



The Kurdish Conflict in the Middle East: Implications for the Region

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ABSTRACT

The Kurdish conflict in the Middle East has long haunted the region. This depicts the complex and complicated nature of the conflict as Kurds have been fighting almost for a century for their cause, an independent Kurdistan state, promised to them in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920. The conflict is still under the yoke of violence after the promise of an independent state was reneged on. This paper aims at elucidating the geopolitical and geostrategic reasons which presented the idea of creating the Kurdistan state for Kurds. In addition, the paper explicates why the state has not come into being yet and looks at the conflict in the framework of John Burton's human needs theory. The nature and scope of this research is qualitative and substantial use of secondary sources has been made to shed light on important developments that took place in the last 3-4 decades in the Middle East in the form of Gulf Wars (first and second) and Arab Spring which brought the Kurds in limelight in international and regional politics. There was a rapid rise in the movement for the autonomy, self-determination, and independence of Kurds in contemporary years, which profoundly impacted the regional power structure in both geostrategic and geopolitical ways. The research argues that the conflict can be transformed if Herbert Kelman's notion of "identity" is considered and the conflicting parties become more flexible towards the acceptance of each other's identity.

Keywords: Identity, Social recognition, Basic Needs, Security, Protracted conflict

1. INTRODUCTION:

KURDS are considered as the largest ethnic group in the world without a home country of their own; the world's largest stateless nation. In the Middle East, which is one of the most volatile regions in the world, Kurds are the fourth largest ethnicity after Arabs, Turks, and Persians. They have been fighting for the recognition of their own distinct identity, autonomy, and independence for decades. Their undeterred pursuit of autonomy and eventually independence play into the conflicts of Middle East. Kurds, in recent history, have become quite a significant force in the Middle East politics: in Iraq the Kurdish movement has reached to a new height; in Syria, they have

established their own de facto autonomous region; and in Turkey, they have expedited their activities in order to increase their breathing space in the country. The Kurdish militias have gained quite a limelight in the past few years but Kurds haven't received legitimacy and support for their cause, a separate Kurdistan, internationally.

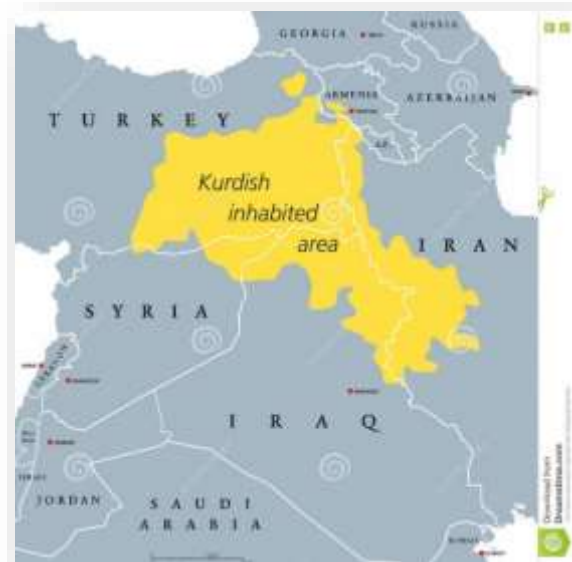
Kurds are the natives of Middle East region and their population ranges from 35-40 million. They are spread across the world, but they majorly inhabit Middle East. The map on the right side shows the area in the states of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq populated by the Kurds. Although Kurds are divided into different countries, they share same language, customs, culture, and traditions etc.

After World War I, Kurds were promised their own independent state in the form of Kurdistan in Middle East. However, when Sykes-Picot agreement was materialized in the form of dismemberment of Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan was nowhere for the Kurds. Sykes-picot agreement was an agreement signed between Britain, and France, with the acquiescence of the then Soviet Union, which was primarily based on securing the national interests (of USSR, Britain, and France) through the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. The empire was divided into four nation states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, where all these states were more interested in maintaining their territorial integrity and protecting their national interests rather than accommodating Kurds. Thus, the agreement, when executed, divided the Kurds into four separate territorial boundaries and set the roots for this decades long Kurdish conflict.

In all four states, Kurds have been systematically suppressed, and denied of their identity over the period of history. For instance, in Turkey, they were forcibly displaced for demographic change, when they revolted against the Turkish government in 20th century. Officially, names like Kurds, Kurdish, and Kurdistan are banned; they are called as Mountain Turks. In Iraq, under the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein, their uprisings

against the state for more autonomy have been dealt with iron hand, though the state of Iraq receded quite a power to them when the writ of the Iraqi state grew weak after the regime of Saddam Hussein was toppled down by US led invasion of Iraq 2003. A Kurdish referendum took place in 2017 in which almost 93% of the votes were in favor of independence; however, the Iraqi government considered the referendum as illegitimate and illegal, eventually declaring it null and void.

In Syria, Kurds are the largest ethnic minority; Syrian Kurds gained popularity and limelight after the Arab



Spring 2011, which led to the emergence of civil war in Syria. Chaos erupted and Syria became a battle ground for proxy war. Four major players came into conflict with each other: the government forces of Bashar al Assad, anti- government forces, ISIS, and Kurds. Kurds were supported, both financially and militarily, by United States so that they can effectively fight against ISIS. Syrian Kurds successfully fought against ISIS and also consolidated their position in the country as they created their own government in their own area in Syria and had gained quite

military and administrative control. However, when US withdrew from the region after the defeat of ISIS, tough time began for Syrian Kurds as Turkey launched a massive military crackdown in northern Syria, primarily to contain the growing outreach of Syrian Kurds along its border. Turkey long feared that any successful attempt by Syrian Kurds in seeking more autonomy would definitely encourage the Kurds in Turkey to expedite their separatist movement.

It is important to note that in the past few years, Kurds have relatively consolidated their position compared to the past, Kurdish nationalism has strengthened. This is indicative through Turkey's assault in Northern Syria in order to create a buffer zone and the strengthening of Peshmerga in Iraq as well. So, these developments made by the Kurds in the Middle East have had quite a substantial impact on the volatile region of Middle East. The next section of this paper focuses on the implications the Kurdish conflict has for the region, especially on Turkey and Syria.

2. Implications for the Region

2.1. Turkey

2.1.1 Security Implications

In Turkey, Kurds movement for resistance has been dealt with iron hand right when they first rebelled in 1920.¹ Kurdish language was banned, their cultural commemoration was not allowed in public. Moreover, they had been forcibly displaced so that their anti-state activities could be reduced to minimum. Although the Turkish government is relatively stronger compared to other regional governments where Kurds reside, Turkey calls Kurds as Mountainous Turks and they have largely been Turkified,² Kurds still demand from the Turkish

authorities to be recognized distinctively and officially identified. However, it was after the beginning of the Iran Iraq war in 1980s which lasted for almost eight long years that led to the increase in the nationalist activities of Turkish Kurds.

Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an armed group of Kurds people primarily carrying out its activities in Turkey, was created. PKK officially has been declared as the terrorist organization by the Turkish government; however, it has the support from southern Turkey where in some provinces Kurds live in majority. Even pro-Kurdish political parties that have emerged over the period of time in Turkey after great struggle, their space got reduced in the political system of Turkey because Turkish authorities take action against them due to their alleged close connection with Kurdistan Workers Party. PKK historically has carried out terrorist activities in Turkey, plus it serves as a guarantor of Kurdish cause in Turkey- they fear that Turkish authorities might bring out demographic changes in their area by displacement etc. Hence, "Kurdish problem" has been declared as the major source of instability in Turkey that has led to the national security concerns in Turkey and has widely impacted the state's foreign policy.

2.1.2. Economic Implications

It is estimated that the military campaign carried out by Turkey's armed forces against the PKK's terrorist activities, has been costing almost 8 billion dollars annually to its exchequer.³ The regions where the PKK carries out terrorist attacks have seen direct economic ramifications since the areas could not carry on the economic activities in such an insecure environment. Data shows a decline in the economic development of the areas characterized by high PKK activity. It is also reported

that where some of the areas of Eastern Turkey could have experienced a GDP growth of 7%, the terrorist activities by PKK became a major reason in the stunted economic growth of those regions. On the national level, without the Kurdish problem and its terrorist episodes, Turkey could have experienced a growth of 14% in its GDP per capita.⁴ These statistics highlight the economic ramifications of the Kurdish problem for Turkey.

2.1.3. Diplomatic Implications

The conflict has severely impacted the reputation and prestige of Turkey in international politics, more specifically in European politics. The Kurdish conflict has remained a major hurdle in its membership of the European Union on humanitarian grounds. In addition, it is noteworthy that Turkey's bid for the membership of European Union gets blocked by Greece on the grounds that Turkey has adopted punitive measures against its minorities and Turkey doesn't appreciate the cultural and ethnic diversity of the minorities. The conflict started with the denial of basic human rights and the acceptance of their identity- and considering that European union is seen as one fine emblem of human rights and cooperation, Turkey's relations with the Europe are at stake since the state has used massive military and economic means to suppress the Kurdish rebels.

2.1.4. Political Ramifications

Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has strong resentment against the United States of their support to Syrian Kurds both financially and supplying of arms, as Turkish authorities considered Y.P.G to be closely connected with or sharing the same ideology of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is officially designated as terrorist

organization by Turkish government.⁵ Turkish authorities analyzed that when the self-interest of the United States will be fulfilled, it will leave the mess behind which would have the detrimental consequences for the region, more specifically for Turkey. It happened the same way as Turkey analyzed.

The United States, when President Trump came to power, slowly and steadily withdrew the US troops from Syria. Turkey feared that if she herself didn't act proactively, the situation might get out of its control. Turkey launched a military offensive against the Kurds in Northern Syria bordering Turkey in order to weaken their strong hold. Moreover, the Turkish authorities wanted to create a buffer zone using the right of self-protection under international law along its border with Syria in order to force back the Kurdish fighters from Peoples' Protection Unit (YPG).⁶ However, here emerged the complexity of the situation. US considered YPG as its ally in the region and was developed professionally by the US Army. President Trump gave strong and powerful messages to Turkey that if Turkey hits the Kurds, his administration will adopt punitive measures against Turkey and will levy economic sanctions against it. US feared that if Turkey took strong action against YPG, it might create a power vacuum in the region which could be filled by the already kicked out Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. It is because of this complex and complicated situation, the bilateral relations between both these countries, USA and Turkey, got strained despite both being the members of NATO. However, a middle ground was adopted in which both the US and Turkey agreed to create a peace corridor in order to safely return the millions of Syrian refugees who seek asylum in Turkey because of the ongoing civil war in Syria. No country had

ever taken as many asylum seekers as Turkey did.

2.2. Iraq

2.2.1. Instability and Chaos

In Iraq, the Baath party and Saddam Hussein's regime remained authoritative and repressive towards Iraqi Kurds. The Iraqi state remained relatively strong but when the state was busy in its long war against Iran, Iraqi Kurds exploited the situation to its benefit and increased its activities for autonomy, independence or cessation from Iraq. The ruthless Saddam Hussein's regime retaliated by persecuting thousands of Kurds; forcibly displaced many of them, killed them, tortured them, and allegedly used the chemical weapons against them on the grounds that Iraqi Kurds grew rebellious and traitors against the state of Iraq.

Allegedly, in the northern Iraqi city of Halabja- Kurds majority area- the Iraqi government attacked with poisonous gas, primarily usage of mustard gas, killing almost more than 5000 Kurds and wounded more than 10000 people.⁷ Many Kurds villages were burned, demolished, and erased to ground. This mass tragedy caused by the Iraqi government has been declared as the genocide or massacre of Kurds. Saddam Hussein's regime termed such actions as collective measures for the purpose of resettlement - however, the intent was quite clear to everybody i.e., the persecution of ethnic or racial minority. Meanwhile, the Iraqi Kurds created and sustained a military force primarily for the protection of their people- from the oppressiveness of the Iraqi government. Peshmerga- those who face death- is the same military force which played a crucial and significant role in capturing of Saddam Hussein following the invasion and occupation of Iraq by US led coalition.

2.2.2. Formation of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

Following the US led operation against Iraq in 1991 (Operation Desert Storm) which was conducted when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the subsequent defeat of Saddam Hussein's regimes, the writ of the state of Iraq again reduced to a substantial level and Iraqi Kurds gained quite a space and consolidated themselves in their own area (Northern Iraq). Iraqi Kurds held an election. They were successful to the extent that they gained maximum autonomy from the central (authoritative government) and formed their own regional government entitled as Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Kurdish identity formation has played a significant role in the emergence of KRG. Initially, KRG was quasi-independent. So, now the Iraqi Kurds have their own autonomous government backed by their own armed forces- Peshmerga. The President of the Kurdistan Regional Government is also the head of Peshmerga. KRG headquarter is based in Erbil- an important city of Iraq.

2.2.3. The 2017 Referendum

In 2012, the relations between Erbil and Baghdad got strained on the issue of control over resources, more specifically control over oil.⁸ For instance, Tigris was the region where both KRG and central government contested over this city's control as this region has vast oil production capacity and both claimed jurisdiction over Tigris. The standoffs between both the powers happen frequently. In 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government held a unilateral referendum in its region⁹, asking a simple question that whether they (Kurds) or northern Iraqis wanted to remain with the state of Iraq or they should secede to create their own independent country.

The result of the referendum was that 93% of the people voted for an independent Kurdistan¹⁰. So the referendum overwhelmingly endorsed independence; however, the central government of Iraq declared this referendum as illegal and repealed it wholeheartedly, so is the case of the Supreme Court of Iraq which had declared the referendum as illegal hence null and void. The fact of the matter is that if the Kurdish people are not fully embraced and integrated by the authorities of the central Iraqi government, if they do not make their political system inclusive, and do not negotiate with them in order to accommodate and integrate them- Kurds will find more aggressive and violent ways to get recognized and identified as an ethnically separate community, which they have been doing lately.

2.3. Syria

The Syrians Kurds roughly constitutes around 10% of the Syrian population. Their activities and maneuverings increased manifold after the eruption of civil war in Syria. There are different contesting groups: the governmental forces supporting their president Bashar al Assad, anti-government forces which aim to subvert the authoritative regime of Bashar al Assad, the Kurds fighting for their own cause- seeking more power in the power structure of Syria' political system and lastly, ISIS- Islamic State of Iraq and Syria- a terrorist organization that basically aims at establishing the Islamic caliphate stretching all over Middle East.

2.3.1. Formation of Democratic Union Party (PYD)

The Syrian Kurds being a distinct ethnic group did not have cordial relationship with the regime of Bashar al Assad who actually believed in the

ideology of Baathism or Arab Nationalism. Kurds do not consider themselves as Arabs. When the civil war broke out in Syria following the Arab Spring almost more than a decade ago, Kurds did not take side, neither with the government forces nor with the oppositional forces who wanted to overthrow Assad's regime. They fought for their own identity, for the protection of their own people. Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is an offshoot of PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), is Syrian Kurdish political party. It became very active after 2011. Syrian Kurds fought for their own cause; they wanted to establish their own autonomous region (Rojava)¹¹ in Northern Syria- which they successfully did, just like KRG in Northern Iraq.

2.3.2 Strategic Implications

Following the Arab Spring when civil war broke out, the central Syrian government required more forces to defend Damascus; so, the President Bashar al Assad called back more troops from the peripheries, and also from the Northern Syria-the Kurds dominated region. Therefore, Kurds exploited the situation to their best and took advantage of the withdrawal of the forces of Syrian central government from their region. They established their own autonomous government, occupied the government buildings and hoisted their own flags (Kurdish flag). The Kurdish forces of Syria not only fought with the governmental forces, but they also fought against other oppositional forces in order to retain and increase their area of influence and to extract more resources from the resourceful areas. This is indicative of the fact that the control of oil reserves was one of the major strategic objectives that the Kurds had in the state, and thus, it was one of the serious implications that Syria

had to face because of the Kurdish conflict.

2.3.3 Security Implications (the ISIS)

During the Syrian civil war, when the writ of the state was growing weak, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria made its footprint in the region. They carried out terrorist activities in the region and targeted American journalists and others who were there to cover the war. The US played a strategic move and allied itself with the Syrian Kurds. Therefore, Syrian Kurdish military wing was heavily armed and funded extensively so that they be in a better position to fight against ISIS on ground. Meanwhile, the US bombed the terrorists through aerial means. This strategy worked best for both the United States and the Syrian Kurds. The power of their militia, People's Protection Units or Y.P.G, grew significantly. They fought very effectively and successfully against the Islamic State, but this development led to more chaos within Syria and led to more terrorist attacks by ISIS, exacerbating the security environment of the state.

3. What can be done

3.1. Addressing the Human Needs (John Burton)

The conflict and its implications for the region have been discussed in a comprehensive manner in the paper. This section of the paper focuses on what can be done in order to resolve or transform this decade's long protracted conflict that has taken the lives of thousands of people and has left the region in a continuous state of chaos and instability. For the prospects of conflict resolution, the paper analyzes the conflict from the lens of John Burton's Human Needs Theory. Burton argues that one of the primary reasons of

protracted and intractable conflict is the resolute struggle to meet the unmet needs either at the individual or societal level. According to John Burton's theory of human needs, the actual source of conflict is the denial of those human needs that are common to all; for instance, security, social recognition of identity and effective participation in those processes that determine the conditions of security of identity.¹² Conflicts take place as a consequence of deprivations of basic human needs of people.

The research argues that Kurdish conflict in the Middle East, from the lens of Burton's theory, involves the unmet needs of identity and recognition of Kurds. The politics of identity and recognition of Kurds remained active in past and in recent years; but their distinction in the form of a separate nation state has not been materialized yet. In the Treaty of Sevres, signed in 1920, Kurds were promised of an independent state of their own in articles 62 and 64.¹³ The major geopolitical reason that prevailed in the minds of the framers (Europeans) of Treaty of Sevres in which they assented for Kurdish state was that they wanted to create a buffer zone between an emerging Turk nationalism, Iranian nationalism and Central Asia's Turkic people who are majorly Sunnis. However, Europeans reneged on the promise and divided Kurds into four countries, denying them their distinct identity in the form of a separate and independent nation state.

The research argues that as long as these basic human needs- that are non-negotiable according to Burton- are not met, the prospects of resolving the Kurdish conflict that has impacted the region in political, security, economic, as well as social ways, are very few. In addition, John Burton stresses upon the fact that the needs of identity,

recognition, and security- if unmet-, exacerbate the conflict; therefore, the need is to officially embrace, recognize and integrate Kurds fully into the political, economic, and social environment of Turkey, and all other states that Kurds are a part of, via effective constitutional changes and protection. Only in such an integrative and inclusive environment, will the conflict be transformed and eventually resolved.

3.2. Transforming the Identity (Herbert Kelman)

Herbert Kelman is an acclaimed theorist of conflict resolution. Herbert Kelman's major work is based upon conflict resolution and conflict reconciliation. According to Kelman, one of the primary aims of conflict reconciliation is identity transformation, which implies that the parties involved in conflict should change the attitude through which they look at each other, the way they perceive each other should be changed.¹⁴ In most of the protracted conflicts, identity remains a major factor in protracting or simply prolonging that particular conflict and is one of the major reasons why conflict resolution strategies become unproductive. According to Kelman, the parties involved in conflict should accept and embrace the identities of each other instead of negating or totally rejecting the identities of each other.

Kelman's concept of identity transformation is essential to the conflict. As far as Kurdish conflict is concerned, Kurds' identity should be accepted wholeheartedly by the respective countries that they populate, and the international community. In the past, they had already been betrayed after the implementation of Sykes-Picot agreement that denied them their independent state where they could live as a sovereign

nation and their territorial integrity would have been respected. The agreement, as mentioned earlier, failed to practically carveout Kurdistan for them, despite the promises made. They are a nation by every definition of nation; as the modern states are created on the basis of nation states, so the Kurds deserve a nation state of their own.

Transforming the Kurds identity- that is generally regarded as being terrorists or creates a sense of "otherness" among them- and considering them a true part of the states they reside in, will lead to resolution efforts that are expected to bear fruit. In the same manner, Kurds are also required to transform the image or perceived identity of the governments they live under. Undoubtedly, the governments have dealt with the Kurds in an oppressive and violent manner, but if the conflict is to be resolved, Kurds will also have to adopt a flexible posture towards the states they are a part of, and rather than considering the regimes as opponents, it is essential to accept their legitimacy and agree on political and economic inclusion on national level rather than an independent state.

In addition to the provided solutions, the interaction between Kurds and other parties (respective countries) should be facilitated (can be through a third party) so that they can come up with ways to resolve the conflict peacefully. Mediation has played a role in transforming and resolving multiple conflicts all over the world, so the prospects of transformation of the Kurdish conflict still remain. However, till the time their genuine grievance of state is addressed, Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and in Iran should be given more protection, recognition and be involved in the political system of respective

countries through integration and inclusiveness.¹⁵

4. Conclusion

In contemporary era, majority of the conflicts that are taking place, are intra states rather than inter states. Intra state conflicts, within the boundaries of states, are driven by different motivations and in a similar fashion, the Kurdish conflict is driven by ethnic motivations. Therefore, the fundamental root cause of Kurdish conflict in Middle East is easily understandable. Kurds are a nation by every definition of a nation. They have their own distinct identity in the form of language, culture, tradition, customs, and territory etc. They were betrayed from the promise committed to them of Kurdistan; their identity, recognition and protection- all are at stake. The countries in which they were divided- some conceded a bit space to them, some carried out enforced displacement of them, some tried to destroy their culture etc. According to John Burton's Human Needs Theory, when the identity and recognition of either of the individual or the society is at stake or challenged, conflict is inevitable and may get protracted until fundamental needs of identity, recognition are not met.

Same goes with Kurdish conflict, until and unless they are not fully integrated or involved in the political systems of the respective countries by giving them due recognition, accepting their distinct identity and embracing their cultures and language - their fight, rebelliousness will continue. Irrespective of the fact that the state government is strong or weak. For instance, Turkey is a strong country but PKK carries out the untoward activities in Turkey. In Iraq, when the writ of the state got challenged, Kurds were able to successfully gain the space for them and created their own

autonomous region, KRG and militia for protection. Likewise happened in Syria, after the eruption of Arab Spring in 2011, when the government forces got engaged in domestic civil war- Kurds exploited the situation to their best and created their own regional government in Rojava.

In nutshell, the conflict will only be resolved or transformed, if Kurds are identified, recognized distinctly and the countries they inhabit embrace them wholeheartedly and make their political systems more inclusive towards Kurds via constitutional changes and protection. They have political, social, and economic grievances, due to which the feelings of relative deprivation exacerbated with the passage of time and led to the expedition in violence by the Kurds. Dialogue, mediation, negotiation are pivotal to resolving conflict. Only in this way, peace and stability can be restored as far as Kurdish conflict is concerned in Middle East.

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