

Marwan Al-Absi*

University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Trnava, Slovakia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2835-9309>

Eva Al-Absiová**

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Nitra, Slovakia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9703-1457>

Kurds in the Middle East in the context of plurality of identities

The Middle East region is characterized by distinctive ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. The largest ethnic minority in the Middle East region is the Kurds, who belong to a group of Iranian Aryan nations. They are the fourth largest nation in the Middle East. Most estimates of the total number of Kurds oscillate between 30 and 40 million. The Kurds are the most numerous nation without their own state¹. Regional and international interests have led to the Kurds being divided into five countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Armenia. In addition to this, we find smaller Kurdish communities in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon and Pakistan. In the last decades of the last century, many Kurds emigrated to Europe and the United States. In Armenia, the Kurdish situation is stable. However, in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish presence is a major problem because of the politics and inability of these countries to find a suitable political, economic and cultural mechanism to incorporate the Kurds into the relevant nation state, where all citizens have the same rights. The status of the Kurds in the above mentioned countries is different. In Iraq, the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan was established, and partly successful are the Kurds in Syria, where they currently control part of northern territory. Turkey and Iran, however, deny the existence of a Kurdish ethnic group in their countries.

Kurdish minority in the Middle East

The issue of minorities is a universal problem that concerns both developing and the developed countries in the world². This problem is like an endless story as it has passed through different historical periods. It always appears and vanishes, depending on the

¹ K. Yildiz, *The Kurds in Turkey: EU Accession and Human Rights*, London 2005, p. 4.

² e.g. France, Belgium, Ireland, USA, Australia and others.

* Correspondence address: Katedra etnológie a mimoeurópskych štúdií, Filozofická fakulta, Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, Námestie J. Herdu 2917 01 Trnava, Slovakia, e-mail: malabsi198@gmail.com.

** Correspondence address: Jazykové centrum FF UKF v Nitre Hodžova 1 94974 Nitra, Slovakia, e-mail: eabsi23@gmail.com.

power-political, social, cultural and economic changes. The status of minorities and their discrimination, integration or assimilation affects everyday reality in many societies. In the independent states, the issue of the status of minority is related to the issue of protecting the sovereignty of the state, maintaining political stability, as well as economic and cultural development.

The issue of ethnic and religious minority status in the Middle East is one of the sensitive and relatively dangerous issues because it embodies the real political, social and economic conflict that raises various racial, ethnic and religious disputes and social unrest. This problem is closely linked to the principle of democracy, protection of human rights and freedom of expression, which unfortunately are not yet common reality in the Middle East.

Minority issues in the Middle East emerged thanks to Western powers, which had a significant share in its politicization. It dates back to the beginning of the Western expansion into Ottoman territory. Western powers supported the interests of various religious and ethnic minorities, which helped them to strengthen their position in the Middle East. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds had a real claim to their own state³. The outcome of the conference of victorious powers held in Sévres (1920) was an agreement that actually counted on the formation of the Kurdistan. Finally, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished this agreement and signed a new peace treaty with the Allies in Lausanne (1923), which ultimately destroyed the hope of the Kurds to establish their nation state⁴. The Kurdish population was dispersed in several Middle Eastern countries, making it impossible for the Kurds to unite. Another opportunity arose in Iraq in 1992, when the Kurdish Autonomous Region of North-East Iraq was created, and in the same year the Kurdish Regional Government was established. UN resolution No. 1546 from 2004 positively influenced the status of Iraqi Kurds. The subsequent adoption of the 2005 Iraqi constitution⁵ is presented by Kurdish political elites as a historical milestone. The Constitution of Iraq has incorporated provisions that recognize the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and define the powers between the centre and the other regions. Kurds relying on international support announced in September 2017 a referendum on the independence of their territory. The result was positive, but the Kurds only found support in Israel. The negative attitude of the neighbouring states, the US and Europe, proves that there is not yet time to realize the Kurdish attempt of an independent state.

Ethnic and linguistic identities

Tracing the origin of the Kurds requires a return to antiquity. Their origin is shrouded by lots of guesswork and assumptions. Ancestors of the Kurds probably appeared in the

³ M.M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascendings: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish problem in Iraq and Turkey*, New York 2008, p. 4.

⁴ M.M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, New York 2011, p. XX.

⁵ *Iraqi Constitution, 2005*, <http://www.uniraq.org> [access on: 20.11.2017].

territory of Iran at the turn of the third and second millennium BC⁶ as mountain tribes who gradually mixed with the domestic population. There are several hypotheses about the origin of Kurdish ethnicity. The most supportive hypothesis is based on the fact that most Kurds claim descent from the Medes, the northern neighbours and imperial predecessors of the ancient Persians. Since the second millennium BC the Indo-European ethnics (different groups or tribes of Iranian origin) come to the areas of the historical Kurdistan. Among them were the Medes⁷, who are of Aryan origin and their language belongs to the old north-western Iranian languages of the Indo-European language family⁸. The linguists included the Kurdish language into the north-western group of modern Iranian languages which also includes the modern Persian language (*Farsi*). The affinity of Kurdish and Median is demonstrated by the analysis of the vocabulary, e.g. the ancient Median word *Kurdish* (translated *strong*) appears in Kurmanji (the Kurdish dialect) with its original meaning⁹.

According to Mehrdad Izady, Kurdish culture and languages are rooted in Iranian culture, and therefore the Kurds are included in a group of people who are ethnically and linguistically related to the Iranians. He states: "Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi referred to the Kurds as the purest of all Aryans, and one of the noble races of the Iranians. As Teheran maintains, Kurds are in fact, like the Persians, an Iranian people in speech and culture"¹⁰.

Modern Kurdish does not represent a unified and by all Kurds recognized and used language. Kurds do not have their own state, which is also reflected in their culture and linguistic situation, as they are scattered across ethnically and culturally different countries. Kurdish is different from Turkish and Arabic, but very similar to Farsi, the national language of Iran. The Kurdish language includes two major, relatively different dialects. About two-thirds of the Kurds, mainly in the northwest areas of Kurdistan, speak Kurmanji, using Roman script. The Sorani dialect is spoken by Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan and in the relevant regions of Iran. It is written in an adapted form of the Arabic script. There are a few more dialects used in the limited geographic areas of Turkey, Iran and Iraq, but all have succumbed to the strong influence of the official language of the country.

No unified script is used to write Kurdish (Kurdish dialects), due to the absence of a standard written form of Kurdish that could be generally accepted. In Turkey and Syria, the Kurdish language uses Roman script. In Syria, a Kurdish adaptation of Roman script was created. In Turkey, the Kurdish is written in Roman script adapted to Turk-

⁶ Some historical sources point to the second and first millennium BC.

⁷ In the eighth-seventh century BC, they created their own state in the northwest part of the Iranian Plateau.

⁸ See more: P.G. Kreyenbroek, S. Sperl, *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, Routledge 2005, pp. 53-64.

⁹ More about the origin of the Kurds can be found in: T. Bois, *The Kurds*, Beirut 1966; M.R. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, Taylor & Francis 1992; M.A. Zaki, *A Short History of the Kurds and Kurdistan*, Vol. I and II, 2008.

¹⁰ M.R. Izady, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

ish spelling. In Iran and Iraq, the modified Arabic script is used to write Kurdish, in accordance with the constitution which provides Arabic script as the only permissible official one. In the former Soviet republics, modified variant of Cyrillic is used.

The differences between the two main dialects are abysmal, so some linguists tend to designate them as separate languages¹¹. This, together with the use of different types of scripts, complicates the effort to establish a unified literary language. Even the political situation does not help standardizing the language. Kurdish (Sorani dialect) has gained the status of an official language only in Iraq (in 2005).

Language is the bearer of culture. It is an important ethno-identifying and cultural-identifying element. Therefore, each ethnic group should retain its own language and cultural traditions. Kurds demonstrate their national identity by their language in countries where the majority population speaks different languages (Arabic, Turkish, Persian). Children learn language in the family, but especially during schooling. The media are part of people's everyday live, and as a means of communication, they influence the language skills of both educated and uneducated people. It is, therefore, understandable that the Kurds are striving to promote the Kurdish language in the media and the education system. In Iran and Syria, Kurdish as a teaching language is forbidden. Turkey gradually, but very cautiously, extends the language rights of the Kurdish minority¹². Since 2002, Kurdish has been allowed to be taught in private schools¹³. In 2009, the first official Kurdish TV channel TRT-6 began broadcasting in Kurdish. However, it does not have any constitutional and legal guarantees, so the Turkish government can abolish it at any time. At present, other TV channels can also broadcast in local languages, but only four hours a day, and have to subtitle in Turkish¹⁴.

Confessional identity

Confessional structure of the Kurdish ethnic group is very diverse. Kurds profess the monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), but also other religions (Zoroastrianism, Baha'is). About three fifths of the Kurds are nominally Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school¹⁵. Part of the Sunni Kurds is also interested in Islamic mysticism, notably the Naqshbandi and Qadirisufi orders. A large number of Shi'ite Kurds live in Khurasani

¹¹ P.G. Kreyenbroek, S. Sperl, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹² C. Cooney, *The AKP's Inclusion and Exclusion of the Kurds in the Democratic Process of Turkey*, "Academia.edu", http://www.academia.edu/14553171/The_AKPs_Inclusion_and_Exclusion_of_the_Kurds_in_the_Democratic_Process_of_Turkey [access on: 12.12.2017].

¹³ Ö. Taşpınar, *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition*, New York 2005, p. 113.

¹⁴ E.E. Guzeldere, *Turkey: Regional Election and the Kurdish Question*. [in] "Caucasian Review of International Affairs" 2009, No.3, <http://search.proquest.com.ez-proxy.svkpl.cz/docview/211088522/4BD BB6311C8A4991PQ/1?accountid=45047> [access on: 10.12.2017].

¹⁵ Sunni Muslims in the neighbouring areas of Kurdistan are committed to the Hanafi school.

enclave, but they are not a majority there. The followers of minority religions, such as Alevism, Yarsanism, Yazidism, Christianity, live in some provinces of Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The Yarsans live only in Turkey, the Alevis live in Turkey and Syria¹⁶. There are also followers of mainstream Twelver Shia Islam among the Kurds in the southern and eastern Kurdistan in Iran, and in much smaller number in far western Kurdistan of Turkey. Islamic identity has remained very active among the Kurds.

In the various areas of the historic Kurdistan, the Kurdish communities live in a special religious community called Yazidis. Its members played an important role in the Kurdish tribal society in the past. The largest group lives in northern Iraq. There is also the seat of their leader and their main shrine. Some authors refer to them as an Islamic sect. However, Czech Islamologist, Luboš Kropáček, points out that it is not about the Islamic sect, but about a syncretistic religion in which many Islamic elements mixed with the various religious traditions of the Middle East (shamanistic, Sabaean, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian)¹⁷. The Islamic share is undoubtedly significant, including, for example, the boy's circumcision, the fast, the pilgrimage, the esoteric elements of Sufism (Islamic mystical teachings). The Yazidis form closed endogamous and hierarchically structured communities. Islamic orthodoxy has condemned the adherents of this sect as heretics.

The confessional structure of the Kurdish people confirms that there has never been a common religion that could fulfil the unifying function for the creation of a common literary language, which could fix the cultural heritage of the Kurds in writing. In the Arabic cultural environment, just the language of the Qur'an has become the basis of language standards for classical literary Arabic, which replaced several languages used in the Arab-Islamic Empire. On the other hand, Kurdish culture is rich due to this religious diversity. After Islam was infiltrated to Kurdish communities, Islamic culture has blended with local customs and different religious traditions. Despite the strong Islamic influence, the Kurds have still retained some old customs based on other religious ideas. Traditional cultural elements have gradually adapted to new living conditions as part of the way of life and culture of the society in which the Kurdish minority lived. Kurdish culture represents a mosaic of traditions and values that originate in the rich Kurdish pre-Islamic history. Therefore, it is not surprising that many contemporary Kurds consider Zoroastrianism to be their original religion.

In connection with the religious identity, it must be noted that Sunni Islam, which is generally the most widespread religion among the Kurds, stands for most of them at a similar level as their ethnicity. This distinguishes the Kurds, for example, from the Arabs, for whom Islam may play an ever more important role than their Arab identity.

¹⁶ M.R. Izady, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹⁷ L. Kropáček, *Duchovníce islámu*, Praha 1998, pp. 200-201.

Tribal identity/the phenomenon of tribalism

The main objective of the Kurds is the creation of a common state even though they are politically fragmented and as an ethnic group represent a diverse mosaic of tribes and clans of different confessional identity, migrating to ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse countries. In the past, Kurds lived nomadic lives in a closed tribal system with a fixed social hierarchy and a patriarchal family structure. The tribal and clan closeness predestined the fate of each family member. The rigorous hierarchy of power has ensured the inviolability of the feudal elite/tribal leaders. A member of the tribe had to respect their decisions and not be able to move out of the territory of the tribe. The landowners (called aghas) owned the land, possessed it and the people who worked on it. Changes in political and economic conditions have resulted in tribal disputes and religious differences, which has led to a disruption of the closure of the living space. The Kurdish community was divided into a number of rival and warring tribes. Many leader families have been differently associated with the authorities of the state in which they lived. And that is one of the main reasons for the failure of efforts to achieve ethnic and cultural autonomy.

In Kurdish society, there is a strong rooted ethnic coherence, solidarity and respect for the traditions that belong to the basic principles of the tribal community. The degree of respect for these principles is compounded by the fact that the Kurds are disseminated in several states of different ethnicity and with a different level of their status as a minority. The principle of co-responsibility and the sense of belonging are considered to be the most important factors in preserving the Kurdish identity. The political, social and cultural development of the Kurdish society has been affected by many factors, in particular the diversity of ethnicities and cultures that shared the same territory with the Kurds. They lived with these ethnicities and took from them certain cultural elements that they acquired or adapted to their needs. They are ethnics of Aryan, Semitic, Armenian, Turkish and other origin. Specific political-geographic and language conditions have influenced the formation of Kurdish identity.

Kurds inhabited the rugged mountainous environment that divided them into isolated and distant tribes. Throughout their history, tribal identity prevailed over ethnicity. Tribal settlement and mountain life have restricted the formation of national consciousness, and therefore the Kurdish regions have been subject to invasions and the domination of great empires. The Arabic and Ottoman Empires dominated most of Kurdish region, some Kurdish areas were under the rule of the Persian Empire. This condition lasted until the World War I, when the Allies agreed to resolve the division of the Ottoman Empire and hence the division of the Kurdistan among several states. Politics of the Left and Communist political parties, especially in the 1950s, ignored the Kurdish tribal identity and strongly promoted only a national dimension among people.

At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the tribal awareness seemed to weaken, and the tribalism phenomenon (tribal cohesion) would disappear. However, it turns out that tribalism still represents a very strong link between the Kurds. At present, it is almost unacceptable that the Kurd, who intends to assume a significant political role, does not belong to a tribal elite or group and has no firm ties with it.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to break these tribal links and strengthen the civil society, i.e. civil secular currents. The problem of the Kurds historically rests in tribal clans and the phenomenon of tribalism, which on the one hand, played a role in the survival of Kurdish society, but on the other, they prevented the creation of a Kurdish entity. Tribalism was a fertile ground for the external political forces that exploited this phenomenon and rivalry between the tribes for the territorial distribution of the Kurds, making it impossible for them to unite and create their own entity.

In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, tribalism/tribal identity played a positive role in the struggle for the establishment of autonomy for Iraqi Kurds. The Iraqi Kurdish community is complexly divided into a number of tribes and clans¹⁸. Most lands and pastures belong to a tribal leader who controls the inner and outer affairs of his tribe. Iraqi Kurds did not get used to being subordinate to the state political and administrative system. Tradition, religion and tribal loyalty have played and still play a key role in shaping the Kurdish citizen's vision of the administrative and political system to be subjected to. So many Iraqi Kurds are members of tribes and clans and are loyal to their leaders. The fulfilment of the duties laid down by the leader of the tribe is perceived not only as an obligation, but they mostly do so by their own conviction and respect towards the leader. As for political or military authorities, they do not feel such loyalty or respect for them.

National, religious, tribal, political and state identities are real and they cannot be ignored. The success of the Iraqi Kurds proves that the strongest perceived identity is the Kurdish one, because Kurdish national interest stands above all other identities.

Conclusions

Kurdistan is a geographic bridge linking different nations (Arabs, Iranians, Turks and Kurds). It is close to the Gulf of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea and its strategic importance results from the strategic importance of Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. It has a rich supply of oil and water. Kurds make up a significant percentage of the Middle East population, allowing them to create an influential independent state. The ideological platforms of Kurdish political parties and forces are diverse, but also unified in promoting the Kurdish national rights. The issue of total Kurdish independence is very complicated as the conditions in the four parts of Kurdistan are significantly different,

¹⁸ Kurdish tribes formed a third of the Kurdish population in the mid-nineteenth century.

and so are the political discourse and the forms of political action. A unified solution to the Kurdish question seems to be unrealistic. According to independent Iraqi-Kurdish analyst Karoch Selim, it is possible to imagine several independent Kurdish entities, but the only Greater Kurdistan is obviously just a dream. Turkey and Iran will never allow the Kurds to establish autonomy of the Iraqi Kurdistan model, as these countries consider this solution a threat to state security. Despite these facts, Kurds will certainly not give up their ambitions. The Kurdish region will continue to try to show its national and political identity as the Turks or the Arabs did to create their own region on the basis of the Arabic identity that connects most of the population of the Arab countries.

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the ethnic, linguistic and religious aspects of the Kurdish region¹⁹. It explains the issue of the tribal identity of Kurdish communities in the Middle East and points to the phenomenon of tribalism as a key factor affecting the degree of ethnic and political consistency of Kurdistan²⁰.
Keywords: Kurds, Kurdish, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish identity, tribalism

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¹⁹ The Kurdish region – the territory of Middle Eastern countries inhabited by the Kurdish population.

²⁰ The word Kurdistan means "the land of the Kurds". This historical ethno-geographic term refers to the mountainous region of south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwest Iran (bordering Iraq and Turkey) and northern part of Syria.