist forces in Iraq enjoyed serious influence both during the British mandate (1921-1932) and during the monarchy (1932-1958). Most of them were Sunnis or from advanced and distinguished families during the Ottoman Empire (late 20s of 16th-20th centuries). In the 1920s, they managed to inflame the national spirit among the Arabs, who were deprived of the feeling of Arab nationalist identity, and then turned the ideas emerging from Pan-Arab nationalist motives into the main ideological basis for the creation of the state.

Activation of the Kurdish problem in Iraq. After Iraq was legally freed from the British mandate system and gained independence (1932), its government tried to consolidate its power in Iraq Kurdistan, which led to the first confrontation between the Kurds and the government in the newly formed state. In 1932, the Kurds started the first rebellion against the government, the reason for which, as we mentioned above, was the Iraqi government's attempt to strengthen its power in Kurdistan. Kurds used to organize rebellions during the British mandate as well, but did not succeed. The existing tribal feuds and disagreements between the Kurds made their coordinated action and consolidation difficult, that is why it can be said that the Kurdish rebellion was doomed in the bud. The next round of conflict between the Kurds and the Iraqi government began in 1940, when the Kurds, led by Mustafa Barzani, declared war on newly established police posts by the Iraqi government. This attempt of theirs was also unsuccessful. Barzani was defeated, after which he and his associates left Iraq. In 1958, after the revolution in Iraq, they returned from exile.

The role of the Kurds in Iraq anti-monarchy revolution. In 1958, Iraqi Arabs and Kurds worked together to organize a revolution against King Faisal II (1937-1958). After the coup, a revolutionary government was established under the leadership of General Abd al-Karim Qassem. According to the third article of the provisional constitution issued in July of the same year, the Republic of Iraq was based on the unity of Arabs and Kurds.² The first months of Qasem's revolutionary government had a positive impact on the social, political and cultural life of the Kurds. The Kurdistan Democratic Party was allowed to act legally for the first time in its history. The reforms carried out by the revolutionary government created favorable conditions for the Kurds to actually realize their national goals and aspirations.³

Stirring up anti-Kurdish sentiment in Iraq. Relations between Arabs and Kurds have been strained since differences of opinion emerged in the Kurdistan Democratic Party regarding the interim government of Abd al-Karim Qassem. All of this led to the rise of anti-Kurdish sentiment in Iraq, which is why the government took retaliatory steps. As a result of the 18-month military operations of Qasem's government in the areas inhabited by Kurds, up to 3 thousand Kurds were killed, more than 100 villages were destroyed, and up to 100 thousand Kurds were displaced in the mountains.⁴

In 1962, an acute national crisis was created in Iraq, which had a negative impact on the socio-economic situation of the country. The policies of Abd al-Karim Qassem's government proved to be ineffective for various reasons. The issue of the Kurds became even worse. All this created a revolutionary situation in the country, which ended with a coup d'état on February 8, 1963, led by the Arab Socialist Origins (Baath) Party.

The situation of the Kurds in Iraq during the rule of the Baath party. At the first stage, the Ba'ath Party welcomed the involvement of the Kurds in the revolution, as the Ba'athists, who had just come to power, had not yet consolidated their positions in the country, and therefore confrontation with the Kurds would be counterproductive at that stage. The new government intended to withdraw the units stationed in the Kurdistan

²Menteshashvili, Albert. *Issues of the history of the Kurds of the Middle East (X-XX centuries)*. Tbilisi, 1978. p. 193.

³The same; p. 194.

⁴. The same p.198

region of Iraq during the Qassem government, in order to use these military units against the democratic forces in the southern and central regions of the country.⁵ Thus, it can be said that a temporary truce was concluded between the Arabs and the Kurds.

Relations between the Baath Party and the Kurds have been strained since the Kurds demanded the annexation of Kirkuk and Mosul to the autonomous Kurdistan region, which was unacceptable to the country's authorities. Just from that period the Ba'ath Party started military operations against the Kurds, that went on until knocking Saddam Hussein's regime down (2003).

During the rule of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003), the Iraqi government carried out eight series of military campaigns against the local Kurds from February 23 to September 6, 1988, that went down in history under the name of Al-Anfal.⁶ This series of military operations against the Kurds is considered a large-scale and unprecedented genocide in the modern history of Iraq.⁷ Although the number of casualties during this military operation has not yet been determined, it is believed that 180,000 people died as a result of the use of chemical weapons or other means against civilians and military personnel during the Al-Anfal military operation.⁸

Kurds after Saddam Hussein's regime. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime (2003), the situation of the Kurds in Iraq has significantly improved. The degree of their autonomy has expanded and it can be said that the Kurdistan Region has even acquired some signs of independence. The national aspirations of the Kurds and the attempts to establish an independent state remain a painful issue for the Iraqi government. **Kurds after Saddam Hussein's regime.** After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime (2003), the situation of the Kurds in Iraq has significantly improved. The degree of their autonomy has expanded and it can be said that the Kurdistan Region has even acquired some signs of independence. The national aspirations of the Kurds and the attempts to establish an independent state remain a painful issue for the Iraqi government.

The conflict between the central government of Iraq and the regional government of Kurdistan is also related to water resources. The Southeastern Anatolia Project has significantly reduced the volume of Euphrates and Tigris water in Syria and Iraq. Since 1980, the flow of the Euphrates and Tigris has decreased by 30%. According to Iraqi government, this figure will increase to 50% by 2030.⁹ Due to the impending threats, Iraqi Kurdistan decided to take care of the issue of water security independently from Baghdad. In 2014, the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government announced an initiative to build 245 dams in the region.¹⁰ The results of the initiative announced by the Kurdistan government will be a serious threat to Iraq. Officials in Baghdad say that the dams built in the Kurdistan region will further reduce the volume of water in the rest of Iraq. Baghdad and Erbil have had tense relations for many years, and it is possible that the issue of water resources will further strain relations between the parties, which could spill over into the regional scale.¹¹

⁵Menteshashvili, Albert. *Issues of the history of the Kurds of the Middle East (X-XX centuries)*. Tbilisi, 1978. p. 208.

⁶The term Al-Anfal has a religious origin. It is the name of the eighth surah of the Quran. Literally, Al-Anfal means booty or spoils of battle.

⁷Story of Aanfal. <https://kurdistanmemoryprogramme.com>

⁸Yildiz, Kerim. *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present and Future*. London, Ann Arbor: Pluto Press. 2004. p. 25.

⁹Sitchinava, Bukhuti. "Water Security in the Middle East on the Example of Iraqi Kurdistan." *Ante Portas - Security Studies (University of Business and Entrepreneurship)* XVI (I): 2021. p. 69-79. doi:10.33674/120215.

¹⁰The same.

¹¹Sitchinava, Bukhuti. "Water Security in the Middle East on the Example of Iraqi Kurdistan." *Ante Portas - Security Studies (University of Business and Entrepreneurship)* XVI (I): 2021. p. 69-79. doi:10.33674/120215.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Referendum and the Response of the International Community. On September 25, 2017, a referendum was held in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, according to which 92.73% of the voters made a choice in favor of gaining independence. Even before the referendum, since 2014, the president of the Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, announced the holding of a referendum on the issue of independence. Erbil's position regarding the independence referendum was determined by two important factors. The first was the weakening of the Iraqi central government as a result of the expansion of the Islamic State terrorist organization, and the second was the annexation of Kirkuk district by the Kurdistan regional government in 2014, which significantly increased the financial situation of the Kurdistan region and pushed Erbil to take independent economic and political steps. It was all this that led Erbil to take independent political steps. The independence referendum received an almost uniformly indifferent response at the regional and global levels.

The referendum was held in the three muhafazas (territorial-administrative unit in Iraq) of the Kurdistan region of Iraq: Dahuk, Erbil and Sulaimani. Also in the disputed territory between Baghdad and Erbil.¹²

The People's Democratic Party (Turkey), whose ideology is focused on political pluralism, social democracy and the protection of minority rights, expressed its support for the referendum of the Kurdistan region. Osman Baydemir, the current speaker of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), said that Kurds, as one of the oldest nations in the region, have the same rights as Persians, Turks or Arabs. Baydemir criticized the Turkish government's position regarding the referendum.¹³

The position of the Palestine Liberation Organization (Palestine Liberation Organization), whose current Secretary General Saeb Erekat, in an interview with Al Arabiya, compared the Kurds' desire for self-determination and the possible independence of Kurdistan to a poisoned sword raised against the Arabs.¹⁴

According to Khalil Shikak -Khalīl Shiqāqī, professor of political science and director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, the Palestinian position regarding the Kurds and Kurdistan should not have been news to anyone.¹⁵ The position of Palestine is inseparable from the position of the Arab League, and therefore, a different view on the issue is almost scarcely credible.

According to the leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Cemil Bayık, the referendum is a democratic right and no one has the right to oppose it. Despite this statement, he perceived the decision of the Iraqi Kurdistan government to hold a referendum as a threat. In his opinion, if the voter gives a positive answer to the question of independence at the referendum, it will create a big problem. In a statement made in April of the same year, Baiki expressed the opinion that: "Rejecting the referendum means a new opportunity and a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem."¹⁶ Another leader of this party, Duran Kalkan, in a statement made three months before

¹² Kurdistan referendum results: 93% of Iraqi Kurds vote for independence, say reports, 27.09.2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdistan-referendum-results-vote-yes-iraqi-kurds-independence-iran-syria-a7970241.html>

¹³ Rudaw, HDP offers congratulations, support for Kurdistan independence vote, 12.06.2017. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/120620172>

¹⁴ Roger Hercz, How Palestinians came to reject Kurdish demands for a homeland, 25.09.2017. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/how-palestinians-came-reject-kurdish-demands-homeland>

¹⁵ Roger Hercz, How Palestinians came to reject Kurdish demands for a homeland, 25.09.2017. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/how-palestinians-came-reject-kurdish-demands-homeland>

¹⁶ Referendum threat from Cemil Bayık, 10.04.2017. <https://beyazgazete.com/haber/2017/4/10/cemil-bayik-tan-referandum-tehdidi-3819733.html>

the referendum, assessed the decision of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government to hold the referendum as "propaganda" and said that: "Kurdish people do not need a state."¹⁷

Artur Mas, the former president of the Autonomous Union of Catalonia, expressed his support for the Kurdistan referendum.

He called the Kurds "defenders of democracy". Both regions have been fighting for independence for a long time, thus such rhetoric from Catalonia was not surprising at all. On the sixth day (October 1) after the Kurdistan referendum, a referendum on independence was also held in Catalonia.¹⁸

The major opposition movement of the newly created state of Kosovo, Vetëvendosje, has expressed its full support for the Kurdistan referendum. Union leader Visar Ymeri said in an interview given to Kurdistan 24 that no one has the right to reject the Kurdish independence referendum. According to his own statement: "The Kurds are one of the great nations that still do not have their own state, so no one should ignore the right of the Kurdish people to self-determination."¹⁹

The statement posted on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the de facto Republic of Karabakh states that: "We welcome the holding of a referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan."²⁰

Israel turned out to be the only country in the Middle East region, as well as in the world, that openly supported holding a referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan. Cooperation between Israel and the Kurds began in the 1960s, and since then, they have maintained military, intelligence, and business ties with each other.

For the Jewish state, the Iraqi Kurdistan region is an irreplaceable and strategic partner in terms of oil supply.

A few days before the referendum in the Kurdistan region, the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, expressed his support for the independence of the Kurdish people on behalf of Israel and supported the political independence of Kurdistan.

Benjamin Netanyahu made a pro-Kurdish statement back in 2014 from the rostrum of the UN General Assembly, in this way he openly supported the Kurds' quest for independence before the international community.²¹

Conclusion. Kurds residing in Iraq have always been active in their quest for independence. They had both supporters and opponents in this case. The referendum of 2017 and the events that followed by clearly showed the extent of real support for the Kurdish path to independence.

¹⁷ PKK leader slams KRG's referendum, says 'Kurds don't need a state', 22.06.2017. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2017/06/22/pkk-leader-slams-krgs-referendum-says-kurds-dont-need-a-state>

¹⁸ Catalonia, Kurdistan 'defending democracy': former Catalan leader, 14.09.2017 <https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/14092017>

¹⁹ Visar Ymeri: We are for the independence of the Kurds, 13.08.2017. <https://sakte.net/visar-ymeri-jemi-per-pavaresine-e-kurdeve-video/>

²⁰ Comment by the Information and Public Relations Department of the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Artsakh, 29.09.2017. <http://www.nkr.am/en/news/2017-09-27/959/>

²¹ Israel endorses independent Kurdish state, 13.09.2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-israel/israel-endorses-independent-kurdish-state-idUSKCN1BO0QZ>

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