



Kurdish Community Differences: Potential Conflict and Politics in The Middle East

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Abstract

The Kurds are the name of an ethnic group that occupies several countries in the Middle East, notably Iraq, Iran, Türkiye, and a small part of Syria. The existence of Kurds who are different from ethnic groups in general has always been seen as a regional problem and treated discriminatorily. Because of this, the Kurds always carry out movements, even rebellions, to fight for political rights. This research aims to determine the differences between the Kurdish community and other communities in this regard regarding the potential for conflict and politics in the Middle East. The method used in this research is qualitative research with a library approach. The results of the study show that each Kurdish community spread across each country has differences that are not too prominent. In general, the difference lies in the direction of their movement based on the group leader and the religion they adhere to. Although the majority of Kurds adhere to Sunni Islam, there are also those who practice different religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Yazidis, and Zoroastrians. Currently, there are still many people who think that the Kurds are a tribe that always causes problems, although there are also those who think that most Kurds want recognition for their existence and special autonomy for the area where they live.

Keywords: *Kurdish Ethnicity, Ethnic Differences, Movement of Kurdish Tribes, Conflict Potential, Kurdish Political Struggle*

Abstrak

Suku Kurdi adalah nama kelompok etnis yang menempati beberapa negara di Timur Tengah, terutama Irak, Iran, Türkiye, dan sebagian kecil Suriah. Keberadaan suku Kurdi yang berbeda dengan suku pada umumnya selalu dipandang sebagai permasalahan daerah dan diperlakukan secara diskriminatif. Oleh karena itu, suku Kurdi selalu melakukan gerakan, bahkan pemberontakan, untuk memperjuangkan hak-hak politik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui perbedaan antara komunitas Kurdi dengan komunitas lainnya dalam hal ini mengenai potensi konflik dan politik di Timur Tengah. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan kajian literatur. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa setiap komunitas Kurdi yang tersebar di setiap negara mempunyai perbedaan yang tidak terlalu menonjol. Secara umum perbedaannya terletak pada arah pergerakan mereka berdasarkan ketua kelompok dan agama yang dianutnya. Meski mayoritas masyarakat Kurdi menganut agama Islam Sunni, ada juga yang menganut agama berbeda, seperti Kristen, Yudaisme, Yazidi, dan Zoroastrian. Saat ini masih banyak masyarakat yang menganggap suku Kurdi adalah suku yang selalu menimbulkan masalah, meski ada juga yang berpendapat bahwa sebagian besar suku Kurdi menginginkan pengakuan atas keberadaannya dan otonomi khusus bagi wilayah tempat tinggalnya.

Kata Kunci: Etnis Kurdi, Perbedaan Etnis, Pergerakan Suku Kurdi, Potensi Konflik, Perjuangan Politik Kurdi.

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Introduction

Geographically, the Middle East region is a region that is quite strategic and has an important presence in the world, both politically and economically. It is also a region that is the center of world religions based on heavenly religions, these religions are Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (Kuncahyono, 2005). However, with all that, until now this region is known as an area that is always plagued by conflict, be it conflict between religions, geography, and ethnicity.

All of this makes the political dynamics in the Middle East region have a unique variety compared to other regions in this part of the world. One of the characteristics of politics in the region is the existence of a number of tribes that play political scenes that have interesting episodes from each act (Topan, 2022). One of these tribes is the Kurds. They had tasted a golden period in their history. The Kurds have an extraordinary warrior and leader like Saladin al-Ayyubi, and there is also a scientist and hero like Ibn Taimiyah whose books are the references for students of religious knowledge to this day.

The Kurds are a minority ethnic group that inhabits several countries in the Middle East, such as Iraq, Iran, Türkiye, and parts of Syria. The existence of the Kurds is part of the ethnic conflict in the Middle East which has been going on for a long time. They have always been victims of the regimes in the countries they inhabit. Iraq, for example, during the reign of Saddam Hussein, who launched a massive attack with chemical weapons against the Kurdish population after the Gulf War (Basyar, 2015) In Türkiye, many Kurds were exiled and deported by the Ankara regime because of the uprisings they carried out in 1925, 1930, and 1937. In 1988, Iran also succeeded in seizing the South Kurdistan region (Kuncahyono, 2005).

Based on historical facts, various countries in the Middle East have given the Kurds a similar portrait to the Jews who experienced diaspora or the dispersion of their

population from their homeland. To a certain extent, the Kurdish ethnicity is understood by many countries as an ethnicity that always causes problems. Efforts to integrate this ethnicity in various Middle Eastern countries always fail even though they use military instruments. This is more due to the desire of the Kurdish people to carry out separatism and then unite in an independent Kurdish state (Mizan, 2015).

Method

In conducting research, researchers used qualitative research methods with a literature review approach. This study combines two main points of discussion, namely those related to differences in Kurdish society and the potential for conflict in the Middle East, both of which are examined in detail based on actual facts. This research also looks at how the Kurdish community is different in each region and how the potential for conflict in the country is assessed through social studies. The research was carried out in Türkiye. A literature review was conducted on the subject. Articles, journals, archives, documents, and other materials supporting the subject are examined. As a result of the examination, inductive findings are obtained by reading and quoting (Moleong, 2018). The findings were obtained as a result of examining secondary sources.

Result and Discussion

Differences in the Kurdish Community and Their Distribution

Kurdish is the name of an ethnic group. Even though they are in the Middle East region, this tribe is not included in the ranks of the Arab ethnic group with a different language from Arabic, namely Kurdish. The Kurds are an Indo-European ethnic group (European tribes) who are predominantly Sunni Muslims and live in a region called Kurdistan ("land of the Kurds"). The Kurdistan region is found in several countries, such as southeastern Türkiye, Northern Iran, Northern Iraq, and Northern Syria, and is also present in the former Soviet Southern region (an area that is geographically not included in the Middle East). Kurdish communities can also be found in Lebanon, Armenia, Azerbaijan (Kalbajar and Lachin, west of Nagorno Karabakh) and, in recent decades, several European countries and the United States. Ethnically, these people have ties with the Iranian ethnic group. They speak Kurdish which is an Indo-European language of the Iranian branch of languages.

The Kurds can also be said to be the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East with around 25 to 35 million people. They form distinct communities, united by race, culture, and language. In general, what distinguishes the Kurds in each region lies in their leaders and the religion they adhere to. Although most of them adhere to Sunni Islam, there are also those who adhere to different religions, including Christians, Jews, Yazidis, and Zoroastrians (Mizan, 2015).

The geographical character of Kurdistan which consists of clusters of hills, a social structure that is very full of tribal sentiments, and a livelihood system that relies on agriculture and herding, has indeed made the nation and region of Kurdistan semi-exclusive throughout its history for around 3,000 years. Throughout its history, no single nation or power has been able to fully control the Kurdish nation and region, also often referred to as Kurdistan . Greek, Roman, Persian, and even Islamic-based dynasties have always failed to fully subdue the Kurds. Even in the modern era, the system that gave birth to states such as Türkiye, Iran, Iraq and Syria failed to fully control the Kurdish region (Romano, 2006). However, geopolitically, the geographical character of Kurdish is disastrous because they have to accept that the region is divided among five countries after World War I.



Picture 1 Spread of Kurds

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdish_nationalism#/media/File:Kurdish_inhabited_area_by_CIA_\(1992\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdish_nationalism#/media/File:Kurdish_inhabited_area_by_CIA_(1992).jpg).

The distribution of Kurds is found in several countries such as Southeastern Türkiye, Northern Iran, Northern Iraq, and Northern Syria. The Kurdish population as a whole is 30-38 million worldwide with more than 20 million in Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. According to data from the Center for Intelligence Agents (CIA), the Kurdish

population in Türkiye covers 19% of the total Turkish population, 15-20% in Iraq, 8% in Syria, and 7% in Iran. Among all these countries except Iran, the Kurds are the second largest ethnic group in each of these countries (Mizan, 2015).

Based on historical records, the ancestors of the Kurds entered the area they occupy today about 3,000 years ago, but the tribe's way of life, as farmers and herders, is still traditional. While many scientists argue that the Kurds came from the Medes tribe who entered Parsi (Iran) from the Central Asian region. They ruled over the Persian Mountains from 614 to 550 BC. Fourteen centuries later they embraced Islam, after the arrival of Arab Islamic troops from the mainland to the Persian Mountains (Basyar, 2015).

The Turkic peoples as a group played an important role in the history of West Asia until 1258 when the Arab Caliphate of Baghdad was conquered by the Mongols. Salahuddin al-Ayyubi (Saladin) is one of the most famous Kurdish leaders in the Islamic world. This figure who was born in 1137 in Tikrit (Iraqi Kurdistan), is very famous for his success in expelling the Crusaders from Jerusalem in 1187 in the second phase of the Crusades (Bruinessen, 2009).

Kurdish Nationalism, Conflict, and Relations With Arab Countries

The majority of Kurds are found in Middle Eastern countries, especially in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, but this tribe is not included in the ranks of the Arab ethnic group with a language that is different from Arabic, namely Kurdish. It is this hereditary difference between Arab and Kurdish tribes in the countries they live in that often becomes the base for riots to erupt (Gunter, 1993). So it is not surprising that this ethnicity is always understood by many countries as an ethnicity that always causes problems.

Although not included in the Arab ethnicity, the Kurds have played an important role in the history of politics in the Middle East. The course of political history is quite old, the Kurds are a nation that is less fortunate. In fact, the Kurds are called a tragic nation due to their geographical characteristics, tribalism, tyranny, and colonialism. The tragedy of the Kurds became known as the "Eastern problem". Ironically, the Kurdish problem is often forgotten, and ignored. There is no defense of the Kurds, they are even used as political commodities for regional and international powers for certain political purposes. The Kurds also occupy a lower class caste in the heterogeneity of Arab

society, their rights are often castrated, their lives are as if they are grateful, and so on. These facts show that the hostilities raised by the Arabs were also met with resistance by the Kurds. One form of their resistance is by way of the Kurdish nationalism movement (Philip *et al.*, 2000).

The Kurds themselves fought for the fate of their ethnic group only in the nineteenth century. To be precise in 1880, when an uprising led by a Kurdish figure, Shaykh Ubaidullah, broke out in Hakari Province which was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire Türkiye. In 1897, the Kurds published a newspaper named Kurdistan for the first time. This newspaper has the aim of disseminating information about the culture and struggle of the Kurdish people (Basyar, 2015).

The aspirations and struggles of the Kurds have been for their homeland since the beginning of the XIX Century. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres (Sevres is a city in France) which guaranteed the establishment of an Independent Kurdistan state was in fact never realized. The Kurdish people have an aspiration to establish an autonomous Kurdistan region, where they can govern themselves and maintain their identity and sociocultural system. The fact that the Kurdistan region is in several countries is a major obstacle to the realization of an Independent Kurdistan state (Candramukti, 2020). While the Kurdistan region has been integrated into the countries of Türkiye, Iran, and Iraq (also the Soviets and Syria) since these countries were founded (Smith, 2007). This is the main source of conflict caused by the presence of Kurds in countries such as Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye. Thus, every activity of the Kurds to liberate themselves always ends in crushing and oppression. The road to independence for Kurdistan seems to be waiting for the destruction of the three countries that control it.

Kurdish Political Movement and Struggle

From the previous explanation, it was said that the Kurds are spread in three main countries, namely Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye. Therefore, this section will explain the political struggle of the Kurds in these three countries.

Iraq

Data for July 2006 shows that the total population of Iraq is 26,783,383. Between 75 and 80 percent of Iraq's population are Arab; Other major ethnic groups are Kurds

(15-20%), Assyrians, Iraqi Turkmen, etc (5%), who mostly live in the north and northeast of the country. The other group is the Persians and Armenians (possibly descendants of the ancient Mesopotamian culture). Some 25,000–60,000 Arabs still live in southern Iraq. The area inhabited by Kurds in the north is known as a fertile and oil-rich region (Mizan, 2015).

The hereditary differences between the Arab tribes, who are the majority, and the Kurds in Iraq are often the root of riots. Arabs have ruled Iraq since 1958 when a revolution ended rule by the British, who allied themselves with the Kurds in a bid to maintain control of the country. After the revolution, the Iraqi government tried to unite the Kurds into the government, but the extreme ethnic group refused to join so war has erupted since then (Ahmed, 2012).

By the time the referendum was held, the vast majority of Kurds had not voted. This is a sign that the Kurds in Iraq are not willing to be led by the Arab majority. During the interwar period, they remained turbulent, and broke out into rebellions when their patience with the government's arbitrariness and corrupt practices by the elites ran out. Major rebellions broke out in 1922-1924, 1930-1931 and 1932 under the leadership of Shaikh Mahmud of Sulaimaniyah. The rebellion, apart from being an internal problem for Iraq, is also part of an international problem. This is due to the stay of Kurds in five other regions of the country. They are very compact, and it often happens that those who are forced to cross Iraqi territory then live and get protection in Kurdish areas in other countries (Mizan, 2015).

The Kurdish struggle began in 1923, led by Ahmad Barzani and his younger brother, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who launched a long campaign aimed at gaining autonomy for the Iraqi Kurdistan region. This struggle was organized under the umbrella of a political party called the Kurdish Democratic Party. Apart from the KDP, the Kurds also have another party formed by Jalal Talabani, namely the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Hevian, 2013).

The Kurds as an unresolved issue in Iraqi politics also often involve or are related to foreign parties, especially Britain and the Soviet Union (currently Russia), to complicate the situation. After World War I, Britain aspired to create a Kurdish state under British protection to expand its influence northwards bordering the Caucasus, as well as to suppress Kemalist Türkiye, Iran, and especially Iraq. Although in the end this

intention was abandoned because it would be dangerous for British interests in the Middle East, including Iraq. But that doesn't mean Britain has thrown away its friendship with the Kurds entirely, especially at the local level. This was done for two reasons: first, as a tactic when facing difficulties with Baghdad and Tehran (Iran); and secondly, to prevent foreign penetration, both Soviet and German. But the British helped Iraq quell a rebellion by the Kurds in 1932 because of its pro-Arab policies (Mizan, 2015). In Iran, the Kurdish political organization, Komala, also spread its activities to Kurdish centers in Iraq (1943). With Soviet support for Kurdish-Iranian independence, the Barzani tribe in Iraq launched an uprising in 1943 led by Mulla Mustafa. Although in the end they were forced to flee to Iran to join the Kurds there (Ahmed, 2012).

In Iraq, until now the Kurds are considered a separatist movement that undermines Iraqi sovereignty. It is suspected that they will separate themselves from Iraqi sovereignty or even seize power in Iraq by carrying out a rebellion. This concern was raised by Iraqi President Jalaluddin Thalibani in his sentence, "Frankly, I can say, if US troops leave Iraq now, there will be arbitrary military action from Kurdish and Shia forces. They are now in a state of readiness. They have hundreds of thousands of armed troops. They were able to control Iraq quickly and spread throughout Iraq. At the KDP congress in Irbil in December 2010, the KDP chairman, Masoud Barzani, asked for the Kurds' right to self-determination. Barzani's statement shows that the dream of the Kurdish people to have their own state has never been dashed since ancient times until now (Ahmed, 2012).

The impact of the Iraqi government's anxiety over the Kurdish threat is the freezing of Kurdish access which is believed to have the potential to seize power. The Kurdish Workers' party, the PKK, was frozen by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who said, "The PKK is a terrorist organization and we have taken the decision to close their representative offices and not allow them to operate on Iraqi territory anymore."

Iran

Iran is a country consisting of many tribes and religions. The majority ethnicity is ethnic Persians (51% of the population,) and 70% of the people are Iranians, descendants of the Aryans. Most Iranians speak languages belonging to the Iranian language family, including Persian. Iran's minority groups are Azeris (24%), Gilaki and

Mazandarani (8%), Kurds (7%), Arabs (3%), Baluchi (2%) Lur (2%) Turkmen (2%), and also ethnic groups other tribes (1%).

This data shows that the percentage of Kurds in Mullah's country, who are approximately 90 percent adherents of Shia, is lower than the percentage of Kurds in Iraq. In Iran, Kurds inhabit the oil-rich Kurdistan (Khuzastan) Province. In their struggle, the Kurds in Iran also formed political parties. In 1942, the Iranian Kurdish Communist Party (Komala) was founded in Mahabad, which was the first political party to be formed by Iranian Kurds. Then in 1945, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI) was founded which united all Kurdish tribal movements, including the Komala. In the same year, they proclaimed the establishment of the so-called "Mahabad Republic" with its "president" Qazi Mohammad. This was the first and only "independent Kurdish state" in history, even though it was only one year old because in 1946 the forces of the Kingdom of Iran invaded Mahabad and dissolved the "republic". a number of Kurdish leaders, including "President" Qazi Mohammad, were arrested and executed (Hevian, 2013).

Tehran was not willing to comply with these demands, as a result the peshmarga again took up arms and turned against the central government. Beginning in June 1979, for the first time the peshmarga were involved in a clash with the pasdaran (Iranian revolutionary guard troops) which claimed around 100 lives. The conflict between peshmarga and pasdaran continued until 1984, especially after the KDP (Iran) led by Abdulrahman Ghassemlou. But in 1985, the KDP leader chose to return to the negotiating table with the Tehran authorities. Although in the end no results were achieved by KDP. The Khomeini government refused to grant autonomy to the Kurdistan Province because the region is rich in oil, which contributes a lot to state revenues (Kuncahyono, 2005).

Türkiye

Türkiye is a democratic, secular, and unified constitutional republic. Its political system was established in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate, following World War I. Since then, Türkiye has gradually joined forces with the West while at the same time establishing relations with the East.

Compared to Iraq and Iran, the Kurdish population in Turkey is the largest, numbering 30 million (Gunter, 1997).

In Türkiye, the Kurds launched large-scale rebellions three times, namely in 1925, 1930, and 1937 (Chaliand, 1993). All of these uprisings ended in total failure, resulting in many Kurds being exiled or deported by the Ankara regime. The rebellion carried out by the Kurds as the strongest form of opposition to secularization was carried out by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Therefore, they demand the return of Islam to its old status. Another request is local autonomy (Yidliz, 2005). The secular government, finally, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who replaced the Ottoman dynasty, managed to unite the Turks and Kurds. The Ankara regime combines repressive and integration policies against the Kurds. The Ottoman, Safavid, and Qajar empires were all noted for their ethnic pluralism and solely sought recognition of a sultan or shah as ruler (McDowall, 1996).

After Iraq's independence in 1932, the Kurds were increasingly isolated and fragmented. Those who inhabit these border areas have always been victims of the conflict between Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye. Due to frustration over the increasingly closed opportunities for independence, Kurdish militant groups emerged which often carried out acts of terrorism (Ahmed, 2012).

These facts show that the hostility expressed by the Arabs was also met with resistance by the Kurds. One form of their resistance is by way of the Kurdish nationalism movement. Unlike in Iraq, Türkiye Kurdish nationalism seeks autonomy, not separation, because most Kurds there have stakes in the economic and political system and want an increase in their civic and political rights rather than separation. Nevertheless, they still admire the symbolic feats of the Iraqi Kurds: The Kurdish tricolor flag with a golden sun in the center, the common people's rituals to honor Kurdish heroes, and the adoption of Kurdish as the official language. Such expressions of cultural and political identity face legal and administrative hurdles in Türkiye, despite statutory and legal reforms since the late 1990s.

The last attack on the Kurds was a major Turkish military offensive in February 2008 against Kurdish militia bases in the Qandil Mountains which killed hundreds of Kurds. It was reported that the United States (US) itself was involved in the operation which was held in northern Iraq. The military attack wrapped in the slogan of fighting

terrorism is indeed supported by the US and the European Union. Given that one of the Kurdish factions in southeastern Türkiye, namely Partiyê Karkaren Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) has been included in the list of international terrorist groups (Tezcür, 2010). Pro-US Kurdish groups in Northern Iraq also allowed attacks on their territory because of the conflict between them. The Kurds who have yearned for independence for almost a century now have an increasingly uncertain fate. Living scattered as a minority among the territories of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and a small part of Syria. It seems that it is believed that the Turkish military operation in the Kurdish region in 2008 will further escalate violence in the Middle East region.

Conclusion

The Kurdish tribe is one of the largest tribes and has a large population. Kurds form a distinct community, united by race, culture, and language. In general, it can be seen that there are differences between Kurdish tribes in each region, namely in the leaders and the religion they adhere to. The rise of Kurdish nationalism, which began in the 1920s, and the independence promised by US President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) through the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, did present a unique challenge to the strong political order in the Middle East region. However, it seems that the ideals of independence are increasingly difficult to realize because of its geopolitically strategic location and the availability of large quantities of oil complete with pipelines to Europe and Israel in areas inhabited by Kurds. Every activity to liberate oneself always ends in crushing and oppression. The road to independence for Kurdistan is very difficult, it is as if waiting for the destruction of the three countries that control it. Moreover, the three countries, Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye, often build cooperation to quell the uprisings perpetrated by the Kurds. Apart from that, the presence of foreign parties also often makes the Kurds a political sacrifice.

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