

The Kurds : An Arab perspective

Shafeeq Ghabra

Professor of Political Science and
Director of the Center for Strategic and Future Studies
at Kuwait University.

The Arab world and the Kurds : the logic of the 1950's, 60's,

As Arabs suffered from the defeat of 1948, when Israel was established, and as they rallied behind a mass based movement of Arab nationalism, non- Arabs in Arab lands were in a peculiar position. Kurds in the 1950's and 1960's had a limited place in an Arab world marching towards Arab unity and nationalism. On another level Kurds were expected to assimilate in a grand movement of Arab Nationalism rather than focus on the divisive issues of identity, language, and possible secession. To be a Kurd or a Berber or an Assyrian was not welcome in an Arab world rising from defeat, and colonialism.

Arab nationalism was as secular and as authoritarian as Turkish and Persian nationalisms. In all these states minorities were expected to assimilate. As an acquaintance of mine told me when he visited Algeria for the first time in the 1970's: "I cannot believe that after Algeria's heroic struggle for its Arab identity some Algerians still speak Berber and know limited Arabic".

The wars that erupted between the Kurds and the Iraqi central government throughout the 20th century over language, culture, independence, oil, and secession made the Arab world see in the Kurds a force of division. Israeli support to the Kurds in different times added to this thinking. Naturally in a world of states, the region and its states favored Iraq's policy towards the Kurds. Kurds in the Arab world were a distant group of which few lived in the gulf states or in other Arab countries outside of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

It is important to keep a perspective. The established thinking in the world and among states on ethnic issues was more towards assimilation and the melting pot. Even in democratic countries like Europe and the USA, immigrants were expected to be part of a larger melting pot. This theory proved not applicable by the 1980's in both east and west.

Shift in paradigm: the 1990's:

Several trends created a paradigm shift on the Kurdish question in the Arab world. For example the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait brought to the forefront in the region the plight of the Kurds and their differences with the central government. The earlier use by Iraq of chemical weapons against the Kurds came to the attention of media and Arab public

opinion in 1990-1991. Even Ali Hasan al Majid's remarks in Kuwait during 1990 to use chemical weapons if resistance continues as he did with the Kurds, brought the Kurdish issue renewed sympathy in Kuwait. Furthermore, Iraq's ability to crush the Kurdish intifada at the end of the Gulf War amidst hundreds of thousands of refugees highlighted the Kurdish suffering. It is ironic that the first true autonomy for Kurds in Iraq took place after a crushing defeat of Saddam in Kuwait.

The Arab position: fears and issues

Today's Arab position is influenced by many directions and concerns. The possibility of Iraq being dismembered in the context of a US effort to change the regime is a real Arab nightmare. This is a central aspect of Arab strategic thinking in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and all other Arab countries. If Iraq is dismembered Shi'i-Sunni balances in the region will also be disrupted with possibilities of anarchy and deep instability. Furthermore, the regional balances, between Iran, Turkey, and even among Arab states such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc., will be disrupted. The Arab world is trying to avoid what they see as a prelude to further secession in the existing Arab states. The civil war in the Sudan with the possibility of the South going its own way adds to this fear.

The best alternative for the Arab world on the Kurdish question is an agreement between the Kurds and the central government. Since the future of the regime in Baghdad is not known such an outcome will have to wait. The Arab world's view of the Kurds changed over time. Iraqis and Arabs recognize today the need to address the Kurdish question in ways that appeal to basic rights, and human development and autonomy. The fact that we are meeting in a conference focused on the Kurdish issue and with Arab participants is testimony to such a renewed awareness.

On the other hand, there is no support in official circles in the Arab world for a democratic Iraq. The established thinking is to have a ruler less brutal, more tolerant, and friendlier to the world. A democratic Iraq is an idea in the liberal intellectual circles in the region. It is an idea the people of Iraq, both Arab and Kurd, will have to work for and develop, even after a regime change.

Finally, we have not seen the end of the process. Saddam is still in power, and his rule has been bloody and destructive. A larger war led by the USA is playing itself in the region. What happens to Iraq as a country (democracy or dictatorship) will determine the nature of the larger picture of Kurdish Arab relations.

End

