



The Kurdish problem in the middle east: A post-modernist and post-structuralist analysis

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Abstract

The Kurdish issue is very vexed and it presents a significant challenge to the security and stability of the Middle East region. The Kurds are one of the significant groups of minorities without state. The Kurdish minority is spread over four states- Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria in the Middle East region. The ethno-political challenge posed by the Kurdish factor is a source of constant threat to the integrity of the states in which Kurdish minority resides. The Kurds have been steadfast in demanding autonomy and even an independent state of Kurdistan. This article seeks to analyse the issue of Kurdish minority through the theoretical lens of post-modernism and post-structuralism in international relations. It endeavours to explicate the differential trajectory of the ethno-political movement of the Kurdish minority in Iran, Iraq and Turkey.

Keywords: kurds, sovereignty, boundary, federalism, ethnicity, colonialism

Introduction

The Kurds are a very formidable minority group in terms of overall demographic presence. However, they are spread across four states- Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. They are present in a region marked by mountainous topography across the four states in the Middle East region. The minority Kurds have faced varying levels of discrimination across these four states. Their position in these states has also been impacted upon by various factors.

The Kurdish issue is very ticklish in the Middle East region (Entessar 1984)^[12]. The minority Kurds have participated in ethnic movements to put pressure on their respective governments to better address their grievances. The ethnic Kurdish movements have been affected by the overbearing historical inheritance of colonialism in the Middle East. This had severe repercussions for the post-colonial states in the region and the future trajectory of their processes of both nation-building and state-building. The moulding and re-moulding of state as a process has been continuing since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) (Singh 2017)^[1]. Such demands for states have implications for legitimacy of the state (ibid). It can have far-reaching consequences for regional security as well as global security.

The historical endowment of colonialism has also impacted upon the process of politicization of ethnic identities in the post-colonial states (Weber 2009)^[10]. Colonialism resulted into a highly stratified social structure in terms of ethnicity with pronounced polarization and enhanced level of bitterness between different social groups. Historically the Kurds became very important in the context of ever-deepening bitterness and contest between the Safavid dynasty in Iran and the Ottoman empire.

Seeing through the theoretical lens

Post-modernist and post-structuralist approaches to IR have provided novel explanations of various global phenomenon by questioning the conventional wisdom (Sayin and Ates 2012)^[2]. These approaches have explicated the relative nature of truth and hampered the frigid boundaries of rigidly held truth (Mc Morrow 2018)^[3]. These approaches have also taught us that the sovereignty as well as the geographical boundaries of states are fluid in nature which

is prone to multiple interpretation (ibid). This is suitably exemplified by the Kurdish question in the Middle East.

The Kurds in Iran

The Kurds in Iran are relatively less rebellious. This is because of a multitude of socio-cultural and historical reasons. The Kurdish population in Iran is better homogenized with the rest of the society (Entessar 1984)^[12]. There is also a deep affinity between Kurdish language and Persian language. This enhances the socio-cultural bonding between the Kurds and the rest of the population in Iran. The Kurds are also supposed to be the primary and pristine natives of the regions around the Iranian plateau.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Kurds established an autonomous independent state in Iran. However, this state lasted for a brief period despite external support of the Soviet Union. The memory of this brief success continues to bolster the persistent ethno-political struggle of Kurds for an independent state. It reverberates in the collective memory of the Kurds inspiring generations of prolonged Kurdish struggle.

The Kurds in Iraq

The Kurds in Iraq have deep religious and linguistic diversity. The rival factions are engaged in bitter rivalry. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) had far-reaching impact on the Kurdish issue in the Middle East (Nelson 2018)^[13]. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 altered the ethno-political landscape of Iraq in terms of governmental power-sharing. This incentivized unity between rival factions of Kurdish groups in Iraq leading to the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the year 2006 (Mac Queen 2015)^[15]. After Saddam Hussein's exit, the Kurdish areas in Iraq are having a relatively amicable self-rule.

The Kurdistan regional government has been a big political and psychological victory for the Kurds in Iraq. This regional government also tried to garner economic dividends out of the rich oil and gas resources in the northern region of Iraq with deeper demographic concentration of Kurds. It passed an oil-and-gas law in August 2007 to earn lucrative foreign contracts aimed at productive oil and gas exploration.

Historically the issues of human rights violations because of the constant conflicts have plagued the collective memory of the Kurds (King 2005) ^[16]. This has led to a situation in which their Kurdish identity becomes primary even at the cost of Iraqi identity. An unofficial referendum was held in Kurdish areas in the year 2005. In this referendum an overwhelming majority of the voters in Iraqi Kurdish areas favoured independence from Iraq. This referendum had the tacit backing of some political parties of the Kurdish areas. The regional leaders utilized the result of this unofficial referendum as a pressure tactic on the central government in Iraq. This pressure was supposed to be applied to achieve desired outcomes in terms of federal devolution of power to satisfy regional aspirations of Kurds.

The U.S-led 2003 invasion of Iraq gave a new voice to the erstwhile subordinated groups like the Shias and Kurds (Taras 2006) ^[17]. This happened because after the exit of the Saddam Hussein, the Sunni faction in Iraq became politically inconsequential. This altering of the ethno-political landscape had consequences beyond the borders of Iraq. This had decisive results for regional geopolitics in the Middle East. The reverberations of this development were felt far and wide in the region.

Indeed the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein government was a big psychological as well as symbolic victory of Kurds. The Kurds were earlier tormented by the Sunnis in Iraq and so the ouster of a sectarian Sunni regime championed by Saddam Hussein gave relief to the entire Kurdish community (MacQueen 2015) ^[15]. After the exit of the Saddam Hussein, the participation of the Kurds was enhanced in the federal government in Iraq. Additionally, the new 2005 constitution of Iraq gave a legal and constitutional validity to the formation of a federal system. This development accorded a new legitimacy to autonomy demands in Kurdish areas bolstering Kurdish nationalism.

The Kurds in turkey

The Kemalist model of secularism in Turkey tried to extinguish minority identities in a politico-constitutional manner reflected in various policies of the state. In the year 1924 Turkey legally prohibited educational institutions, sectarian associational groups and related literature having socio-cultural linkages with the ethnic Kurdish community (Tombus and Aygenc 2017) ^[22]. The Kurds were also irked by the overthrow of the Caliphate. So, there was the sheikh Said rebellion in the year 1925 symbolising grievances against Kemalist secular project which sought to banish Islam from public life (Esposito 2013) ^[20]. The rebels demanded reinstallation of Islam and its rejuvenated presence in public life. This religious motive was in conjunction with the demand of an independent Kurdistan. After this rebellion the Turkish government responded with heavy repression leading to destruction of residential areas associated with the ethnic Kurdish community. Another Kurdish rebellion in Turkey happened in the year 1929 which was spearheaded by Nouri Pasha. This movement demanded Kurdistan but had secular overtones.

The Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) founded in 1974 demanded official endorsement of the use of Kurdish language and legal sanctity for Kurdish minority rights (Criss 1995; Yavuz 2001) ^[25, 24]. It also wanted establishment of a Kurdish Republic in the southeastern region of Turkey. However, its final and decisive aim was the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. There was a military coup in the year 1980 in Turkey which also altered the pattern of activities of Kurdish Worker's party (PKK). The PKK and its active pursuits went into seclusion.

The 1982 Constitution was drafted by the military government of Turkey formed after the 1980 military coup (Isiksel 2013) ^[26]. This Constitution persisted with policies related to prohibition of Kurdish language and other cultural symbols. The state proscribing a particular minority language was indeed shameful. This led to anger and resentment among the Kurdish population in Turkey.

It was widely anticipated that Turkey would earn peace dividends after the climax of the Cold War in the early 1990s (Aydin 2005) ^[27]. It was supposed to enhance the international profile of Turkey as a significant power. But the anticipated peace dividend could not materialize as it was hampered by the challenge of ethnic conflict posed by the Kurdish minority (Robins 1993) ^[28]. This ethnic factor internally fractured the Turkish state and equally led to stress in its foreign relations especially with its neighbours. The ethno-political gains made by Iraqi Kurds adjoined by an important external variable to the politicization of the Kurdish ethnic minority in Turkey (Tezcur and Gurses 2017) ^[29].

Conclusion

The ethnic conflicts because of the Kurdish factor in the Middle- East have been quite challenging for both regional politico-military security as well as human security. These conflicts had varied trajectory in the different states like Iran, Iraq and Turkey in the Middle- East region. The resolution of such conflicts requires a very conscious multi-pronged strategy that can address root causes. There is also a need to find out an appropriate politico-legal and constitutional framework to provide an outlet for the expression of cultural and ethnic aspirations of minorities. Such conventions also need to be in sync with International Conventions related to minority rights and human rights.

The aim of an independent Kurdistan to be formed after geographical alteration in the present boundaries of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey does not seem to be practically feasible (Rafaat 2007) ^[5]. It is not logically attainable. It is almost impossible to carry out such large-scale rupture in present geographical boundaries of different states in question. All these states are highly sensitive about protection of their sovereignty and territorial integrity. There is no magic wand to solve this vexed issue. It is next to impossible to construct an ethnically homogenous state. The minorities are bound to be there in almost every state. So, the only realistic way out is to find out a politico-legal and constitutional framework to accommodate genuine grievances of ethnic minorities.

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