

The Arabs and the Kurds: Shared Hopes and Common Fears

Background Paper for an academic conference: April 29-30, 2017

This paper elaborates the themes that to be explored during a two-day (April 29-30, 2017) academic symposium hosted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar and covering the question of Kurdish-Arab relations in the Middle East. For centuries, Arabs and Kurds have shared not only the same geographical space, but also the same cultural sphere. Even during periods of heightened awareness of their ethnic differences, it would have been impossible to speak of anything approaching a “Kurdish Question” within the Arab world prior the twentieth century and the advent—and global spread—of the nation-state model born in the 19th century, which, in its Middle Eastern variant, was always rooted in ethnicity. This was complicated by the need of the emergent nation-states to absorb and integrate nascent political identities born of these ethnic groups.

Two Identities, One State

As Kurdish identity took an increasingly political form, Kurdish national rhetoric came to demand a special status for the Kurdish people, after they had formed an integral part of all of the Islamic empires which had taken root in the wider Middle East, and in particular the Ottoman Empire. Contemporaneous to this transformation, Arab identity was also increasingly politicized. By the time the Ottoman Empire was breaking up, the conflicting national identities came to a head with the revolt for Kurdish independence led by Sheikh Mahmoud II in 1919. Centered in the town of Suliemaniya in present-day Iraq, two years before the official formation of the Kingdom of Iraq, the Sheikh Mahmoud movement demanded that the Great Powers carving up the remains of the Ottoman Empire take Kurdish aspirations into account.

Although outright territorial separatism proved impossible within the new states of the Middle East, a growing Kurdish national movement worked deliberately and methodically to remove all traces of a centuries-old legacy of a shared culture with the Arabs. Just as Arab nationalist lexicographers had offered their skills in the service of a wider Arab nationalist cause, Kurdish nationalists went to great lengths to purge their language of all words of an Arab origin. Paralleling similar changes in Arab culture throughout the nineteenth century, they labored to erect symbolically important barriers and make distinctions between what was Arab and what was Kurdish.

These transformations were very important to large sections of the Kurdish political elite which had arisen with the birth of nation-states in the Middle East. This group formed a part of a wider Arab cultural and political space, and had contributed to the formation of Middle Eastern nation-states, and had not been proponents of a Kurdish ethnic separatism. Perhaps the most renowned example here is Bakr Sidqi—an Iraqi officer of Kurdish descent who, despite his militaristic tendencies, was embraced by Iraqis more widely as being the champion of a nation-wide agenda. Comparable examples from Syria

include Adib Shishakli, Ibrahim Hanano and Fawzi Salo. Many of these ethnically Kurdish individuals were branded “Arabized Kurds”, dismissing a centuries-old trend in the urban centers of the Fertile Crescent as if it were a term of abuse. The Arabization of the Kurdish elite came to a quick halt with the rise of nation-states in the Middle East.

The growth of the Kurds’ own nationalism mirrored similar trends among national groups living in the surrounding region. Even the concept of a “Greater Kurdistan” can be cast as an imitation of various contemporaneous projects to unify national groups over geographically disparate areas. While there may have been a nugget of geographical reality for these plans, the creation of geographically, linguistically and culturally homogenous and contiguous regions was also an imaginative leap. Today, it is clear that the centuries of shared history between Arabs and Kurds have not prevented the Kurdish question from becoming the single most intractable “ethnic minority question” facing the present-day Arab nation-state, and in particular as it relates to Iraq and (to a lesser extent) Syria.

The “Kurdish Question” which these two countries face is closely linked to the same issues faced by Turkey and Iran, while in fact the latter host far larger numbers of Kurds: 15 million in Turkey and 9 million in Iran, compared to 5 million and 1.5 million in Iraq and Syria, respectively. Nonetheless, Kurdish historiography has been tied up with political and military developments which took place in the Arab world, with the most significant Kurdish national movements springing up in Iraq. Although the single experience of the establishment of an independent Kurdish state took place in Iran next door, Iraq was the site of the most vigorous attempts at political resolution to the Kurdish Question. In summary, the Iraqi Kurdish experience can be said to provide the basic template for the relationship of the Kurdish ethnic community to the non-Kurdish states in which they live.

This has impacts both for the way in which all Kurds, on a grassroots level, conceptualize their relationship to the states in which they live; the way in which the Kurdish political elite views the administrative and political order which ties the Kurdish community to the wider polity; the praxis of Kurdish political parties and armed groups; and the lived experience of Kurdish self-rule in autonomous zones or even separate states. Given the immense size of the Arab cultural sphere in relation to both Turkey and Iran, Kurdish political expression continued to find fertile ground for interaction across the region. Even Kurdish attempts to bring about de-centralized federalism in Iraq since 1991 unleashed similar ambitions in numerous Arab countries. One striking example was the clamoring for decentralized rule across Syria since 2011, despite the fact that the intensity of Kurdish separatism in Syria pales in comparison to that found in other countries in the region.

Within Syria itself, it is important to draw a distinction between the ethnic Kurdish community the roots of which stretch as far back as Saladin and the Ayubid Dynasty in the eleventh century and who have completely assimilated with the wider Arab community of Syria in places such as the Jabal Kurd along the Syrian coast, and a much more recent wave of Kurdish migration. These latter Kurds, who came into the country under the French Mandate mostly clustered around the northeast of Syria, in the region known as the Jazira of Syria, largely concurrent with the Governorate of Hasaka. Two over-arching trends pulled the Kurds in the Syrian Jazira in opposing directions: one towards a separatist Kurdish

nationalism, the other towards a resolutely Syrian nationalism; in general, their coexistence with other groups in the northeast of Syria was harmonious.

The geographical isolation and localization of a large Kurdish community in northeastern Syria, coupled with a certain level of discrimination which this group faced, created the environment for better intra-Kurdish links which crossed national boundaries. The first seeds of Kurdish political organization in Syria were planted by exiles from Turkey before fanning out across the Hasaka Governorate. The banning of Kurdish education and restrictions on Kurdish cultural expression converged with the experiences in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan to give rise to a Kurdish national consciousness among Kurds living in the Syrian Jazira. Increased Kurdish national sentiment did not, at first, conflict with the specifically Syrian loyalties of these groups. This held true during the period from 1946 to 1970, until the formation of the Kurdish Democratic Party, and the ushering in of a repressive state apparatus across all of Syria.

The Kurdish Question and State Repression across the Arab East: a Crisis of Citizenship

The Kurdish protest movement was focused largely on their exclusion from active participation in the administration of their countries and their cultural repression, and grew into intensified demands for self-rule in autonomous regions. The Kurdish national movement viewed Kurdish autonomy as a means of achieving a political and cultural compromise. The earliest expression of a demand for Kurdish self-rule was born in Iraq following the events known there as the “September, 1961 Revolution”. By 1992, a regional parliament in Iraqi Kurdistan formulated a type of relationship which would tie Kurdish regions to a central Iraqi government in Baghdad.

Examining this period of growing Kurdish nationalism, however, it becomes clear that Kurdish frustrations were due to the same repressive state policies which their Arab co-citizens suffered. Even the Arab citizens of Syria and Iraq suffered the fate of political disenfranchisement, the usurping of their civil rights and the intensification of state repression. In essence, then, the Kurdish Question is the result of the same repressive mechanisms which the Arab nation-state has unleashed on all of its citizens, regardless of ethnicity, and a reflection of how that nation-state views national identity, the relationship of the state to the individual and citizenship itself. In other words, the problems which give rise to Kurdish separatism are symptoms of a wider crisis not necessarily related to issues specific to the Kurdish ethnic community.

Likewise, the Kurdish nationalists failed to create a political movement which accounted for the realities of all Kurds. Instead, the Kurdish leadership took a two-pronged approach: demanding the collective national rights of the Kurds while simultaneously demanding that Kurds be granted equal citizenship within the countries in which they lived. All the while, this Kurdish political leadership worked to make sure that the apparatus of an independent Kurdish state—which would ultimately threaten the existence of existing states—was put in place. While the exact features of what a Kurdish national project would entail remain unclear, one effect which this national movement had is the undermining of both demands for decentralized federalism and equal citizenship within Arab states. It is this vacillation between two poles which has given the Kurdish political leadership the cover needed to try and forge an

ethnically homogenous enclave the type of which has long evaded nationalists across the globe. The achievement of this goal is only possible with the forced expulsion of non-Kurds from the territory of a presumptive “State of Kurdistan”. In Syria, Kurdish militia have already displaced the Arab residents of a number of districts—in some cases, majority-Arab locales—while in Iraq, Kurdish aspirations for a homogenous enclave have so far prevented the ratification of the 2005 Constitution.

The Conference

To address the theme detailed above, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies will convene “The Arabs and the Kurds: Shared Hopes and Common Fears” over April 29 and 30, 2017. The conference fits into a broader series of academic events hosted by the ACRPS over the years and which focus on the cultural, political and economic relations that bind the Arab region to groups around it. Unlike previous conferences (“China and the Arabs”, “The Arabs and Russia”) “The Arabs and the Kurds” will explore the relationship of the Arab nation-state to the “domestic other”, an ethnic minority group living within the borders of Arab states.

Participants at the meeting will be invited to consider some of the following topics:

- The Historical Roots of the Kurdish Question in Iraq and in Syria
- The Kurdish Question and Nationalism in the Arab Region
- The Racialization of Identity in the Modern Arab State: the Cases of Iraq and Syria
- Kurds and the National Identities of Syria and Iraq
- Kurdish Political Participation in the Modern Arab State: Political Parties, State Institutions and Civil Society
- Kurds and the Struggle for Citizenship Rights
- Mutual Reflections of the Other: the Kurds in Arab Eyes; the Arabs in Kurdish Eyes
- The Kurdish Question as Seen by Kurdish Political Movements
- The Kurdish Question as Seen by Arab Political Movements
- The Kurdish Question and the Repressive State in the Arab East
- The Kurdish Question: Aspects of Minority Rights and Nationalism
- The Armed Kurdish Movement: the Role of the Peshmerga
- Autonomy, Federalism and Decentralization: Kurdish Aspirations, Arab Responses
- The Kurdish Question and Demographic Shifts
- The Kurds and the Consociational System in Iraq since 2003
- Kurds and the Syrian Revolution: Vision, Reality and the Relations with the Syrian Opposition
- The Kurdish Question: Regional and Global Circumstances
- Turkey and the Kurdish Question in Iraq and in Syria
- Kurdish Nationalist Groups, Palestine and Israel
- Syrian Kurdish Poets and their Contributions to the Aesthetics of the Modern Arabic Language
- A Blood-stained Memory: How it Might Inform the Future Arab-Kurdish Relationship
- The Future of Arab-Kurdish Relations: Radical Responses and Coexistence