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## **Language Policy and Kurdish Identity since 2003**

**Rashwan Salih** (BA, MA, PhD)

College of Languages

Salahaddin University

[rashwan.salih@su.edu.krd](mailto:rashwan.salih@su.edu.krd)

**Hawzhen R. Ahmed** (BA, MA, PhD)

Faculty of Arts

Soran University, Soran/Erbil

[hawzhenahmed85@gmail.com](mailto:hawzhenahmed85@gmail.com)

## **Abstract:**

Contemporary debates on multiculturalism, literary studies, nationalism, and linguistic rights often find language policy scholars and politics researchers at crossroads. This paper aims at assessing the difficulties and building bridges between scholars of language and cultural policies and political theory regarding Kurdistan Region-Iraq case. The sections map out the descriptions of the debates and potential contributions that political theory can make to language-cultural policy and vice-versa. The paper provides insights on how language policy evolved in Kurdistan Region of Iraq from 2003 to date. This is a particularly remarkable period of Kurdish people's history as they have enjoyed an autonomous status within Federal Iraq. The paper also offers an appraisal of current research, areas of contest and a framework for future interdisciplinary inquiry on the complex interface between language, culture, power and ethics. This collection will be useful for scholars from diverse fields with interests in contemporary societal debates in which language and culture play an important and central role.

**Key words:** Language and Cultural Policies, National Identity, Dialectical Conflicts

## **Language Policy and Kurdish Identity since 2003**

### **Introduction**

This study analyzes the interrelation between language policy and political conjunctions that determine the development of a language (positively or negatively) and the sense of national identity among the natives. Language policy change is probably the first step to significant changes (political, social and economic) taking place in Kurdistan region in the future. According to Minasyan-Bareid (2014), the notions of language policy, national identity and political concurrences are interrelated and interdependent and the analysis of language policy as a political tool purportedly brings in social changes and influences the (national) lives of nations very significantly.

Political theorists have put multifarious arguments about “the language of politics” but rarely dealt with “the politics of language” – the former being about the symbols and rhetorical devices used in political discourse, whereas the latter is more focused on the decisions concerning languages used in political, legal and educational arenas (Kymlicka, 1996: 111). This study attempts to analyze both “the language of politics” and “the politics of language” in the framework of the Arabic-Kurdish-English relations. According to Cooper, “language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes” (1989: 45), by establishing a comprehensive analysis of the issues related to linguistic pluralism and nationalism. We are trying to contribute to demonstrating the role of linguistic rights for active establishment of a viable pluralistic democracy and to find a peaceful path towards co-existence amongst social groups.

This research is unique in its interdisciplinary character and the fact that it could bridge political science and cultural and linguistic aspects. Finally, the research of lingo-cultural policy under the influence of political consensus can be, on the one hand, applied in political studies to observe the moods and tendencies in political life of many countries; on the other hand, this could serve as a good signal to the language policy makers, linguists, cultural anthropologists and academics to work on protecting the languages and cultures that might seem to be under the danger of colonization.

## **Historical Background of Kurds and Kurdish Language in Iraq**

### **Background**

Kurds are an ethnic group whose origins are in the Middle East. They are one of the largest ethnic groups in the world that do not have a state of their own. This geo-cultural region is referred to as "Land of the Kurds". Iraqi Kurdistan is an autonomous region in northern Iraq, covering 40,643 square kilometers and has a population of approximately four million people (Bartu, 2010: 86). Kurdish populations occupy the territory in and around the Zagros mountains. Michael M. Gunter states that "these waterless unwelcoming mountains have been a geographic buffer to cultural and political dominance from neighboring empires" (2008: 3). Thus, Persians, Arabs, and Ottomans were kept away and left a space for the Kurds to develop Kurdish culture, language, and identity over the years.

### **Pre-1991**

According to Gunter, the Kurds are thought by some scholars to be the descendants of various Indo-European tribes that arrived

the region about 4,000 years ago. In the sixteenth century, the majority of Kurds fell under the Ottoman Rule. Following the World War I, the Great Britain created the state of Iraq out of the Sykes–Picot Agreement during the way days, Iraqi Kurds developed as a subgroup of the Kurdish peoples. The Kurdish people were expecting to soon gain independence from what they were promised in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, but this was quickly overturned in 1923, when the Treaty of Lausanne established the Republic of Turkey over Kurdistan's borders (Ali, 1997: 522).

During the twentieth century, many Kurdish nationalist movements rose, struggling for the Kurdish cause and calling for Kurdish political, cultural and linguistic rights. All four Kurdistan parts witnessed the rise of these nationalist movements, and in the Iraqi Kurdistan, the movements were mainly led by Kurdistan Democratic Party (established in 1946) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (emerged from KDP and established in 1976).

### **1991–2003**

After the Gulf War and unsuccessful Kurdish Uprising in 1991, Kurds fled back to the mountains to seek refuge from Saddam's regime. The United States established a safe- haven and a no-fly zone initiative in Iraqi Kurdistan for the Kurds for them to develop an asylum away from the Saddam's regime. United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 in 1991 condemned and prohibited "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population [...] in Kurdish populated areas." After many bloody encounters, an uneasy balance of power was reached between the Iraqi forces and Kurdish Peshmerga forces, ultimately allowing Iraqi Kurdistan to function independently. The region continued to be ruled by the Kurdish political parties and began to establish a stable economy and national identity. Iraqi Kurdistan "built a socioeconomic

infrastructure from scratch, completely independent from the centralized framework for the Baath regime” (Bengio, 2005: 173). Though civil war broke out in the north between Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party and Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan from 1994 to 1998, Kurds were still able to maintain a democratic and prosperous foundation for their region (Gunter, et al 2004).

### **2003 – present**

When the US-led war on Saddam in 2003 broke out, the northern Kurdish border with Iraq was moved considerably southward. This gave Kurds more access to water and oil resources, therefore increasing priorities within the region to establish steady relations with the Kurds. This new access also encouraged more investment within the region, softening political tensions and polarization. Feeling safe and rescued from Saddam’s repressions, Kurds then gained confidence and started developing the region in economic, social, diplomatic and political aspects. However, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has done very little to develop a standardized language to be used at public and private sectors. Perhaps the polarized nature of Kurdish dialects and the distribution of two main dialects (Kurmanji and Sorani) between different geographies within the Kurdistan Region were among the reasons why a straightforward and sustainable policy was not adopted. According to Sheyholislami, different policies towards Kurdish, coupled with other geographical and socio-economic factors (Ahmed, 2006: 48), have contributed to the rise of particular challenges for the language. Among these are the lack of a common standard language, a unified writing system and mutual intelligibility across the main dialect groups – which are influenced by various aspects of the dominant state languages (sound system,

vocabulary, grammar, idioms, and other discourse features) (2015: 30).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The significance of linguistic and cultural legacies has hardly occupied a position in the KRG's policy-making. This is a grave pitfall stemmed from the lack of awareness regarding the importance of Kurdish language and culture that have long been subjected to oppression and denial. Even though language has, historically and culturally, proved to be the nation's spirit, the historical existence of nation itself is problematic (Mondal, 2003). For Ernest Gellner, nations are not simply there, but are creations of nationalist ideology. It is not 'a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny', while it is 'nationalism' that 'sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures' (Gellner, 1983: 49). No matter to which extent Gellner's argument is well swallowed since nationhood is now a reality and inescapable. Absence of putting a well-enhanced policy-making towards language –and therefore national identity– has caused friction between the parts of Kurdistan located in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, since a bleak connection exists between the Kurdish speakers in these parts where cultural practices are at issue. Hardly in any case, the colonized nation had not faced suppression of its native language and culture by the colonizer. A glimpse of nations and peoples' histories in different geographies indicates the confluence of language and identity, a coincidental narration of past, present and future of social groups. An obvious example of this is that up until this moment, African writers and intellectuals have not reached an agreement to decide on the language of their writings and on a unified language (of each African state) in narrating the

stories of African peoples to the world readership. It was not accidental that the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, refrained from using English language in writing his fictional works; for Thiong'o English is rather the language of the commanding master and colonization and can hardly represent the spirit of African self-expression (Stansfield, 2003: 18).

Studying language through political science is to be interested in persistence of linguistic ethnicity as a political phenomenon: alliances, elite formation, political, economic reasons for language maintenance or shift. The link between language and national identity was first explored in the works of the eighteenth century German Romantics like Herder and Fichte. These philosophers defined the linguistic and cultural identity of the German nation, and "their ideas were immensely influential in shaping nationalist movements throughout Europe" (Cemiloglu, 2009: 8). The German philosophers believed that national communities are natural and unique. They argued that even if these communities should forget their true identities, they could reclaim their authentic selves through an "awakening of consciousness." (Ibid: 9). Language plays an essential role in the process of reclaiming one's true nature. Herder believed that language was synonymous with thought and was to be learned in a community. Since every language is unique, he reasoned that each community had its own mode of thought and the community is the sum of these modes of expression. According to Herder, "every nation has its own storehouse of thought rendered into signs; this is its national language". Similarly, Fichte claimed that "language mirrored the national soul" (Ozkirimli, 2000: 18).

Iraqi Kurdistan Region had a quasi-government from 1991 to 2003, but it had not been really a fully-fledged authority with high standard qualities of administration. Then came the era of post

2003, following which the Kurdistan Region gained considerable power in Iraq after the demise of the Ba'ath regime. However, the successive Kurdistan cabinets since 2003 have been passive to produce a clear and sustainable policy towards Kurdish language. According to Crawford, language policy is “what a government does officially through legislation, court decisions, executive action or other means” to regulate how languages are used in public contexts; cultivate language skills needed for national priorities; and establish the rights of individuals or groups to learn, use, and maintain languages (2005: 09-16). Záhořík also states that “Language Policy has to do with decisions (rules, regulations, guidelines) about the status, use, domains, and territories of language(s) and the rights of speakers of the languages in question” (2011: 91). Similarly, Calvet notes that the possession of authority is necessary in the formulation of language policies. In other words, language policy is the responsibility of the government (1998: 228). Since its establishment in 2005, the Kurdish academy was expected to pave the way towards standardization of Kurdish language and formulate the government’s models of language policy.

Záhořík and Teshome propose four models of public policy towards language: “disestablishment, official multilingualism, language rationalization and language maintenance” (2008: 14). The disestablishment or public disengagement model specifies that there should not be any official publicly recognized language or languages. Official multilingualism model dictates that there must be the same recognition for the various languages used in the country. Language rationalization attempts to choose a privileged public language by either denying or limiting the recognition of other languages. Language maintenance aims to make all languages equally successful. KRG is in between the four models of language policy proposed by Záhořík and Teshome (2008). They have

adopted a mixture of covert and overt policies towards official language in the region by assigning Kurdish language as the official language of Kurdistan Regional Government and explicitly stating the rights of any or all linguistic groups to the use of their language in whatever domains they specify.

### **Historical Background of Language Policy in Kurdistan Region**

Following the 1991 Uprising against the Ba'ath Regime in Iraq and gaining semi-autonomy, Kurdish political parties, the then "Kurdistan Front", formed an autonomous regional state with a parliament of their own and established a council of ministers on 4 July 1992. Afterwards, they adopted the policy of "decentralization" of the Arabic language (Stansfield, 2003: 13). Considering that most of the population in Kurdistan Region were Kurdish speakers, the administration at that time collectively realized that the Region was losing its national identity and culture. Thus, they started with crucial changes in the language policy of the regional government. KRG claimed the Kurdish language to be the state language in the region with a de facto status providing the Arabic and English languages with the de jure status of an international language of communication (Ahmed, 2006: 71).

The KRG efforts aimed at diminishing the role of the Arabic language were proved to have succeeded for several years when the number of schoolchildren studying in Kurdish at educational institutions in the region had outnumbered those studying in Arabic by 2000. Shops and commercial institutions had to remove Arabic names from their walls and substitute them with Kurdish names. City neighbourhood names in Kurdistan Region were changed from Arabic (or pro-Ba'athist names) to Kurdish names, such as Saddam Quarter in Erbil to Kurdistan Quarter, al-Qadissiya Quarter to Kwestan, etc. However, this attempt to diminish the effects of

Arabization<sup>i</sup> led to the emergence of a generation with a broken Arabic and who were oblivious of the oppression Kurds suffered from the Arab rules.

After the fall of Saddam's Ba'athist Regime in 2003, the Kurdish law-makers in Baghdad were able to include Kurdish language in the first Federal Iraqi Constitution in 2005; Section One, Article Four, First Paragraph reads:

**The Arabic language and the Kurdish Language are the two official languages of Iraq. The right of Iraqis to educate their children in their mother tongue, such as Turkmen, Assyrian, and Armenian shall be guaranteed in government educational institutions in accordance with educational guidelines, or in any other language in private educational institutions<sup>ii</sup>.**

(Federal Iraqi Constitution 2005: Part1, Article 4, 1st Paragraph)

Consequently, all official correspondence and state communication shall be produced in Arabic and Kurdish languages, including Kurdistan Region. However, apart from the name of council of representatives in Baghdad, all official correspondence and Iraqi parliament sessions are conducted in Arabic without the provision of Kurdish content. Reciprocally, Kurdistan Region administrative institutions issue all correspondence, unless addressing Baghdad or international bodies, in Kurdish.

Kurdistan Parliament approved a draft constitution on the 24th of June 2009, where Article 14, Section One states that:

Kurdish and Arabic shall be the two official languages of the Kurdistan Region. This constitution guarantees the right of the

citizens of the Kurdistan Region to educate their children in their mother tongue, including Turkmen, Assyrian, and Armenian, in the government's educational institutions and in accordance with pedagogical guidelines.

(Draft Constitution of Kurdistan Region-Iraq, 2009: Article 14, 1st Paragraph)

With Kurdish political move towards establishing an independent Kurdistan state following the 2017 referendum, the problematic status of the Kurds in Iraq deteriorated and the issue of Kurdish identity in Iraq became more complicated. If the pre-2003 Kurdistan Region had struggled against Arabization, now Kurdistan was facing a greater danger of losing its autonomous status in Iraq. To make people vote for '2017 independence referendum', Kurdish politicians, first, had to persuade Kurdistan population that their economic, social status and security are preserved and, second, to solve the issue of the fading national identity feeling among the Kurds in the region due to the KRG's institutionally unorganised administration<sup>iii</sup>.

This challenge was made harder by Baghdad's military solution to the issue of Kurdistan Independence Referendum. Baghdad decided to remove Kurdish language from the Iraqi National Cards and National Food Rations – even though the decision was not executed. International Flights to/from Erbil and Sulaimaniyah airports were also banned<sup>iv</sup>.

Iraqi Kurdistan Region adopted a mixture of overt and covert policy towards official language in the region by explicitly stating the rights of any or all linguistic groups to the use of their language in whatever domains they specify and using only Kurdish in public administration communications. Despite the claims stating that KRG is gradually taking the same steps of preceding language

colonizers (for instance, the Ba'ath Regime), all minorities in the region are free to use their language and school their children in their own language (Arabic, Turkmen, Assyrian, etc). However, on the micro level, there is a tendency towards standardizing Sorani dialect in Kurdistan Region, as stated by Sheyholislami that KRG had adhered to the Nationalist Linguistic Policy “one nation equals one language” (2012: 109).

### **Kurdish Language and Dialectical Conflicts in Iraqi Kurdistan Region**

Kurdish is a macro-language consisting of at least five dialect groups: Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Southern Kurdish (Kirmashani/ Faili/ Kalhuri), Zazaki and Gorani/Hawrami. These groups belong to the northwestern branch of Iranian languages, a branch of the Indo-Iranian family, which is a sub-group of the world's largest family of languages - the Indo-European languages (Sheyholislami, 2015: 31). This classification sets Kurdish apart from Arabic and Turkish and places it close to Dari, Balouchi, Pashtu and Persian/Farsi on linguistic and sociolinguistic grounds. While linguists overwhelmingly accept this as a fact, there is less consensus as to the varieties of Kurdish itself. Whereas a number of Western philologists and theoretical linguists do not consider Zazaki and Gorani/Hawrami as Kurdish, the vast majority of the speakers of these varieties - except for a group of Zazaki intellectuals - consider their speech variety a Kurdish “dialect”. While Central, Southern and Gorani/Hawrami groups are spoken in Iran and Iraq, Zazaki is spoken in Turkey only; Kurmanji is spoken in all major Kurdish areas. Only two dialect groups, Sorani and Kurmanji, have standardized literary varieties (Sheyholislami, 2015: 32). Nonetheless, the oldest and most established Kurdish variety in the Region is Sorani variety based on Sulaymaniyah dialect. Haig and Matras point out that

“prose in this dialect dates back to the nineteenth century... and a phonemic orthography was designed for the language on the basis of Persian-Arabic script” by the British administration later in nineteenth century (Haig and Matras, 2002: 4).

One of the challenges that Kurdish language policy has faced is the diversity of dialects spoken throughout the Region. However, this linguistic diversity is not seen as a threat to the formation of the national identity in Kurdistan Region, because, all in all, Kurdish varieties and dialects spoken in the Region are collectively referred to as Kurdish language. Sheyholislami indicates that lack of a clear language policy by KRG has created arrays among intellectuals in the Region which have led to disputes between Sorani and Hawrami intellectuals and activists.

Before 1991, all Kurdish dialects were equally oppressed by Saddam’s regime. After 1991, and more specifically after 2003, in the absence of a common enemy, internal differences between the speakers of various dialects started to emerge. Sorani has always been the predominant dialect in Iraqi Kurdistan Region and has widely been used in the public and private domain, except in Duhok province where Badini (Kurmanji) has always been the dominant dialect (Sheyholislami, 2012: 111). In 1995, Duhok directorate of education requested KRG to replace Sorani dialect with the Badini dialect in the school curriculum. In 2006, a group of Hawrami speakers submitted a petition to Kurdistan Parliament demanding linguistic rights and asked that Hawrami dialect be recognized as a “minority language” (May, 2001: 153). The extent of reactions against this petition by the conservative Kurdish nationalists and naming the petitioners as separatists and non-patriotic was ironically very similar to what nationalist Arabs would call Kurdish intellectuals before 2003. According to Sheyholislami, Hawrami speakers’ petition was perceived as a

challenge to the years-long hegemony of Sorani Kurdish. In response, some well-known Sorani Kurdish writers, academics, journalists and artists signed a petition demanding Sorani Kurdish to be declared the standard and official language of Iraqi Kurdistan, the petition was addressed to Mr Masoud Barzani, the Kurdistan President, KRG cabinet and Kurdistan Parliament (Sheyholislami, 2012: 114).

This dispute between Sorani (as a dominant dialect in Iraqi Kurdistan Region) and other Kurdish dialects still exists. The Kurdish academy, which is funded by KRG, is supposed to tackle this issue and find logical and scientific solutions. The academy is populated by several well-known Kurdish linguists, academics, and writers. In 2008, they held a number of meetings and the views were published by the academy, only there was no consensus on a clear language policy. Later in 2010, the academy held a conference on language issues and studies in which academics, writers and language experts were asked to express their views on the issue of officialization of the Sorani Dialect. One of the views to stand out among the others is that of Amir Hassanpour's, who believes that Kurdish is a bi-standard language and that KRG has to declare two varieties as the standard languages in the Region instead of one (Sheyholislami, 2012: 116). However, this is not very popular among language nationalists.

The German philosophers, Herder and Fichte, believe that national communities are "natural and unique". They argue that even if these communities should forget their true identities, language will play an essential role in the process of reclaiming their true nature (Cemiloglu, 2009: 9). Since every language is unique, Herder reasons that each community has its own mode of thought and the community is the sum of these modes of expression. According to Herder, "every nation has its own

storehouse of thought rendered into signs; this is its national language”. Similarly, Fichte claims that “language mirrored the national soul” (Ozkirimli, 2000: 18). According to these claims, Kurdish language might be shredded to smaller separate languages, an act played by state governments for decades. On the other hand, if Kurdish communities unified under the national label of Kurdistan and unified Kurdish language, then this thought of “one nation, one language” would favour the Kurds regardless of other non-Kurdish groups. However, according to Haugen, “to choose any one vernacular as a norm means to favour the group of people speaking that variety” (2003: 420). Thus, it is logical to say that the political polarization in Kurdistan Region before 2003 and deepening ideological dichotomy among the rival political powers have led to the widening of the space between Kurmanji and Sorani Dialects. Consequently, the successive KRG cabinets have been broad-based embracing the participation of several political powers since 2003.

### **Language as Symbolic Power in Kurdistan Region- Iraq**

According to the official Kurdistan Regional Government website<sup>v</sup>, “language colonization was one of the most dangerous means of Arabization” because it was the Arabization of the brains of the educated Kurdish elites and intellectuals. Ironically, until the mid-1990s, the dominant Kurdish dialect in Iraqi Kurdistan Region was Sorani. Following the 1994 – 1997 civil war in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, KDP expanded their authority from Duhok to Erbil governorate and the PUK took over Sulaimaniyah Governorate and Garmiyān District (Area). The civil war brought in social and cultural fractions inside the Kurdish society that has long suffered from previous humanitarian predicaments at the hands of Iraqi regimes. Thousands of people were disadvantaged from the civil war, including murder, injuries, displacements,

disappearances and imprisonments. The 1998 “Washington Agreement”, fortunately, put the fighting between the KDP and PUK fighters to an end. KDP and PUK officials have repeatedly cursed these unlikely consequences. The former Kurdistan Region president, Masoud Barzani, president of the KDP, too, and the late Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (Former General Secretary of PUK) have often reassured Kurdistan Region people of not restarting the civil war in any circumstance. However, the civil war resulted in the establishment of two administrations and the leaders have not – and been unable – to form a national administration, and divided the Region into two zones, one ruled by KDP in the areas of Duhok and Erbil and the other governed by PUK in Sulaimaniyah and Garbiyan areas (See map 1). Consequently, the dominance of Sorani was challenged in 1996 when the Duhok Assembly and Board of Education called upon the KRG in Erbil to help them replace Sorani with Badini in schools, starting with grades one to three. The KRG in Erbil was led by the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) whose leadership (Barzani) spoke Badini. The KDP government agreed and assisted the Duhok governorate to introduce Badini as the medium of instruction to their curriculum and after 2003 Badini became the medium of instruction for grades one to six (Sheyholislami, 2015: 41).

“Iraq Provinces and Capital” (Clawson, 2002: vii)

Realizing language as a symbolic power, the two major powers deepened the dialectical differences in the Region, because Badini and Sorani represented two opposing political powers. Language has therefore been viewed beyond being a mere means of communication in the way Prah put it that language enjoys having “different values and socio-political positions” (Prah, 1995: 7).



Bourdieu analyzes the relation between language and power and explains that language as a cultural symbol and as a communicational instrument plays a significant political power role. In his seminal work, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Bourdieu maintains that language is not merely a tool of communication, but also a medium of power (Bourdieu, 1991: 12).

In the mid-2000s, when the PUK and KDP power-sharing KRG was formed again, both the Ministry of Education and the Kurdish Academy were reluctant to give their consent to Duhok's call for expanding their language rights to higher levels of education and other public domains. The KDP was no longer the sole decision maker in Erbil, as the PUK had a strong influence on

both the Ministry of Education and the Kurdish Academy. The KRG came under constant pressure by the majority of Sorani speaking writers, poets and artists to declare Sorani the official language of the Kurdistan Region. This materialized in a controversial letter signed by influential Sorani literary figures that was submitted to the Kurdish authorities. Despite this, Duhok's Board of Education gradually and unilaterally completely replaced Sorani in all levels of education by 2012. This replacement was also extended to other domains such as media, public signage, public and private institutions. Thus, Kurdish in Iraq is practically a double-standard language since the KRG has committed itself to the promotion of both dialects (Hassanpour et al, 2012: 182).

### **Foreign language learning and national identity**

The KRG's refusal, and failure, to declare one Kurdish dialect as the only official language of the Region, has resulted in conceiving English language as the only solution. English has correspondingly grown in popularity in recent years. After 2003, English has been gradually replacing Arabic as the second language of the KRG. Barbarani writes in an article to Rudaw website "English as a second language is on the rise in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Region, where the population increasingly embraces the lingua franca"<sup>vi</sup>. Moreover, the KRG's Ministry of Education decided to open seven international schools throughout Kurdistan Region to teach in English language<sup>vii</sup>. There are tens of private schools that use English as language of instruction such as Ishik, Cambridge, ChouEIFat, Media, Bala, etc. Furthermore, a handful of private universities have decided to use English as the medium of instruction such as Cihan, Kurdistan-Hawler, Lebanese-French, Ishik and American Universities in Sulaimaniya and Duhok. After 2011, several programmes in various public universities such as Soran University, Salahaddin Univeristy and

Duhok University have started to make English the sole language of instruction in a number of degree programs (Sociology and Political Sciences). Other groups, mostly concerned with education and business, are actively promoting the status of English by using it. They have not only adopted English as the Region's second language (instead of Arabic) but have also designated it as one of the official languages. In the early months of 2015, a group of parliamentarians submitted a bill to the KRG's Constitutional Committee to recognize English as one of the official languages of Iraqi Kurdistan. English has now thus deemed significant, a worldview stemmed from the idea that "Arabic is the language of the dominant group in Baghdad, who committed atrocities against Kurds and Kurdistan" (Sheyholislami, 2015: 42).

Despite this, Arabic continues to play an important role in Iraqi Kurdistan. The major reason is that Arabic is Iraq's official language. For many Kurds, Arabic is considered important as a key to social goods and services in the country. Secondly, most senior Kurdish politicians and law makers, especially those with university degrees, were educated in Arabic. Some of those in power continue to use Arabic when writing bills and laws at the KRG parliament. Yet for others, Arabic is significant for its representational value as a symbol of Islam (as the language of Islamic texts such as Quran and Prophet's sayings), which is the religion of most of the Kurds (Sheyholislami, 2015: 43).

In addition to that, the education policy in the Region appears dualist by dragging English language into the scope of education as Wahab states: "Other than the pervasive notion of English as the international language of commerce, academia and the sciences in KR, the particular attention to English might seem counterintuitive to the nationalist project towards the Kurdish language" (2017: 134). The KRG higher education policy thus contradicts itself and

retreats from its approach to Kurdish language. Adopting English language, meanwhile, stemmed from the idea that English nowadays is closely related to the capitalist wave and marketing. The (Kurdish) nationalist institutionalization of education therefore establishes a bridge to connect western capitalism and local values, a step jeopardizing the position of conceived traditional past.

### **Educational and Cultural Aspects of Kurdistan Region- Iraq**

The protection or loss of language, history and culture appears to determine a group's status as being at home or displaced. If physical violence is a means of human suppression, cultural and linguistic prohibition and repression are other methods of nation-state discriminations. As Thiong'o observes: "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (Thiong'o, 1987: 9). Although Chinua Achebe used English as the medium of expression, because he wrote his worldwide novels in English, it was not an easy experience.

For the Kurds, whose homeland is located within neighboring Turkey, Iran, Syria and – as Kurds consider – Iraq, the language issue should have occupied a larger space when it comes to governmental and policy-making procedures. Despite the bitter historical experience of suppressing Kurdish language especially in Turkey, Iran, Syria, and, to a lesser extent, in Iraq following the creation of these modern states (Weedon, 2004: 20), (Asgharzadeh, 2007: 57), (Hassanpour, 1992: 244) and (Perry, 2003: 238-59), the Kurdistan Regional Government has not been sparkly successful in deeming the legacy of language in nation-building projection. As (Turkish, Persian and Arabic) language(s) is/are the backbone of nation's existence with the establishment of modern states of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. Such worldview has *not* been adopted

by the KRG policy-makers on the real ground since the establishment of the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq in 1992. This does not mean that the policy-makers have not insisted on the significance of Kurdish language during conferences, events and delivering national preaches, but refers to the fact that such awareness by the policy-makers has not been much witnessed and their supposedly national awareness has not reflected in the cultural establishment of nation-building. Even though this is not a kind of impulse or attempt to launch a racialized vision towards Kurdish language for the policy-makers in the way it has been practiced by the Kurds' neighbours. This, however, should play the role of connecting Kurdish culture(s) as a means of resistance in today's ethnic tensions.

Despite the significance of language in the historical construction of a nation, the KRG Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) issued an ordinance (on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017) of excluding the Kurdish language subject score for the high school graduates applying for university colleges of Medicines, Engineering and Scientific branches.<sup>viii</sup> According to this decision, it is optional for those high school graduates to consider the Kurdish studies subject score while applying for admission at university colleges mentioned. Such treatment of Kurdish language – intentionally or otherwise – stems from conceiving the weak position of Kurdishness in structuring the future of generations in terms of viewing the world not through their Kurdish background, but assumingly through the other adopted languages, namely English. The MHESR simply appears to have no clear vision of nation-building by excluding Kurdish language subject while the ministry's justification has surprisingly been that the decision is for the sake of nation-building. Many social groups and elites in the Region voiced out their criticism to this governmental decision. For them, such decision was not made

carefully and would cause harm to the future of Kurdish language as a pillar of the nation's spirit.

The governmental policy regarding “development” and “modernness” has mainly focused on economic aspects in the Region, an understanding that has put non-humanities subjects—amongst them are language, history, literature, geography— at a lower position in comparison to other scientific subjects. Even though the higher education laws in the Kurdistan Region promote supporting the Kurdistan people cultures and histories, the KRG market-focused approach has proved otherwise. One clear example of this is the MHESR 2008 law which obviously shows the Ministry's vision (Wahab, 2017: 96):

The development of human character dependent on free thinking and working to bring about a free and bright society,” “strengthening the national belonging” as well as “establishing Kurdish as the language of instruction in the humanities and social sciences in higher education and encouraging translations and publishing in Kurdish.

This step initiated by the ministry is an indication of the existing awareness of Kurdish language significance. However, this article by no means support establishing an ethnocentric standpoint towards Kurdish language by making it the *only* language of education. Considering Kurdish language as the language of studies is against the democratization of education that should bring in enforcing democratic values for all Kurdistan ethnic components. However, this does not seem to be the intention of the MHESR since the ministry in its 2015 conference highly regards the position of English language in the educational process to look “modern” in today's world (Wahab, 2017: 133). The ministry in lieu would rather adopt an unbiased approach by launching more active and

scientific institutions for Kurdish language, and in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, the MHESR could run joint strategic plans in establishing better performing media outlets. The MHESR also needed to contribute – by means of its skillful cadres and employees – in improving Kurdish cinema, which could also be a means of promoting Kurdish culture, heritage and collective historical myths as KRG calls for in different ceremonies.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Post-2003 Kurdistan Region has witnessed the emergence of a new linguistic order. Although the Kurdish dialects and their speakers have achieved important cultural and political advances, there are significant challenges ahead. Following decades of denial, oppression, negligence and underdevelopment, Kurdish has entered a new era since 2003; it is now the main language of Iraqi Kurdistan Region and one of the official languages of Iraq as per the new Iraqi constitution. The KRG is dedicated to promoting two standard varieties of Kurdish, namely Sorani and Badini/Kurmanji.

The KRG and relevant authorities, including Kurdish Academy, have decided not to have a specific language policy in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region regarding the declaration of an official language to be used by the government, schools, universities and media. The absence of a clear language policy by the KRG could have grave consequences. It is still unclear for how long KRG can remain uninterested in dialect officialization (Sorani and/or Badini) and Hawramis' demand for mother-tongue education. There is also uncertainty about the status of Arabic and English in Iraqi Kurdistan institutional and public lives, where the two languages have been competing over the “second language” position. The competition between the two main political parties (KDP and PUK)

has resulted in dividing Kurdistan Region into two poles. Supporters of KDP enshrine Badini dialect and see privilege in using it, while people from Sulaymaniyah do not consider Badini as a suitable official language. Consequently, choosing a specific dialect to make it official language is not going to work for Kurdistan Region, because it means to favor the speaking group of that specific dialect.

The KRG cannot stay idle and evade the issue of language policy for too long. Without prioritizing political affiliations of the elites, the government should involve academics, intellectuals, and language experts from various dialectical backgrounds to set forth a solid language policy. Meanwhile, KRG has to refrain from adopting any form of racialization in addressing the language issue and should consider the cultural and linguistic rights of minorities and different social groups while employing any language policy. Moreover, KRG has to bear in mind that democratization of officialization of language and educational policies need to be the top priorities in order to witness a healthy generation comprehending universal humanitarian values.

## End Notes:

i Arabization was a process conducted by the Ba'ath Regime ranging from destroying Kurdish villages to settling Arab families in areas heavily populated by Kurdish people.

ii Iraqi constitution (in English), article 4: [http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi\\_constitution.pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi_constitution.pdf) (Accessed on 7 October 2018)

iii Kurdish Language Education Faces Obstacles in Kirkuk; Rudaw Editorial, published on 28/10/2013, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/281020131>

iv Kurdish History and Language According to Iran Draws KRG Protest; Rudaw Editorial, published on 15/5/2014, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/150520142>

v <http://www.gov.krd/p/page.aspx?l=12&s=050000&r=305&p=215>

vi Sofia Barbarani, “The Rise of English in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region” article published on Rudaw website on 29/04/2013 <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/29042013> (Accessed on 20 December 2018).

vii KRG’s Ministry of Education website: <https://moe-kgk.com/Default?page=page&c=ppp-kurdistan-schools>

viii The decision was later rejected by Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani, who notified the Council of Ministers to dismiss this ministerial ordinance. (<http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/sorani/kurdistan/2903201712> Accessed on 31 December 2018)

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## ملخص:

غالباً ما تجد النقاشات المعاصرة حول التعددية الثقافية والدراسات الأدبية والقومية والحقوق اللغوية باحثي سياسة اللغة والباحثين في السياسة على مفترق طرق. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تقييم الصعوبات وبناء الجسور بين علماء اللغة والسياسات الثقافية والنظرية السياسية المتعلقة بقضية إقليم كردستان العراق. توضح المقاطع وصفا للمناقشات والمساهمات المحتملة التي يمكن أن تقدمها النظرية السياسية في السياسة اللغوية والعكس. تقدم الورقة نظرة ثاقبة حول كيفية تطور سياسة اللغة في إقليم كردستان العراق من عام ٢٠٠٣ حتى الآن. هذه فترة

رائعة بشكل خاص من تاريخ الشعب الكردي حيث تمتعوا بوضع مستقل داخل العراق الفيدرالي. تقدم الورقة أيضاً تقييماً للبحث الحالي ومجالات المسابقة وإطاراً للبحث المستقبلي متعدد التخصصات حول التفاعل المعقد بين اللغة والثقافة والسلطة والأخلاق. ستكون هذه المجموعة مفيدة للباحثين من مختلف المجالات مع اهتمامات في المناقشات المجتمعية المعاصرة التي تلعب فيها اللغة والثقافة دوراً مهماً ومحورياً.

### پوخته:

گفتووگو و دییه‌یته هاوچه‌رخه‌کان ده‌باره‌ی فره‌که‌لتوری و دیراساته ئه‌ده‌بییه‌کان و ناسیۆنالیزم و مافه زمانه‌وانییه‌کان زۆرجار ده‌بنه‌مایه‌ی ئاریشه‌سازکرن بۆ لیکۆله‌رانی سیاسه‌تی زمان و بواری سیاسه‌ت. ئامانجی ئه‌م لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه بریتیه له هه‌لسه‌نگاندنی ئاسته‌نگه‌کان و بنیاتنای هیلای به‌یه‌کگه‌یشتن له‌نیوان لیکۆله‌رانی زمان و سیاسه‌ته فره‌ه‌نگیه‌کان و تیۆری سیاسی سه‌باره‌ت به هه‌ریمی کوردستان-عیراق. به‌شه‌کانی ئه‌م لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه هه‌لده‌ستن به خسته‌نه به‌رده‌ستی ویناکردنه‌کانی تاییه‌ت به‌و دییه‌یتانه و ئه‌و زانیاریانه‌ی که تیۆری سیاسی ده‌توانیت له سیاسه‌تی زمان و فره‌ه‌نگ بیانکات و به‌پێچه‌وانه‌شه‌وه. ئه‌م لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه، به‌رچاوپروونی ده‌باره‌ی چۆنییه‌تی گه‌شه‌کردنی سیاسه‌تی زمان له هه‌ریمی کوردستانی عیراق، له ۲۰۰۳ هه‌و تاوه‌کو ئیستا به‌رچاوده‌خات. ئه‌م ماوه‌یه بریتیه له کاتگه‌لیکی گرنگ له میژووی کوردان که ئه‌زموونی دۆخی ئۆتونۆمییان کردووه له‌چوارجیوه‌ی عیراقی فیدرال. هه‌روه‌ها ئه‌م لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه هه‌لده‌ستیت به پیشکه‌شکردنی جوړیک له هه‌لسه‌نگاندن و نیشاندانی ئه‌و لیکۆلینه‌وانه‌ی تاییه‌تمه‌ندن به تیکه‌ه‌لکیشبونی زمان و فره‌ه‌نگ و هیژ و ئیټیک. ئه‌م تیکه‌ه‌لکیشیه بۆ ئه‌و لیکۆله‌رانه‌ی له جوړه‌ها بواری تاییه‌ت به دییه‌ته کۆمه‌لایه‌تییه‌کان کارده‌کن، که تیاپاندا زمان و فره‌ه‌نگ پۆلیکی کارا و گرنگ ده‌گیرن، سوودبه‌خشه.