



## Key Factors for Understanding Political Dynamics in Northern Iraq: A Study of Change in the Region

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### Abstract

*Although it is one of the most crucial aspects of Turkish foreign policy, northern Iraq has not been thoroughly studied in Turkey. For several years, this region and its politics have been explained in simple terms as an issue of balance of power. In the 1990s, the creation of a safe haven and the war between the Kurdish parties constituted the main factors that shaped the region's politics. However, the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and its allies in 2003 started a new era for the Iraqi Kurds. This article aims to explain the changing political dynamics in this new era. Therefore, this article focuses on the actors and factors in northern Iraq and their relationship to one another.*

**Keywords:** Northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurds, Tribalism, Kurdish Political Parties, Kurdish Politics

Northern Iraq is one of the regions that Middle East researchers in Turkey have trouble defining. The difficulty lies not in defining it in geographical terms but in political terms. There are many different names that can be used to describe the region in question, including north of Iraq, northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, southern Kurdistan and the Kurdistan region. For the purposes of this article, northern Iraq will be the term used to describe the region. However, it should be noted that the term northern Iraq is sometimes mistakenly used by the international press. The press has used it for the purposes of defining the northern settlements of Baghdad (Mosul, Kirkuk and even some parts of northern Diyala), rather than the regions of Iraq where the Kurds are in control and make up the majority.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Some world famous news corporations mistakenly use the term northern Iraq in an overgeneralization of the area: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2010/10/2010>

Therefore, in this article it is necessary to define the geographical borders that the term northern Iraq covers. The Iraqi constitution defines the term “Iraqi Kurdistan,” or as this article will call it northern Iraq, as the Duhok, Sulaimania and Erbil provinces, though these provinces are not clearly outlined in the constitution.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the article the three main provinces currently situated in the Kurdish Regional Government as outlined above and the regions where the Iraqi Kurds are the majority will be examined.

Another point that needs to be made early in this article is that the findings and conclusions of this article were based primarily on the personal observations of the writer. This includes observations made over twelve different visits to the region over a span of three years. The article will also include findings that came from interviews conducted during this time. These interviews were conducted with a range of people including Kurdish authorities in and out the Kurdish Regional Government (especially Mosul and Kirkuk), politicians, analysts, scholars, tribal, religious, and community leaders. Since the findings are primarily based on personal observations and interviews, a review of literature will not be given in this article. However, previous studies that have been made especially over the past twenty years on this subject will be referred to in this article when and where it is appropriate.<sup>3</sup>

The main argument of this study is that the beginning of the social and political transformation seen in northern Iraq, which started with the formation of a safe zone in 1991, reached a new phase after 2003, and has now turned into a political structure that possesses very different dynamics. In particular, this transformation, which accelerated after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, has created an original political entity in northern Iraq. Therefore, throughout this study everything will tie back into this notion of change.

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101912292637297.html; Northern Iraq Bomb Follows a Deadly Iraqi Weekend,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2012/0116/Northern-Iraq-bomb-follows-a-deadly-Iraqi-weekend>, January 16, 2012, “Car Bomb and Suicide Attack in Northern Iraq Kill at least 12 people,” *Al Arabiya*, 7 Mart 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/03/07/199178.html>.

- 2 Regulations about Northern Iraq are stated in the 117<sup>th</sup> article of the Iraqi Constitution and the 140<sup>th</sup> temporary article. For the Iraqi Constitution: [http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi\\_constitution.pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi_constitution.pdf).
- 3 Some of these studies are as follows: Robert Olson, *The Goat And the Butcher: Nationalism and State Formation in Kurdistan-Iraq Since the Iraqi War*, (Costa Meza, California: Mazda Pub., 2005); Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi State: Development and Dependent in the Post Gulf War Iraq*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010); Michael Gunter, “The Changing Dynamics in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq”, Michael Gunter, (ed.), *The Kurds Ascending*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

### ***The main features of the political system in northern Iraq***

It is not possible to fully define the KRG's system, which is a federal region according to the Iraqi Constitution, since the KRG's regional constitution has not been approved yet.<sup>4</sup> However, some inferences can be made considering the legal mechanisms and the regional political structure. In the KRG, along with the regional government president who is elected by the people and is equipped with broad powers, there is also a parliament that is also elected by the people for terms of four years. The provincial councils are also elected by the people for a four year period.<sup>5</sup> Thus the KRG's political structure is different from the central Iraqi government's. This is mainly because the rest of Iraq has a parliamentary structure.<sup>6</sup> Just to point out here, there are still doubts on the fairness of these elections even though there was the presence of international observers.<sup>7</sup> It should also be pointed out here that in recent changes to the constitution of northern Iraq, its political structure now represents the French political style of a semi-presidential system.

Northern Iraq, which had its first election in 1992, has two main parties dominating the political sphere: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Each gained a similar amount of votes and thus divided the parliament equally between themselves.<sup>8</sup> The conflict that broke out between these two sides occurred in the midst of the 1990s, which led them to form different governments.<sup>9</sup> The normalization process that occurred after 2002<sup>10</sup> was responsible for the region's political atmos-

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4 The draft constitution from the 2009 agenda was not approved by parliament.

5 Since 2005, the Provincial Council elections in northern Iraq have not taken place. The last election that took place was in 2009 and had been postponed several times, claiming that there were political and/or administrative constrictions. The election which was to take place on September 27, 2012 was once again suspended, this time for an indefinite period in June 2012.

6 The Iraqi Constitution, Section 1, Article 1, [http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi\\_constitution.pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi_constitution.pdf)

7 As part of the observation mission, the writer witnessed some problems during these elections. Furthermore, the opposition parties have lodged complaints about the unfairness of those elections.

8 Michael M Gunter, "A de facto Kurdish State in Northern Iraq", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol: 14, No: 2, p. 299.

9 Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, (Routledge: London, 2003), p. 154.

10 Gareth Stansfield, "The Kurdish Dilemma: The Golden Era Threatened," in Toby Dodge and Steve Simon, (eds.), *Iraq at the Crossroads: State and Society in The Shadow of Regime Change*, Adelphi Papers 354, (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 145; Also see, Chris Kutschera,

phere in 2005, when the two parties began to dominate the parliament again. The opposition movement asserts that the strategic alliance between the KDP and the PUK has to function properly in order to legitimize the power divided between them.<sup>11</sup> Considering this implementation, it cannot be said that this criticism is wrong. With the emergence of the Gorran Movement, the KDP-PUK coalition lost chairs in the parliament in 2009. However, the KDP-PUK coalition did not fully lose its power as it can form a government and pass legislation.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime, it became obvious that the most important power in the political structure of northern Iraq was not actually the parliament. The most important example of this can be seen in most of the leading politicians' credentials in the region. This is because they are neither ministers nor parliament members. In fact in 2005, important people from the KDP and PUK did not participate in the parliamentary elections. Massoud Barzani, Nechirvan Barzani, Masrur Barzani and Azad Barwari of the KDP, and Celal Talabani, Barham Salih, Kosrat Ali Resul, Hero Talabani and Molla Bahtiyar of the PUK have not worked in northern Iraq's parliament or government since 2003, except for being the prime minister and the deputy prime minister. This is not true for only these two parties. In fact other strong opposition parties exhibit the same habitude. The leader of the Gorran Movement, Nosirvan Mustafa, his deputy Mohammed Tawfik Rahim, and former president of the Kurdistan Islamic Union Salahaddin Bahaddin have not been candidates for ministers in the regional parliament. Leading politicians accept the fact that the parliament in northern Iraq is not the main establishment of government. Barham Salih and Nechirvan Barzani, both of whom have been prime ministers in the past two terms, have mentioned that a strengthening of government and the enforcement of the assembly are reforms necessary in the political arena.

Moreover it should be stated that both the former and current prime minister have not concealed their discomfort with the fact that the parties are

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"KURDISTAN IRAQ : KDP and PUK have reached an agreement which would assure them prominence in any new federal Iraq", *The Middle East Magazine*, December 2002), <http://www.chris-kutschera.com/A/reconciliation.htm>.

11 "Views differ on PUK-KDP Agreement", *Kurdish Globe*, August 8, 2007, <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=702F1DBC3658968C9B82CFDFB050B69>.

12 Kenneth Katzman, *The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq*, CRS Report for Congress, October 1, 2010, p. 4. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22079.pdf> ; Iraq's Kurdish Election, "The Times They Are a-Changing", *The Economist*, 30 July 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/14140770>.

above the assembly, an issue that will be discussed in the future.<sup>13</sup> The most obvious example of this is the period where the KDP and the PUK had separate governments and some of the ministries were unable to be united.<sup>14</sup> In the government, unity is the foundation of executive power; the ministers are not as strong as the provincial heads of the parties or as strong as the politburo members. With a few exceptions, powerful politicians of the region do not become ministers. Some of the ministers are appointed because of their political relations and others are appointed because they are technocrats. This situation also shows that the executive and legislative powers are nonfunctional; the main power belongs to the parties.

### ***Main Political Tendencies of Iraqi Kurds***

The significant studies done on the political life and dynamics of Iraqi Kurds pivot on two axes in general. The first axis is based on the approach that explains the political history of Iraqi Kurds. This approach looks through the historical lens of the Kurdish struggle against the central government of Iraq and the history of conflict between the two most powerful parties in the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). On some occasions it is still possible to observe this tendency today. As an effect of this approach, the political history of the Iraqi Kurds has often been regarded as a nationalist struggle led by the KDP until 1975 against the central government with the collaboration of the Kurdish tribes. With the establishment of the PUK, an interparty power struggle also became incorporated into the Kurdish political history. The conflict between the KDP and the PUK has occasionally preponderated over the struggle against the central government.<sup>15</sup>

The second axis became important in 2003 when issues such as new political movements, economic development, nation-building and religious move-

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13 Barham Salih, "Kurdistan Regional Government Has Made Several Achievements Under Difficult Circumstances," 04 April 2012, <http://www.bondladyscorner.com/t39871-barham-salih-kurdistan-regional-government-has-made-several-achievements-under-difficult-circumstances>; KRG Prime Minister Barzani's Inaugural Speech, 13 April 2012, <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2012/04/13/krp-prime-minister-barzani-inaugural-speech/6/>.

14 Matan Chorev, "Iraqi Kurdistan: The Internal Dynamics and Statecraft of a Semistate," *The Fletcher School Online Journal*, Fall 2007, p. 8. During the writing of this study only Ministry of Pesmergha had not united.

15 Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981); Saad Jawad, *Iraq & the Kurdish Question, 1958-1970*, (London: Ithaca Press, 1981); David McDonald, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: Tauris, 2004).

ments occurring in the boundaries of Iraqi Kurdistan came to the forefront and started to dominate studies on the region. In these studies, under the conceptual framework of *de facto* and *quasi state*, how the structural socio-economic transformations have influenced the Iraqi Kurds is based on the conflict and competition between the two parties and the rebel movements against the central government. The political life of the Iraqi Kurds has been studied in the context of socio-political and economical transformations in a given region. After analyzing all of these studies and conducting fieldwork in can be argued that four basic political tendencies exist in northern Iraq.<sup>16</sup> These political tendencies include: tribal nationalist movements of the Bahdinan region, nationalist movements centered in Sulaymaniyah, Islamist movements, and pro-central government movements in collaboration with the Arabs.

The first of these movements, the tribally-rooted nationalist movements in Bahdinan, is a separatist and pro-independence movement that has tried to melt traditionalism and nationalism in the same pot. This movement, of which the most important representative today is the KDP,<sup>17</sup> is indeed highly conservative in its domestic policy. The movement has not been able to sever its ties with traditional social values yet. It has been pursuing a political route largely based on the relationship between feudal masters, merchants and politicians. The tribes and their traditional structure accept some of the KDP's values as represented by the current leaders of the movement, the Barzani family and Massoud Barzani. Even though the KDP had the previously defined political posture it has been undergoing a transformation, most notable in the post-2003 period. As compared with previous decades, despite its enduring conservatism in the social field, real differentiation has debouched both into the components of the KDP and in its political rhetoric on certain issues such as the status of women,<sup>18</sup> the place of religion in the political arena and the role of tribes. Within this scope, the party has developed a political

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16 Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod, (eds.), *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, (London: Saqi Press, 2006); Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi State: Development and Dependence in the Post Gulf War Iraq*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

17 İdris Demir, "The Northern Iraq: 1990 – 2000", *ZKÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, Vol: 3, No: 5, 2007, p. 203.

18 Although there are still several problems with regard to status of women in northern Iraq, after 2003 there has been considerable improvement. Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Between Nationalism and Women's Rights: The Kurdish Women's Movement in Iraq," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, Vol: 4, 2011, p. 338.

discourse that highlights the problems of women and opened the door for comments on the relationship between religion and state, all the while not ceasing to respect the men of the cloth. It has also undergone the nation-state process by incorporating tribalism into a monopolized governmental institution, while on one hand also protecting the chieftains.

The second political tendency, Sulaymaniyah-centered politics, in general largely has social democratic features and in certain terms it even has some characteristics analogous with the “*national liberationist*” leftist movements in third world countries. The most noteworthy difference between the Sulaymaniyah-centered movement and the Bahdinan-centered movement is that while the former is based on a social structure which is more secular, relatively modern, and with a shattered tribal mold, the latter runs counter to these. It seems that the Sulaymaniyah-centered movement has two representatives today: the PUK and Gorran.<sup>19</sup> The PUK was the unique representative of Sulaymaniyah politics for 31 years until 2006, when the PUK started experiencing fragmentation because of internal strife. One of the movements that arose from this fragmentation, the Gorran Movement (the Movement for Change), has magnetized the former PUK members, as well as the educated young population that was apathetic to politics and has initiated a new political dynamism.<sup>20</sup> The Gorran Movement has avoided the political polarization that emerged after the first regional elections which transformed the regional political structure into a two-party system. In a short span of time, the movement has been able to start a new political and social discourse and has managed to become a third power group. The former PUK members’ reaction to losing power to the KDP and the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia in Sulaymaniyah had a big share in the fruition of this situation.

The third basic political tendency among the Iraqi Kurds surrounds the Islamist parties.<sup>21</sup> Although the Kurdish society in Iraq is largely conservative, political Islamist movements started falling into place as early as the mid-1980s. Unlike the first two tendencies mentioned above, this movement has been able to spread throughout northern Iraq, whereas the political move-

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19 Rustum Mahmoud, *The Outlook for the Opposition in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region*, (Doha: Arab Center for Policy and Research Studies, 2011), p. 3.

20 David Romano, “The Gorran Movement – A Change in the Iraqi Kurdish Political Landscape,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 8, Issue: 13, April 2, 2010 [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=36229](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36229).

21 It can be said today that the two most important Islamist opposition parties in northern Iraq are: the Kurdistan Islamic Union and the Kurdistan Islamic Movement.



ments among the Iraqi Kurds emerged in Sulaymaniyah. For instance, while the KDP was weak in Soran and the PUK and Gorran Movement were powerless in Bahdinan, Islamist parties spread over the whole region. Nevertheless, Islamist movements failed to become a dominant power in Kurdish political life despite their extensive existence.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that the principal reason for this situation is the nature of the Iraqi-Kurdish movement. The role of tribes in the Kurdish movements from the early 20th century to the 1990s restricted the development area of Islamist movements. Even though they are conservative as a result of their feudal texture, tribes have not assented to a religious authority over themselves; almost every tribe has its own sheikh. Problems of task sharing and power relations between a man of the cloth and a chieftain inside the tribes have led them not to approve of concepts of leadership proposed by Islamist political parties for their men of the cloth.

Besides this, nationalist characteristics have weighed heavily in Kurdish political movements since 1945, which has prevailed against the Islamic character. In the circumstances when a struggle of “national liberation” was being carried out, nationalist parties managed to band all the tribal identities together. Despite all of this, just as we have been observing in other countries of the Middle East, some dissident individuals and masses have chosen to align themselves with the Islamist parties, thus opposing corruption, tyranny, authoritarian regimes and similar problems they were faced with particularly since 1991. The mentioned problems also account for why the Islamist opposition remains limited in spite of the fact that it has gained so wide a currency. When people are alienated from the system, they may gravitate to the Islamist groups, but these groups highlight their oppositional perspective rather than their perspective of power. As a result of this, it is the dominant opinion that since 1991 the third power in northern Iraq after the KDP and the PUK is the Islamist parties and their movements. This situation continued until the parliamentary elections in 2009. The success of the Gorran Movement in these elections, notably in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, showed that the votes for the Islamist parties had waned. This loss of votes and victory for the Gorran Movement lead us to think that the opposition is starting to flow away from the Islamist parties and toward the Gorran Movement.<sup>23</sup>

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22 Harun Akyol, “From Stalemate to Soul Mate: Emergent Democracy in Kurdistan”, *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, Vol: 3, No: 1, 2010, p. 128.

23 Veyssel Ayhan, Serhat Erkmen, Kürşat Turan (et al.), Irak Parlamento Seçim Sonuçlarının Ve Yeni Siyasal Denklemin Değerlendirilmesi, *ORSAM Report*, No: 17, April 2010, [http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/Uploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/2011126\\_orsamreportt\\_17\\_tr.pdf](http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/Uploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/2011126_orsamreportt_17_tr.pdf)



The fourth basic political tendency among the Iraqi Kurds is composed of groups who take part in the central government and who collaborate with the Arabs. After Iraq was separated from the Ottoman Empire, some Kurdish groups were in search of independence, whereas some others preferred to act together with the Arabs (some of them even cooperated with the Ottomans and Turkey). This connection has been going on since the 1930s. Most of the Kurds who acted jointly with the Arabs were from tribes who received economic aid, positions and arms from the central government.<sup>24</sup> Since 1991 when a “safe zone” was established in northern Iraq, the centralist tribes in the north have been forced to move closer to the KDP and the PUK. These tribes remained under the control of the central government in places like Mosul and Kirkuk and became more hostile to the KDP and the PUK. Today, the majority of Kurds who collaborate with the Arabs are composed of this latter group. Even though they have large and small-scale political parties, it is appropriate to say that they are composed of mainly the Kurdish tribes of Zebari, Herki, Surchi and Goran.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The Factors That Affect the Political Structure Among Iraqi Kurds***

The three main factors that affect the political structure amongst the Iraqi Kurds is tribalism, religion and political parties, which can now be addressed.

#### *Tribalism*

For many years when the word tribalism was heard, the Iraqi Kurds and their social structure came to mind. Until recently tribalism had a powerful presence in the region, but it has been eroded over the past twenty years due to the acceleration of the nation building process. However, the erosion that occurred was not the result of a direct and systematic plan. In fact it is possible to argue that the civil war between the KDP and the PUK in the 1990s resulted in the protection of these tribes’ existence and even served to strengthen them.<sup>26</sup> The changes in the economic structure in northern Iraq seen since 2003 and the efforts to create a new political order have not only had an impact on

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24 Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Kurds and Their Agas: An Assessment of the Situation in Northern Iraq*, Strategic Studies Institute, 1991, p. 18.

25 New Dynamics In Local And Iraqi Politics In Mosul, *ORSAM*, No: 121, May 2012, p.12, [http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/2012612\\_rapor%20121%20inga.pdf](http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/2012612_rapor%20121%20inga.pdf).

26 Martin van Bruinessen, ‘Kurds, states and tribes’, in Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod, (eds.), *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, (London: Saqi, 2002), pp. 178-179.

the political domain, but have also affected the social structure. Tribes and tribalism are the leading structures that were affected most by this political change.<sup>27</sup> The factors causing a loss of power for the tribes and for tribalism are as follows:

- War with the central government and conflicts among the Kurds, which in turn has accelerated immigration from rural to urban areas.<sup>28</sup>
- The economic resource base shifted from agricultural production to a rentier structure linked to a service-intensive economy that is based on oil revenues.
- The collection and distribution of resources has been managed by one hand; one central political structure that was formed with the alliance between the two parties.
- The need for armed men has gone away with the end of the conflict between the KDP and the PUK as well as the end of the war with the central government.<sup>29</sup>
- During the process of building a nation-state, the promotion of national identity became more prominent than the desire to promote tribal identity.

These factors have contributed to the loss of meaning that tribal membership used to carry in the region. It can also be claimed that the tribal leaders' impact on their members, excluding some of the elderly members, is limited and they no longer have the power for sanctions. It should be noted that the existence and importance of tribal leaders has not gone away completely and that they have a continued presence in the social field (a kind of "social big brother" role in wedding ceremonies or to prevent small-scale events that may emerge from fights or accidents) and in some social problems.<sup>30</sup>

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27 David Romano, "Safe Havens as Political Projects: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan", in Paul Kingston and Ian S. Spears, (eds.) *States- Within- States: Incipient Political Entities in the Post-Cold War Era*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 154.

28 Michael Leezenberg, "Urbanization, Privatization, and the Patronage: The Political Economy of Iraqi Kurdistan", Faleh Jabar and Hosham Dawod, (eds.), *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics* (London: Saqi Publishing, 2006) pp. 158-159.

29 Michael Leezenberg, "Urbanization, Privatization, and...", pp. 171-173.

30 The author interviewed several tribal leaders including the Herki, Rekani, Barwari, Zibari, Surci, Goran, Zengene, Kakai tribes in Duhok, Mosul and Kirkuk. These meetings with both leaders and members of those tribes create this impression.

Observations obtained from interviews with these tribal leaders, other important figures of these tribes, academics and analysts both within the boundaries and outlying areas of the KRG can be summarized as follows.<sup>31</sup>

In the KRG, the tribal ties among the urban and rural populations have started to differ to a significant extent. Within the KRG borders, Dohuk Province is where the tribe's structures are the strongest. Even within this province, tribal identity and tribal leadership take on more of a social nature rather than a political nature.<sup>32</sup> With regard to the places that extend beyond the borders of the KRG, Mosul has the most extensive tribal structure when compared to other areas. Both in the KRG and oppositional Kurds, tribalism has social and political aspects. In particular, it has been observed that these tribes are against the current KDP-PUK alliance and oppose the revisionist policy of the KRG toward disputed areas. Portions of the Zebari, Surçi, Herki and Goran tribes that live in Mosul have been holding the leadership of these tribes. These tribes have continued to fuel past conflicts, especially with the KDP in the political arena. After Mosul, the most dominant tribes are in Diyala and Saladin. Despite the fact that there are several Kurdish tribes and strong tribal leaders like Kakai and Zengene (from the Kirkuk region), tribes are not very powerful in politics.

Shifts in structure from tribalism to modern leadership have been encouraged by the strongest parties in the KRG. The impact of tribal relations within the KDP is stronger than within others.<sup>33</sup> After sixty years in politics, the KDP has already exceeded any tribal identity. Especially since 2003, groups such as the KDP and other parties can be seen holding onto their identities over other political identities. Parties' identities have strengthened so much recently that they have begun to push tribal identity toward a subsidiary position. However, it cannot be said that tribes and tribalism has been completely expelled from Kurdish political life. It should be noted that some of the tribal leadership is still stronger than some other forms of leadership. There are a few examples where tribal leaders have important political positions. The most important of these examples is Massoud Barzani, who is the President of the KRG and the KDP, Adil Bervari who represents Massoud Barzani in the Iraqi government

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31 Since most of the people interviewed have some reservations about publishing their names, places, dates and names were not mentioned.

32 David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: Tauris, 2007), p. 385.

33 Martin M. van Bruinessen, "The Kurds Between Iran and Iraq," *Middle East Report*, Vol: 16, No: 4, July-August 1986, p. 16.

and Didar Zebari who is one of the most important members of the Movement for Hadba and is the Deputy Chair of the Mosul Provincial Council.

### *Religion*

Another factor that has affected the political structure in northern Iraq is religion. Although the vast majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, there is a small number of Yezidis, Shiites, Kakai and others who are members of other religions and sects.<sup>34</sup> In addition to these, there are a substantial number of Christian minorities within the KRG's borders and in territories that are out of the KRG but controlled by the Kurds. Religion has an important place in the social life of Iraqi Kurds. However, this degree of importance varies among regions. Conservatism in particular is present more in the Bahdinan region. The religious values are strong in the rural areas of the Soran region while this is not the case at the center of Sulaymaniyah.

In the past, Kurdish clergy, who held not only social and religious leadership but also political leadership, have started to vastly lose their impact today. Except for the Islamist parties, the involvement of clergy in politics has been prevented and religion is kept under the control of the government. The KRG has been able to indirectly control religious affairs because of their creation of an institution that is responsible for the appointment of clergy. One cannot infer that the government has full control over the religious institutions. In rural areas, mullahs are specifically still influential in social issues. In fact, losing power over society or not having power like in the past is not only due to the administration's effort to control them. Factors such as the decrease in the rural population and increase in modern educational institutions have naturally eased feudal ties. Educating clergy in universities and similar institutions has resulted in the replacement of traditional sheikhs with a more educated stratum. With the creation of dependency on educational institutions for appointing clergy to upper posts, ties with traditional structures have been broken and clergies have become officials. This situation has changed the impact and power of classic sheikdom and the clergy. It is hard to argue that this situation has spread to all corners of society, but the tendency is strengthened with every passing day.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Martin M. van Bruinessen, "Religion in Kurdistan," *Kurdish Times*, No: 4, Summer/Fall 1991, pp. 5-27.

35 These ideas are based on the author's personal observation and talks on several visits between 2009 and 2012.

Politicization of religion is not a new phenomenon, especially for the Iraqi Kurds. This situation is not limited to only the political interests of local communities and tribal leaders. In the 1950s, the Muslim Brotherhood began to increase their activities in Iraq, with their impact felt among the Kurds. Indeed, one of the two leaders of the Iraqi MB, in the first years of its establishment, was a Kurd, Sheikh Amcad El Zahavi.<sup>36</sup> However, the MB did not become very influential among the Kurds until 1970. The political Islamist movements which began to strengthen in the late 70s had been supported by external links and were urban-ideological movements and organizations rather than an output of traditional conservatism and religious values.<sup>37</sup>

The Islamist movements had been supported by countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as organizations like the MB and the Jamaat-i-Islami (Pakistan). Islamic parties, which began with the establishment of the Kurdistan Islamist Movement, were not able to sustain stability as a result of ruptures within the movement including the formation of armed groups. It is interesting to note that the most powerful Islamist Kurdish party, Kurdistan Islamist Union, had been following non-violent policies.

### **Role and Power of Political Parties**

Today, the most important actors of political life in northern Iraq are political parties. However, the role of these parties is different than political parties in democratic regimes. Dating back to 1991, the KDP and PUK constituted areas belonging to themselves in northern Iraq and established rule over these areas. In the 1990s, the division of northern Iraq impacted both the KDP and PUK, causing both parties to behave like governments in their respected areas.<sup>38</sup> This was the case lasting throughout the invasion of Iraq and has continued despite the progressive unification of administrations after 2003. Beginning in 1991, the KDP and PUK turned into a state first in the boundaries of the “safe haven,” then within the KRG borders, and then they turned into a state themselves. Thanks to a strategic agreement in 2006, the power relations of parties continued after the invasion of Iraq. They have managed to not turn the issue of partisanship toward each other in politics and party privileges in their own

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36 Michael Leezenberg, “Political Islam Among the Kurds”, in Faleh Jabar and Hosham Dawod, (eds.), *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, (London: Saqi Publishing, 2006), p. 214.

37 Leezenberg, “Political Islam Among...”, p. 220.

38 Carl Dahlman, “The Political Geography of Kurdistan”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2002, Vol: 43, No: 4, p. 290.

regions into an issue of conflict. Moreover, senior governors and relatives of the KDP and PUK work together in senior public offices, governorships and as directorate generals. True or not, the thought among the Iraqi Kurds that a political party of a city is more powerful than a minister or a parliamentarian is common.

Another important issue about parties is that they are viewed as being under family management.<sup>39</sup> This case can clearly be observed in the KDP, as well as in the PUK. In the KDP, the president, vice president, one of the members of the Politburo and six members of the Leadership Council are from the Barzani family.<sup>40</sup> A similar case is seen in the PUK. A president and one of the members of the PUK are from the same family. Through inter-family marriages the two groups have united their power. Furthermore, some families are powerful within the parties. For example, it can be seen that some family members take on active roles in security forces, intelligence agencies and sometimes in diplomatic representations and ministries.

Another point about parties is that they also have ownership of companies, either directly or indirectly. At the very least, Darin Group belongs to the KDP, while the Nokan Group belongs to the PUK and the Wusha Company is with the Gorran Movement. Today among the Kurdish parties that have been identified in northern Iraq, four parties take the lead as being the most powerful actors and the most influential in shaping the political structure. They are the KDP, PUK, Gorran Movement and Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU).

The most powerful party that Iraq has had so far is the KDP. In 1946 the party that was set up under the chairmanship of Molla Mustafa Barzani in Iran came to be ruled by Idris and Massoud Barzani after the leader of the party died. The KDP, in general terms, can be identified as a "leader oriented party." Its leadership comes from the family and will continue to remain this way into the next period. The KDP was structured according to the Marxist base with their organization highly resembling a communist party system, but began to be disrupted with internal conflicts starting in 1970. The KDP is a party that has four strong qualities: being leader oriented, a tradition of struggle, relations between tribes and a sharing of interests.

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39 Kamal Said Qadir, "Iraqi Kurdistan's Downward Spiral", *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2007, p. 20.

40 Full list of KDP Politburo members and Leadership Committee can be reached from this website, <http://www.kdp.se/led.html>.

It is difficult to describe the ideology of the party. Though their ideology had tendencies to lean toward the left in its first years of establishment, now it has substantially changed. Today their ideology can be identified as nationalist and conservative. For several years its discourse has been focused on the Iraqi Kurdish affairs, but the party still gradually promotes statements covering other Kurds. The KDP has promoted statements about the political, social and economic issues for Kurds living in such countries as Turkey, Iran and Syria, and has expressed its desire to take the lead in these matters. The KDP is surely a party whose ideology should be surveyed in terms outside of its leadership. Since the KDP have a powerful leader, he is able to keep key points under control versus other parties with weaker leaders. It can be said that it has a much more powerful organization than the other parties. While the governance of the party is in the hands of Massoud Barzani, who has indisputable superiority and a charismatic leadership, it keeps itself away from problems that are commonly seen in other parties.

The PUK, which is second in power to the KDP, was formed in 1975 by a group that separated from the KDP. Since its establishment in 1975, it has had several different factions.<sup>41</sup> These factions have been united under one umbrella since 1991. In the 1990s, the PUK turned into another version of the KDP, to a movement that highlights the struggle for national liberation. However, the PUK did not adopt a move toward having strong tribal identities like the KDP did. The most important reason for this is because in Sulaymaniyah, the actual base of the party, tribalism is weak and in Kirkuk, another place where the party is powerful, Arabs have been in governance for a long time. Even if in the PUK tribalism is weak, it can be said that family relations are strong. Thus beginning from 2006, one of the most important criticisms of the management of the party directed by intra-party opposition is that it is under the influence of the family.

The PUK has been weakened by the breakup of Nawshirwan Mustafa, who was seen as the second most powerful man in the party, and the establishment of the Gorran Movement. After the unsuccessful performance of the PUK in the parliamentary election held in the KRG in 2009 and 2010 for the Iraqi parliament, discussions on the future of the PUK became imminent. Besides the worsening health of Celal Talabani, the leader of the party and president of Iraq, it created a power struggle between the party strong men.

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41 Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 26.



The third most powerful political movement in the KRG is the Gorran Movement. Gorran, whose leader is Nawshirwan Mustafa, is based on divergences between the PUK and a new policy-making form that was developing in Sulaymaniyah and was ideational in the mid-1990s.<sup>42</sup> The anti-democratic structure appeared in northern Iraq after the safe haven that was created caused criticism from educated peshmergas and intellectuals struggling against Saddam Hussein. The most basic criticism is that the binary system created by the parties is closed and oppressive. In 2006, the Gorran Movement joined with the separatists in the party. In 2009, the PUK with young intellectuals, people who had not yet taken part in politics, took on their first trial in the PUK parliamentary elections and succeeded. However, the movement which was formed against political events, corruption and the lack of democracy in northern Iraq did not turn out to be as powerful in the whole area like expected. In fact there is only an active force in Sulaymaniyah (and somewhat in Erbil); this is mainly a result of its vision and strategy.

The fourth important party in the region is the KIU, which became official in 1994, though its roots predate this. The most important difference of this party compared to the other Islamic parties is that it represents an attitude against armed struggle. At the beginning, the KIU was under the shadow of the Kurdish Islamic Movement and the Kurdish Islamic Group and took its lead from other Islamic parties that addressed corruption and a peaceful political approach by not appealing to weapons. The party is powerful in Duhok and Sulaymaniyah and carries potential even if it seems that it has given control of its reins to Gorran.

## Conclusion

In this study, the factors that have determined the political structure in northern Iraq, the main actors in this political structure, the general structure of this political system and the basic tendencies in politics in this region have been covered. There is a typical political dynamism in the areas in which Kurds constitute the majority or in the areas that are predominantly under the control of the Iraqi Kurds. Northern Iraq has a more advanced political organization than the period when the “safe haven” was formed in 1991. It is wrong to regard the social structure of the Iraqi Kurds in the context of tribalism as well as to think that politics monopolizes these groups. Today, political dynamics

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42 James Danly, “The 2009 Kurdish Elections”, *Institute for The Study of War*, July 23, 2009, p. 7, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/KurdishElections.pdf>

among the Iraqi Kurds have new economic truths, social dynamics, interest groups, international companies and complex relations with the actors in the rest of Iraq. However, the most crucial point of this equation is the “strategic agreement” linking the destiny of the KDP and the PUK. Despite the criticism coming from the bases of their parties, both have maintained this agreement.

However, 2012 may be the year when new political dynamics begin to appear. The source of these new political dynamics could possibly be the change that might occur in the “strategic agreement.” This change could be prompted by two facts. First, an alliance including the KDP and the KIU could attempt to form in order to upset Nuri Maliki’s government in Baghdad, but could possibly not be successful because of the PUK and the Gorranists on the opposing side. This case would be a blow to the strategic alliance between the KDP and the PUK. The second fact that could prompt change to this agreement is the election of the Provincial Council, something that has not taken place since 2005. In this possible election, the parties could enter with separate lists which will clearly define the power balance between the parties. The change that the election’s results could create in the KDP and the PUK could be strong enough to affect the order in Iraq that has been in place the past nine years. The future of the strategic treaty will be able to offer an important tip about which four political tendencies is more powerful in northern Iraq.

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