

Ethnic Conflicts in Iraqi Society: the Kurdish-Turkmen Conflict in Kirkuk as a Model

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This research addresses the issue of ethnic conflicts in Iraqi society by analysing the Kurdish-Turkmen conflict in the city of Kirkuk as a representative example of the complexities of national diversity in Iraq, seeking to explore the historical, social and political dynamics that have shaped this chronic conflict, focusing on the intersection of competing identities with struggles over power and resources, and their impact on the reproduction of tensions between societal components. **Method:** The research adopts a multidimensional analytical framework based on theories of social identity, realist conflict, and symbolic interaction to explain the mechanisms of ethnic polarisation in Kirkuk. **Result:** The findings show that the absence of inclusive state institutions, the employment of sub-identities by political elites, and regional interventions have all contributed to perpetuating a state of mutual distrust and marginalisation between Kurds and Turkmen, while also addressing the social, psychological and economic consequences of the conflict, including the disintegration of social networks, the deepening of feelings of identity closure, and the stagnation of development in disputed areas. **Novelty:** The research concludes with a number of strategic recommendations aimed at enhancing opportunities for peaceful coexistence and effective diversity management, including reforming representative institutions, distributing resources equitably, and promoting an inclusive national identity, drawing on comparative international experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Importance of the research

The study of ethnic conflicts in Iraqi society is gaining increasing importance in light of the political and social transformations that Iraq has witnessed since 2003. The city of Kirkuk represents a unique example of the complexity of the social fabric, where several national components - most notably Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen - converge in one geographical space, making it a mirror of the manifestations of national and ethnic conflict in Iraq. The importance of this research arises from the fact that it deals with an in-depth study of a complex multidimensional conflict in which political and economic interests are intertwined with issues of identity, belonging, and history.

This type of study contributes to supporting the efforts of decision-makers, researchers, and civil society organisations to understand the dynamics of the conflict and provide realistic solutions that enhance the chances of peaceful coexistence in multi-ethnic societies. The importance of this research comes at a time when Iraq is facing challenges in building a state of citizenship and managing diversity in a fair and balanced manner.

Research Objectives

This research aims to achieve a set of objectives, most notably:

- To provide an in-depth sociological analysis of the nature of the Kurdish-Turkmen conflict in Kirkuk.
- Revealing the structural, historical and political factors that contributed to the exacerbation of the conflict.
- Evaluate the role of government policies in shaping the features of ethnic tension in the city.
- Highlight the social and psychological effects of the conflict on the local population.
- Review comparative international experiences in managing similar conflicts.
- Develop a set of recommendations that contribute to the development of a national strategy for managing ethnic diversity.
- Support academic debate on issues of identity, integration, and multiculturalism in modern Iraq.

The Research issue

The research issue is the chronic and complex conflict between the Kurdish and Turkmen components in the city of Kirkuk, which cannot be understood as a mere dispute over power or land, but rather as the result of historical accumulations of marginalisation, unbalanced competition, mutual exclusion, and different narratives of identity and belonging. While the Kurds see Kirkuk as part of the Kurdistan Region, the Turkmen see it as the centre of their historical and cultural identity, which has created a state of symbolic and physical conflict.

This issue is exacerbated by the absence of clear government policies to manage ethnic diversity, which weakens the confidence of the components in state institutions and pushes some parties to fortify themselves with sub-identities. Therefore, the central question that the research attempts to answer is: Why has the Iraqi state failed to manage the Kurdish-Turkmen conflict in Kirkuk in a way that prevents it from escalating into an open conflict?

Research Questions

The research is based on a set of main and sub-questions:

1. What is the nature of the Kurdish-Turkmen conflict in Kirkuk, and what are its historical stages?
2. What are the social, political and economic factors that led to the escalation of this conflict?
3. What are the representations of this conflict in the daily life of the local population?
4. How have the post-2003 transformations affected the relationship between the components?
5. To what extent has the media and political discourse influenced the formation of mutual stereotypes?
6. What are the theoretical models that explain this type of conflict, and can they be applied to the Iraqi case?

7. What are the possible ways to overcome this conflict and build a model of peaceful co-existence in Kirkuk?

RESEARCH METHOD

Terms, Concepts and Previous Studies:

First research: Terminology and Concepts

It is known that every science has basic concepts that determine its cognitive direction and intellectual content; a concept is "an abstraction derived from observed events", or as defined by McClellan as "a shorthand expression of a set of facts" (McClellan, n.d.). Henderson argues that thinking without a conceptual framework is impossible, and that scientific conceptual frameworks are simpler and clearer to define, and involve clarification and simplification of facts (Henderson).

Concepts in general are "linguistic verbal symbols that express general ideas that have been abstracted through scientific observation". In this sense, it is necessary to clarify the terms used in the study to avoid misunderstandings. This is because many terms, especially in the fields of social sciences and education, have multiple meanings and varied interpretations, which requires a precise definition of the meaning that is consistent with the objectives and procedures of the study.

Defining concepts also helps in establishing a frame of reference that enables the researcher to deal with the research issue in an organised and clear manner (Abdel-Rahman, 2004). Due to the different intellectual backgrounds of researchers in each discipline, the way of understanding the same term sometimes differs, so this study sought to define a set of concepts in line with its directions and objectives.

A procedural definition was developed for each concept in order to facilitate the process of linking the concepts with the research procedures, and to make these definitions express verifiable procedural meanings, as the meaning of a concept is determined by the procedures, we use to investigate that meaning (Abdel-Rahman).

• **Conflict:**

Conflict refers to a social process in which two or more parties come into conflict over specific goals, interests, or resources, often resulting in competition or direct confrontation [1], [2], [3], [4], [5].

In the Arab context, it is defined by Anwar Abdel Malek as an intense interaction between social forces, often emerging in periods of social change and manifested in conflict over status, power, or symbolic control, Abdel Malek. Thus, conflict is not always negative, as it can be a means of revealing structural imbalances that need to be addressed to achieve social equilibrium.

Procedural definition of conflict.

In the context of this research, conflict is procedurally defined as: "a set of competitive interactions or attitudes between two or more national groups (e.g. Kurds and Turkmen in Kirkuk), arising from a sense of unfairness, marginalisation or threat to identity or political and social interests, and manifesting in the form of discursive tension,

field friction, or a sharp divergence in vision of status and role within the local community."

- **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity refers to a group of individuals who share common elements such as language, religion, history and culture and feel a sense of collective belonging that distinguishes them from other groups within the wider society [6], [7].

Similarly, Friedrich Barth argues that ethnicity is not based on cultural traits alone but is mainly determined by the boundaries of perceived social differentiation between groups, which are reshaped by political and social transformations, reflecting its dynamic and changing dimension (Barth).

From another angle, Hassan Abu Zeid offers a definition that takes into account the contextual specificity of Arab societies, describing ethnicities as sub-populations within the state, with distinct cultural, linguistic or religious characteristics, while seeking to preserve their identity within the framework of the pluralistic nation-state (Abu Zeid).

Based on this, it can be said that ethnicity represents a framework of group affiliation characterised by relative stability, but it is not a closed or rigid entity but is negotiable and reconfigurable within different socio-political contexts.

Procedural Definition of Ethnicity: Ethnicity is procedurally defined as national or cultural subgroups within Iraqi society that have distinctive features such as language, religion, or ethnicity, and seek to preserve their identity and rights within the national framework and are identified in the field through self-affiliation and societal differentiation evident in daily relations.

- **Ethnic conflicts**

Ethnic conflicts are defined as conflicts between population groups belonging to distinct cultural, linguistic, religious or national identities, centred on demands for recognition, power sharing, or protection of collective interests in a shared political and social context [9]. Tajfel and Turner argue that these conflicts are fuelled by psychosocial differentiation mechanisms, whereby each group tends to value itself positively at the expense of other groups, deepening exclusion and fuelling tensions [10].

At the field level, Salah Hassan Ahmed's study indicates that ethnic conflicts, particularly in Kirkuk, are driven by a sense of inequity in political representation, anxiety about loss of identity, and mutual fears of exclusion and cancellation (Ahmed).

In the same context, Alaa Abdelrazak explains that the core of these conflicts is a "cultural and existential anxiety" resulting from the lack of institutional recognition of diversity, which leads to the transformation of conflicts from mere material demands to deep-rooted identity conflicts [11]. Thus, it is clear that ethnic conflicts are complex and intertwined, with psychological, social and political dimensions, and express a crisis of recognition, integration and equitable participation, rather than just a conflict over resources.

Procedural definition of ethnic conflicts: Ethnic conflicts are defined in this research as tensions and conflicts that arise between different national or cultural groups in the city of Kirkuk, based on competition over identity, political representation and resources,

and are manifested through political discourse, the behaviour of local actors, and the attitudes of residents towards other groups.

- **Social Integration:**

Social integration is defined as the process by which individuals or groups with different cultural and social backgrounds are integrated into society to ensure their fair participation in various areas of life without discrimination or marginalization (Lockwood).

From a different perspective, Hassan Abu Zeid argues that integration is not limited to institutional integration but extends to include the cohesion of diverse groups within a common social fabric, based on respect for pluralism and the promotion of societal harmony (Abu Zeid).

Thus, integration is an essential component in building social peace, as it establishes a sense of belonging and minimizes the likelihood of discrimination and conflict.

Procedural definition of social inclusion: It is procedurally defined as the degree to which members of national groups in Kirkuk feel that they are part of the national fabric, which is reflected in the extent of their participation in political, social and economic institutions, as well as the quality of their daily relationships with other groups.

- **Social Exclusion:**

Social exclusion is understood as a systematic process through which certain groups are excluded from opportunities for political, economic and social participation, leading to their marginalisation and weakening their ability to influence (Silver, 1994, p. 540). In the Arab context, Said Al-Masri asserts that exclusion is not limited to poverty but is embodied in the denial of full citizenship rights, whether through discrimination, weak protection networks or the absence of their voices from the public sphere (Al-Masri). Accordingly, it represents a real obstacle to achieving social justice and balanced development.

Procedural definition of social exclusion: It has been procedurally defined as the absence of opportunities for representation or effective participation of national groups in Kirkuk within formal and informal institutions and is represented by the marginalisation of these groups from fair access to services, resources or influence, measured through indicators of inequitable distribution and the absence of compensatory policies or effective inclusion.

- **Cultural Assimilation:**

Cultural assimilation is a process in which a minority cultural group comes under the influence of the dominant culture, gradually adopting its patterns, values and behaviour, often at the expense of its original cultural specificity (Gordon, 1964, p. 71). In this context, Faleh Abdul-Jabbar argues that assimilation is not always spontaneous, but may occur under political or social pressure that leads to the obliteration of privacy and loss of identity (Abdul-Jabbar). Thus, assimilation is often problematic in pluralistic societies, as it contradicts the principle of multiculturalism.

Procedural definition of cultural assimilation: It is procedurally defined as the extent to which a group, especially less numerous or influential groups, adopt the culture

of the dominant group in Kirkuk (in terms of language, values, symbols), whether due to public policies or social pressures, leading to the erosion of the original cultural specificity.

- **Peaceful Coexistence:**

Peaceful coexistence refers to a state in which culturally, religiously or nationally different groups are based on mutual respect and differences are managed by peaceful means without resorting to violence or exclusion (Galtung). In the Arab context, Abdullah Ibrahim argues that coexistence is a pillar of stability for pluralistic societies as it contributes to building a common legal and moral space that allows the expression of difference without threatening societal unity (Ibrahim).

Accordingly, peaceful coexistence is not just a state of non-violence, but a permanent project of managing diversity and maximising commonalities.

The procedural definition of peaceful coexistence is defined as the absence of direct violence between the national components in Kirkuk, and the presence of a level of mutual respect and social interaction that minimises the potential for open conflict. It is measured through indicators such as mutual trust, willingness to co-operate, and engagement in shared spaces.

Previous Studies:

First: Iraqi studies

Over the past two decades, the Iraqi academic environment has witnessed a growing interest in the study of ethnic conflicts, especially in multinational regions such as Kirkuk. One of the most prominent studies in this field is Ahmed Qasim Muftin's study titled "Ethnic Diversity and Societal Peace: Arabs and Kurds as a Model", which focused on analysing the relationship between ethnic diversity and the components of peace in Kirkuk. The study concluded that the absence of comprehensive policies that take into account the cultural and identity specificities of the components is one of the most prominent factors that lead to the escalation of societal tensions.

Salah Hassan Ahmed's study entitled "Ethnic Tension and Social Security: A Field Study in Kirkuk", revealed the psychosocial dimensions of the conflict, revealing the existence of feelings of fear and mistrust among the population, which are exacerbated by hate speech, inequitable distribution of resources, and poor representation in official institutions.

Alaa [11] study entitled "Ethnic Conflicts and Cultural Identity Anxiety" focused on the long-term impact of conflicts on individual and collective identity, stressing that ethnic conflict goes beyond political conflict to become a direct threat to societal cohesion and is reflected in individuals' behaviour and daily perceptions of the other.

Secondly, Arab studies have also provided valuable theoretical and field insights into ethnic conflicts: Arab Studies

Arab studies have also provided valuable theoretical and field-based insights into ethnic conflicts. [12] in his study "Cultural Diversity and the Construction of the Civil State in Iraq" addressed the impact of the absence of cultural justice in undermining the

concept of the inclusive state. He noted that political elites often treat ethnic diversity as a threat rather than an opportunity, leading to the entrenchment of nationalist conflicts.

Mona Tawahiriya compared the Iraqi and Sudanese cases and highlighted the similarities between the two cases in the absence of mechanisms for official recognition of multiculturalism, which led to the militarisation of identities and the production of violence.

On the other hand, [13] presented in their study "Methods of Intervention in Ethnic Conflicts" a practical framework for conflict management in fragile environments, emphasising the importance of preventive approaches, community mediation, and constitutional reforms as means to minimise the risk of escalation.

Thirdly, foreign studies have contributed to the development of theoretical concepts and models for understanding ethnic conflicts: Foreign Studies

Foreign studies have contributed to the development of theoretical concepts and models for understanding ethnic conflicts. [8] book "Ethnic Groups in Conflict" is a foundational reference in this field, providing an in-depth analysis of the structural and cultural factors that fuel conflicts in multiple societies. He argues that political marginalisation, linguistic exclusion and economic disparity are the main drivers of conflict.

Gurr introduced the concept of "at-risk groups" in his book "Peoples Versus States", emphasising that the lack of recognition and fair representation is what drives ethnic groups to rebel and protest. He presented an analytical model used to monitor indicators of the likelihood of conflicts erupting.

In the context of cultural rights, Kymlicka is one of the most prominent theorists in his book "Multicultural Citizenship", where he defended the need to recognise the collective rights of cultural groups, not as a privilege but as a prerequisite for justice and social integration.

Through a review of previous studies, it can be seen that Iraqi studies focused on field and statistical descriptions of the reality, while Arab studies paid more attention to linking the local and regional context, and foreign studies provided theoretical frameworks and general analytical models. Combining these levels of analysis is necessary to understand the dimensions of the ethnic conflict in Kirkuk, as each level illuminates a different aspect of the phenomenon.

This research benefited from these studies in formulating its analytical framework, building its theoretical background, and guiding its research questions. It also sought to fill the methodological gaps left by previous studies by combining sociological analysis with cultural critique and political analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

A Socio-Historical View of Kurds and Turkmen in Kirkuk

A Brief History of the Kurds in Kirkuk

Kurds are one of the oldest peoples to colonise the northern regions of Iraq, and their presence in Kirkuk has been documented since the Middle Ages. Their roots go back to the Medes, and their position in Kirkuk was strengthened during the Ottoman era, as some of them were employed in local administrations. In the 20th century, the Kurdish presence increased as a result of tribal conflicts in the north and mass migrations to Kirkuk, especially after repeated Kurdish revolts.

During the Republican era, Kurds faced systematic Arabisation policies, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. These policies led to their political and economic marginalisation, creating a general sense of exclusion and deepening their demand to return to the administration of Kirkuk as part of the Kurdistan Region project. After 2003, the Kurds returned strongly to the city and actively participated in its administration, which angered the Turkmen and other components, especially in light of the competition over the city's identity and wealth.

A brief history of the Turkmen in Kirkuk

The Turkmen are the second largest nationality in Kirkuk after the Kurds. They trace their origins back to the Turkish tribes that settled in Iraq since the Abbasid era, and their density increased during the Seljuk and Ottoman eras. Kirkuk was a cultural and political centre for Turkmen, where schools and religious centres that taught in Ottoman Turkish flourished, and the city witnessed significant Turkmen influence in administrative functions.

With the establishment of the modern Iraqi state, Turkmen influence gradually began to diminish, especially with the rise of Arab and then Kurdish nationalism. The Turkmen felt culturally and demographically threatened, especially after 2003, with the expansion of Kurdish influence, and demanded constitutional guarantees and official recognition of their cultural and political rights. Today, the Turkmen represent an unassailable political and social force in Kirkuk, despite their relatively low numbers according to some estimates.

Social and political interactions between the two sides

The relationship between Kurds and Turkmen in Kirkuk has known stages of co-operation, competition and tension. During the Ottoman era, the relationship was characterised by relative stability, with both groups sharing jobs and social roles. However, after the establishment of the modern Iraqi state, competition began to intensify, especially over positions of influence and administration.

During the Baathist era, both sides were marginalised, but the Turkmen often benefited from some periods of rapprochement with the central authority, unlike the Kurds who fought armed conflicts. After the fall of the regime in 2003, the conflict over Kirkuk became intense between the two nationalities, with each side seeking to strengthen its presence through employment, media, education, and political discourse.

This rivalry contributed to the formation of a tense nationalist discourse on both sides, despite the existence of civil and civil initiatives that tried to alleviate the tension, but with limited effectiveness.

Factors that deepened the ethnic divide

The factors that contributed to deepening the Kurdish-Turkmen conflict in Kirkuk are numerous and can be summarised as follows:

- a. The absence of a clear mechanism to manage multinationalism in the city.
- b. Fluctuating government policies towards Kirkuk, both at the centre and in the Kurdistan Region.
- c. The exploitation of ethnic identities in political competition.
- d. External regional interventions (e.g. Turkey and Iran) to fuel the division to serve their interests.
- e. The absence of joint development projects that bring the components together in productive and economic frameworks.
- f. The weakness of neutral media and the spread of extremist nationalist platforms.

Together, these factors make Kirkuk an accurate model for understanding the limits of fragile coexistence in the absence of true citizenship institutions and emphasise the importance of research into building a sustainable pluralistic administrative model.

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Ethnic Conflicts and Their Effects

- Definition of ethnic conflicts and their causes

Ethnic conflicts are defined as a type of social conflict that arises between groups that differ in ethnic, national, linguistic, or religious origin, and compete for resources, political representation, or cultural recognition. According to [8], these conflicts are often fuelled by a sense of injustice or marginalisation by the state or other groups.

There are many theoretical approaches to understanding this type of conflict:

- Structuralist approach: Argues that conflicts arise as a result of the unequal distribution of power and wealth among constituents.
- Symbolic approach: It emphasises the importance of symbols, identity and belonging in igniting conflicts.
- The psychological approach: It argues that the collective memory of marginalisation and exclusion produces a permanent readiness for rejection and resistance.

- Causes of Ethnic Conflict:

The immediate causes of the ethnic conflict can be summarised as follows:

1. Competition for economic resources (e.g. land, positions, government contracts).
2. Lack of justice in political representation.
3. Cultural and linguistic marginalisation.
4. Policies of discrimination, Arabisation, Arabisation or Turkification.
5. Regional interventions that capitalise on division.

6. The complicity of political elites in fuelling the division for electoral or interest purposes.

The social, psychological and economic effects of the conflict can be summarised as follows: Ethnic conflicts undermine societal cohesion and reproduce identities in a convulsive manner, and often have long-lasting effects:

I: Social effects:

- Disintegration of social networks.
- Reluctance to intermarriage and daily interaction between groups.
- Transmission of the conflict to new generations through education and discourse.
- Promoting hate speech and racial categorisation.

II: Psychological effects:

- Permanent sense of threat.
- Growing feelings of exclusivity and closure.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder among the population in the contact zones.

III: Third: Economic impacts:

- Weak investment and development in the disputed areas.
- The emergence of a parallel economy based on sectarian or ethnic loyalties.
- The destruction of infrastructure due to repeated conflicts.

Ahmed's study in Kirkuk showed that feelings of fear and vulnerability among citizens negatively affect participation in public life and lead to a decline in interaction with state institutions, which reinforces the isolation of components within their own neighbourhoods.

In this chapter, we will attempt to link the research findings to the general conceptual framework by applying a number of theories that explain how the Kurdish-Turkmen conflict in Kirkuk was formed and continues to persist. The chapter also offers an explanatory approach that relies on analysing the social, political and cultural dynamics that underpin this conflict.

Firstly: Analysing the conflict in light of social identity theory

Social identity theory [10] starts from the premise that individuals tend to categorise themselves into groups with which they share basic elements of identity. This hypothesis was clearly demonstrated in Kirkuk, where Kurds identify themselves as the original inhabitants and see Kirkuk as the “Holy of Holies of Kurdistan”. Turkmen, on the other hand, see Kirkuk as the historical centre of their cultural identity, in which they have played an important role since the Ottoman era.

This opposing perception of identities creates what is known as “negative identity”, where each side defines itself in opposition to the negation of the other. Educational and media institutions and political discourses have continuously reproduced this differentiation, making the conflict more complex and ramified.

Analysing the conflict according to the realistic conflict theory

The realistic conflict theory [14] asserts that competition for limited resources leads to collective conflicts. This model applies to Kirkuk, where competition over resources - particularly oil, jobs, and local authority - is a constant focus of tension. Power-sharing

after 2003 led to fierce inter-component conflicts over the city's administration, including control of the local council, security, education, and oil.

Field reports indicate that the unbalanced distribution of positions has deepened the Turkmen's sense of exclusion, while the Kurds see themselves as victims of the postponement of the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which would have given them an administrative advantage.

The Conflict in the Light of Symbolic Interaction Theory

This theory [15] focuses on how meanings are created through social and symbolic interaction. In Kirkuk, language, flags, billboards, and even street names became axes of symbolic conflict. Raising the Kurdish flag or using the Turkmen language in signs can be interpreted as a challenge to the opposing identity.

Nationalist events such as Nowruz or the anniversary of the Turkmen massacres become spaces for asserting collective identity, and sometimes for registering a political presence on the scene in Kirkuk city. These practices may be normal in pluralistic societies, but they turn into conflict when the environment lacks tolerance or pluralistic frameworks.

Explanatory conclusions based on the theories of social identity, realist conflict, and symbolic interaction:

- The three theories intersect in explaining that the Kurdish-Turkmen conflict is a struggle for meaning and status before it is a struggle for power.
- The absence of inclusive institutions has contributed to the consolidation of closed identities.
- The failure of the state to provide an inclusive framework for citizenship has turned ethnic identities into political tools.
- Historical memory and the symbolic recall of past events play a key role in reinforcing polarisation.
- The solution lies not only in power-sharing, but also in building cultural trust between the components.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : By interpreting the research findings, it is clear that managing diversity in Kirkuk needs comprehensive institutional reform, social security cannot be achieved without justice in political representation and economic distribution, the issue of identity cannot be separated from geography as the city is highly symbolic for both sides, societal components tend to become closed as a result of repeated cycles of conflict and mutual exclusion, and there is an urgent need to transform the principle of "partnership" into an institutionalised practice on the ground, not just political slogans.

Implication : These conclusions imply that addressing ethnic conflict in Kirkuk requires multidimensional strategies that combine structural reform, equitable resource distribution, and cultural-symbolic reconciliation, highlighting the necessity of linking institutional frameworks with the lived experiences of diverse communities. **Limitation :** However, the study is limited by its contextual focus on Kirkuk, which may not fully

capture the variations of ethnic relations in other disputed or diverse regions of Iraq, thereby constraining the generalisability of its recommendations. **Future Research :** Building on this work, future studies could adopt comparative approaches across multiple Iraqi cities or broader Middle Eastern contexts to examine how different models of institutional reform, educational policy, civil society engagement, and media practices might foster sustainable coexistence and effective diversity management.

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