

The Political Perspective of the Iraqi Kurds after the US Military Retreat

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***Abstract:** With the approaching of the US military retreating from Iraq in 2011, Iraq is getting into the “post-reconstruction” period without its direct interference. At the same time, this new situation will also promote the Kurds in Iraq to reconsider their political perspective. As a minority with the tendency of separatism for many years in Iraq, the Kurds recently are facing at least four factors that will affect their political future, which includes the “collaborating democracy” in Iraq designed by the US government is containing so many hidden problems, the rising Arabian nationalism with a strong inclination for the centralization of the state power is requiring to obliterate the federalism articles from the Iraq Constitution and opposing the autonomy of the Kurds, the conflicts caused by the core interests among the different racial nationalities and religious sects are becoming more serious, and the changes of the geopolitical environment around Kurdistan is in a favorable direction for the Kurds. All these will not only promote the Kurds to strive for a more advantageous political future, but will also attract the international society to concern itself more about the Kurds’ problem in this region.*

***Key Words:** Iraq; Kurds; Political Perspective; US Military*

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After the Iraq War, the Kurds in Iraq announced that they would keep themselves as a part of Iraq with high autonomy in the Kurdistan region under the federalist system. However, it is hard to say how the Kurds in Iraq will consider their political perspective. In the past 80 years, the centralized government of Iraq under the leadership of the Arabian nationalists has given the Kurds very little toleration but so much suffering. Today even though Iraq has built up the federal government with the interference of the US army, this still will not make the Kurds feel really at ease. What the Kurds worry about is that the centralized government supported by the Arabian nationalists will reappear in Iraq after the retreat of the US military and their right of autonomy will be deprived once again. Therefore, the Kurds have never given up their struggle for independence, though they have actively promoted the establishment of federalism in Iraq. The Kurdish leaders warned many times that they would separate from Iraq if they once would again be under violation, oppression or autarchy in Iraq in the future. Besides this, the continuous exclusion and conflict that have led to the split of the Iraq society is also important reason for the Kurds to keep the tendency of separation. In the political reconstruction process after the Iraq War, Iraq has built up a power-sharing “collaborating democracy” under the guidance of the US military. But this institution can not really solve the confrontation among different religious sects and racial nationalities. And it has no interior coherence to unite the whole country together. In general, after the US military retreat in 2011 and Iraq gets into a new “post reconstruction” period, there are at least four factors that will affect the political perspective of the Kurds in Iraq.

I. The Problems Left in the “Collaborating Democracy”

After the end of the Iraq War in 2003, the most important goal for the US government to achieve in the political reconstruction was to build up a “collaborating democracy” government in Iraq to replace

the Saddam regime. In theory, “collaborating democracy” maybe is the best institution for a heterogeneous society such as Iraq. But in practice, the ruling of the majority in a pluralistic society is often just an autarchy of the majority but not a real democracy. If a pluralistic society wishes to maintain this democracy, it must keep unity and toleration to reach a democracy in form at least. Therefore, there is usually a great limitation in this kind of democracy. Actually, it is only a majority based on compromise but not the result of the rational selection by the civil society.

In the process of the political reconstruction in Iraq, the various political forces indeed have reached a lot of agreements under the pressure of the US military to build up the “collaborating democracy”, but there are still many problems that have prevented this institution from becoming a realistic and effective approach. These problems include three aspects. The first, the “collaborating democracy” cannot really eliminate the difference in the targets pursued by the different political forces. Therefore, “power sharing devices have not consistently prevented intercommunion conflicts, yielded peace and stable democracy.” (Seave, 2000: 254). The second, many facts proved that the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq did not wish to accept the “collaborating democracy”, but they were under the pressure of the US military and they had no other choice. In this process, the US military played the role to weigh among the different government offices and to prevent armed conflict among the different sects. At the same time, the US military also played the role as the intercessor among the political forces of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds and urged them to negotiate and to reach various agreements. The third, the different political force had a different understanding on the power-sharing institution. The Shiites only supported the simple majority rule and rejected the power-sharing in the “collaborating democracy”, because they have the majority number in the population. The Sunnis always opposed the arrangement of the power-sharing, because they have no advantage in the number of population. At the

same time, the Sunnis also strongly argued against the Constitution drafted mainly by the Kurds and required the government to amend the articles that involve federalism, the character of the country, and oil income distribution. And both the Sunnis and Shiites hoped the US military to retreat as soon as possible, because both of them wished to control the whole nation without the interference from the US military. As for the Kurds, they not only doubted about the effectiveness of the power-sharing institution, but also asked to solve the problem of Kirkuk before the retreat of the US military. Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani of the Kurdistan regional government clearly expressed, "our fear is that Baghdad is weak today and ready to make a solution, but tomorrow it might become stronger and refuse to solve it." (Smyth, 2005: January 28). Based on this doubt, the Kurds have refused to establish any Iraq national government institutions or dispose any Iraq national army in the Kurdistan region until now.

It is obvious that all these problems mean that the "collaborating democracy" institution built up in Iraq is only the arrangement by the US military authority. Therefore, this device will be difficult to maintain after its retreat. In fact, the purpose for building up the power-sharing institution in Iraq is mainly the goal set up by the US government to achieve the political reconstruction in Iraq and it is not based on the common will of the Iraq people. As an effective institution, the "collaborating democracy" must be established through compromise and combination of the different political forces and its purpose "is to let all of the important parties share executive power in a broad coalition" (Lijphart, 1984: 23). Therefore, this institution requires common understanding from the different political groups but also distributes the positions in the government and the cabinet through the majority number in the population. However, it is obvious that the Iraqi society has never reached such a common understanding in the post-war reconstruction. As a nonhomogeneous community, the Iraqi society has been filled with the conflict in identities, contradiction in interests, and exclusion in

understanding. These problems are hidden behind the “collaborating democracy” institution that will emerge after the withdrawal of the US military. In the “post-reconstruction” situation without the interference from the foreign powers, the Shiites will try to control the whole nation through their majority population, the Sunnis will exert themselves to seize the power that they lost in the Iraq War, and the choice for the Kurds is only to further expand their autonomy and even to separate from this country.

II. The Racial-nationalist Contradiction in Iraq

In the political perspective of the Kurds, the racial-nationalist contradiction between the Arabian and the Kurdish nationalism has been another important reason that will cause the Kurds to concern themselves about. According to this theory, the Iraq nationalism refers to “the group's claim to be distinct from others with which it is in alliance or conflict, and that it is distinguished by unique cultural features” (Smith, 1983: 216). Therefore, it is clear that the conflict between the Kurds and the Arabians in Iraq will be defined as the racial-nationalist contradiction.

In Iraq, the Arabian nationalism is actually called Pan-Arabism. As a group of pan-nationalists, “their ultimate goal is to establish a state or expand it in such a way that state and ethnic boundaries coincide”(Smith, 1983: 223). Before the Iraq War in 2003, the constitutions issued by the Iraqi government in the past years had expressed clearly the strong pan-Arabism tendency. In these constitutions, there were a great number of the clauses to stress that Iraq was a part of the whole Arab nation and the goal of the Iraqi government was to realize the unification of the Arabian nation. Based on these constitutions with clear pan-Arabism feature, the Iraqi government ruled by the Sunnis not only took the unification of the Arabian nation as its basic policy, but also defined the pan-Arabism as the official ideology in Iraq. In those years, the Iraqi government had

tried two times to unify with the other Arabian nations. The first was in 1958 to unify with Jordan, and the second was in 1963 to unify with Syria and Egypt as the United Arab Republic. When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, he also had shown a strong willingness to unify the two Arabian nations together.

After the Iraq War in 2003, the Sunnis have lost their dominant position in the public opinion in Iraq, but they still insist that Iraq should bear the identity of Arabism. For this reason, the Sunnis changed their original refusing attitude and began to participate in the Iraqi political reconstruction in 2005. For maintaining the Arabism identity in Iraq, the Sunnis strongly opposed the Kurds to occupy the positions of the President and the Foreign Ministry of Iraq. They stressed that these positions should be occupied by the Sunnis to show the identity of Arabism of this nation. They also desired to establish a department controlled by the Arabians in the Iraqi government to deal with the Arabian national issues.

Compared to the Sunnis, the Iraq Kurds are even more radical in stressing their nationalist identity. Especially, the Kurdish nationalism contains two aspects: separatism and irredentism. Generally, the separatism is born from the cultural heterogeneity. In fact, "as far as language, race, and common history are concerned the Kurds differ from the Iraqi Arabs" (Bengio, 1999: 149-169). As the only one heterogeneous group in the political unit of Iraq, the Kurds have constituted a special political entity based on the racial-nationality that always searches for independence. This also explains why the Kurds are not satisfied with the recent territorial frame of Iraq and wish to separate from it.

Besides, irredentism is the other aspect of the Kurdish nationalism. It stresses unifying together the whole Kurdistan that was intersected in the history. Actually the irredentism in the Kurdish nationalism "is both incorporated and divided up between different oppressive units" (Smith, 1983: 218). In the geographic perspective, the Kurdistan in Iraq is the center of the whole Kurdistan, which is bordering with the

Kurdistan in Turkey, Syria and Iran. In this region, the linking connection among the different parts of the Kurdistan is the common language that is used by all the Kurds, the common discrimination they have suffered for so many years, and the pan-Kurdish emotion spreading in the whole Kurdistan. So the political leader of the Iraq KDP Massoud Barzani stressed, "it is the legitimate right of the Kurdish nation to be united and to build its independent state." (Fayad, 2006: June 7).

Now the Kurdish irredentism has two important signs. On one hand, it has the national flag and anthem as the symbol for the Kurdish irredentism mainly used in the Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the end of the Iraq War in 2003, the Iraqi Kurds have refused to hang the Iraqi national flag in the Kurdistan region. The reason is that the three stars on the Iraqi national flag show the Arabian union among Iraq, Egypt and Syria in the 1960s. At the same time, the Kurdish national flag and the national anthem have also been accepted by the Kurdish people in Syria, Turkey and Iran. On the other hand, the Kurdish irredentism is also spreading in the network of "transnational nationalism". In the past years after the Iraq War, "trans-border networks have increased the significance of Kurdish nationalist mobilizations" (Natali, 2004: 111). In this network, for instance, there are KDP in Iran led by Qazi Mohammed and KDP in Turkey led by Said Elci', and both of them have gotten a large amount of financial support from the KDP in Iraq led by Barzani.

Under the influence of the racial-nationalism, the Kurds in Iraq generally lack the identity with the Iraqi nation and show little passion to this nation. The Constitution of the Kurdistan in Iraq issued in 1992 makes clear that the Kurdistan was merged into Iraq by armed force. Therefore, the Kurds have never accepted the sovereignty of Iraq over them and most Kurds have never admitted that they are Iraqis. As a fact, what the Kurds struggle with the Arabian nationalism in Iraq is not for an equal representative right, but to separate from Iraq to maintain their own nationalism. This means that the contradiction

between Arabians and Kurds in Iraq has only summed up the difference in national identity and loyalty caused by the different racial-nationalism.

III. The Core Interest Conflicts among Different Nationalities and Sects in Iraq

Since the end of the Iraq War, the core interests pursued by different political sects have led to another main conflict. For the Shiites who consist of 60 percents of the population in Iraq, the most important issue is to win the national power to control the whole country as the majority group. At the same time, the Kurds have always regarded the regional autonomy as their core interest and they have threatened many times to separate from Iraq if their right of autonomy is damaged. As far as the Sunnis in Iraq are concerned, their most important interests are to get back their power over the whole nation and to keep the integrity of the Iraq territory. It is clear that the difference in the core interests pursued by the different political forces has brought up the conflict. In general, the conflict over the core interests covers four ways:

First, the conflict in the core interests involves the understanding of the attribute of the nation. Both Shiites and Sunnis, though belonging to different Islamic sects, commonly stress that Islam should be the basic attribute of Iraq. However, it is hard for the Kurds in Iraq to accept this idea. They deeply feel that "an Islamicized state will merely attempt to subsume the Kurdish identity under the banner of Islam" (Al-Marashi, 2005: 156) and insist that establishing an Islamic state in Iraq will contradict their core interest. The Kurdish political leaders have proclaimed that the Kurds will not submit to any Islamic order in Iraq or regard Islam as the attribute of the nation. A survey in the Kurds in Iraq also shows that 97% of the people will not agree to take the Islamic religious law as the main source of the legislation of the nation (Awene, 2006: November 14). On this

difference in the attribute of the nation, both sides almost have no way to find a middle position to negotiate.

Secondly, the different anticipation in the democratic institution also has caused the conflict in the core interests. The Shiites in Iraq take the democratic institution as a way to win the power over the nation and to explain their point of view about the Islamic nation. The Kurds in Iraq anticipate that the democratic institution will provide a frame to realize the right of national self-determination and to strengthen their autonomy. To show their democratic right, the Kurds even organized referendums in Kurdistan to express their desire for independence. But according to the Sunnis, the democratic institution is only the evil resource that causes them to lose the power over the nation that they have maintained for so many years and to give the Kurds a pretext to separate from Iraq. Therefore, it is obvious that the difference in the anticipation of the democratic institution will become another rootstock for the conflict in core interests.

Thirdly, the difference in the core interests has also caused the conflict among the different political groups in the foreign policy. As for the relations with Israel, both Shiites and Sunnis have clearly expressed that they as Muslim will oppose any contact with Israel. But the Kurds in Iraq have not only kept a close relationship with Israel in recent years but also have reached many agreements with the Israeli government (Eland, 2005: 42). However, in the relations with Iran, the Shiites and the Sunnis will never accept each other's opinion. When the Shiites regard Iran as their "friend, the land of co-religionists, and a model of a powerful Shiite state", the Sunnis attack Iran as "the ancient enemy that now threatens the Iraqi Arab identity" (Galbraith, 2005: 173).

Fourthly, the difference in the core interests has also caused the Iraqi parliament, constitution and army to be in a non-ordered situation. Recently, these institutions are not playing the role of the national harmonious situation but have become the fields for the various political forces to struggle for their different core interests. In

the parliament, there is a deep split and high tension among different political forces. The Shiite parliament members will vote for the Shiite religious parties, the Kurds members will support the interests pursued by the Kurds nationalist parties, and the Sunnite members will only stand by the Sunnis religious parties and the Arabian nationalists to maintain their interests. As for the constitution, since it is supported by the Kurds and part of the Shiites in Iraq, it is strongly opposed by the Sunnis for the articles about the federalism and the position of Kirkuk. Though the Sunnis have insisted to modify the constitution, it will surely become another source to cause conflict inside Iraq. As far as the Iraq army is concerned, it is actually divided into several parts and belongs to the different political forces to protect their core interests. The army's loyalty to the Shiite mainly resides in the south of Iraq, the army supporting the Sunnis gathers around the communities of Sunnis, and the so called "Peshmerga" is the main military force to defend the Kurdistan. It is easy to see that such a frail nation entity has already been broken up in the conflict among the different core interests.

IV. The Geopolitical Situation Change in Kurdistan Region

Apart from the three points mentioned above, we also have to notice the important change which happens in the geopolitical relation around the Kurdistan. When the Iraqi Kurds began to proclaim the autonomic movement in 1950s, they got a negative response from the outside. On one hand, it caused serious concern by the surrounding nations such as Turkey, Iran and Syria, because these nations also had the problem of the Kurds. Among them, the Turkish government even warned that the independence of the Iraqi Kurds would become the reason for Turkey to declare war against them. On the other hand, the international community also felt that the appearance of a new Kurds nation would break the balance of power in this region and "the possibility of instability and turmoil would not only be detrimental to

the region but also to the U.S. and the broader international community” (Gunter, 2004: 108).

However, when the semi-independent Kurdistan in Iraq was established in 1991 after the Gulf War, the neighboring countries not only tried to cooperate with it but also showed that they have accepted such a fact. After the Iraq War in 2003, the Kurdistan under the federalism of Iraq is almost regarded as an independent nation by the surrounding countries. For these countries, the cooperation with Kurdistan will be helpful to keep the security and stability in this region. First, it will prohibit the Iraqi Kurds from supporting the radical Kurds in the neighboring countries to revolt against the governments. Secondly, the Kurdistan will become a glacier between these countries and the Arabian nationalism force in Iraq. At the same time, the Kurdistan political leaders also have taken actions to show their sincerity in maintaining the security in this region. In October 1992, they allowed the Turk army to take military action against the Turkish Kurdistan Worker Party members in their autonomic region. The Kurdistan regional government at the same time strictly forbade the Iranian Kurds radical organizations to enter into Iran from their armed camps in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. The Kurdistan political leaders also persuaded the Kurds in Syria to stop struggling against the government. For this reason, the Syrian government has kept close connection with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq for a long time. Especially, the Turkish government even “recognized some government-to-government relations with Kurdistan in Iraq both before and after the invasion” (Olson, 2004: 115). Since the US army is withdrawing from Iraq soon and the Arabian nationalism is rising strongly in Iraq, “Turkey will prefer an independent Kurdish state over the Iraqi state dominated by an Islamist government.” (Chatham, 2004: 4). With the good relations with Turkey, the Kurdistan political leaders have realized that “Turkey had contributed significantly to the consolidation of Kurdish self-rule in northern Iraq in the 1990s” (Chatham, 2004: 4).

Besides the security, the Turkish government is also concerning itself very much about the economic situation in this region. In the economic sanction against Iraq organized by the international society in 1990s, Turkey lost billions of US dollars in its economy for closing the border with Iraq. Now the Kurdistan region has established close ties with Turkey in trade and has formed an interdependent balance in its economy between each other. The Turkish businesses have signed large amounts of trade contracts in the Kurdistan region and also have begun to invest in the petroleum industry in Kurdistan. After the withdrawal of the US military from Iraq, Turkey will especially “need stability in Iraqi Kurdistan (whatever its eventual status), and the only way it can facilitate this is to work closely with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to promote trade and funnel investment to the region” (International Crisis Group, 2006: 16).

On its face, the power frame around the Kurdistan region has changed greatly after the Iraq War in 2003. The Turkish government has felt that some other US strategic partners are replacing its position in this region. Therefore, Turkey must strengthen its relations with the new rising force of the Kurdistan to make up its loss in its strategic advantage. With the improvement in its relations with Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds also have won a much better geopolitical situation in maintaining and expanding its autonomy and even in promoting its independence cause in the future post-reconstruction period. When the US withdraws from Iraq at the end of 2011, the Arabian nationalism will surely rise again and the centralization of the national power in Iraq will put the federalism under serious threat. If such a situation happens in the future, it will be very possible for the Kurds to pursue a more practical separation from Iraq on the basis of the autonomy they have already achieved.

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