Perspectives on Kurdistan's Economy and Society in Transition: Volume II

Edited by

Almas Heshmati, Alan Dilani and Serwan M.J. Baban

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
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SPEECH OF PRESIDENT MASSOUD BARZANI

At the 2nd World Kurdish Congress, Saad Palace
Conference Centre, Erbil, 13 October 2012

[Image of speaker]
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE KURDISH DIASPORA:
A NEW SUBJECT FORMATION
IN TRANSTATIONAL SPACE

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Abstract

In recent decades, a Kurdish diaspora has begun to appear and its emergence has influenced the nature of the Kurdish question, which until then had been a conflict mainly involving the Kurds and the states of the Middle East. Subsequently, Kurdish communities have become very active in the diaspora, imposing themselves on the political agendas of most European countries. This change was most dramatic when the Kurds in Iraq began to develop self-government in 1991, constitutionally recognized after the fall of Saddam Hussein regime. Iraqi Kurdistan turned out to be a centre of attraction for the Kurds who were living in the diaspora and in Turkey, Iran and Syria. The relationship between the diaspora and the homeland is addressed in this chapter in the context of such changes. The aim is to study how the ongoing nation-building process in Iraqi Kurdistan affects the Kurdish diaspora. It explores how the enduring Kurdish struggle for nationhood and the relatively new transnational space of the Kurdish diaspora can interact and how changes take place in both spaces. It is argued that the Kurdish diaspora has responded to the developments in the homeland through different forms of diaspora circulation, rather than returning to the homeland, as was supposed in previous studies. More importantly, people in the diaspora develop a distinct identity in a very general sense. Briefly, this identity

References


refers to a duality between homeland and diaspora, a sense of belonging to both. This chapter is based on the results of qualitative research conducted among the “elites” of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium in 2008.

Key Words: Kurdish diaspora, myth of return, diasporic identity

1. Introduction

Kurdistanê Azad Çebû (“A free Kurdistan is born”)

The Kurds in different countries of the Middle East and the diaspora have used the above popular motto to express the developments in the Kurdish region of Iraq since the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime. What it implies is the realization of a historical dream of the Kurds which cannot be summarized as the quest for their own state. This chapter aims to explore the impact of these developments taking place in Iraqi Kurdistan on the Kurdish diaspora in terms of identity formation. What is the importance of the emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan as a self-governing body to the Kurdish diaspora? And how did the Kurdish Diaspora react to these developments in Iraqi Kurdistan? These are the main questions I tried to answer in this chapter, which is based on my master’s thesis.

In general, the nation-building process of the Kurds is related to those in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, the countries governing the Kurds in the Middle East, which have given rise to different forms of exclusion of the Kurds within them. This exclusion embodies a very wide range of policies towards the Kurds, from the genocidal poison gas attack of Saddam Hussein in 1988 in Iraq, to the denial of the Kurds as a distinct ethnicity, as in modern Turkey. One of the most important results of this exclusion has been the movement of the Kurds leading to the formation of a Kurdish diaspora. Therefore, the formation of a Kurdish diaspora has, from its beginning, been intertwined with the nationhood process of Kurds and nation-building in their so-called “host” states. In other words, the Kurdish Diaspora is based on strong ethno-national ties and has also been very active and politicized since its inception.

In this sense, the relationship between diaspora and homeland is a very common focal point for studies on the Kurdish diaspora, although this was studied from different perspectives. In these studies, two arguments concerning the relationship between diaspora and homeland have come to the forefront: “Almost all Kurdish refugees wish to return to Kurdistan when conditions are appropriate,” and “the concept of homeland for the members of diaspora is vague and ambivalent, since Kurdistan does not exist as a juridical-political reality.”

This chapter aims to advance these two arguments, assuming that the conditions are now appropriate given the concept of the homeland has become concrete through the self-governing experience in the Kurdish region of Iraq, which has become a de facto Kurdish state. In another chapter, I tried to discuss the general impacts of this de facto statehood on the Kurdish diaspora, and argued that instead of a returning diaspora, we are witnessing alternative forms of diaspora circulation. In this chapter, I will trace the impact of Iraqi Kurdistan on the Kurdish diaspora in terms of identity formation. How do the members of the Kurdish Diaspora identify themselves? Does the Kurdish Diaspora formulate a more inclusive and cohesive discourse of the diasporic identity instead of the “home-oriented” nationalist discourse based on victimhood? And what do they think about the perception of their identity in the homeland (in this case, Iraqi Kurdistan)?

These questions are discussed from the perspectives of the people who are involved in the Kurdish diaspora. Qualitative research through semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted with those people who can

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3 Wahlbeck, 106.

4 Alinia, 232.

be considered as the “elites” of the Kurdish diaspora. The present analysis
draws on seventeen life stories which refer to the themes of the
relationship between diaspora and homeland, and the formation of a
diasporic identity. My sample is composed of people from different parts
of Kurdistan who now live in Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and the
UK. They all have strong connections to Iraqi Kurdistan, therefore all
references made to the “homeland” are to Iraqi Kurdistan. All interviewees
can be considered as the elite of Kurdish diaspora in the sense that they
have been (and are) politicians, academics, NGO representatives etc.
This is important because, as stated: “Diasporas are social constructs that
are constructed by the political entrepreneurs who are acting rationally and
strategically through the strategic deployment of identity frames and
categories.”

This chapter is composed of four parts. First, I trace the evolution of
the Kurdish diaspora as the result of population movements from different
parts of Kurdistan. In the second part, I take a closer look at the structure
of this diaspora. In the third part, the formation of diasporic identity based
on the creation of Kurdish transnational space is discussed. Finally, in the
fourth part, this new diasporic identity is discussed in terms of the
contingencies it creates for a new relationship between the diaspora and
homeland.

2. The Formation of Kurdish Diaspora

Before talking about the formation of the Kurdish diaspora, it should first
be noted that the population movements from different parts of Kurdistan,
namely Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, differ from each other
significantly. Secondly, there are also significant socio-cultural and
political differences among the Kurdish communities from these parts.
And lastly, in terms of the policies of the “host countries” toward migrants,
we can also talk about considerable differences. In this sense, instead of
the one diaspora, it is much more realistic to talk about Kurdish diasporas,
as suggested by the title of one of the pioneering studies made on this
subject.4

Concerning the Iraqi Kurds’ population movements and the formation
of a Kurdish diaspora, we can talk about four great migration waves since
the 1970s which should be discussed in conjunction with the social and
historical development of Iraqi Kurdistan. The first three occurred as a
result of the ongoing struggle against the Iraqi state and had mainly a
regional and temporal character. The first wave came in the second half of
1970s, just after the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran following
the defeat of the Kurdish uprising begun in 1961. It had a mainly regional
character, and more than two hundred thousand Kurds crossed the border
into Iran. However, during this period, a first international migration
movement, at a small scale, had also taken place in a way, seeing many
frustrated Kurdish politicians or fighters flee to European countries and
settle there. The second migration wave came after the Anfal campaign5
in the late 1980s. This also had a foremost regional character, but this time
hundreds of thousands of Kurds crossed the border into Iran and Turkey
where they had to stay in makeshift camps for a long time. The third wave
occurred after the Kurdish uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan in April 1991, when
almost 1.5 million Iraqi Kurds crossed the Turkish and Iranian borders. In
all of these waves, different numbers of people have been able to migrate
to Europe, and so the Kurdish diaspora continued to grow in size.
However, the main Kurdish exodus to Europe from Iraqi Kurdistan took
place in the 1990s, and can be considered as the fourth wave. This started
mainly after 1993 due to the economic embargo imposed upon Iraqi
Kurdistan and accelerated during the internal fighting among the Kurdish
groups between 1994 and 1998. The composition and aims of this group of
refugees are very different from the previous ones.

The migration movements of the Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Syria
have followed their own ways. However, it can be generalized that the
population movement had a “transnational” character after the 1960s,
when the wave mainly comprising workers from Turkey towards West
European countries began. Among them, the Kurds contributed a
significant number, although in the beginning their Kurdishness was not
explicitly stated. Transnational migration continued in 1970s and 1980s in
the form of refugee movements following the oppressive policies of

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4 A. H. Akkaya, The Impact of the Nation-Building Process in Iraqi Kurdistan on

5 F. B. Adamson, “Constructing the Diaspora: Diaspora Identity Politics and
Transnational Social Movements,” paper submitted at the 49th Annual Meeting


The al-Anfal was a genocidal campaign against the Kurds in Iraq, led by the
regime of Saddam Hussein in the final stages of the Iran-Iraq War. The campaign
takes its name from Surat al-Anfal in the Qur’an, which was used as a code name
by the former Iraqi Baathist regime for a series of systematic attacks against the
Kurdish population of northern Iraq, conducted between 1986 and 1989 and
culminating during February 23 to September 6, 1988; see HRW Report, 1993,
Genocide in Iraq.
Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian states against the Kurds. In the same period, a very wide economic migration also took place.

As a result of these different waves of migration, the Kurdish diaspora(s), composing different Kurdish communities living in different Western countries, has emerged. Although no precise and reliable census of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe has been carried out, the most widely accepted estimates set their number at about 1.4 million in Western Europe and North America, nearly 85% of them from Turkey. The number of Kurds from Iraq increased in the 1990s and now form the largest part of the Kurdish communities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States. This newly emerged diaspora, at the beginning, was mainly based on the "home-oriented" nationalist discourse which depicted itself as a victim diaspora. The Kurdish popular narrative of exile considers the Kurds' tragic and traumatic past a major driving force for them entering the diaspora and their practice of "long-distance nationalism," which they maintain vis-à-vis their "land of origin." In this sense, arguments such as "we are all Kurds" and "we do not belong here because here is not our country" have been very common among the Kurds in the diaspora, independent of their social or political affiliations. One of the researchers, who is also a member of the Kurdish diaspora, summarizes it with these words:

"The feeling of commitment and duty for the real or imagined homeland Kurdistan is extremely strong among the Kurds. Among the political refugees and other politically active migrants nearly everything is explained or legitimized by its degree of usefulness or harm to the homeland and the cause of establishing that homeland. Sometimes, extreme acts of sacrifice and denial for self and family are committed for the sake of the homeland."  

11 Emanuelsson, 85.
13 Khayeti 2008.
14 O. Sheikholeslami, "Crystallisation of a New Diaspora: Migration and Political Culture among the Kurds in Europe," Paper presented at the Conference On

However, the emergence of the de facto Kurdish state in Iraq Kurdistan has led to important changes, including a change in the depiction of the Kurdish diaspora as a victim diaspora and the reconstruction of a new diasporic identity. Before going into the details of these changes I tried to find out how the respondents define the Kurds who live abroad, and thus, in a sense how they define themselves. It appears that this depiction is very closely related to their personal migration history and their position in the host country they now live in, as well as their relationship to their homeland which is, at least rhetorically, considered their "true land."

3. The Victim Diaspora and the Myth of Return

Most of the interviewees narrated their personal migration history and their position as a kind of "victim diaspora," and their status as "guest," at least at the beginning. One of the interviewees explained this as such: "When we first got here, everybody was thinking 'we will stay for a limited period of time here.' Many people thought of themselves as guests and many still think of themselves as guest."

Having said this, the interviewees were generally using the term "diaspora" to define themselves. Through this usage they were mostly focusing on dispersion from their homeland of origin and the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the host society. However, there were also some hesitations in using this term, which may have been due to the fact that they were still considering themselves guests. In this sense, it can be argued that the conception of the diaspora is developing, as one interviewee noted:

"The Kurds are gradually becoming a diaspora. Maybe in the next twenty to thirty years, Kurds will have genuinely something called diaspora. They are becoming a diaspora in the sense that they are organizing abroad, joining the political parties of their host societies, establishing the lobbies, and they are accepting the fact that they will stay abroad. They are no longer immigrants or exiles that had their eyes on returning to their home."

In terms of the formation process of the Kurdish diaspora, all interviewees narrated their personal experiences as refugees on the basis of the critical events of the nation-building process in their homelands. They had mainly migrated in the refugee waves of the late 1970s and 1980s and had been

politically very active. Therefore, they had been very sensitive to the political developments in the homeland which led to the assumption of a returning diaspora, as noted by Safran: “when the conditions are appropriate, they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return to their ancestral homeland.”

However, the figures did not bear this out. Only a very limited number of the refugees, mostly from the political and cultural elite of the Kurdish diaspora, have returned to assume posts in the universities and governmental offices. Some of the interviewees had gone to Iraqi Kurdistan to participate in some ongoing projects. In this sense, a returning diaspora is a kind of myth which was explicitly described by the interviewees: “It would be individual cases. As a group I do not expect them to go back for a simple reason—their living conditions here are much better. The most expected thing that will happen is that they will have a residency here and another there.”

Instead of a returning diaspora, as has been assumed by the previous studies on the Kurdish diaspora, alternative forms of diasporic circulation among the members of the Kurdish diaspora have developed. The development of the self-governing experience in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991 has opened doors for more contact with the homeland. This process developed significantly after 2003—for example, the opportunity of direct flight between the diaspora and the homeland has accelerated transnational connections. As one interviewee noted: “Visiting Kurdistan has become a part of our everyday life. There are many families who stay there for six months and here for six months.”

Mobility between the diaspora and the homeland took also other forms, including the movement of people, knowledge and capital. The interviewees seem very confident about their roles as actors in this process. They mainly consider the diaspora as representing human capital and the homeland physical capital, especially economic capital. This became very obvious when they talked enthusiastically about the various projects they had developed. They saw this period as a construction process and the “making of the project” as the most popular way of communicating with the homeland. Another interesting finding regarding the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland is the changing mentality of the political forces in Iraqi Kurdistan towards diasporic Kurds. As one interviewee stated: “Until the 1990s, the political forces in Iraqi Kurdistan saw diasporic Kurds as lost. During the 1990s there was a significant change in their attitude. They came to look at diasporic Kurds as a national resource to be used and to accounted for.”

However, this increasing contact between the diaspora and the homeland can also create tensions due to changing expectations. In general, the leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan expects the Kurds in the diaspora to help with the building of the country and lobby for it. On the other hand, members of the Kurdish diaspora criticize the Kurdish authorities for having expectations but no clear policy towards the diaspora. The members of the diaspora also consider themselves as more “modern” and “developed” than those Kurds with political power. Some respondents, for example, talked about how the discourse of democracy is stronger in the diaspora than in Iraqi Kurdistan. This has the possibility of leading to a divergence in the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland.

However, the more important change in terms of the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland can be observed in the formation of a new identity. To investigate this relationship, I asked the respondents how they, as member of the diaspora, identify themselves and how they are perceived in the homeland, and I tried to understand how diasporic identity which is “far-from fixed or pre-given, is constituted in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively.”

4. The Diaspora and Identity

Kurdish national identity has been denied and suppressed by the states which govern Kurdistan. In this sense, the emergence of the diaspora had an explicit impact on the ethno-national identity of the Kurdish immigrants in a way that they had the chance to rediscover or recreate their Kurdishness. As noted by one interviewee: “When I came to Sweden, I just realized that I have no need to be Iranian since I was no longer under the oppression of the Iranian regime. I discovered my Kurdishness here.”

On the other hand, modern Kurdish identity, which has largely developed as a reaction to cultural and political domination by the Turks, Persians and Arabs, has a very fragmented character based on its internal as well as transnational structure. Another important impact of the diaspora on identity is related to its unifying capability towards the

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formation of a general Kurdish identity. Therefore, the creation of a diasporic identity can make it possible to transcend the fragmented structure of the Kurdish identity. As one interviewee noted:

The Kurds in the diaspora have more in common together than Kurds in Kurdistan. A Kurd in Sulaimaniyah would have very little in common with a Kurd in Diyarbakir in terms of dialect, culture, sense of humour and daily life. But a Kurd from Britain, a British Kurd whose parents are from Diyarbakir and a British Kurd whose parents are from Sulaimaniyah have more in common. They understand each other more and they have values that can actually be matched.

For other diasporas, a similar process has been experienced:

Sets of connected immigrants who did not have a common identity at the point of origin acquired a new identification with others at the destination. In the United States, Piedmontese, Neapolitans, Sicilians and Romans became Italians.19

Although Kurdish identity has been based on a very strong reference to the homeland, diasporic experience has allowed the Kurds in the diaspora to have multiple identities rather than only one, and most of the interviewees explained this diasporic identity in the following way:

I am Kurdish. I sometimes say British/Swedish Kurd. If they ask me, which part of Kurdistan, I say Southern Kurdistan. But the first thing when someone asks me who you are, with great pride I say I am Kurdish.

Another interviewee also stresses this multi-layered structure of identity in the following way:

People in the migration situation do not have one identity. They develop many identities. Some people who are very narrow minded say they have one identity. I say that I am Kurd, Swedish, Middle Eastern. We have also other identities as academics, journalists etc.'

However it should be noted that the homeland still has importance in defining members of the Kurdish diaspora. Moreover, the development of Iraqi Kurdistan as a locus for Kurdish national identity has exerted a very positive influence over the members of the diaspora personally, as one interviewee noted:


Even up to 2003, the mental and sentimental power that I had was lesser. After that, when the Kurds became stronger, I felt myself strong here as well. Now the people regard me as somebody valuable, as somebody having a valuable identity.

How they are perceived in Iraqi Kurdistan is much more complex, and for some of them, especially those from parts other than Iraqi Kurdistan, it can even be considered as traumatic. However, in some cases this is also true for those who are from Iraqi Kurdistan. One of the respondents explained this as “being a guest in both places”:

I tried to behave like I am at home. But they treat me like a guest, like a VIP, but still a guest. Sometimes they do not allow me to feel at home. The way they treat me, the way they behave, the way they speak is a constant reminder that you do not belong here. It gives us a strange feeling. Because here you always have in your mind Kurdistan as the homeland, as home. When you go home and people think you do not belong there, that you are a guest and asks “where are you from?” it creates a feeling that you have lost both, instead of gaining both. Being a guest in both places gives you a strange feeling that is not comfortable.

Another interviewee summarizes his experience in these words:

“You are no longer from here, you are a Swedish Kurd,” they say, because they suppose that I am thinking like a Swedish that I have a Swedish mentality and that this mentality is foreign.

The perception of the respondents who are originally from the other parts of Kurdistan is mainly based on the country from which they come. One interviewee expresses this as:

They see you as an outsider anyway. I went to the passport authority, and they sent me to the Iranian section, although I had a European passport. I said to them “There is no word ‘Iran’ in that passport,” because all ideas of being a refugee was to be not Iranian. I am Kurdish. It is sad for me, because the Europeans never told me that I am an Iranian, but twenty years later I came back here and you called me Iranian. This has been very insulting for me.

Some other respondents from Iraqi Kurdistan told of how they did not experience anything different in terms of identification and were welcomed as a Kurd from the region, but also admitted that the situation for their children is different, as one of them noted:
For the 2nd generation there are some differences. For example, their Kurdish is not in the same rhythm with mine. They are thinking in another language and translating it into Kurdish. So when they speak, people easily know that they are from abroad.

In summary, it can be said that the respondents consider themselves within the framework of a diaspora community in its broader meaning. This mainly involves integration in the host societies as well as keeping alive the relations to the homeland. However, diasporic experience provides new opportunities for the creation of a new diasporic identity which has a transnational character. This diasporic identity is still being formed and confirms the idea that: “identities are marked by the multiplicity of subject positions that constitute the subject. Hence, identity is neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a constantly changing relational multiplicity.”

5. Conclusion

In this article, I discussed how the Kurdish diaspora was influenced by the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan. And as a general conclusion, it can be said that the relationship between the homeland and the diaspora has gained a new form rather than a returning diaspora, as assumed by the previous studies on the Kurdish Diaspora. Iraqi Kurds have experienced different forms of diaspora circulation, involving integration in the host societies as well as keeping the relations to the homeland alive. These new forms of circulation include homeland visits, return-visits, transferring knowledge capital and investment, acting as human capital in developing various projects and lobbying for the homeland. The establishment of the de facto Kurdish state in Iraq has qualitatively affected this process in the sense that it has created a more stable atmosphere and greater resources to advance it. In this sense, the homeland still plays an important role, especially in Kurdish diasporic identity and belonging. The assumed identification of the diaspora members themselves with the homeland, which can take other forms in the course of time, shows the “homeland not as something left behind but as a place of attachment.”

More importantly, it appears that people in the diaspora develop a distinct identity in a very general sense. However, this new identity is still being formed and “is not a singular but rather a multifaceted and context-specific construct.” Briefly, this identity refers to a duality between homeland and diaspora, a sense of belonging to both, and this paradoxical nature of diasporic identity can be transcended through the building of a multidimensional relationship between diaspora and homeland. As a matter of fact, the creation of diaspora as a transnational space for Kurds, which adds a new dimension to the Kurdish case, has already made this possible, especially in view of the change in the depiction of the Kurdish diaspora. What takes place is a shift from being a victimized, ethno-national, homeland-oriented diaspora to one that is orientated towards being a transnational-diaspora. A recent study calls this “from a victim diaspora to transborder citizenship.” This shift also implies a change in the conception of homeland and the nationhood or nation-building process. In Khayeti’s words: “the practice of transborder citizenship creates a new notion of home, which can be imagined beyond any assimilationist form of state belongingness as it is lived both here and there.” So the connection between the national and transnational spaces, or in other words between territorialisation and de-territorialisation, can be established. The diaspora as a social form and consciousness that exists across state borders, i.e. a de-territorialized entity, and the nation-state as a territorialized entity, and their interaction, can be understood within such a framework. In this sense, the Kurdish diaspora now has a greater capability and opportunity to be an influential actor for the general process of Kurdish nationhood.

6. Bibliography


20 Brah 2005, 123.
22 Brah 2005, 46.
23 Khayeti, 2008.
24 Ibid., 177.


