

# The Construction and Perception of 'Kurdishness' among Iranian Kurds in the wake of Kurdish advances in Iraqi Kurdistan

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This paper will examine the construction and perception of 'Kurdishness' as a unique phenomenon that appears in other parts of Kurdistan with a focus on Iranian Kurdish youth. The removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003 ensured an increased representation of the Kurds in the new Iraq and also increased their profile within international political and media spectrums. In a matter of months, and after years of relative insignificance, they became the second political power in Iraq, with the Kurdish language being formally recognised as the official second language. A historical precedent was set when a Kurdish president gained power in Baghdad, followed by a Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and a fully functioning Kurdish parliament and semi-autonomous Kurdistan with Erbil (Hawler) as capital.

This self-ruling area known as south Kurdistan has inspired a sense of nationalism in young Kurds from the other areas of the divided lands known as Kurdistan. A full one third of the Kurdish population in the Iraqi and Iranian areas is under the age of 30, giving such popular socio-political movements a strength which could potentially transform the nature of thinking about the future of Kurdistan.

Recent indications, compiled through the referendum campaign in South Kurdistan before the Iraqi election, found that 95% of Kurds would welcome a free Kurdistan. Since Kurds in other areas are still fighting to have their basic rights to read, write, and speak in their own language in public schools and offices secured, there is a widespread perception that Iraqi Kurds have a better chance to reach complete liberation first.

With respect to events in Iraq, the fall of Saddam Hussein became a catalyst for the strong sense of Kurdish identity among the Kurds of Iran and Syria. This is frequently expressed verbally with the term *kurdayeti* (Kurdishness), which represents a complex of ideas surrounding the articulation of Kurdishness through behaviour, dress, social interaction, political activity and belief, among others. To have *kurdayeti* implies not only an ethnic identity but a particular commitment to politicised Kurdishness. The proposed research will explore the political events and ideologies generating and maintaining the boundaries of this indigenous concept of Kurdishness, and further examine how it has come to be practiced within the context of political process.

The state oppression within Iran and the prohibition on alternative political parties also influences the way this Kurdishness becomes expressed. Because of lack of political infrastructure or well developed civil society, Kurdish interests and the accompanying ideas of Kurdishness only arise in a context of protest against the government, in short-lived bursts of resistance which are rarely carried beyond this. Such activity lacks a vehicle necessary to transform itself into coherent political mechanisms, though the will is strong. This strength of political will is most deeply articulated through notions of kurdayeti. What are the conditions that give rise to this diffuse sense of Kurdishness, and what exactly is the will of the people in terms of specific actions or direction to take? The proposed research will address these questions.

In the light of recent political developments in Iraq, and the headway made Kurdish interests within this, the meaning and perceptions of Kurdishness in this new era of Middle East history will undoubtedly change alongside such new developments. Further, it is necessary to consider the possible variability of beliefs surrounding notions of Kurdishness, or kurdayeti and its articulation according to different regional cultures in Kurdish areas throughout Iran. Factors such as religion, political affiliation, language and cultural traits shared with the host country influence the ways this is viewed. In the sphere of religion alone, Yezedis in Iraq, Armenian Christians in both Iraq and Iran and Shi'ia Muslims in particular regions of western Iran, by their very presence, pluralize the perception and practice of Kurdishness. Previously, these religious identities took precedence over Kurdish ethnicity in the minds of these groups, but here again the increased salience of the Kurds on the world stage, with respect to developments in the Middle East especially, has altered such perceptions. While variability according to these factors of identity remains, there is an increased sense of connectivity to Kurdishness on the whole. Thus, another aim of the research will be to identify and analyse the factors which account for variations in the understanding and articulation of kurdayeti across Kurdish populations in Iran.

Tribal structures form another important fault line along which differing notions of kurdayeti are conceived and expressed. Within the tribal context, the entire complex of Kurdishness remains so intact as a daily lived reality that it is rendered insignificant as a political articulation. Class and gender are also important prisms through which the perception and experience of Kurdishness may become fragmented. Thus it is reasonable to say that we are witnessing a proliferation of interpretations of the traditional conception of kurdayeti within the present political climate.

The public sphere must also be addressed in the examination of these issues. The educational system in Iran, for example, has obviously not allowed a channel for the exploration or expression of this kurdheti or even of Kurdish history, culture, language, or cartography, thus interactions between middle class bourgeoisie education and notions of Kurdishness in this public sphere have been severely curtailed. What is more, the educational sphere has also contributed to a significant generation gap in terms of the identification with and articulation of ideas of kurdheti; older generations tend to be illiterate, and thus their exposure to political ideologies underlying Kurdish nationalist movements has been limited. Within these generations, kurdheti replaced ideology, while for younger generations, particularly in the wake of Kurdish diplomatic and political advances in post-Saddam Iraq, the concept is much more closely tied to and informed by contemporary political events.

Witnessing the first ever images of a Kurdish president sent across the globe, particularly with the aid of Kurdish satellite television channels, and Saddam Hussein's regime being held publicly accountable for atrocities in Halabja and the genocide of the Kurds, brought waves of jubilation, followed by rising demands for equal rights and greater representation in national affairs. The neglect of these demands, contributing to several incidents and riots, and bringing almost eight months of unrest in Kurdish areas of Iran and Iraq has remained unresolved. The peak of uprising fuelled by Kurdishness in Iran in recent weeks alone has meant an increased attention to security issues by Iran, Iraq and Turkey, over fears of a massified effect. This comes in the context of a recent election of the fundamentalist Ahmadi Nejad, replacing a government whose broadly reformist agenda had allowed until now the informal expression of Kurdishness. At the same time, Iran is under increasing pressure from the international community with regards to its nuclear weapons programme, ensuring difficulties on both the domestic and international fronts.

This is the international context in which expressions of kurdheti are currently displayed. It is such recent political developments and their influence on the domestic articulation of Kurdishness that the present situation examines.