

International Relations theories and Kurdish nationalism: a brief analysis

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Abstract: The Kurdish issue and particularly the struggle for separate Kurdish homeland have been subject of researches from different perspective in different disciplines for long time. Scholars across social sciences tried to analyse and understand by applying various methods to grasp the root cause and the main objectives of the struggle. This paper briefly explores the understanding of the issue and also analyses the issue by applying few mainstream International Relations theories and the particular focus is given to the recent debates among the concept of self-determination and territorial sovereignty of the countries like Turkey, Syria and Iraq where the Kurdish population are habitant for long time and struggling for a separate homeland. This paper suggests that the emergence of small groups where nationalism is used as a main driving force to achieve the ultimate target of separate homeland actually fuels the struggle from time to time.

Keywords: Kurdish issue, self-determination, nationalism, state sovereignty

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Introduction

The paper explores how Kurdish nationalists generate sympathy and support for their ethnically defined claims to territory and self-determination in international society and promote their identity at different platforms. It also focuses the conceptual and theoretical insights from the field of IR and studies on nationalism, and also draws attention on national identity, sub-state groups and international norms. It also include the brief the brief literatures of different fields, particularly International Relations (IR) and nationalism studies, and looks more closely at the territorial component of nationalisms. It shows that insights from nationalism theories regarding the meanings and roles of nations and nationalism is necessary in understanding the challenges nationalist separatist movements pose to state sovereignty territorial stability and security.

In this regards, Kurdish nationalism and its ideal national homeland, Iraqi Kurdistan which is a good case to use in explaining how such groups frame their self-determination claims to territorial autonomy or independence based on their distinct cultural and ethnic characteristics in order to help them to maximise their legitimacy and influence in international society. The ethnicist assumptions in relation to territory and national self-determination are at their most prominent in the notion of Kurdistan that encompasses sections of the territories of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Additionally, these ethnicist assumptions emphasise maps depicting Kurdistan (assumed total territory with majority population of Kurds in these countries). Kurdish activists in the region and in the diaspora have always promoted the idea of Kurdistan to international society, typically framing their promotions using the language of human rights and self-determination to make their claims as legitimate as possible to those democratic countries whose influence they are trying to gain. They have been quite successful in generating support among Kurds and in generating sympathy for their cause in international society. Their long-standing promotion of Kurdistan and Kurdish identity has enjoyed some success compared to other ethnic groups' claims to distinct identity in the same region such as the Assyrian Christians and Turkmens in Iraq.

But in Turkey the situation is totally different because according different authors Turkey is where the most seemingly complicated and pressing Kurdish challenge presently seems to lie. The PKK and the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in Turkey, the pro-Kurdish party with representatives in the Turkish Parliament, repeatedly state their desire for Kurdish autonomy within Turkey. In recent years they have become more assertive in their insistence that they

are ready to negotiate a solution as long as their currently imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan who was captured by Turkish armed forces in 1999, is released and the Turkish government agrees to sit at a negotiation table with him (Huriyat Daily News, 2012). However, as long as the government continues to declare publicly that they refuse to negotiate with what they consider a terrorist organisation, there is no immediate sign of a solution. Kurdish nationalists have claimed ownership of this territory since very long and Kurdish nationalists in the diaspora are particularly attached to the idea of greater Kurdistan probably because of the absence of a Kurdish state or a clearly definable Kurdish homeland (Bruinessen, 2000).

Today both Kurdish nationalists and their sympathisers use the aspirant idea of Kurdistan to refer to the region and their identity. For them, notions such as ‘South-Eastern Turkey’ or ‘northern Iraq’ appear as insufficient or inappropriate titles to refer to the region and their identity. This understanding of Kurdistan has moved beyond the discourse of Kurdish nationalists and become embedded in the language used by other influential Kurdish groups who has aspiration with respect to the geography and distribution of Kurds in different countries in the region. Some officials from certain states have adopted similar conceptions when supporting the Kurdish cause and encouraged their states to put pressure on regional governments, particularly evident in the cases of Turkey and Iraq (Filner, 1997). For instance a report prepared by the Congressional Research Service, a research centre that works for the US Congress and provides policy and legal analysis for the members of the House and Senate, included a map which titled as ‘Kurdish Area’ highlighting the same boundaries and territories as indicated in the aspirant Kurdish nationalist map.

I. Kurdish nationalism: a brief literature

The literature on Kurds is mainly composed of in depth historical analyses of the Kurds and histories of the development of Kurdish national identity and Kurdish nationalism. These studies provide an alternative historical account of the region and its people, different from the historical narratives and arguments of the regional states. The observations of different authors on the social structure and political organisation of Kurdish society give detailed accounts of a case usually neglected in the academic and non-academic literature examining regional states. Among these, Martin Van Bruinessen, David McDowall and Denise Natali have written the most significant and reliable sources. Natali and Hussein Tahiri combined these works locate the longevity and power of Kurdish nationalism in the regional and local

historical events, particularly the WWI, when the Kurds came closest to a possible Kurdish state in their history. Additionally, they also emphasise that their peripheral location had given Kurdish tribal leaders in the past some degree of authority in their internal affairs. Therefore, centralisation, assimilation or exclusion policies of the new states led Kurdish leaders to react and mobilise dissident movements against the states they are located. These reactionary movements have enabled the endurance of Kurdish nationalism and where Kurdish identity and territorial integrity are central focus for Kurdish leaders.

Martin Van Bruinessen work titled as 'Agha, Shaikh and the State' has been one of the most influential historical and sociological studies undertaken on the Kurds (Bruinessen M. V., *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, 1992). This book examines the social and political structures of Kurdistan and deals with the role of tribal loyalties within Kurdish societies. Van Bruinessen tackles the question of how tribal and primordial loyalties transform into national loyalties in the Kurdish case, and emphasises the role of economic and political circumstances in this transformation. Through a detailed analysis of the Sheikh and tribal order among Kurdish society and through his observations from his fieldwork in the region, Van Bruinessen other work titled as 'Kurds, States and Tribes' provides significant insights into the internal structures of Kurdish society and how they have responded to the formation of new states in the region and to economic, social and political changes (Bruinessen M. V., *Kurds, States and Tribes*, 2002).

On the other hand, McDowall work on 'A Modern History of the Kurds' represents a comprehensive historical account of the Kurdish society in the Middle East and their interactions with the regional states where Kurds in majority. In this book, McDowall traces the problems experienced by the Kurds back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the policies of the Ottoman and Iranian empires towards their Kurdish populations, and provides useful insights in understanding the internal and external dynamics that shape Kurdish nationalism (McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 2004). In the report he prepared for the Minority Rights Group, McDowall explores the issues that affect the identity and political development of the Kurds. He argues that although Kurds have mainly blamed the states where they have been living for years for their inability to create their own state, and that this is indeed a contributory factor, in addition Kurdish tribal structure and internal rivalry at the beginning of the twentieth century (which is a more or less continuing feature of Kurdish society) also defined the political progress of the Kurdish society (McDowall, *The Kurds*, 1996). In addition, McDowall indicates that the map of Kurdistan he has highlighted

in the report is not a political map, but merely indicates the location of the Kurds. He also acknowledges the heterogeneous composition of the population in this region.

Denise Natali's work is another intuitive work on the Kurds that entitled as 'The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran'. Natali provides an analytically sophisticated and comparative analysis of the Kurdish societies in the Middle East and the implications of state formation processes on the development of the Kurdish identity in each state. Natali emphasises the development of transnational Kurdish nationalism, but argues that this has not managed to unite the Kurds under one movement (Denise, 2005). In addition to these studies mentioned looking at Kurds and Kurdish nationalism, there are many other studies looking at the development and structure of Kurdish society and Kurdish nationalism in a regional context or more local contexts. Most of these studies perceive a pervasive Kurdish identity that led to the emergence of Kurdish nationalism back in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and explain the endurance of Kurdish nationalism based on this assumption.

Although the literature on the Kurds is mainly constituted of historical and sociological studies there are also a considerable number of studies that aims to construct a connection between Kurdish nationalism and international politics. Some of these studies look at the influence of the problems encountered by Kurds and the activities of Kurdish nationalists on Middle Eastern politics and vice versa. Among these, Robert Olson's work is particularly important because of his focus on the centrality of the Kurds to understanding Middle Eastern politics in international relations mainly in relation to Turkey and Iraq (Olson, 2009). Olson looks at the policies of regional states, particularly Iraq and Turkey, towards the Kurds and the Kurdish parties' response to those policies. He discusses the relationship between Kurdish political parties and regional states and the implications of these on the wider Middle Eastern politics, and he addresses the issue of Kurdish independence only in relation to the Kurds of Iraq.

II. International Relations and Kurdish nationalism

The case of Kurdish nationalism and its promotion of the notion of Kurdistan within international society demonstrate and prove the necessity for adopting an approach that brings together different fields and perspectives for the study of sub-state nationalist actors, their

territorial claims and their relationship with international society. Moreover, the analysis of the territorial claims of sub-state nationalists from a theoretical perspective is largely neglected both in the studies of nationalism and international relations studies. Therefore, through the study of the territorial aspect of Kurdish nationalism because of its neglect brief emphasis have been given to highlight the some areas in IR where Kurdish nationalism is highlighted.

In International Relation studies there is a lack of substantial research dealing with self-determination of some groups here in the case of Kurds and nationalism with a focus on territorial demands. Mainstream International Relation theories usually treat the domestic and the international spheres as separate and consider nationalism as an ideology related to the domestic sphere and see the principle of self-determination as mainly related to international law (Griffiths and Sullivan, 1997). Considering nationalism as a domestic phenomenon and understanding self-determination merely in terms of its legal implications rather than its political implications limits the ability to incorporate these phenomena into the study of IR theory. Realism and neo-realism see the ‘international’ as defined by the relations between states and by the structure of the international system. Power and interest define the norms and rules states adhere to and the behaviours they follow. Therefore, neo-realism would be explanatory in understanding how and why the ‘external’ meaning of self-determination has begun to be used in relation to the human and democratic rights of sub-state groups (Waltz, 2010). A rational choice perspective assumes that a particular usage of self-determination serves the political and economic interests of the actors that uses it. This serves also one of the important motivations for Kurds leaders to emphasise on the self-determination during different elections campaign.

Constructivists on the other hand emphasise the role of norms and ideas in shaping the actions of political actors. As such, constructivist theorists assume that politics is socially constructed and that specific occurrences do not take place independently from the international constitution in which more or less recognised principles and ideas exist (Adler, 1997). Based on the general constructivist arguments Risse and Sikkink argue that international democratisation is central to understanding the norms of socialisation (Risse and Sikkink, 1999). Risse and Sikkink, through an analysis of a number of cases, look at the conditions under which international human rights norms are implemented. Therefore, the argument of Risse and Sikkink to understand the use of Kurdish sub-state nationalist groups’ use of self-determination in relation to human rights and democracy discourses.

The English School of IR, particularly international society thinking, provides the possibility of studying sub-state groups' activities within an international context with an emphasis on the common interests, rules, norms and values in inter-state relations that influence the states' and other actors decisions and behaviour (Hedley and Watson, 1994). According to this view, ideas seem to disseminate not only through interactions between states but also they become part of a set of international institutions that are separate from individual states. The international society approach to understanding international relations sees international society as the result of shared interest and identity among states that creates and maintains norms, rules and institutions (Buzan, 2001). Therefore, the English School's international society approach provides the conceptual and theoretical tools to study and understand why self-determination in relation to human rights and democracy is increasingly used by sub-state groups and why international society provides a normative framework for this use. Overall, these theories assume that norms, rules and patterns of behaviour disseminate among states and transnational actors, but the ways they explain the formation and dissemination of norms and shared behaviour vary. When taken as complementary explanations, these theories and arguments in IR provide a more complete analytical and conceptual framework to understand the relationship between sub-state nationalist groups and international society. However, the study of nationalism as an international phenomenon is largely neglected in IR studies.

Conclusions

The goal of nationalism is the desire for autonomy, usually in the form of a sovereign state, on behalf of the nation on a national territory. Especially in the twentieth century, after which clear examples of nation-state formations had taken place and the nation-state was accepted as the political norm, popular nationalist movements began to emerge without existing state institutions. Based on this, it could be assumed that a modern and political conception of nationalism not only applies to state nationalisms but also to sub-state nationalisms. In this sense, the idea of a national territory, which emerged as a result of the establishment of the nation-state system based on nation-state territories, provided a context for the emergence of Kurdish nationalism. To sum up, the issue of sub-state nationalist groups' demands for territorial autonomy and independence is under-theorised and understudied. Considering the general status of the Nationalism and IR literatures in relation to self-determination and sub-state nationalist groups.

The emergence of the concept of Kurdistan as a national homeland can best be understood by reference to material, political and ideational processes, rather than through an essentialist historical view that sees Kurdistan as a consistent and given feature of Kurdish national identity. The essentialist historical view deploys contemporary conceptions of national territory by building upon an idea of Kurdistan that had previously been used to define administrative or geographic regions. One of the key characteristics of this conception is to assume that the history of the region is identical to the history of the Kurdish nation. The perception that the history of the region is identical to the history of the Kurdish nation and that Kurdistan is a given feature of Kurdish identity, not a national aspiration, strengthens Kurdish nationalists' use of Kurdistan and its maps in order to promote their self-determination claims. Moreover, their contemporary conception of national territory is loaded with ethnicist and primordial interpretations of Kurdish territory and national identity.

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