

## **Full Length Research**

# **The political Development of Iraqi Kurdistan**

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This research has reviewed the political developments of the Iraqi Kurdistan through investigating its political and historical background which provides deeper understanding of the strategies of the Kurdish national movements to protect the Kurdish culture and to develop its political rights in Iraq. The Kurdish political problem, as a part of Iraq, has been going on for over hundred years. Since the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1921, the Kurds have been experiencing a terrible treatment by the Baghdad governments. For example, the Iraqi politicians sought ethnic cleansing process in which they imposed the Arab identity on the Iraqi nations and on its components. As a consequence, the Kurds lost the sense of Iraqi identity and the loyalty to Iraq. Despite the overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003 through the international coalition led by the United States, and the establishment of a new Iraqi government formed by the Iraqi oppositions and the Kurds, the Arabs, particularly the Shia component, dominated the power at the expense of the other parties. This indicates that a peaceful coexistence of the Iraqi components is illogical and an independent state for the Kurds in Iraq would be the best recourse.

**Keywords:** Kurdistan, Political Development, Culture, Iraq, Geopolitics, Political Issue, Political Right

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## **KURDISTAN**

The term 'Kurdistan' is composed of two words; the first is Kurd, which means the Kurdish people and the second one is Stan which means land or country. Under the Ottoman Empire the Kurdish people were ruled by their own local authority, such as the Emirate of Botan, the Emirate of Ardlan, the Emirate of Soran, the Emirate of Bahdenan, the Emirate of Baban and the Emirate of Ardlan (Eppel, 2008). Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan was divided by the victors of World War I between four countries, namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria as well as a small portion coming under Armenian control (Kelly, 2008). There is no accurate estimate of the size of Kurdistan in political, and historical

records, however, the traditional area of Kurdistan is believed to be around '500,000 sq. Km'. (Laizer, 1991, p 2).

### **Iraqi Kurdistan**

This section outlines the history and geopolitics, language and culture of Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **Brief history and Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan**

This section focuses only on Iraqi Kurdistan, its area is estimated to be about 40,643 sq. Km covering the

northern and north-eastern area of Iraq. There are four main cities in Iraqi Kurdistan: Erbil, the capital, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk. By the end of the First World War, Iraqi Kurdistan remained under Mosul Vilayet, which was affiliated to the Ottoman Empire. However, in 1919, the Kurdish people seized the opportunity to create an entity of their own when Sheikh Mahmoud became the governor of Sulaymaniyah; he was known as King Mahmoud. However, his kingdom only lasted less than a year because the territory came under the control of the British Empire and it was subsequently handed over to the Iraqi State under the command of King Faisal. The Allied Powers (Britain and France) promised to help the Arabs establish their own state which included Iraqi Kurdistan and they later created Iraq which included that part of Kurdistan now referred to as Iraqi Kurdistan. This situation remained unchanged until recently and meant that the Kurdish people have been able to exercise much autonomy or a sense of collective national identity since then (Dahlman, 2002). The Kurdish people began their struggle to establish their own entity by gradually creating their own cultural heritage, political organisations and political parties.

Iraqi Kurdistan is rich in natural resources and is particularly known to have large reserves of oil, minerals and fresh water. The oil reserves are estimated at about 45 billion barrels, more than those of the United States (Gunter, 2011). The topographic nature of Kurdistan is mountainous, with valleys and fertile soil, which enables agriculture, although this has not been fully developed by successive regimes. Kurdistan includes several mountainous areas which not only lend an agreeable aspect to the natural landscape but have also helped the Kurdish rebels (Peshmerga) to fight the former Iraqi regimes. This feature has given rise to a popular local proverb which claims that there is 'no Kurdish friend, only their own mountains'. Kurdistan has a moderate climate and as a result it has become the most popular tourist attraction in Iraq (Gaffur, 2005). However, the tourism sector in Kurdistan has not been developed efficiently as yet. Furthermore, Kurdistan occupies a strategic location for Iraq since it covers all the border area between Iraq and Turkey, together with the north-eastern Iraqi border with Iran. The previous Iraqi regime dominated Kurdistan by force and coercion, and did not allow multi-partisan or coalition governments. The former Iraqi regime also started to "Arabise" some cities, towns and villages, mainly Kirkuk, due to its rich deposits of oil by deporting the local Kurds to settlements in Arab areas and replacing them with Arab people from desert villages. This process took place especially from 1963 to the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003, when the Kurdish rebels known as Peshmerga (meaning those who face death for the Kurdish National Movement) gradually gained control of the three cities that composed the majority of Iraqi Kurdistan. The remainder of the territory later became

known as the disputed areas and includes the main city of Kirkuk as well as part of the governorates of Nineveh, Saladin and Diyala. The Peshmerga established a Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992 through democratic elections which comprised the political participation of four main lists. These lists were: (Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK), Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and Socialist Party of Kurdistan (SPK). The stipulation in the first election was that a party needed to achieve 7% of the votes in order to enter parliament. Some of the five political parties were not able to achieve this percentage and were eliminated from the political scene. This allowed the formation of two main large parties: the (KDP) and the (PUK), who gained all of the seats between them at the first election. The KDP won 51% of votes and the PUK won 49% (Dabrowska and Hann, 2008). The KDP had achieved a minimal majority but the PUK did not accept the election result, accusing the KDP of fraudulent activities. Nonetheless, the two largest parties established a coalition government as the PUK did not agree to become the opposition party, due to the lack of trust in the KDP (a lack of trust which was reciprocal) and their fear of losing popularity in the next elections. Finally, both parties attempted to keep control of those specific areas where their influence was greatest. For example, the Yellow Zone is the area of influence of the KDP which is composed of Dohuk province and Erbil city, whereas the area of influence of the PUK is called the Green Zone composed of Sulaymaniyah and a small part of Erbil province. The two parties entered into a conflict and civil war for five years, from 1994 to 1999. The PUK controlled Erbil, the capital city, from 1994 to the end of August 1997, when the KDP took over control of Erbil with military help from Baghdad. Following this, the PUK established a government until 2004 in Sulaymaniyah, until after the unification of both governments of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah to form one central government in Erbil after 2004 (Al Zaidi and Sadiq, 2012).

### **Kurdish culture and language**

The Kurdish people have a shared culture but since they do not have an independent state, their culture has remained divided among the Kurdish communities living in the five neighbouring countries, namely Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Iran and Armenia. The Kurds have therefore continued to remain an ethnic minority in each nation where they reside, but their aspiration for nationhood is upheld through their strong cultural identity. This political division has affected the development of Kurdish culture and language. For instance, the Iraqi Kurds use an Arabic-based alphabet, while Kurds in Turkey use a Latin-based alphabet. The Kurdish people tend to be

tribal, especially in rural areas, nevertheless, they have gradually adopted modern technology which has opened up access to the information highway, social media and news and information from around the globe (Sheyholislami, 2011). More recently, economic development in Iraqi Kurdistan has impacted greatly on Kurdish people's lifestyle. For instance, many people, before the economic growth of the last two or three years, relied solely on the privileges they gained from the two main parties (the KDP and the PUK). Whilst it is still the case that both parties have a monopoly over the public sector economy, there are now more opportunities for people to engage in the private sector economy (Leezenberg, 2003). Meanwhile, the national budget of Iraq has increased due to the upsurge in oil production after 2006, and Iraqi Kurdistan obtained 18% of the overall national budget of Iraq. Meanwhile individual incomes have risen in line with increases in average salaries and expanded job opportunities.

Religious practices are also diverse, although 'at least two thirds of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims' (Nehme and Meho, 1997, P 5). The other religions are those practised by the Yezidis, Christians and Jews. Although most Kurds are devout Muslims, their ethnic and national identity is stronger than their religious affiliation as a result of the discrimination suffered under the Iraqi regime. The Kurdish media have played an active role in protecting Kurdish identity through focusing on political rights and political awareness rather than on religion (McDowall, 2007). The Kurdish language has four dialects in general, which are permitted in Iraq. Whereas writing and publishing in the Kurdish language was forbidden by law in Iran until 1990 and it was not allowed in Turkey until 1992 when it was accepted for speaking purposes only (Nehme and Meho, 1995).

The Sorani dialect has become the official language in Iraqi Kurdistan, while both the Sorani and the Badini dialects are utilised by the media. In Iraqi Kurdistan, most of the population speak Sorani, especially in the eastern and southern regions, while Badinani is spoken in the northern and western regions; only a few people speak the Hawrami and the Coloury dialects. Given the diversity of dialects the Kurdish media in Iraq is very concerned about protecting the official Kurdish languages. For this reason the media focuses on both Sorani and to a lesser extent Badinani (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999). Furthermore, the Kurdish people in Iraq began to understand their dialects due to the media broadcast of news, programmes and TV dramas in different dialects particularly after the increase in the number of Kurdish satellite TV channels after 2006 when some of these channels started to present some programmes in different dialects.

### **The Kurdish issue in Iraq**

Many new countries were created in the Middle East following the First World War. For instance, the Arabs established 21 countries (which are called the Arab nations or the Arab World) that were previously under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Empire. This region (Iraqi Kurdistan) was occupied by the British Army in the First World War and later became part of Iraq; the British promised the Arabs that they would eventually be allowed to control this area. The idea of one Kurdish nation had not developed among Kurdish people as the whole of the Kurdish Emirates had previously been under the control of the Ottoman Empire. In the First World War the Kurdish people were not aligned to Britain and France and they did not prepared well to create their own state comparing to Arabs. The main factor which led to the Kurds not gaining their own nation state was the agreement between the Arabs and Allied countries which aimed to help them through a combined Arab uprising against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. This was carried out in return for a promise to ensure Arab independence after the war. Alongside this, the geopolitics of Kurdistan was not considered significant as Kurdistan did not have a sea border to access the world. During this historical period, the Allied countries did not help the Kurds rather, they favoured the Arabs whose geographical location was seen as being strategically more significant at that time.

The division of Kurdistan was brought about by the Treaty of Sèvres and Lausanne which concluded the settlement of regional borders agreed by Britain, France, Iraq, Turkey and Iran in 1923. Harwaty (2006) stated that the Kurdish people were not keen to exchange Turkish rule under the Ottoman Empire for Arab rule from Baghdad. Consequently, the Kurds started to create their own political parties and cultural organisations, later to be called the Kurdish National Movement.

In 1943, Mulla Mustafa Barzani and Shaykh Mahmud's brother demanded that Baghdad implement the promises to the Kurds based on the League of Nations agreement (Dahlman, 2002). The Baghdad regime ignored the Kurds' demands; as a result, the Kurds resorted to armed conflict to gain their independence rights (Rasul, 2005). The Iraqi Royal Air Force defeated Barzani's uprising in 1945 and Barzani, with approximately 300 rebels, was compelled to leave Kurdistan and flee to Iran (Harwaty, 2006). Barzani went on to support Kurdish independence when the Mahabad Republic was founded in Iran in 1946. This Mahabad Republic was defeated after 11 months by the Iranian regime and his rebels sought political refuge in the former Soviet Union.

Around the same time the Kurdish Democratic Party was founded (1946) in Iraqi Kurdistan by the same Kurdish Nationalist Movement while its president remained in exile for 11 years. Barzani was invited back

by Abdul Karim Qasim, the first President of the Republic of Iraq in 1958, after the fall of the Iraqi monarchy (Rubin, 2007). The consultation between Baghdad and the Kurdish rebels took three years. The Kurds made some gains in those negotiations especially in relation to cultural rights such as the recognition of the Kurdish language as a second language in Iraq and the opening of the Department of Kurdish language in the University of Baghdad.

Nevertheless, that conciliation process did not provide long-lasting solutions for the Kurds' problems and neither did it meet their demands in relation to political rights, such as autonomy and full sovereignty. Qasim also refused the Kurdish demands due to pressure imposed on him by higher Iraqi officials. Following the failure of the negotiations between the Kurds and Qasim, Barzani started his revolt against the Iraqi authorities; this lasted from 1961 to 1963. Barzani's revolutionary forces were rather a tribal movement than a well-organised or coordinated army, as most of Barzani's support was from the rural areas and he relied on them more than on the elite intellectuals based in the cities. This was ascribed by Freij (1997) to the fact that the Kurds' primary identity community is the tribe, as is also stressed in the literature of the Kurdish National Movement. For instance, Barzani, for the most part, sent his relatives to meetings with the Baghdad leadership during the negotiations with the Iraqi regime, although the Kurdistan Democratic Party had intellectual members who were more suitable for such negotiations. This situation caused several intellectual members to defect from the party. However, the Kurdish National Movement was not unified and their division had both negative and positive impacts. The positive aspect led to the emergence of a new political movement amongst urban Kurds whereas the splits led to the division of the spheres of influence between the KDP and other dissident members of the party. Subsequently, dissident members founded the PUK in 1975. Following the split, the KDP has gradually maintained its control over the north-western part of Iraqi Kurdistan, in the Badinan region because Barzani's family lived there and also the Badinani dialect is spoken there. In contrast, the PUK has preserved its influence in the south eastern region, a Sorani-speaking area, as most of the members, especially the prominent leaders of the PUK, are from that area.

In 1966 the Iraqi leader, Rahamn Arif announced a 12-point peace treaty but this was not concluded as the Ba'ath party, via a military-backed coup, returned to power in 1968. The new Ba'ath government started a campaign to end the Kurdish insurrection, and a new government was formed in Baghdad which began the war on the Kurds in 1969. This period saw the subsequent rise to power of Saddam Hussein who at first led the government's intelligence agency. Since the new government in Baghdad was unable to defeat the Kurdish

national movement, it offered autonomy to the Kurds, by way of a treaty signed by both sides on March 11, 1970. However, this did not succeed because both sides did not abide by its terms (Natali, 2005). Baghdad refused to allow Kirkuk City, which is rich in oil, to become part of the area controlled by the Kurds. On the other hand, Baghdad gained time during the negotiation period to take a rest and reorganise itself against the Kurdish National Movement, while at the same time it gained foreign support for the control of Kurdistan, in particular from the former Soviet Union and Iran. During the negotiations Baghdad opened another dialogue with Iran and offered material concessions to Tehran such as granting it control of the Shatt al-Arab which is a river corridor leading to the Arab Gulf and some oil fields on the Iraqi-Iranian border in order to prevent its support of the Kurdish movement. Iran accepted Baghdad's offer in the Algeria Agreement in 1975, which resulted in the failure of the Kurdish revolution. Alongside this, the Iraqi regime granted autonomy to the Kurds but this was not accepted by Barzani as it did not include Kirkuk province (Hassanpour, 1994).

Nehme and Meho (1995) noted that in the wake of the failed negotiations between Barzani and Baghdad, the Kurds' movement was defeated and later the KDP withdrew to Iran with more than 200,000 refugees. At the same time, the Iraqi regime started its prolonged operations of Arabising Kirkuk province through the forced deportation of the Kurds and the resettlement of Arabs on their land. In 1975, the PUK was founded in Damascus by Talabani and other Kurdish leaders; the most prominent of these was Nawshirwan Mustafa (Gunter, 2009). Subsequently, the PUK started its armed activities which steadily increased during the First Gulf War between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988) as the Iraqi forces were occupied in the war with Iran.

By the end of the First Gulf War, the Iraqi regime ordered Kurds in the rural areas to leave their villages and come to live in settlements because the regime claimed that Kurdish rebels were hiding there. Moreover, the Iraqi regime accused the Kurdish people in the villages of supporting the rebels. However, most Kurds refused Iraq's orders with the argument that those settlements did not provide essential services as Baghdad did not plan to compensate them for losing their homes. It was in this period that Baghdad started its genocide against the Kurds who were living in the rural areas; the Iraqi regime named that campaign Al-Anfal (Van Bruinessen, 1994; Black, 1993). The Al-Anfal (meaning booty) concept came from the Qur'an and interpreters of the Qur'an note that it is permissible for Muslim armies to wage a war against infidels, but the paradox is that most Kurdish people are followers of the Islamic faith (Qur'an, chapter 9, Verse 1-75). The Al-Anfal operation began on 23 February 1988 and ended on the 26 May and it led to the killing of about 182,000

civilians and the destruction of most of the villages, including livestock and trees. The most enduring effect of the campaign was the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqi regime (Dzai, 2001; Kelly, 2008) and the most symbolic catastrophic chemical attack was put into operation in Halabja; the one day attack led to the killing of 6,000 civilians in March 1988 (Horvitz and Catherwood, 2009; Cooper, 2009).

The Iraqi regime through the Al-Anfal campaign defeated the Kurdish armed movement. When the Iraqi forces were destroyed in the Second Gulf War, the Kurds were encouraged to re-launch their uprising. Although the uprising spread to most of the Kurdistan region, the Iraqi regime attacked the Kurdish people. Kreyenbroek (2005) and Knox & Kushner (1999) observed that the majority of people in Kurdistan became refugees in Turkey and Iran after the last attack; it was estimated that there were around a million civilians who fled because they feared the reprisal of Saddam Hussein's regime. Brown (1999) referred to the fact that the Kurdish refugees were suffering on the Iraq-Turkey border, in addition to the 5,000 to 10,000 refugees who were estimated to have been killed each day by the Saddam forces. Following this last reprisal against the Kurds, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 688, to provide a safe haven for them (Gallant, 1991). Iraq was made a no-fly zone and the United Nations intervened to provide refugee relief and to offer the Kurds humanitarian assistance.

After the adoption of Resolution 688 the Iraqi regime became uncomfortable with the presence of international observers in Iraq, which they saw as interference in the country's sovereignty and as a result Iraq withdrew its civil administration from Kurdistan. Subsequently, through the election of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) was created in May 1992. The KDP and PUK established the first Regional Government as both parties obtained near equal power, already mentioned above, while five seats on the National Assembly were given to members of the Assyrian-Chaldean Christian community (Brown, 1999).

Although the Kurds gained freedom, they have since faced a double sanction, the first from Iraq and the second from the United Nations Council because the placing of Iraq under international punishment also affected Kurdistan as part of Iraq, even though it is outside the administration of Iraq. From the first cabinet of the government in 1992 until 2010, the KDP and PUK have maintained joint control of power as neither of them would accept a role in opposition because of their mutual mistrust. The reason why these two parties have chosen power sharing is because each party believes the other would control the government for a long time through using public funds to buy votes. During all this time, the opposition parties were weak and this allowed the monopoly of the two main parties to continue for nearly

two decades (1991-2009). Despite the fact that the two main parties have consistently entered the election under one list, the opposition parties have grown stronger, and have at least forced parliament to become more active. During the nearly twenty-year rule of the two main parties, the majority of the Kurdistan region such as Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah have come under Kurdish control while parts of some border provinces as well as Kirkuk city remain under the Iraqi government's control. These areas are referred to as disputed areas between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG). Since October 1991, the Kurdistan region has been considered as being outside the control of the Iraqi regime, and protected by the aforementioned UN resolution. This resolution also allowed other Iraqi opposition parties to open their offices in Kurdistan, in particular those representing Shiite parties.

As in many countries, following a revolution, the former country are more likely to face instability and conflict; similarly Kurdish parties have been in conflict in order to hang onto their power (Harris, 2011). Fighting broke out amongst Kurdish parties was a regular occurrence; one was the conflict between the PUK and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) which flared up from 1993 to 1997, another was the disagreement between the PUK and KDP which occurred from 1994 to 1999. Kurdish parties were not able to stop fighting through negotiation even when the USA and Turkey pressured them to stop fighting, through arguing that the conflict threaten on their interests in the middle east, particularly the USA has adopted the resolution from UN Security Council to keep the Kurds from Saddam's oppression (Al Zaidi and Sadiq, 2012).

In particular, the fighting between the KDP and PUK led to a division of power, for instance, the KDP has dominated Erbil and Dohuk and the PUK was forced to form a government in Sulaymaniyah where it had influence from 1997 to 2005. During that period the Kurdistan region was like two separate regions until the Iraqi regime collapsed in 2003 and this change led to encouraging the PUK government in Sulaymaniyah and the KDP government in Erbil to unify their administrations. Moreover, Kurdish public opinion pushed both parties to present a unified political front when dealing with Baghdad. Since 2003 the Kurds have participated in the new Iraqi government and achieved sovereign status and the election of the first president of the republic as well as assignation of some ministries in the Iraqi government. It is the first time in history that the Kurdish political parties have participated in an Iraqi political system that takes into account the Kurds' status as of main minority in Iraq. At the same time, the Kurds have kept control within the KRG through local government due to the Iraqi regime adopting a federal system. The former Iraq Republic was changed to the

Federal Republic of Iraq, and since then, Baghdad has fully recognised the Erbil government according to the new Iraqi Federal Constitution.

The change of the Iraqi regime in 2003 led to the introduction of rights and gains for the Kurds, however some Kurdish politicians argue that the Kurds should push for self-determination and have their own national independent state outside the Federal Republic of Iraq. This issue is openly debated amongst the Kurdish political class. Some Kurds favour independence rather than being a federal region only, as they argue that since the emergence of the Iraqi state most of its successive governments, upon coming to power, have always sought negotiation with the Kurds, until that regime became strong enough to dominate the geographical area. Most of these governments attained power through military coups or through colonialism, or foreign occupation. The normal pattern has been that Iraqi regimes, whilst being initially weak, gradually became much stronger and asserted control over the opposition until they eventually became the sole power in the area.

As aforementioned, following the establishment of Iraq by Britain in 1921 the Iraqi Kingdom promised to give the Kurds self-determination, but that promise remained unfulfilled. Similarly when Iraq became a republic through the military coup led by Qasim, he negotiated with the Kurds, and although he provided some rights he eventually withdrew his promise. Equally when the Ba'athists obtained power they demanded negotiations with the Kurds and then when they became more powerful refused to grant any concessions to the Kurds. Finally, when Kurdistan was protected by the UN during 1991-2003, all the Iraqi opposition parties opened offices in Kurdistan and they promised to establish democracy and introduce a federal system after Saddam Hussein that would provide for Kurdish autonomy.

The main problematic of the Kurds within the Iraq regime is Kirkuk province and there are several reasons for this. Firstly, Kirkuk as already mentioned, is rich in oil. Secondly, Kirkuk consists of three main ethnic groups, the majority group is Kurdish, the second are the Turkmen who came during the Ottoman Empire, and the third group are Arabs. After the fall of Saddam's regime, the Kurdish people in Kirkuk wished to join and follow the rest of Kurdistan. Baghdad offered a solution to this case in the new Iraqi constitution in 2005 that was stated in Article 140. This consists of two main points: the first point seeks the normalisation of Kirkuk and some other towns in the so-called disputed areas through the reinstatement of Kurdish people who formerly lived in Kirkuk and deportation of the Arabs who came during the Arabisation process, while offering compensation to both ethnic groups. The second point called for a referendum, after completion of the normalisation process mentioned in the first point, by the end of 2007. Baghdad started to procrastinate about Article 140 as it believed that full

implementation of these arrangements would enable the Kurdish to take Kirkuk, thus encouraging them to become more economically powerful and to seek full independence. Therefore, Baghdad started to implement the Article in several ways for example it cut the funds earmarked for compensation and to date, there has not been any agreement on the implementation of Article 140. Moreover, Baghdad justifies this inaction by referring to the expiration of that article, despite the fact that Baghdad is the reason for its non-implementation. In addition, Baghdad has attempted to make adjustments to some articles of the Iraqi constitution that are relevant to the Kurdistan Region, as Baghdad argues that the constitution was written in the post-Saddam Hussein era when Iraq was under occupation, therefore it needs to be adjusted. However, this constitution as mentioned by Turcan (2009) was officially approved by 80% of the Iraqis and was confirmed both domestically and internationally. As Saber (2006) argued, Iraq needs further democratisation because it consists of three main ethnic groups and therefore it needs a system that operates on the basis of citizenship. However he did not predict it would happen soon because 'the problematic situation amongst these ethnic groups is long-standing in Iraq, as it has also many other kinds of problems such as corruption, security, lack of infrastructure, regional interventions, and dysfunctional public services which need resolving first' (Saber, 2006, p 45).

Fundamentally the Kurdish people want to become independent. Berwari and Ambrosio (2008) stated that according to a referendum which was conducted in 2005, 98% of the participants voted for Kurdistan to become independent. Nevertheless the Kurdish political parties in power namely the PUK and KDP rejected this notion as they argue that the regional and international situations are still not ready for independence. By contrast, the main opposition political entity in Iraqi Kurdistan, namely the Gorran movement (meaning change) which emerged in 2008 led by Nawsherwan Mustafa stated that the Kurdish people have a right to independence and that the Kurdish people are ready to struggle to realise it but first they should organise the current regional government through starting reforms and eradicating corruption. Subsequently independence will become desirable and necessary. The origins and evolution of opposition parties and democratisation in Kurdistan will be discussed in detail in the next section.

### **Origins and evolution of opposition parties and democratisation process**

There are two kinds of oppositions in Kurdish political life. Firstly there is the more general opposition towards the state or regime that is governing the Kurds. This opposition is based on the Kurdish political movement

with the aims of gaining political and cultural rights for the Kurdish people. However there is a different view about the history of the Kurds amongst the opposition movement. Qaftan (1985) mentioned that the Kurds possessed a number of Emirates, namely: Soran, Baban, Botan and Ardalan when the Ottoman Empire and previously the Safavid Empire were in control of Kurdistan. Moreover, the princes of these Emirates revolted against both Ottoman and Safavid Empires during the mid-nineteenth century and this struggle continued in the wake of WW1 and ever since then, the Kurds, have been struggling against various Iraqi regimes to achieve political rights for themselves and eventually full independence.

The second kind of opposition is internal to the region and related to the various factions amongst Kurdish political parties, whose differences are linked to governance style and the evolving democratic experience in Iraqi Kurdistan.

## CONCLUSION

The term 'Kurdistan' refers to the Kurds' land which is located in the Middle East and the Kurds formerly had their own local power under the Ottoman Empire called emirates. In the wake of WW1 the Ottoman Empire was defeated by Britain and France and as a result Kurdistan was divided between four new countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Worse still, those four countries started to fight and prevent the Kurds from using their own language and culture by ethnically cleansing the Kurds in order to control them, and as result Kurdish culture has been mixed with that of the four countries. This led the Kurds to start their struggle to achieve freedom from those countries, which was called the Kurdish National Movement, the establishing of the Peshmerga (army of freedom fighters) and eventually of Kurdish political parties. The Kurds of Iraq established several parties which constituted the Kurdish National Movement against the Iraqi regime. The Iraqi regime offered autonomy to the Kurds in 1975 but the Kurds refused that for two reasons. Firstly because the Iraqi regime was essentially a dictatorship and did not allow any form of multi-party or coalition government, in another words, the Iraqi offer was not a real opportunity for the Kurds to gain real political rights. Secondly, the Iraqi offer did not include the Kirkuk province which is rich in oil. After that, the Iraqi regime started to control Kurdistan through the worst methods, such as using chemical attacks and genocide through the (Al-Anfal) campaign of the Saddam regime and the Arabising process of key towns.

The fall of the Iraqi regime after the Second Gulf War in 1991 gave a chance to Peshmerga to lead an uprising and take control of their provinces in Iraqi Kurdistan. At the same time the UN helped the Kurds to keep their

power in these three provinces through the adoption of Resolution 986 which was called (providing comfort for Iraqi Kurdistan). This was a significant gain for the Kurds in Iraq and enabled the Kurdish political parties to establish their own parliament and government by elections.

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