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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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'How to Be or Not to Be an Iraqi Kurd? Processes of Identity Consolidation beyond National and Ethnic Rhetoric in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Northern Iraq'

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Abstract: With ongoing power struggles in Iraq, apparently only the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) constantly managed to consolidate its collective identity both internally and externally over the last decade, throughout three key periods of time (2002-2007; 2007-2011; 2011-2015). This paper aims at presenting the ways both main actors (regional and federal government in Iraq) have nurtured various discourses on identity and on the different types of identities for political purposes and the enforcement of the collective's own interests. While Iraq has failed in building an overarching national identity, the KRG managed to overcome the "classical pattern" of identity instrumentalization based on ethnical or separatist rhetoric. On the contrary, at least on declarative level, they strive at the consolidation of a collective identity beyond national, regional, ethnical, religious or social movement features. Even if a definitive result cannot be described yet, as it still is an unfolding process, it has been observed, that internationalization has played a decisive role in the KRG's chosen self-defining path. Notable is also the fact that the KRG's self-ascription often corresponds with external attributions, thus neutralizing conflict potentials.

Autonomous Region of Kurdistan - Iraq – collective identities – conflict – ethnicity

Introduction

It is not an easy endeavor for researchers to try to analyze phenomena related with the Middle East. In addition to the chaotic plethora of conflicts, networks, intrigues and other forms of contentions, reminiscent of the Hobbesian state of nature, even a simple preliminary decision as choosing the object of analysis poses a serious challenge. Besides popular references such as "Iraqi Kurdistan" or "South Kurdistan", the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, encompassing the provinces of Dohuk, Sulaimaniyya and Erbil, is the officially accepted name, defined by the Iraqi constitution. However, designations such as "region of Kurdistan", "Kurdish region", etc., seem misleading, since they imply an ethnically determined, rather homogenous, territory. Moreover, in line with this type of nomenclature, the region is administratively and politically lead by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Despite ongoing power struggles and violent armed conflict, apparently only the KRG constantly managed to stabilize its position, assert themselves and – as this paper claims – consolidate their collective identity, both internally and externally, over the last two decades. However, many critics would claim, that this "success" is detrimental to the unity of Iraq and its people and regard "Kurdish" aspiration as dangerous ethno-national secessionist attempts to establish a Kurdish state.

Contrary thereto, the territory encompassed by the autonomous entity in northern Iraq, features a high density of various religious and ethnical groups (Kurds, Turkmen, Shia and Sunni Arabs, Yezidi, Assyrian-Chaldeans, Shabak, Kakaiya or Mandaeans[1]) of different descent, with respective cultural and traditional customs, lacking a uniform wide-spread consistent form of communication such as a common language. Beside this, people, who identify themselves as being "Kurdish" reside inside the territory of four different international recognized countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Moreover, they are entangled in different socio-political and historic conflicts and thus pursue at least different short and middle-term goals. But, considering this, what does "Kurdistan" or "Kurdish" stand for? *Who are the Kurds in Iraq and how can one become one; and even more important whom does the KRG represent*?

By posing these questions, this paper enters the treacherous territory of the sociology of identities; to be more exact: of collective identities. In order to avoid the most common pitfalls of this area, this paper relies on a solid theoretical framework, aiming at a transparent, unequivocal explanation of the object of analysis. Based on these, the results of the conducted discourse analyses, will be presented, highlighting the processes of collective identity consolidation of the KRG over time. This paper relies on the extensive research conducted by the author over a considerable period of time, including in her master thesis. While the author's world view has been defined by constructivism, and the creation and shaping of meaning through interaction and exchange, the focus of the analysis does fall more on the self-representation of the KRG and the extent to which they live up to their own pronunciations – or at least the ones they claim as their own. However, this declarative level will always be set in relations to actual deeds and to the external ascriptions made by the actors the KRG is interacting with. This does not only serve for verifying the inherent logic of

the argument, but mostly to corroborate the way identity is being used rhetorically, pursuing political advantages, and foremost, how it is being misused or even abused.

But why focus on only one actor – the KRG - in an area of such a heterogeneous cultural and political plenitude? First of all, when analyzing the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, the KRG is the legitimate political actor, identified and agreed upon within the Iraqi constitution. Moreover, this legitimation has also established itself on an international level. Secondly, the KRG is primarily and directly involved in processes of political claim-making both internally as also internationally. Thus it does not only steer certain discourses, but has the capacity to move beyond that, and institutionalize political practices and even collective identities through the promotion of symbolic means, conducting administrative tasks and law adoptions. While the interaction between society and the political level cannot be portrayed in its entirety in this paper – due to its limited scope - it is being assumed, that the constitutional legitimacy of the actor is also reflected through the democratic political processes, – with their strong limitations[2] – even if more indirect than in the case of the Parliament. Furthermore, the Parliament in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan plays a minor role in comparison to the KRG. Essential law initiatives – including the economic developments – are being initiated by the government.

While analyzing the political contention between the KRG and the federal Iraqi government over energy-related issues, it could be observed, that the KRG's shared identity-in- the- making seemed to have consolidated over time, concomitantly with the increase in international economic cooperation, throughout three key periods of time (2002-2007; 2007-2011; 2011-2015). *This paper aims at answering the question of whom the KRG represents respectively, what the KRG stands for*, through contrasting the ways both main actors (regional and federal governments) have nurtured various discourses on identity and on different types of identities for political purposes and the enforcement of the collective's own interests. As will be shown further on, while Iraq has failed in building an overarching national identity, the KRG tries to overcome the "classical pattern" of identity instrumentalization based on ethnical and separatist rhetoric. First indications suggest, that the processes of their collective identity' consolidation, work beyond exclusively national, regional, ethnical, religious or social movement features.

Theoretical framework

There are not many (sociological) concepts, which incite spirits among scholars the way "identity" does. While some may argue, that there is no possible way to clearly and unequivocally operationalize such a diffuse term[3], there is an on-going trend of ascribing an identity to everything surrounding us. Furthermore, several disciplines (e.g. political science, psychology, sociology, law, gender studies, etc.) lay their focus on the research of one or more aspects of identity, sometimes contributing to confusion or ambiguity. While interdisciplinary approaches may foster the widening of one owns subject-specific horizon, it also makes a transparent, precise and reflected articulation of the meaning ascribed to a working term even more important.

One of the main arguments against the academic use of identity as a "category of analysis" is exactly this broad and inflationary usage as a "category of practice" in addition to the susceptibility of political instrumentalization of the term[4]. However, as will be shown in the following pages, it is of utmost importance to address exactly these potential uses and misuses of certain concepts and reveal manipulative intentions or even already occurred wrongfully implementations. In order to avoid the expressed criticism and manage to fruitfully achieve the aim of this paper, presenting the uses and missuses of collective identity rhetoric in ongoing confrontations between Iraq and the Autonomous Region Kurdistan in the north of Iraq, the working terms together with their main analytic components will be defined and put into relation with other common traditions and meanings.

Since the research question regards the internal power setting and political framework within Iraq, more concretely the interaction between the KRG and the federal government, the focus will be deliberately laid upon identity in its social and collective meaning. Firstly, from a sociological point of view, interaction and the embeddedness within a social context are the most basic conditions for the establishment of a social identity[5]. Beyond these, by means of processes of identification (ascription of common characteristics to the self, observed in other interacting participants) and categorization (observing and ascribing differences between one self and other counterparts of the interaction), an individual is able to relate to other members of a society or a different social group and position itself towards these and the social system it became part of. Once the self-ascribed and the assigned characteristics are being shared among interacting members, a social group is being created together with the concepts of belonging and membership. Social identities are thus a source of shared meanings and self-conception[6].

A direct interaction between members is only possible up to a certain size of a social group. When a direct interaction becomes physically impossible, the core principles of how a social identity works remain the same. While the assurance over ones' own belonging to a certain group cannot take place through direct exchange with the other members anymore, it takes place in the form of a bigger "imagined community" through the repeated symbolic

intermediation on an abstract level of shared meanings, perceptions, values, etc., among the members by relying on symbols, myths, narratives, stereotypes, etc.

In the case of a collective identity the starting point for developing a definition is not the individual anymore but the social group itself. Thus a collective identity will be different from the sum of the social identities of the members of that certain collective. The major difference between the two types of identities lays within the concept of collective agency, i.e. the capacity and will of a group of people (believing to share similar or even the same characteristics, which they, at the same time, perceive as being distinctive from others) to act in the name of the shared meanings specific to the group and their feeling of belonging and thus pursue the enforcement or implementation of the groups' interest[7].

Through its processual character (based on the principles of social interaction, identification and categorization and collective agency) collective identities may develop from social identities but often go beyond these and thereby tend to be more fluid and tentative. While each person of a social group can embrace several and different social identities on a daily basis (being for example a mother, a florist, a Buddhist, French, Latino and an cellist), these identities are being hierarchized in the event of a conflictual situation, calling for action due to the hurtle of different interests or world views regarding the same claim-making process. The one claiming the first rank, the identity empowering action, in this way becomes a collective identity[8]. As stated before, this can be one of the social identities, all of the members already shared, or can be a completely emerging one. In case of the latter, this new collective identity can consolidate over time through repetition, persistence and the internationalization by the members and eventually also become a social identity. On the other hand it can lose the momentum.

With increasing consolidation a certain degree of institutionalization is being achieved, which connects the dynamics of collective identities in a certain way to elites and established or establishing institutions. However, even once this stage is being reached, the consolidation process of collective identities will not be completed. Even at such a point, high material resources are being needed for the preservation and further diffusion of the shared meanings and allegiance the collective identity has been founded on in the first place. This can occur through a specific narrative, the media, the education system, norms etc. or a combination of all of these instruments[9]. At the same time however, a continuous renegotiation of these shared meanings is perpetually being carried out.

But who are the actors involved in the ongoing energy resources confrontation in Iraq and which collective identities clash during this claim-making process? The main actors, which are directly taking part in the political decision-making process are the federal government, the KRG, further regional and international governments, international companies as also domestic Iraqi institutions. However, all these do not exist as stand-alone black boxes, but are the product of exchanges between society and the system. Since this paper on the one hand analyses the consolidation processes of the KRG's collective identity, the interaction between the KRG and society will also flow into the analyses to the best possible extent allowed by such a brief framework. These interactions will be measured mainly through the analysis of protests and election results. This aims at a counter-check, if the meanings propagated by the KRG represent the wide population of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan and if they indeed reflect the same interpretation and understanding of the collective identity in the name of which the regional government is supposedly acting[10].

Before compiling the indicators, which will help recognize when a collective identity comes into play by deconstructing it to its smallest denominations, several different forms of collective identities will be presented: ethnic and sectarian identities, regional and national identities, and social movements.

The concept of ethnicity has been used since the 1950s, mainly describing the essence of an ethnic group, or the particular thing one has, when he is part of such a group[11]. While the discourse has passed from biological definitions based on kinship and distanced itself from this essentialist connotation, the idea of shared ancestral, hereditary characteristics such as history, tradition, settledness, language, customs, origin, religion, appearance still remains popular among laypersons, when imagining what makes up for an ethnic identity[12]. Only beginning with the work of Frederik Barth has there been a qualitative difference in how groups differentiate themselves. The previous "objective" criteria have been outdated by the usage of the *boundary* as delimitation criteria. Consequently, shared meanings among the members of a group about what makes their collective unique and different from others, depend less on having the same origin or religion and more on tracing the same social boundary between groups[13].

While ethnic and religious identities are primarily an expression of social identities, they can become collective identities though political mobilization or instrumentalization. Ferhad Ibrahim points out, that "boundaries are not per se political. They gain such a relevance only when the respective conflict parties use during a conflict their prevailing vertical group membership in order to improve their position horizontally, that is, the societal hierarchy"[14]. The conflict can be about concrete manifestations such as resources or territory, but also about abstract ideas such as rights (of self-determination), power, (interpretational) sovereignty, etc.

The switch of ethnic or sectarian social identities to collective ones is of utmost importance for this case study, given the deeply rooted historical ethnic and religious diversity present in the region: Kurds, Turkmen, Shia and Sunni Arabs, Yezidi, Assyrian-Chaldeans, Shabak, Kakaiya or Mandaeans live on today's internationally recognized territory of Iraq. While ethnic-sectarian boundary demarcation has shown conflict prone potentials during the latest decades, there is also an opening taking the form of an emerging political plurality among the main Iraqi political groups of the Kurds, Shia and Sunni.

A further widespread form of collective identity is the national identity. With a strong Eurocentric history, this modern phenomenon is based on the mobilization of premodern ethnic identities towards the formation of a nation – more precisely an ethnic nation – as a predecessor of today's European nation states. In addition to the previously mentioned characteristics of ethnic identities, a national identity has been developed close to an ideology, a political program, an abstract notion, in the name of which, entire collectives would bond and act jointly. This process influenced the development of normative projections about the relationship between the members of a collective as also the relation these would have towards the abstract idea on which the actions of the group are based. Thus they all become equals in regard to their rights and duties but subordinated to the concept of citizenship. This, currently, highest level of institutionalization of common beliefs and shared projections about one owns group has been supported through the implementation of a mandatory general education system, the introduction of a common communication medium such as a standard language, symbolic public ceremonies, rituals or memorials or the establishment of a public administration, which is carrying tasks out in the name of the new entity through issuing visa, maps, developing infrastructure or further regulating the social cohabitation of the collective's members[15].

Without taking into consideration the different processes of genesis or contexts, there has been an attempt to impose the European state-model upon the geopolitical landscape ofAsia and Africa. The result – as can still be seen today – is an Iraq agglutinated from randomly lumped together provinces, despite the lack of an awareness of a common national identity[16]. Consequently, in this case, the boundary has not been drawn in the wake of the coming of age of this historical process of the emergence of a national state but before this.

On the other hand, the territory populated by Kurds has been divided and incorporated into four different states. Due to this, there is the widespread popular belief, that the Kurds are the biggest nation without a conventional state. At the same time, this belief is also nurturing the idea, that whatever collective identity might be emerging or consolidated regarding Kurds, whoever they might or might not be nowadays, must be a national one, as a historical correction and compensation of the faults of the past. However, another form of collective identities might serve as a more suitable description of the potential processes unleashed in the region. Despite a negative connotation of the concept of a region as not being a nation state yet or anymore[17] (e.g. following processes of secession or nation-building), regional identities are developing, the most vivid example being the European Union. Even if this process is steered top-down by elites, it presents the same features of how an abstract idea gains momentum and settles into the collective memory of a group, mobilizing it to collective actions.

On the contrary, social movements usually have a bottom-up approach. Being, however, at the same time the most volatile form of collective identities, this paper deals with. This modern phenomenon is crucial for understanding collective identities, since it ignites commitment for a claim and cohesion among highly different individuals with only few overlaps of their social identities. This means, firstly, that the common shared understanding of the group crystalizes only through the claim-making processes where goals, actions, and means are being defined and implemented. In this way, the social interaction enables new shared experiences, as also the strengthening of emotional bonds and leads to a form of collective identity formation beyond the potential social identities. While, on the first glance, this may seem a very heterogeneous phenomenon, social movements do usually have the oppositional character towards dominant cultural practices in common and thus share a strong polarization[18].

As Fominaya concludes,

> "although collective identities can be understood as (potentially) encompassing shared interests, ideologies, subcultures, goals, rituals, practices, values, worldview, commitment, solidarity, tactics, strategies, definitions of the 'enemy' or the opposition and framing of issues, it is not synonymous with and cannot be reduced to any of these things"[19].

A collective identity is, thus, the synergy between foreign ascriptions and self-ascriptions regarding a shared understanding, which describes and moves a social group to take collective action in pursuing an interest in a conflictual confrontation.

This short outline regarding different forms of collective identities only conveys a short and limited enumeration of possible identity formations and consolidation processes, which could be observed when dealing with the KRG. Nevertheless this does not yet indicate, how collective identities can be observed, analyzed and interpreted during a discourse analysis. Therefore, the key elements identified while elaborating the difference between social and collective identities or the different forms of the latter, will be more deeply discussed further on.

To begin with, boundaries must not be seen only as demarcation lines between social groups or territories but as an abstract thought pattern capable of separating different categories of the mind[20]. However, a delimitation allows both a categorization and differentiation as also the opposite process of identifying similitudes. At the same time, social boundaries also cause social bonds, which circulate around the *shared stories* about the own group and that of others[21]. Specifically for this endeavor, this paper will assess the cases, in which the KRG, the federal Iraqi government or other key participating actors in the claim-making process undertake separations, identifications and comparisons regarding any attribute meant to describe participating groups, their actions or outcomes.

In the second step, the shared stories and common understandings have to be explained more elaborately. These are most commonly propagated inside of imagined communities through symbolical means such as myths, narratives, traditions, common experiences, stereotypes, etc.[22] Through the constant repetition over time, shared stories gain momentum and become enshrined into the collective memory of a group, being, however, constantly altered over time and put in another context. This type of shared stories may be thus reproduced unreflectingly, since the verification of the original source is possible only to a limited extent. This is also the type most prone to political instrumentalization, disinformation and propaganda. Political instrumentalized narratives are usually employed in order to portrait the own collective in a better way in comparison to an – perceived – hostile other. Thus legitimizing the demarcation, the animosity and antagonism. In most cases these shared stories recall events, which have happened many decades or centuries ago and whose meaning in that time cannot be transferred one to one to the present. However a "good story" is not an indicator for a stable collective identity. Moreover, social groups, which are united only around an ancient tale, seem less assertive. Future-oriented projects or claims provide a higher mobilization potential, deliver new memories and thus consolidate collective identities.

Thirdly, the relation between the ascriptions and self-ascriptions across a boundary is important. While some scholars claim that these should have a common denominator in the spirit of *recognition*, others do not regards recognition to be a condition for the emergence of a collective identity[23]. Recognition would imply equality on an abstract level, and that all members of an interaction are liable to the same binding rules and norms[24]. While it is not a prerequisite, it seems to have a positive, deescalating effect on confrontations; similarly, also on complementary attributions or further common secondary social identities. From a methodic point of view, the ascriptions and self-ascriptions will be assessed through comparison.

Charles Tilly´s work can be drawn upon to summarize the theoretical remarks made above as it defines four major characteristics of a collective identity: it emerges around a boundary, on both sides of it, the collectives engage in within-boundary relations in addition to cross-boundary interactions, under the premises of a shared understanding of the own group, the other, the relation between them and also of the boundary[25]. These also represent the main indicators by which the discourse analysis has been guided.

Analysis

Historical context

The Gulf-War of 1991, especially the no-fly-zone above the 36th parallel of latitude in Iraq, has created the first opportunities on the ground regarding the formation of a self-administration on today's territory of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. However, this entity has been recognized as in this way only in 2005 after a second intervention and the fall of Saddam Hussein´s regime. Nevertheless, the starting point of this analysis is set to the year 2002. This has a twofold meaning.

First, when looking at a rough contextual outline, it becomes clear, that the population of today's Autonomous Region of Kurdistan has continuously been socioeconomically deprived by the oppressing Baath-regime. A comprehensive administrative, infrastructural or health provision had been lacking, while first industrial developments had timidly started in the late 80s[26]. Under these conditions, the inhabitants of these territories have seen themselves obliged to take first steps towards self-ruling, modernization and improvement of living conditions, while lacking the consciousness of a positive identification of themselves as members of the same social group or collective. Despite first collective actions – triggered by pragmatic need and survival instincts – the population only grasped the antagonistic relationship between them as oppressed victims and the Baathist state as the oppressor. They had traced a boundary but did not yet manage to conceptualize the complementary bond.

Under these circumstances, following the implementation of the no-fly zone, the powder keg of the power vacuum imploded into the so called "brother war", where the two main clans Barzani and Talabani had been engaged in an open armed conflict between 1994 and 1998. The conditions on the ground clashed against the deeply rooted tribal loyalties. During this time two separate administrations, seconded by different security apparatus, had been initiated in parallel. While a formal reconciliation agreement had been signed in 1998, this translated in concrete actions only in

2002, when the Kurdish National Assembly gathered again pursuing its legislative prerogatives[27]. In the same year the unification of the two divided administrations has been preluded, a process which lasted until 2009. Since 2002 practically marks the year the KRG started taking actual shape and responsibility as a collective actor representing, at least in theory, a heterogeneous population instead of being limited to kinship, this analysis starts at the same point. Secondly, in 2002, the KRG independently signed the first international cooperation contracts regarding oil exploration, an interaction, which has facilitated the observations summarized by this paper.

First period (2002 – 2007)

The first analyzed period has been deeply marked by the process of drawing up the Iraqi constitution after political realignment of the country has been imposed by foreign military intervention. Two different state philosophies have been opposing each other in the constitutional claim-making process: a centralist and a federal model. Federalism, if understood as a problem-solving approach to bring and keep together heterogeneous, conflict prone and along diverse demarcation lines such as ethnical, religious or political considerations deeply divided people has prevailed in Iraq in an administrative reading[28]. Under these circumstances, three out of 18 provinces of Iraq make up the first autonomous region of the country. This has been possible not only through external – mainly American – influence, but also through the generic mobilization of the people of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. In a referendum of up to 99% of the voters elected the Kurdistan Alliance[29] and thus a federal solution (Erbil: 99,36%, Dohuk: 99,13%, Sulaimaniyya: 98,96%)[30]. The Kurdistan Alliance also enjoyed a similar amount of acceptance on local level, where they gained the direct support of almost 90% of the voters[31]. While it can be claimed with high certainty, that the vote against centralization has on the national level been steered by the historical trauma of oppression, persecution and marginalization by a too powerful central state, it remains notable, that such a hybrid coalition could find a common denominator regarding the exertion of power on the local level.

However, the originally intention of curbing ethnical or religious balkanization of the country has been doomed to failure from the moment of its inception. This fragmentation has not only been internally fomented but also ascribed – intentionally or unintentionally - from the outside. Under these circumstances, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) affirms:

> "*Iraq's resources are not evenly divided across sectarian-demographic lines. Most hydrocarbon resources are concentrated in the Shiite areas of the South and the ethnically Kurdish region in the north, with few resources in control of the Sunni minority in central Iraq*"[32].

This description goes beyond geographical orientation suggestions leading to decisive geo-political interpretation, fostering ethical and sectarian fragmentation through external ascription. While the "ethnical Kurds" consider themselves Sunni Muslims, they are, at least on a declarative level, being deprived from their self-ascribed affiliation with this group. On the other hand, Arab Sunni political parties do tend to include the Kurds in their interpretation, when it comes to portraying their relative numeric strength in comparison to the Arab Shia. Thereby deleting the ethnic affiliation, which Kurds might favor, when prioritizing their identity belongings. These are two clear examples of how political identities can be easily instrumentalized and abused, but also how easy ascription, self-ascription, identification and categorization can change and thus identities shift.

Regarding the already mentioned uneven distribution of fossil resources inside Iraq, the struggle over the prerogative of interpretation of who has the right of governing over oil and gas deposits, is further burdening the already strained relation between central and regional government. The two actors did not agree upon the reading of the article 112 of the constitution. While article 111 clearly states, that "oil and gas are owned by all the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates", article 112 envisions common competences for federal Iraq and the KRG only for "the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields"[33]. Thereby it is being speculated, that the KRG is seated on numerous not yet exploited deposits. According to the EIA, Iraq had proven oil reserves of 121 million barrels in 2013. According to the declarations of the president of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani, the KRG would sit on reserves of 45 million barrels, almost a third of the entire Iraqi reserves[34], while governing over only 10% of the territory[35].

While Iraq has been weakened by highly devastating sectarian fighting, which have peaked between 2006 and 2008, the KRG managed to bypass the constitutional contention by adopting an Oil and Gas law in 2007[36]. This aims at regulating the business and legitimizing the interaction between KRG and IOCs, whose interests have been gradually rising since the first contract has been signed in 2002 and which have already undertaken drilling activities. Some claim, that the KRG took advantage of the weakened central government and bypassed its authority in adopting a law contravening federal legislation. Despite this juridical grey zone, it is nevertheless also worth looking at the processes and mechanisms, which have been in place, for a law to be passed by the KRG, in the context of an actor lacking extensive self-governing experience, which has also been deeply divided just a couple of years before.

While there is no doubt concerning the existence a power struggle on national level, this argument falls short in explaining the whole extent of the process, of how a consensus has been achieved regionally, especially when not even all KDP and PUK ministries have been united yet. From a pragmatic point of view, it can be claimed, that the KRG's consensual voice and collective action has been only guided by the pursuit of the highest gain: attracting direct investments and direct money flows by eliminating the federal government as an intermediator an thus extending their rights of self-determination also over financial matters.

Second period (2007 – 2011)

While it has not been clear in 2007, to what extent the consensual exertion of self-governing activities might have influenced the KRG to reflect about their self-conceptualization, since it has not been obvious that the collective action has unfolded due and in the name of a shared representation of a collective, the second period of analysis provides fruitful evidence in this direction.

Firstly, the afore mentioned legislative adoption has not been an isolated case. In 2009 the KRG adopted the investment law, guarantying attractive and lucrative advantages for foreign investors. This adds to the already introduced (and on national level highly disputed) Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs), which entitle the investors to a share of the extracted oil in distinction of the Iraqi Technical Sharing Contracts (TSCs), which restrict the investors influence and participation to a technical consultation only[37].

Besides the questions of the disputed legality of this solo action of the KRG, it is noteworthy, that the KRG has been able to think through new pieces of legislation and offer the semblance of progress and productivity. Despite a new constitution, Iraq still functions based on the old laws of the Saddam regime such as the Income Tax Law from 1983, or other acts from the 60s and 70s[38]. Due to these negative connoted remainders, the oil minister of the KRG sums up the antagonism as follows: "SOMO (State Organization for Marketing of Oil) is an instrument of power of power of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s to get all the money"[39]. Thus the KRG instrumentalizes an originally ethnical demarcation between an "Arab" central state (in the eyes of the KRG, although Iraq is officially no longer an Arab state, according to its 2005 constitution) and potential "Kurdish" separatists (according to the federal government condemning solo actions), into an ideological dispute between to economical models: The KRG as visionary, future-oriented, progressive and liberal and central Iraq as outdated, rigid, stagnant and, most dangerously, the remains of an condemned dictatorial and rentier regime. However, the KRG does not officially claim, that its actions are conducted in the name of an ethnic group, nor of a new emerging or wannabe state-alike entity.

Secondly, the sudden economic boom, which has not only brought unprecedented amounts of money to Kurdistan but also saw to the return of significant numbers of people from exile and the diaspora back to the Autonomous Region. While new, liberal and open ideas do seem to take root in the KRG, they collided against corruption, nepotism, patronage and abuse of authority[40]. However, there also seems to be a debate within society about these unwanted developments und thus a discourse about the self-understanding of the KRG. Under these circumstances, a new party managed to rise from a social movement against corruption and establish itself as a political party, next to the Kurdistan Alliance built by KDP and PUK, thus influencing the political course and KRG's self-image.

Moreover, the election law has been amended in 2009, guarantying ethnical and religious minorities more participative and integrative rights, as also a specific quota on parliamentary seats and thus continuous representation[41]. While this practice does foster ethnical and religious differentiation, it also promotes participation and equality next to an incipient emergence of an overarching abstract political program beyond a potentially levelling Kurdistanisation. Based on more than 100 conducted interviews, Carole A. O'Leary shows, that the consolidating collective identity of the KRG has begun gaining momentum within the society based on the promotion of pluralism and cultural diversity. However, the bonding identifications between the member of the society mainly base themselves on a common enemy and shared trauma, the experienced of being oppressed non-Arab Iraqis, new memories, routines and shared stories based on the experiences of self-governing but also the projection of a future-oriented prosperity project[42].

Third period (2011 – 2015)

After winning first parliamentary seats, the Gorran movement, managed to establish itself as the second most powerful political party in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, with 24 seats, 6 more than PUK and 14 less than the KDP during the election in 2010[43]. This development has been followed by protest through the Autonomous Region during 2011 against patronage and corruption and for more transparency and freedom of the press. While the president, Masoud Barzani, has promised a series of reforms, the KRG is being confronted with a deadlock. While having

introduced a draft constitution in 2009[44], the adoption has not been achieve by all organs as of yet, despite continuous an effervescent debates on the orientation and organization of the political system. While it is undoubtedly also a question of power having a parliamentary or a presidential system, this continuing debate within the society shows how active the exchange processes between politics and society is and also to which high extent the people do want to be (better) represented by the KRG, since they feel that they are part of this consolidating collective.

On the other hand, in parallel to this internal processes, the KRG also gained massive ground internationally by appearing as a legitimate actor but foremost receiving recognition on all levels, not only humanitarian or financial but also political. Numerous states have opened diplomatic representations in Erbil, a sign of flourishing exchanges. The KRG has even established foreign offices in many of the partner countries.

The exchange with other countries and partners beyond the region, seems to have influenced the political process in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. Besides new investor-friendly economic laws, the KRG has also tried to accommodate the needs of the international foreign workforce through the opening of schools with a foreign language of education (e.g. German or French), the elimination of visa, etc. While this may be only an attempt to become more attractive arisen from financial considerations, the KRG also adopted laws improving the status of its own population – especially that of minorities. Under these circumstances, Law No. 5 from April 2015 includes an increased number of religious, ethnical or cultural groups on the list of minorities, whose rights are to be protected. Moreover, these are also supported in taking political action and running for election. Already a few months after the adoption of the minority law, the first Kakai (a threatened religious minority scattered throughout Iraq) member has been elected in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in the Halabja provincial council[45].

Conclusion

Within only two decades the Kurdistan Regional Government has evolved into an assertive political actor, able and willing to take action within its territory. These developments, however, have always been accompanied by ongoing tensions with the federal government. The KRG has, thus, created its image in an antagonistic comparison with the rest of Iraq, which did neither manage to neutralize armed sectarian violence nor to bid adieu to practices reminiscent of Saddam's dictatorial time.

Keeping this hostile demarcation alive, helped the KRG to begin with outlining its self-understanding. However, the KRG went further than a classical friend-foe dichotomy taking additional actions regarding the way they wanted to be perceived and the values they apparently want to stand for. Consequently, it seems that the KRG has chosen to stand for economic liberalization, socioeconomic progress and wealth. By adding political pluralism to their agenda, the KRG signaled, that it does not only represent ethnical Kurds, but all cultural, religious and ethnical groups on the territory of the Autonomous Region. This is a clear example, that KRG's collective actions are not purely ethnical, nor deriving from an ethnic-nationalism. The already high-degree of institutionalization also indicates that these processes go beyond social movement mobilizations.

While these developments seem promising and constitute an - for the region - unprecedented progress regarding human rights, equality and participation, the process is only in its infancy, time being needed for these ideas to also become enrooted in the mentality of the mass.

Regarding the question of who the Kurds of Iraq are, the majority of the population seems to regard itself as governed by the KRG, it does define itself through the traumatic experiences of the past, fearing but also defying the central state –since the young population under 30 years does not speak or learn Arabic anymore. Besides a relative openness, however, the population seems stuck in a quagmire, since they have an unclear relationship towards the other social groups in the area, which regard themselves also as being Kurdish.

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