

Do Kurds Constitute a Nation?

Talar Othman Dezayee*

Department of Social Sciences, Istanbul Aydin University, Florya, Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract

This paper is an analytical and theoretical study of Kurdish nationalism. In this study, I looked to find justification or rejection for long held Kurdish desire of independence by simply observing its nation formation process. With the argument of Anthony D smith about the dimensions for an *ethnie* (nation), I scrutinized the Kurdish attempts and efforts steered toward its nation building. I also explored the roots of Kurdish nationalism, which fall into two categories of essentialists and constructionists. As a result of this study, I argue that Kurdish nation has been built on the previous traits of pre-modern Kurdish nation. By applying the concept of Anthony D. Smith about the formation of nations, I argue that Kurdish nationalists have managed to promote the idea of Kurdish nationalism despite the savage campaigns of Kurdish suppression by the newly formed national states of Middle East.

Keywords: Essentialism, Constructivism, Nationalism, Nation Formation, Culture, and History

1. Introduction

“Oh foes who watch us, the nation whose language is Kurdish is alive, it cannot be defeated by makers of weapons of anytime” this is the first lyrics of Kurdistan regional government’s national anthem in north of Iraq. This patriotic emotional lyric of the Kurds’ national anthem impedes with itself the desire of millions of Kurds to have their own internationality-recognized sovereign state.

The history of Kurdistan as a geographic identity has passed through a rotted path. Various independent Kurdish kingdoms and large principalities have ruled over this region. But no power succeeds to establish a unified formal state. Nonetheless, the struggle of the Kurdish people continued due to the continual presence of foreign occupiers. In 1514, Kurdistan joins the Othman empire and thus experiences a three subsequent peaceful centuries in its history. However, with emergence of western notion of nationalism, Kurds realized their own right for self-determination. The 19th century marked years of uprising and suppression for Kurdistan independence by the Othman empire (West, 2013).

After World War I and the weakening of the Othman empire, the Kurdish leaders observed an opportunity to stand for their ground. A group of Kurds formed a delegation at the conference of Versailles to present their claim for independence. In the subsequent treaty of Sevres between the allies and Othman empire, it was recommended that Kurds could establish their own government within those frontiers. But this recommendation stayed on paper forever. In 1925, British lobbied to the League of Nations for annexation of Kurdish region into Iraq. The reason behind that only laid into the exploitation of its natural resources especially oil resorts. For another time, Kurds were tricked by the British mouthful promises of protecting rights of Kurds and establishing a source of governmental autonomy within Iraq (Mcdowall, 2007, pp. 151-153).

In 1946, the soviets supported the establishment of a Kurdish republic in Iran. But soon the soviets left Iran, the central government of Iran torn down the Mahabat Republic and executed its leaders. During 1950s and 60s, Iraq waged brutal campaign against the Kurds. Kurds were largely either prosecuted or expelled from the country. USA then was a strong alliance of Saddam Hussein war against Iran and that was why the outcry of Kurds due to the large-scale crimes committed by Saddam didn’t find an international audience to itself. As a result of these and the continual struggle of Kurds for separation, Iraq used its first poison chemical weapon on Kurdish masses in Kurdish town of Halabja. At least, five thousand civilians including women and children were killed (Meho, 1997, p. 14).

Despite of the legitimate appeal of Kurds for independence, from the inception of 20th century, the Kurds have been subject to oppression and inhuman atrocities committed by the four states of Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria; in which the Kurds region was divided. Since nation states constitute the most prevalent form of state

organization in today's world, I am going to observe if Kurds efforts for independence is justified by simply passing the test for defining as a nation.

2. Literature Review

There are two main schools of thought on the origin of nation and nationalism. The primordialists or essentialists argue that nations have some roots that date back to some distant points in history. The essentialists argue that nations slowly emerged in the pre-modern period through processes as symbols, communication and myth. They accept that nations are made, but argue that nations predate the concept of nationalism which is a new phenomenon (Gunter, 2013, p. 29).

Constructionists, on the other hand, argue that nations don't predate nationalism and thus nationalism invents nations. The constructionist theorists believe that states create nations. A constructive theorist would first make Kurdistan then he would make Kurd nationalism, for example (Gunter, 2013, p. 34).

Anthony Smith idea about nation building is more parallel to primordialist concept of nationalism. Anthony D. Smith agrees with primordialist school when he argues that the origin of the nation lie in the *ethnie* which contains such attributes as collective name, myth of descent, shared history, culture, association with a specific territory and sense of solidarity (Smith, 1988, pp. 22-32).

2.1 Primordial Kurdish nationalism

Most Kurdish nationalists would be considered primordialists because they argue that the origin of their nation and nationalism root back into time immemorial. Many of them see themselves as the descendants of the ancient Medes who overthrew the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C.E. They also can recite interesting myth about their origins regarding King Solomon, Jinn, and the blacksmith Kawa who defeated the ruthless ruler. Kurdish history also recorded that Saladin (1137-93) was a famous Kurd who overthrew Shiite Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt and established his own Ayyubid dynasty that ruled Egypt, Syria, and Iraq (Gunter, 2013, pp. 29-34).

In 1597, the Kurdish Mir Sharaf Khan Bitlisi published Sharafnama which included an extensive history of semi independent Kurdish emirates. In the following hundred years, Ahmad Khan composed Mem u Zin, a tragic love poem which hailed as the Kurdish national epic. Ahmed khan's work, which impeded within itself the Kurdish nationalist beliefs, indicated that he was proud of being a Kurd and he thought that Kurds were a nation. Therefore, many contemporary Kurdish nationalists point to the Sharafnama and Mem u Zin as historical documentations of the antiquity of their nation and nationalism (Gunter, 2013, pp. 29-34).

2.2 Constructive Kurdish nationalism

The argument of primordialists for the antiquity of Kurdish nationalism is strongly challenged. The constructivists argue that the concept of nationalism is a new phenomenon, which emerged in late 18 century during the French revolution. Even the concept of nationalism arrived to Middle East later. Turkish, Iranian and Arab nationalism started to shape in the same region as Kurds dwelled only after world war one (Gunter, 2013, pp. 34-38).

Constructive theorists argue that Ahmad khan epic Mem u Zin was a precursor of modern Kurdish nationalism. There was not any political and socio economic perquisites for any notion of nation to exist because tribes were the main collectivities that Kurd were identified. In general, constructivists argue that people didn't identify themselves as ethnic group or nations in the way that people do nowadays. They further argue that Kurdish nationalism only began to develop after world one in response to the attempts to build a modern Arab state that would permit no more than a minimal amount of Kurdish autonomy (Gunter, 2013, pp. 34-38).

3. How Kurds are a Nation?

Anthony D. Smith defines nation as an *ethnie*. He argues that in order to define a community of people as a nation, they need to meet six criteria of an *ethnie*. Collective names, common myth of ancestry, shared history, culture and association with a territory are the six dimensions required to qualify a community of people as a nation. I would like to apply these criteria on Kurds to observe whether or not they constitute as a nation (Smith, 1988, p. 22).

First, what establishes a collective name for Kurdish nation is the word “Kurd” and Kurdistan. If one is inspecting the history, he would find proper documentation that would prove Kurd and Kurdistan as name and territory can be traced back over two thousand years. Collective names are the hallmark of a nation in the historical record. Kurdistan had a collective name by which it distinguished and continues still to distinguish its members from other nations. Kurdistan as a name lay down the magic of a nation existence and a guarantee of its survival (Aziz, 2011, p. 33).

Beginning with emergence of notion of nation-states in middle at the beginning of 20th century, Kurds ended up deprived of their own state and thus were divided among different newly emerged nation states, like Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Each of these states, in order to monopolize the use of legitimate violence in their territories widely suppressed the Kurdish unrests for independence. For example, in Turkey, steps were taken to dismantle the essence of Kurdish nation by publicly calling them as the mountainous Turks. In Iraq, too, the essence of the Kurdish nation was disrupted when Saddam Hussein decided to assimilate the Kurds of Karkuk into Arab nationalism. Due to the widespread discriminations against Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, Kurds were forced to embrace Arab and Turk nationalisms. Despite these assimilations campaign, Kurds overall managed to survive such wicked processes of assimilations and they kept the essence of their Kurdish nation alive, but simply choosing to go with the name of being a Kurd rather than Turk or Arab (Mcdowall, 2007, p. 45).

Second, another dimension of an *ethnie* is a common myth of ancestry which establishes a sense of national ties and sentiments for its members. A shared myth of origin and ancestry not only provides information about the geographical location of the nation, but also it defines a sphere for the community’s self-understanding, which explains its origin and destiny. Myths provide for the members of the nation an overall meaning of the nation, which is called *mythomoteur*. Without such overall meaning for *ethnie*, the nation fails to define itself to itself and others and thus fails to inspire its members to guide collective action (Smith, 1988, p. 24).

A common myth of descent for Kurds can be traced back to Kurdish golden age, heroes, myths and symbols. One of the examples could be citation of the Kurds to the dynasties and families who ruled various places in Kurdistan in pre-modern history. Among these Kurdish dynasties, Shaddadids who ruled Transcaucasia, north of Kurdistan and Hasanwaybids who ruled Dinawar in 10th century are the few examples. A common myth of descent in Kurdish nation has been fostered by popular memories of Kaway Asinger, Mami Alan and Zuhak. The legend of Zuhak contains one of several folklore myths pertaining to the origin of Kurdish nation. According to the Kurdish writing folklore, Zuhak was the tyrant ruler who had snakes growing from his shoulders. Satan appears to him, and convinces him he would be cured if he feeds the snakes every day with brain of two youngsters. The executioner felt pity for youngsters and thus he substitutes the brain of youngsters with brain of sheep. The survivors escaped to safety of mountains where they became the founders of the new people, the forefathers of Kurds (Aziz, 2011, p. 34).

Third, shared history is another dimension for Kurdish nationalism. It is argued that history should tell a story. It must please and satisfy as a narrative and above all, history should educate members of a nation. Kurds have a rich history which embodies with itself a strong sentiment for unifying its nation. A good example, which have functioned as a shared history among the Kurds can be the celebration of Nawroz. In fact, March 21st is believed to be the day when the tyrant ruler Zuhak was killed. The myth of Nawroz has been used by the Kurdish nationalists to rally Kurdish support against the newly formed national states which were encompassing the lands in which they were living. Nawroz is considered as a symbol of freedom and victory of the people over the tyranny of Zuhak. Therefore, Kurds used the symbol of Nawroz as an essential practice and requisite to their sense of national identity. The Nawroz festival is a shared historical memory and serves as an opportunity to practice Kurdish culture (Aziz, 2011, p. 35).

Fourth, shared culture is another dimension for defining a nation. A distinctive shared culture serves to bind the members of a nation together and distinguish them from the outsiders. Language and religion have been the most commonly shared cultural traits for a nation, compared to other cultural traits of laws, dress, music, food and folklore. In Kurdish nationalism, language has played the role of a main but not the sole differentiating mark of a nation. Kurdish language has been shared and spoken by Kurds for centuries, although it has diverse dialogues but generally, Kurds speak one Kurdish language. In contrast to this, religion in Kurdistan has not been effective in forming a unique mark for Kurdish nation. The reason for that would be the diverse religious population of Kurdish nation. Kurds are not monolith group in regard to religion, since Kurds, are not only Muslims. They practice different faith, like Islam, Christianity, Judaism or even Yazidi. Therefore, language not religious has allowed Kurdish nationalists to make up a concept that emphasizes on a clear differentiation between Kurds and the non-Kurds such as Arabs or Turkmen (Aziz, 2011, p. 36).

Fifth, another dimension for an *ethnie* is association with a specific homeland or territory. Homeland is relevant to a nation, because of an alleged and felt symbiosis between a certain piece of earth and its community. Association with territory can refer to three aspects of territories, which are sacred centers, commemorative association and external recognition. In case of Kurdish nationalism, Kurdish region of north Iraq embodies in its self the sacred city of ancient Urartu named Musasir. In the contemporary history of Kurdistan, the links between Kurds and their territory remained despite of the widespread campaign for assimilation and eradication of Kurdish identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran. For example, Kirkuk which was first the mainly Kurdish populated city has been assimilated into Arab nation by frequent use of force. Still, Kurds consider this place as their homeland and are hard to accept it as non Kurd city. It is argued, that some of the Arabs who were transferred from south of Iraq during the assimilation process of Kurdish areas are still not burying their dead bodies in the city, rather they sent them to their original areas to be buried, since it is believed that it is the land of Kurds (Aziz, 2011, p. 36).

Sixth, the last dimension for an *ethnie* is a sense of solidarity. It is the strongest in term of evoking identity and national feeling. The feeling among Kurds of belonging to Kurdistan is vital to demonstrate their national identity and political solidarity. In time of stress and danger, this strong sense of solidarity among the Kurds transcends the social, political and factional division within the Kurdish nation. National symbols are observed as markers of national solidarity and they played a vital role in consolidating national identity for Kurds since the 1990s (Aziz, 2011, p. 37).

National symbols, such as flags and national anthem proved tremendously effective in promoting nation building in Kurdistan. Flags and national anthem are interactive aids around which Kurdish nationalist used to mobilize and thus promote the essentials for a strong Kurdish nation. Kurdish sense of solidarity is observable easily by Kurdish people use of media such as Facebook and others. Every year, they hold ceremony for flag and named it as the Flag Day. During this day, mostly Kurdish youth change their profile pictures to Kurdistan flag and post patriotic national rhetoric's for Kurdistan independence. In real lives, they attend the official ceremonies and decorate themselves with traditional culture cloth and usually in such festival traditional food is served too (Aziz, 2011, p. 37).

4. Conclusion

The six dimensions of an *ethnie* suggested by Anthony D. Smith indicate the Kurds constitute a nation. Despite of the savage campaign to suppress the oppress the Kurdish nationalist efforts in the last century in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, Kurds managed to keep and promote the essentials that define and unify them as a nation. Therefore, now that nation-state is the most prevalent form of state organization in the world, and every nation almost received its state in the region where Kurdistan lies, Kurds should also be given the right to have their own independent sovereign state. Creation of Kurdish state would put an end to the regional grievances that has been occurring in the region for the last century. With creation of Kurdish nation statehood, the amount of violence happening in Iraq, Iran, and Syria and especially in Turkey will reduce dramatically.

Reference

- Aziz, M. A. (2011). *The Kurds of Iraq: Ethnonationalism and National Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan*. New York: Thomson Press.
- Gunter, M. M. (2013, December 08). The Contemporary Roots of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq. Kufa, Iraq, Iraq.
- Mcdowall, D. (2007). *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: Replika Press.
- Meho, L. I. (1997). *The Kurds and Kurdistan*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Smith, A. D. (1988). *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Washington: Blackwell prss.
- West, C. (2013, 03 7). *The Kurds: A Stateless Nation*. Retrieved 01 02, 2016, from Brown Political Review: www.brownpoliticalreview.org/2013/03/the-kurds-a-stateless-nation/