

Beyond Nationalism: Kurdistan as a Catalyst for a New Middle East

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Feb 25, 2016

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Caught at the geographic convergence of four key states and their various political and military conflicts, Kurdistan may gradually spread a new paradigm focused on sharing the space instead of attempting to carve untenable dominions out of it.

A century ago, a new order for the Middle East was being conceived. Informed by the European age of nationalism, the new framework for the region sought to match states with nations -- rediscovered, reimagined, reinvented. Some would-be nations never emerged: Neo-Assyria never had a chance. Armenia, scattered by genocide, became a Soviet vassal on a partial and remote part of her desired abode. Other nation-state candidates fleetingly surfaced then disappeared: the Nusayris, rechristened as Alawites, were granted a territory that was soon to be integrated into Syria; another project for the Druze was also abandoned.

But from a pure numerical perspective the most glaring omission in the engineering of nations that followed the First World War was Kurdistan. Straddling Turkish, French, British, and Iranian domains, Kurdistan would have been an inconvenience to conceive and manage. Instead, Kurdish interests were swept aside in favor of other nationalisms that labeled them "Mountain Turks," "Kurdish Arabs," and "Fellow Aryans." Many were instructed that speaking Kurdish was now akin to treason.

Today, it is unsurprising that Kurdish intellectuals and activists have sought to compensate, and even overcompensate, for prior attempts to erase their culture and identity. Iraqi Kurdish schoolrooms now display the map of Kurdistan not as the KRG region but as a "Greater Kurdistan" that extends from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, absorbing within it considerable portions of the countries that have denied the existence of a Kurdish state. One can't help but note the map's similarities to the Baath Party's old dream of a "Greater Arabia" that would have stretched over much of the same territory.

Especially after Saddam Hussein's attempts to erase the Iraqi Kurdish minority during the carnage of al-Anfal, Iraqi

Kurdistan may have been expected to fall into its own brand of intransigent hypernationalism. Instead, while manifestations of cultural and national pride abound, Iraqi Kurdistan has embraced an effective formula of multiculturalism. Local communities, as well as those displaced by the regional strife and seeking refuge in the self-governed region, are accorded the explicit right to maintain their separate identities and differences. Iraqi Kurdistan may have a long way to go in realizing a liberal political climate, but at the cultural and social levels the Iraqi Kurdish region has moved toward acceptance and tolerance. This is particularly remarkable since much of the region is heading in the opposite direction.

Iraqi Kurdistan has also revealed the limits and implications of the quest for Kurdish independence. The realities of economic interdependence against the backdrop of plummeting oil prices, along with the need to mitigate local political rigidity, have all increased the value of Baghdad in Erbil. Realism has begun to temper and coordinate with historical longings and political ideology.

Beyond Iraq, Kurdish politics in other areas display different types of challenges. Iran continues to thwart any meaningful expression of a separate Kurdish identity, but flare-ups from Iranian Kurds have occurred and are likely to increase. The balance is not as definitive in the north, where ethnic consciousness has been enhanced both by the activism of its promoters and the recurrent missteps of successive Turkish governments. The current Turkish administration has yet to find a suitable method of engaging and addressing Kurdish civil and cultural demands, nor has it been able to convincingly counter or contain the ideological and often violent insistence on secession. It is an existential question for both Turkey and Turkish Kurds, but one that should not be understood as a zero-sum situation. New ways of conceptualizing the nature of Turkey and Kurdistan by separating the ideas from assumptions of unitary and reductionist identities can safeguard both political movements. The currently practiced alternative of binary opposition has demonstrated its inability to encompass realistic resolutions.

In Syrian Kurdistan, an even murkier reality is settling in. While enjoying unprecedented de facto independence, Kurdish political expression in Syria oscillates between the Iraqi and Turkish models of Kurdish political identity. Inclusiveness is publicly embraced, but an adversarial nationalism appears to influence some of the actions on the ground. Reports of ethnic cleansing of Sunni Arabs may be exaggerated and taken out of the context of the harsh war against the "Islamic State" (IS), but the accusations are nevertheless too numerous to ignore. In repeated instances, Sunni Arab communities have reported discrimination, exclusion, and even deportation from Syrian Kurdish-controlled areas.

In contrast to parts of Iraq and Turkey, where the claim to continuous majority in particular provinces and districts can be advanced, Kurdish presence in Syria is more diffuse. Syria's border strip with Turkey is home to a wide array of linguistically and religiously distinct groups, the Kurdish Syrians being but one part of a cultural commonwealth that has long characterized the region. There may be a worrisome manifestation of irredentism in creating one solid body out of the archipelago of Kurdish majority spots in northern Syria. It is a temptation that may offer a false sense of historical retribution for some, but will certainly create new narratives of victimization to fuel strife for generations to come.

The Kurdish Syrian political leadership has displayed an ambiguity toward the Syrian uprising from its onset, claiming it is concerned over the apparent Arab Sunni sectarian bent of the rebels. Syrian civil activists have countered that it was exactly the abstention of the Kurdish Syrian leadership, among others, from embracing the revolution that has doomed the movement to sectarianism. With accolades today from both Washington and Moscow, this leadership may feel vindicated in its tactical maneuvers. The Democratic Forces of Syria (DFS) under its command have Arab Syrian recruits fighting along Kurdish forces and a temporary claim against accusations of factional pursuits. Yet the validity of such a claim means little if the Kurdish leadership does not genuinely and strategically adhere to a common Syrian vision that rejects the malevolence of both IS and the regime.

It is too soon to visualize what shape the Middle East will take once the dust of the current conflicts settles. What seems increasingly evident is that the new regional reality will include an emergent Kurdistan. The questions that the next phase in the region's history will address are whether it would be one Kurdistan or many, and whether this new entity will indulge in reductionist nationalism and revolutionary populism in the already failed style attempted by others in the region and beyond. Alternately, the current experimentation in Iraqi Kurdistan with inclusiveness and innovative forms of local partnerships may mature and expand beyond the confines of Iraq.

The late and often maligned Iraqi politician Ahmed Chalabi advocated a "Fourth Clime" alliance, in which Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran would seek to coordinate and harmonize in order to jointly obtain prosperity and sound governance. Engaged in diverging pursuits of state survival, regional hegemony, and internal consolidation, none of the central governments of those states seems in a position to champion such a vision. Yet Kurdistan, the geographic convergence of all four states, may spread a new paradigm, focused on the realized necessity of sharing the space instead of attempting to carve untenable dominions out of it. Whether Kurdistan can provide the catalyst for a new type of sociopolitical organization in the region or simply become another claimant for territory and sovereignty in the already crowded real estate will be a function of mundane political decisions with grand consequences.

With the town of Dabiq as its version of Armageddon, the messianic death cult of IS expects events in Aleppo province to shape the future of history. A far more modest but more reasonable expectation based on the unfolding of events in the province may be to interpret the DFS sweeping through Sunni Arab villages as a harbinger of the future of both Kurdistan and the Middle East.

Hassan Mneimneh is a Fikra Forum contributing editor. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8719#.VtJY1PkrLIV\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8719#.VtJY1PkrLIV). ❖

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