Framing the Historical and Political Context of Oppression and Resistance in Iraqi Kurdistan

Introduction

The region of Iraqi Kurdistan, situated in the northern part of Iraq, comprises the three governorates of Erbil, Suleimaniah and Duhok. It has common borders with Syria, Iran and Turkey. Estimates of the number of Kurds in Iraq range from 4 to 5 million, or about 23 percent of the population (Izady 1992: 119; McDowall 1992a; van Bruinessen 1992a). Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkmen, Armenians and Arabs also live in the Iraqi Kurdish region. According to the official homepage of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the region has a young and growing population, 36 percent of which is under 14 years of age. Only 4 percent is aged over 63 years and the median age is just over 20 (ibid.). Traditionally, the majority of people in the Kurdistan region lived in villages and survived through farming and animal husbandry. The region was known as “the breadbasket of Iraq.” Today, the majority live and work in the three main cities of Erbil, Duhok and Suleimaniah (ibid.). The region’s demography has changed considerably in recent decades, mainly as a result of the destruction of villages and the forced migrations to towns and cities organized by the previous Iraqi regime.

There are now seven universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, most of which were established after 2003 and since the formation of the KRG. Nonetheless, for decades, “school attendance for Kurdish children has been difficult as a result of war and displacement” and “girls have been disproportionately affected” (Begikhani, Gill and Hague 2010: 27). According to the Iraqi Family Health Survey, in 2006–2007, 43.3 percent of women were illiterate, compared to 19.6 percent...
of men. Some families, especially in rural areas and among uneducated sectors of society, do not send girls to school but instead often force them into early marriage or to help within the household (ibid.). According to a report by the World Health Organization, in 2006–2007 26 percent of women aged 20–49 years had been married before they reached the age of 18 (ibid.).

A Historical Overview

The region of Kurdistan comprises parts of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, but there has never been a state of Kurdistan. The heart of the area is the extremely rugged Zagros mountain range. A large part of this region has been called Kurdistan since the early thirteenth century, but it was not until the sixteenth century that the term Kurdistan came into common use. Various non-Kurdish-speaking minorities based in Kurdistan have been tied to the Kurds by networks of social and economic relations. Kurds are primarily concentrated in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, but Kurdish communities are also found in Armenia and Lebanon. The majority of the people in the Kurdistan region are Sunni Muslims, mainly of the Shafi’i school. Some Muslims in the region follow Sufi orders. Other groups are Shi’a Muslims, Alavi, Yezidi and Christians of different churches. Religion has not been a major unifying factor among Kurds (McDowall 1992a; van Bruinessen 1992b). Kurdish Islamist parties have grown in strength in Iraqi Kurdistan in recent years, but even they define their political goals and aspirations mainly within the frame of Kurdish nationalism. There are a large number of different Kurdish dialects and subdialects, but Kurmanji and Sorani are the main ones. Both are spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan—Kurmanji in the north and Sorani in the south.

Traditionally, the Kurds were largely organized into a rough hierarchy of tribes, subtribes and tribal confederations with strong primordial loyalties. Power in the emirates was in the hands of the Emir, the Pasha and the Khan. They had their own territories, and their own armies recruited from the tribes. Kurdish society has always been heterogeneous, highly stratified and complex, with many internal conflicts and rivalries that usually affected social and political life. These loyalties and local power relations, often linked to the strategic geopolitical location of Kurdistan, later became linked with those at the state and interstate levels, and also operated in the context of world politics (Entessar 1992; McDowall 1992b: 12; van Bruinessen 1992a: 34).