

Kurdistan Region: A Country Profile

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Introduction

At the end of the Second Gulf War in early 1991, the Kurdish people in Iraq rose against Saddam Hussein's regime by liberating most of the areas inhabited by them. However, within a few weeks, the uprising was crushed. The Iraqi army's attack on Kurdish cities and villages and its retaliation against the Kurdish forces and civilians led to a mass exodus of the Kurds to Iran and Turkey. The international community's intervention resulted in the creation of the northern no-fly-zone by the UN Security Council. This facilitated the return of most of Kurdish refugees back to their habitat. But the continued pressure by the Kurds on the regime forced the government to withdraw its forces, as well as the administrative units from parts of Kurdistan in October 1991. The Kurds then filled the vacuum created by holding elections in 1992, and thus began self-governance in the region. The areas under the control of Kurdish authorities since then came to be known as the Kurdistan Region (RG) which was a self-declared federal region in Iraq until 2005 when the Iraqi constitution officially recognized the region of Kurdistan, along with its existing authorities, as a federal region in Iraq.

The KR is located in north and north eastern parts of Iraq, Syria is to the west, Iran to the east, and Turkey to the north. Its area is 40,643 square kilometers with population of 5,351,276 (estimated). The city of Erbil is the capital of the Region. Kurdish and Arabic are the official languages in the Region. However, Turkmeni, Assyrian and Armenian are also used by the respective communities in some areas. In addition to Kurds a diverse collection of ethnic and religious groups live side-by-side in the Region — including Arabs, Turkmen, Chaldeans, Syrians, Assyrians, Yazidis, Kakayi and Shabaks. The region is geographically diverse, from hot plains to cooler mountainous areas where snow falls in the winter.

Historical Background

Before examining the history of the Kurdish Region (KR) in Iraq it will be useful, though briefly, to explore the history of Kurds and Kurdistan in general as the Kurdish question in Iraq can hardly be separated from the Kurdish question in the region and beyond. At the very outset it has to be mentioned that Kurdistan is not the name of a state, but rather, a land which in the twentieth century was divided among four states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) by the colonial masters. Hence the Kurds are today the largest stateless territorial nation in the world. In the absence of proper census it is estimated that the Kurds population is around 40 million with over 22 million in Turkey, over 8 million in Iran, over 6 million in Iraq and nearly 2 million in Syria. The Kurdish language is part of Indo-European languages.

Most scholars tend to believe that there is a connection between the Medes, the founders of Median Empire who defeated Assyrians in 612BC, and the Kurds (Minorsky, 1992, p. 141; Nebez, 2004, p. 15). The land on which the Kurds now reside was invaded by Arab Muslims in the mid-seventh century. Consequently most Kurds converted to Islam. From the tenth century, as a result of weakening of the power of the Islamic caliphs' the Kurds began to establish their own independent dynasties which lasted until the Mongolian invasions of the thirteenth century.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Kurdish areas became the main stake of rivalries between the Ottoman and Safavid empires. In 1514, the Kurdish-populated area was officially divided between the Ottomans and the Safavids. Initially the Kurds enjoyed some degree of autonomy and were able to establish several principalities which ruled different regions of Kurdistan (McDowall, 2004, p. 21-62). In 1834, the centralization policies of the Ottomans ended Kurdish self-rule and that led to several rebellions with no avail.

After the defeat of Ottomans in World War I, the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed between the Allies and the Ottomans recommended the creation of a Kurdish state. However, in 1923, a new treaty, the Treaty of Lausanne, signed between the newly established Turkish state and the Allied powers superseded the Treaty of Sèvres and did not take into consideration the Kurds and their national rights (Kirmanj, 2013, p.25), instead the Ottoman part of Kurdistan was divided into three newly created nation-states, Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The Safavid part of Kurdistan however, remained part of Iran. Furthermore, by all standards, these new states did not make any attempt to solve the Kurdish right to statehood. This resulted in ignoring Kurdish national rights. With the Kurds deprived the right of statehood, they found themselves apportioned as minorities in the above mentioned new state systems (McDowall, 2004, p.1).

Kurds of Iraq

The Kurds of Iraq were part of Mosul province during the Ottoman rule. The British conquered the province in 1918 and formally annexed it to Iraq in 1926. Generally speaking, the Kurdish people considered their inclusion into the new state as a betrayal by the great powers. Consequently, they resisted the annexation by means of struggle in a context of national liberation movement. Until the advent of the Baath Party to power in 1968, three main periods in the history of the Kurdish struggle in Iraq can be identified. The first period (1918–1946) was marked by a slow transition from uncoordinated tribal rebellion, lacking a defined political direction. The second period (1946–1961) was marked by the establishment in 1946 of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which henceforth provided the Kurds with a national organizational structure, an ideological direction, and a political center. The third period (1961–1968) witnessed the emergence of a relatively strong Kurdish national movement. At the same time, the politicization of Kurdish society mobilized the Kurds for an all-out armed struggle which started in 1961 and continued, though interruptedly, until 1991 (Bengio, 2012, p.13).

The fourth period (1968–1991) started with a rapprochement between the Iraqi regime and the Kurdish leadership resulted in signing the March 11 Manifesto in 1970 which on paper guaranteed autonomy to the Kurds in the Kurdish areas, with proportional representation in the central government and equitable distribution of oil revenues. It also recognized Kurdish language as the official language in the proposed autonomous region. However, it postponed outlining the boundaries of Kurdistan region until a census could be conducted later. However, any hope of implementing the manifesto soon evaporated, as shortly after the signing, the regime expelled thousands of Faili-Kurds from Iraq and launched a policy of Arabization – designed to change the ethnic identity of targeted areas and cities by expelling the Kurds and replacing them with Arab settlers (Kirmanj, 2013, pp. 150-152). Eventually, Baghdad unilaterally decreed an autonomy statute for Kurdistan, but excluded strategic places such as Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Akra, and Sinjar from the autonomous region. The government proposal was rejected by the Kurds. In March of 1974, the conflict resumed, and fighting lasted for a year. According to official state records, more than 60,000 Iraqis were killed during the war in Kurdistan from March 1974 to March 1975 alone, including 16,000 Iraqi soldiers (Kirmanj, 2013, p. 151; Bengio, 2012, p. 135).

After the collapse of the Kurdish rebellion, the regime commenced a systematic program of Arabization, internal displacement and deportation of the Kurds. While the Iraqi regime was preoccupied in implementing a policy of Arabization, the Kurdish rebels who had escaped and fled abroad after the failed 1974–1975 rebellion reorganized themselves into different groups. In addition to KDP a new player emerged i.e. the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), headed by Jalal Talabani.

The Arabization policy continued and it was basically part of the process of internal colonization. For example, while the oil from the Kurdish region was exported, the revenue was used for the development of the Arab parts of Iraq (Kirmanj, 2013, p. 154). The process of Arabization culminated in the infamous Anfal operations of 1988. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the Iraqi government massacred between 50,000 and 100,000 noncombatant Kurdish civilians (the Kurdish figure is 182,000), including women and children. Also, another 1,500,000 Kurds were relocated during the Anfal operations (Human Rights Watch, 1995, pp. 5). Most of Iraqi Kurdistan's villages were simply wiped out (Kirmanj, 2013, pp. 153-156; Bengio, 2012, p. 184).

These onslaughts of the Kurds were to become etched in the collective Kurdish memory, it added another layer in the Kurdish shared memory (Hiltermann, 2007, pp. 226-227). If it were not for the Kuwait War, the Iraqi government would certainly have taken even more drastic measures to attain its objective to obliterate the Kurds from Iraq. But the invasion of Kuwait and its ramifications, in particular the 1991 uprising changed the political scene in Iraq forever. As the demoralized Iraqi troops retreated from Kuwait, a soldier aimed his gun at one of Saddam's wall posters in Basra. The incident sparked antigovernment demonstrations that led to a widespread uprising. Within days it spread throughout southern Iraq. On March 5, 1991, shortly after the outbreak of the Shiite uprising in the south, another

uprising took place in the Kurdistan. The victory celebrations lasted almost to the end of March 1991. By early April 1991, the defeated and demoralized Kurds of nearly 2 million people began an unprecedented exodus (Kirmanj, 2013, p. 160; Bengio, 2012, p. 199).

Kurdistan Regional Government

As mentioned above, in October 1991, the Iraqi regime and its security apparatus once more lost control of the Kurdish areas. Consequently it withdrew its administration and military forces. This made the Kurdistan Front, an alliance of diverse Kurdish political groups to fill the vacuum created by holding a general election. Only the two major parties, the KDP and PUK, managed to secure seats. Since the results were close they decided to divide the 100 parliamentary seats equally, with the 5 remaining seats awarded to the Christian minority. The elections in Kurdistan region greatly alarmed not only the Iraqi regime, but also neighbouring countries that feared a spillover effect on their own Kurdish populations (Bengio, 2012, p. 202). In 1992 after much deliberation at the Kurdistan Parliament federation was chosen as a platform to solve the Kurdish question in Iraq. So alarming did this development appear that it prompted a tripartite Syrian-Turkish-Iranian meeting in November 1992, aimed at curbing Kurdish ambitions (Bengio, 2012, p. 219).

Sadly, the region that had benefited from self-rule since 1992 was torn apart by severe internal fighting in 1994 that threatened its autonomy. Fighting soon split the region into two spheres of influence, the KDP and the PUK spheres. Barzani, leader of the KDP, took the world by surprise when in late August 1996 he called on the Iraqi Army to help in his struggle against the PUK. The move was widely perceived as a betrayal, both by the Kurdish people and their US supporters (Bengio, 2012, p. 232). By the end of 1998, casualties resulting from internal fighting had reached 3,000. The entire situation had a galvanizing effect for the Kurdish region in that Kurdish society became divided politically, economically, geographically, and even intellectually into two blocs. Nevertheless, mediation by various external and internal representatives, popular pressure from within the Kurdish community, and the realization by both factions that neither could win the war militarily finally resulted in a cease-fire. This led to the signing of an agreement in 1998 through the goodwill and assistance of the US. The end of the civil war created an environment where the Kurds, though slowly, embarked on the process of nation and state building within the state of Iraq.

Nation and State Building

In the last fifteen years, since the internal war came to an end, Kurdish national projects had begun to show embryonic signs of maturity. By 2003, the KRG had developed all the trappings of a quasi-state, which had greatly boosted its position in the aftermath of the war (Natali, 2010, pp. 127-131). In fact, the framework of a Kurdish quasi-state has been in the making from the early 1990s. It included a constitution, a parliament, a cabinet, and

security and defense forces all of which became state symbols and function independently of Baghdad (Bengio, 2012, p. 279). The defense forces locally called *Peshmerga* numbered 127,000 (Chapman, 2009, p. 112). Although, the unification of the *Peshmerga* has been ongoing since 2006, they are still strongly affiliated to their respective political parties, KDP and PUK. The KRG has about 100,000 personnel in police force. In addition, both the KDP and PUK have their own intelligence agencies that have nothing to do with Iraqi intelligence agencies. Indeed since 1991 no single Iraqi army personnel have been stationed in KR. Other signs of nation and state building, separate of Iraq, can be seen from the adoption of the Kurdish national anthem, printing of stamps, building of monuments, memorial sculptures, and museums. Lately two international airports were built where foreigners could get their visas from Kurdish officers and not from Iraqi foreign ministry officials. The Kurdish language has also witnessed an unprecedented renaissance following the establishment of KRG. The younger generation has access to schools, colleges, and universities that teach in their Kurdish mother tongue. Currently, the Region has nine public universities, excluding the English Language University of Kurdistan. There are some ten private universities including the American University of Iraq in Suleimaniya. The emergence of a third party, the Gorran Movement, as opposition in parliament, had slowed down the headway of Islamists that begun in mid 1990s. Not surprisingly the KRG experiment in Iraq has energized the other Kurdish communities, especially in Turkey and Syria. Generally speaking, the Kurds in Iraq have been more successful than the central government with regard to building projects. This is primarily because the KR has been the most stable and war-free region in the country. Being the most organized militarily and the strongest economically, the Kurds have added their weight to the shaping of post-Saddam Iraq, also (Bengio, 2012, pp. 297-298). There have not been any terrorist attacks in the KR in several years. The political changes that had taken place in Iraqi Kurdistan after 1991 and the existence of the Kurdish quasi-state since 1992 coalesced to cause a sense of political and national cohesiveness among urban and literate Kurds in which a widely accepted identity as 'Kurdistanis' displacing the former self-designation of 'Iraqi Kurds' or 'Iraqis' (Aziz, 2010, p. 5; Stansfield, 2006, pp. 264–265).

Despite these great achievements for a nation that rose from the ashes of genocide and chemical bombs the KRG and the Kurds still face enormous challenges. On the home front, it needs to articulate a clear-cut vision regarding the future of the Kurds in Iraq. The democratizing experience remains a fledgling enterprise; Freedom of expression is far from guaranteed. On the social level tribalism, nepotism, corruption, honour killings and sexism are rampant. More importantly, although the two rival parties of the KDP and PUK have taken steps to unify the administration and governmental institutions, deep down rivalry and competition are very much alive (Bengio, 2012, p. 307). The human rights situation in KR was volatile in 2011 as a result of the crackdown on the pro-democracy demonstrations in spring 2011. The Kurdistan Region does not have permanent representatives at the UN, nor does any state recognize its entity or its right to self-determination. Nevertheless, with the emergence of the Kurdish quasi-state in Iraq they are closer to achieving it than at any time in the past century.

Political System

The KR is officially a federation within Iraq. Its three main institutions are the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan Parliament (KP) established first in 1992, and the Kurdistan Region Presidency (KRP) established later in 2005. As proposed in Iraq's federal constitution, Kurdistan's institutions exercise legislative and executive authority in many areas, including the Regional budget, police and security forces, education and health policies, natural resource management and infrastructural development. Although the Iraqi constitution states that in "formulating foreign policy and diplomatic representation; negotiating, signing, and ratifying international treaties and agreements; formulating foreign sovereign economic and trade policy" the federal government shall be the exclusive authority but in reality the KRG practices most of these policies without consulting the federal government.

The KR is yet to have a permanent constitution. The proposed draft constitution was ratified by the KP in June 2009. It was supposed to have been put to vote in a referendum. However, the emergence of a strong opposition in the political arena after the 2009 elections became an obstacle for the two major parties to put the draft to a popular referendum. New elections were held recently on September 21, 2013. It is yet to be known whether the ruling coalition will consult with the opposition regarding contentious items and articles in the draft constitution, to reach national consensus.

In the absence of a constitution the KRG exercises executive power according to the KR's laws, as enacted by the KP. The term of the current government which assumed office on April 5, 2012 expired in September 2013, was led by Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, from KDP. Prior to him, Barham Salih, from PUK, headed the coalition government for two years. The cabinet is made up of members of the Kurdistan List coalition, which won the region's parliamentary elections in July 2009. The 19 cabinet ministers are from the KDP, PUK, Kurdistan Islamic Movement, the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council, Turkmen, Communists and Socialists representatives. The President of the Kurdistan Region holds the highest executive authority and he is elected by secret ballot in a popular vote every four years and can stand for election for a second term. However, this rule was breached as Barzani's term in office was extended for two more years in June 2013.

The current, 2009-2013 Parliament which has 111 seats consists of 59 members from KDP and PUK coalition, 25 from Gorran Movement, 13 from the Reform and Services List (an Islamist dominated block), 2 members from Islamic Movement List, 1 member from the Freedom and Social Justice List. The remaining, 11 seats are reserved for minority groups - 5 seats for Turkmen, 5 seats for Christians and 1 seat for the Armenians.

Foreign Relations and Foreign Policy

The unfortunate Kurdish internal civil war from 1994 to 1998, willingly or unwillingly, pushed the regional and super powers to get involved in the Kurdish politics that resulted

in the internationalization of the Kurdish cause. The KDP and PUK, attempted to increase their respective spheres of influence through alliances with regional powers –the KDP with Turkey and Iraq, and the PUK with Iran. The regional powers tried to exploit the power struggle of local Kurdish groups, primarily to keep the Kurds of Iraq and their own Kurds in check. US involvement was mostly to contain the local and regional powers.

The late 1990s witnessed intensive efforts by various regional and western governments to mediate between the KDP and PUK. It helped upgrade relations with outside powers as the mediators began to regard their Kurdish interlocutors as representatives of a Kurdish entity and not of an Iraqi state (Bengio, 2012, p. 246). Initially, French involvement in the mediation efforts somehow contributed towards internationalization of the Kurdish problem. Later, when the US got involved it further internationalized its cause. By 1996 the US under the auspices of Foreign Minister, Madeleine Albright managed to broker a cease-fire which eventually led to an agreement between the KDP and PUK. In 1998, the State Department issued a statement which mentioned the Kurds' aspiration "that Iraq be reformed on a federative basis" (Bengio 2012, p. 264). This was the first time that US officially recognized the right of the Kurdish nation in Iraq, though, in the framework of a united Iraq. In June 2000 the US Vice President, Al Gore, reaffirmed the US commitment to "the protection of the people of Iraqi Kurdistan" (Bengio, 2012, p. 265). The existence of a large Kurdish diaspora in Europe, numbering nearly one million, also served as a catalyst for internationalizing the Kurdish issue.

The event that boosted to KRG's internationalization of Kurdish cause was the 2003 US-led Iraq War. It basically turned the Kurds from a local to a regional if not say an international player. In February 2003, the KDP and PUK declared their intention to join the US forces in the anticipated war against Iraq. At the same time in its drive to gain world support and Kurdish cooperation, the US chose the Halabja chemical bombing to justify the war. The position of the Kurds enhanced, primarily, due to Turkey's decision not to allow the passage of Allied forces through its territory. Generally speaking, the Iraq war proved to be a golden opportunity for the Kurds to leave their mark on the domestic, regional, and international arena (Bengio, 2012, p. 268; Ozcan, 2011, p. 75). In recent years, the growing importance of the Kurdistan Region is to an extent the byproduct of two important factors. First, is the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East and second, the richness of the KR of natural resources (Bryza, 2012, p. 56).

Iraq

Before the establishment of the KRG, the Kurdish leadership and Iraqi authorities negotiated a settlement to the Kurdish question. The process continued until mid-1991 with discussions focusing on four key points: mutual trust, democratization, Kurdish national rights, and Iraq's national unity. As in previous negotiations (from 1961 to 1984), the fate of Kirkuk and demarcation of the borders of the Kurdish autonomous region became the main points of contention (Kirmanj, 2013, p. 182). In May 1998, the Iraqi authorities revealed that the

central government was in regular contact with the Kurds and Baghdad would have reached an agreement with the Kurds, had the US not prevented the Kurds from doing so (Bengio, 2012, p. 250). While on the tactical level both the Kurds and Baghdad sought to leave the line of communications open between them, strategically speaking the two parties remained far apart. Once more, negotiations failed. In addition to previous issues and obstacles, this time federation emerged as another issue. By early 2000s, the years of separation from Iraq had produced a generation of Kurds that had minimal contact with the Arab Iraqis. Moreover, the new generation of Kurds had been introduced to a school curriculum that emphasized the sense of belonging to Kurdistan rather than to Iraq (Kirmanj, 2013, p. 186).

After the collapse of Saddam's regime, in 2003, and the emergence of the Arab-Shiites dominated government, initially, the Kurds and the Arab-Shiites enjoyed a close relationship for a few years. However, this good relationship did not last long. The first sign of disunity appeared when Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, the prime minister of the transitional government, omitted the phrase "federal and democratic" from the oath of inauguration in May 2005. This move enraged Kurdish leaders and raised fear among ordinary Kurds because many Arab-Shiites seemed to be like the Arab-Sunnis before them, rejected the notion of federalism. Another disagreement developed over the use of the Iraqi flag when Barzani, the President of the KR, banned the display of the Iraqi flag in August 2006 claiming that "mass-killings were committed in its name. Therefore, it is impossible [for us] to hoist this flag in Kurdistan" (Agence France-Presse, 2010).

In addition, the KRG had yet to settle differences with the central government over some major issues, including: the division of power between the region and the federal government; the distribution of resources; the right to sign oil deals with companies; and, most importantly, the chronic problem of Kirkuk and the territorial delineation of the KR. The unyielding Kurdish stance with regard to the inclusion of the oil-rich district of Kirkuk in their region has been interpreted by Baghdad as a clear indication of their aspirations to achieve economic and, in the long run, political independence. Central to the conflict between the Kurds and Arab Iraqis is not only the issue of recognizing the Kurds as an ethnic/national group but the recognition of Kurdistan as a homeland regardless of whether it is inside or out-side of Iraq's borders. Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution provides an opportunity for resolving the issue of demarcation of Kurdistan borders within Iraq based on referendum that was supposed to have been held by December 31, 2007, a date that had already passed. The disputed areas between the Kurds and Iraqis, contain about 14 percent of Iraq's proven oil reserves, which are estimated at 143 billion barrels. Iraqis fear is that, with the wealth of disputed areas to provide a strong economic base, Kurdistan may declare independence.

Turkey

A couple of decades ago, no one would have ever imagined that today KG would be debating on Turkish foreign policy towards the KR (Charountaki, 2012, p. 185). The establishment

of the KRG's relations with Turkey can be divided into four stages. The first stage came about as a result of Turkish support for the creation of no-fly-zone over Kurdistan region in May 1991 and the Turkish approval of the US's plans to attack Iraq from Turkey's Incirlik air base (Charountaki, 2012, p. 187). The aftermath of Saddam's overthrow marked the second stage in Turkish's relations with the KRG. Between the years 2003 to 2008, Turks feared further empowerment of the KRG in the event of incorporation of the oil-rich region of Kirkuk immediately after the fall of Saddam. Turkey exercised pressure to limit the federalism of the future Iraqi state and the degree of autonomy given to any Kurdish federalist region (Charountaki, 2012, p. 191; Rifaat, 2007, p. 81). During the second stage, the Turkish government boycotted the KRG, and worked exclusively with the Iraqi central government, depicting the Kurdish leaders as tribal chieftains. It was only in 2008 when the Turkish-KRG rapprochement started that the first direct high level meeting between the KRG and Turkey was held in Baghdad in May 2008. The meeting was followed by the Turkish Prime Minister making a historic visit to the Erbil meeting with the President Barzani in March 2011 (Charountaki, 2012, p.192).

Why has there been a shift in position, from denial to recognition and partnership? There are several factors behind the Turkish shift in position. First, Turkey realized that KRG not Baghdad was in control of the region. Second, oil contracts awarded by the KRG to major oil companies disregarding Baghdad ascended the status of the KRG and brought Ankara closer to Erbil. Third, the Turkish regional doctrinal policy approach based on a sectarian discourse *vis-à-vis* Iraqi Shiite dominated government aligned with Iran pushed Turkey closer to the KRG where the majority of population are Sunni Kurds. Fourth, Turkish fragile relation with its former ally Israel and its broken relation with Syria and Iran, has raised the Kurdish factor as a guarantor of the regional balance. Fifth, is the constitutional recognition of the KRG in 2005 (Charountaki, 2012, pp. 194-198; Ozcan, 2011, p. 72). Sixth, the independence of KRG from Iraq in developing its foreign policy and its implementation made KRG a direct partner for Turkey. Seventh, the Turkish soft approach to its own Kurdish should not be underestimated in its shift policy towards Kurds (Charountaki, 2012, p. 198; Bryaz, 2012, p. 57). Last but not least, Turkey's energy thirst and the potential capabilities of the KR to meet Turkish demands for energy, and the KRG need for an outlet to export its natural resources contributed greatly in Turkish-KRG rapprochements. All these resulted in opening the Turkish Consulate in Erbil in 2010. By 2012 the overall trade volume between Turkey and Iraq was about \$12 billion, while more than 70% was with the KRG (Charountaki, 2012, p. 194).

United States of America

In 1991 during the Kuwait war US President George Bush, called upon Iraqis to revolt, however, when the Kurds in the north and the Shiites in the south revolted, US failed to protect them from the regime. US became more involved in Kurdish affairs when it became the main mediator between the Kurdish warring factions, PUK and KDP, in 1990s. Until the invasion of Iraq, there was no overarching in US policy toward the Kurds. Rather,

the US interacted with Kurds precisely as they did with any other citizen of the various countries where Kurds live (Ricciardone, 2000). Despite that, in time, the Kurds who were first viewed as a moral burden on the US became allies of sorts. This became evident when Turkey rejected to allow US forces to use Turkish territory to launch its campaign against Iraq in 2003 but the Kurds did. The role of KRG as an ally to US for the implementation of the US policy of regime change in Baghdad, as well as the KRG's stability as a semi-independent state, were major factors in the rising power of the KRG as an influential regional actor which left the US with no choice but to take the Kurds into consideration.

After the invasion of Iraq a major Kurdish priority was to secure and consolidate semi-independent status of the KR. This seems to have challenged the US vision of ensuring a strong central government in Baghdad. This situation potentially put the two sides in contradictory positions (Rafaat, 2007, p. 79). According to Barzani, Paul Bremer, the American head of the Iraqi provisional authority, wanted to eliminate all references to the KRG from the interim constitution. Besides, the US initially avoided opening a consulate in KR (Rafaat, 2007, p.80; Gundi, 2013). Not long after the invasion of Iraq, US faced an insurgency from the Arab-Sunnis in Iraq, the growing strength of pro-Iranian Shiite parties and lack of regional and international support for its misguided adventure. All these and several other reasons, in particular US's attempt to strengthen the anti-Iran camp, led to a rapprochement between the Kurds and US (Charountaki, 2012, p. 200; Rafaat, 2007, p. 81). The Americans conceded on a number of issues that had been rejected during the earlier phase. These included Talabani's election as president (a reversal of US policy); federalism with a weaker central government; a clearer resolution for disputed area; and recognition of the *Peshmerga* as the guards of Kurdistan. Furthermore, US officials began visiting Kurdistan (Rafaat, 2007, p. 82). President of the KR, Barzani, visited Washington DC twice, in January 2010 and April 2012, where he met with President Obama and Vice President Biden. In July 2011 The US Consulate General was opened in Erbil. However in the absence of an official US policy towards Kurds, how long the "friendship and cooperation" will last is a question to which there is no definite answer.

Economy

In 1991 as a result of the withdrawal of Iraq, some 300,000 civil servants lost their jobs and consequently their income. This state of affairs led to dire consequences that pushed the Kurdish economy to the "brink of the abyss" as unemployment reached 70-90% (Kirmanj, 2013, p. 183). However, in 1996, the UN's oil-for-food program relieved the economic and financial pressure on the Region. Nevertheless, it was only after the US invasion of Iraq where the real relief was felt when the KR started to get its portion, 17%, of the national Iraqi budget which amounted to approximately \$12 billion was set aside for the KR in 2012.

The region has proven reserves of around 45 billion barrels of crude oil, or about a third of Iraq's total reserves, and one to three trillion cubic meters of gas (Decamme, 2013; Bryza, 2012, p. 56). The relatively stable KR has attracted foreign companies and entrepreneurs

such as Exxon Mobil, Chevron and Total which have signed deals during the past years directly with the KRG bypassing Iraqi government. The Iraqi central government has retaliated by excluding Exxon Mobil and Chevron from its fourth round bidding in 2012 of oil field tenders outside the KR. So far such threats have not prevented these major companies from entering directly into partnership with the KRG.

The Region is currently enjoying economic growth of 12%, faster than Iraq's economy as a whole which is expanding by 9%. Almost 800 foreign firms, the majority of them from Turkey, have so far entered the Kurdish market, apparently encouraged by the 2006 investment law that exempts them from taxes on imports and profits for their first 10 years in the Region (Decamme, 2013). One negative aspect of the KRG's investment law is that foreign firms are not obliged to hire local staff which basically means the foreign investment does not contribute to job creation in the Region. KRG's investment in energy sector seems to be more productive compared to Iraq as the KR exports surplus power to Iraqi provinces. The natural population growth in Kurdistan Region is 3% and those between ages of 15-34 constitute 34% of Kurdistan Region population (Ministry of Planning, 2012). Generally speaking, KR is more developed than the rest of Iraq in terms of education, economy and per capita income. According to Suleimaniya Statistic Directorate (2013) the poverty rate in KR is 5% while in the rest of Iraq it is 23%; the rate of unemployment in the KR is 6% while in Iraq it is 8%.

Despite these bright pictures, the Region still needs to increase investments that can create jobs in private sector and manufacturing industry. The general trend in the structure of public spending currently is in favor of operating expenses at the expense of investment expenditure. In 2012, the KRG as a public employer was the largest employer providing more than 57% of full time work (Ministry of Planning, 2012, p. 52).

Administrative Set-up

The federal region of Kurdistan is divided into three provinces, the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, and Suleimaniya. Each of these provinces is divided into districts with a total of 26 districts. Each district is divided into sub-districts. Provinces have a capital city, while districts and sub-districts have district centers.

Kurdistan Region at Glance

Capital City: Erbil

Population: 5,351,276 (estimated)

Approximate size: 40,643 square kilometers, four times the area of Lebanon

Population growth rate: 2.55%

Life expectancy at birth: 58.2 years

Ethnic groups: Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmens, Armenians, due to the absence of a proper population census number and rate of ethnic groups is unknown.

Religion: Islam (majority of Kurdish, Turkmen, and Arab inhabitants of the region are Muslims), Christianity (is followed by Kaldo-Assyrians and Armenians) and Yazidis, Kakay and Shabak (small indigenous religious groups, Kurds by ethnicity)

Languages: Kurdish and Arabic are official languages

Literacy: 81.6%

GDP real growth rate: 12% (2012)

GDP Per Capita: \$5,000 (2012) approximate

Budget: \$12.0 billion (2012) approximate

Unemployment: 6%

Administrative divisions: 3 provinces

Establishment: 19 May 1992

National holiday: Kurdish National Day, 21 of March

Major Political Parties: Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP [Masoud Barzani]; The Change Movement, Gorran [Nawshirwan Mustafa]; Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK [Jalal Talabani], Kurdistan Islamic Union, Yekgirtu [Muhammad Faraj]; Kurdistan Islamic Group, Komal [Ali Baper].

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