



مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

Kurds From Secession to Democratic Nation

Brian Ahmed Zardasht



Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

About

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

Translation: Milad Al-Nofaly

Copyright © 2024

www.bayancenter.org
info@bayancenter.org
Since 2014

Kurds From Secession to Democratic Nation

Brian Ahmed Zardasht *

Abstract

The Kurdish issue is one of the most prominent issues in the Middle East, and the most complex, since the end of the two world wars and the end of colonialism in the region, which brought about the concept of the nation state, which has always been one of the most unjust concepts for the rights of the Kurdish people, as a nation and politically, and the feeling of oppression grew with the conclusion of international agreements such as the Convention Lausanne and Sykes-Picot, which stressed the impossibility of establishing a state for the Kurdish nation. Problems are raised here, the most prominent of which is: Does the solution to the Kurdish issue lie in establishing a national state? Will the nationalist orientation of the Kurds lead us to resolving this issue in the Middle East? Is it possible to find alternatives to the nation-state? In order to study these problems, this study is based on the hypothesis that: “It is possible for society to exist without a state, but the state is not possible without society,” which some nations have been able to benefit from in order to achieve their goals and demands, whether within the framework of the state or in the international community. One of the most important results of this paper is that establishing the nation-state is not the way. It is the only solution to guarantee the rights of the Kurds, and secession is not the solution. Rather, it constitutes an obstacle to coexistence within the framework of the Iraqi state.

* Kurdish journalist and researcher, holds a master’s degree in political.

Introduction:

The concept of the nation–state, a product of capitalist modernity, continues to be one of the most significant issues affecting societies today. Despite its role in triggering wars, internal conflicts, and external interventions, the nation–state is still promoted as the optimal solution for societal issues. This perspective often neglects the unique cultural, ethnic, and racial diversities of societies. The nation–state is far more complex and intertwined than commonly presented, often interfering in societal issues in a hierarchical manner.

Nations and peoples frequently fall into the paradigm of the nation–state. Despite consistent rejection and denial faced by Kurdish nationalists, some still attribute the injustices endured by the Kurdish people to the absence of a nation–state, overlooking potential alternatives that could replace it.

This paper aims to provide solutions to the Kurdish issue, advocate for coexistence among the nations of Iraq and the peoples of the Middle East, and offer an alternative to separation. It critically examines the Kurdish nationalist trend, which has historically sparked wars, conflicts, and rebellions against the central authority in Iraq since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. This nationalist trend has been in pursuit of a national identity within the confines of the nation–state.

A series of questions arise, including: What defines a nation? How has it been represented in dictionaries and political lexicons? Is the nation–state a genuine product of nations in the Middle East? What are the alternatives to the nation–state for the Kurds?

The paper proceeds from the hypothesis that “society can exist without a state, but a state cannot exist without a society.” This concept has enabled some nations to achieve their goals and demands, both within the state framework and in the international community.

First: What defines a nation?

The modernist conception views the nation as the fundamental political unit of modern human society. According to most modernists, several key characteristics define a nation:

- **Clearly Defined Territory:** A nation possesses a fixed center with clearly defined and controlled borders, delineating its territorial integrity.
- **Unified Legal System:** Within its territory, a nation maintains a unified legal system and common legal institutions, thereby establishing a legal and political community.
- **Collective Self-Government:** The concept includes well-established self-governance within a sovereign territorial state, ensuring that the governance mechanisms reflect the will and identity of the nation.
- **International System Membership:** A nation participates as a member of the international community of nations, engaging in diplomacy and international relations.
- **Legitimacy Through Nationalist Ideology:** The legitimacy of a nation, and often its formation, is typically grounded in nationalist ideology. This perspective represents a purely nationalist view of what constitutes a nation, serving as a standard in specific cases and often considered the decisive “norm” from which any deviation is measured.¹

¹ Anthony D. Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic*, translated by Safia Mukhtar, Hindawi Foundation, United Kingdom, 2017, p. 25

According to the Political Encyclopedia, a nation is defined as “a human group whose national cohesion and homogeneity are formed through historical stages during which a common language, history, cultural and moral heritage, and a common psychological makeup were achieved. These groups live on one land and share common economic interests, leading to a sense of a strong personality and unified and independent national aspirations and interests.”²

Marxist theory posits that the nation emerges alongside the capitalist system, where the bourgeoisie plays a pivotal role in shaping the nation. This shaping is based on the necessity for unity within the national market—the economic foundation of the nation—resulting in inevitable struggles and conflicts.³

The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations describes the nation as “a vague concept referring to a social group whose members share some or all of the following: a sense of common identity, history, language, ethnic or racial origins, a common economic life, a common geographical location, and a political base.”⁴

Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, articulating a classic principle of the nation-state, described it as a society based on collective law, represented by a legislative council.⁵

From these definitions, we conclude that the nation is a human group that transcends the tribe and clan and possesses a distinct

2 Dr. Abdul Wahab Al-Kayali, *Encyclopedia of Politics (Part One)*, Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing, Fifth Edition, Beirut, 2009, p. 305

3 The same reference, p. 306

4 Graham Evans, Jeffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, Gulf Research Center, United Arab Emirates, 2004, p. 469

5 *Atlas of Political Science*, Oriental Library, Beirut, 2010, p. 63

character, diverging from the concept of pluralism by virtue of national homogeneity, language, and common cultural heritage. Its aim is to achieve hegemony in the political, economic, and social fields, given that it is a product of the nation-state in the era of capitalist modernity. Experiences in the Middle East with the nation-state have demonstrated that it serves primarily as a means of capitalist hegemony and control, facilitating the dispersion of empires and the suppression of democratic republics that pose obstacles to their ascendance.

Your passage delves into the criticisms of traditional definitions of the nation-state and introduces the concept of the “democratic nation” as an alternative, especially in the context of the Kurdish liberation movement. Here’s a refined version that enhances clarity and cohesion:

All the definitions that outline the components of the nation-state, including language, culture, market, land, and history, and limit these elements as the sole and sufficient factors, often conclude by extracting judgments generalized as immutable facts. Such approaches are not consistent with the logic of positive sciences, nor with rational or real-world judgments. These definitions have been one of the factors leading humanity into conflicts and wars, resulting in significant tragedies and calamities suffered by peoples and societies in our modern era. Political systems have adopted these definitions with a crude selectivity that contradicts the historical identities of peoples in defining their state based on these elements.

It was from this realization that the struggle of the Kurdish liberation movement in Turkey began. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the movement acknowledged that the dream of a nation-state was unattainable to the extent that it necessitated proposing an alternative. This alternative, first introduced on March 21, 2005, was

based on the concept of the “democratic nation.” It was proposed as a solution to the Kurdish issue in the Middle East.⁶ This term challenges any boundaries sanctified by the proponents of the nation-state and transcends those claims that present it as an absolute truth, immune to change or modification. The concept of the democratic nation contains two fundamental dimensions:⁷

First: The Local Subjective Dimension

This dimension is realized through the concept of the “democratic nation,” which allows local residents and regions to assert their affiliation to a sub-identity. These sub-identities exist autonomously at the local level, yet individuals and groups also have the right to declare their representation through a common general identity. This general identity is capable of expressing these sub-identities as integral parts of a whole. Such a comprehensive identity is not complete unless it encompasses all its components, which together form the core and essence of national and human commonalities.

Second: The Objective and General Dimension

This approach raises the question: Does this definition accept all other traditional definitions of the nation? If it does, what distinguishes this new definition from the others? While recognizing the importance of traditional nation-defining factors, this should not obstruct efforts in searching for an advanced modern concept—a vessel that includes all

6 Abdullah Ocalan: “Manifesto of Democratic Civilization: The Kurdish Question and the Solution of the Democratic Nation” (Volume Five), Azadi Press, 2017, Lebanon, pp. 35-36

7 The Democratic Nation, Kurdish Center for Studies, Date of Visit 6/7/2024, Available on the website:
<https://nlka.net/archives/6159>

these definitions, infused with the spirit of the age and lessons drawn from the experiences of peoples and the advancements achieved by various sciences across fields.

To transform into a nation, it is sufficient for a group to form a common mental and cultural world, despite variations in class, gender, color, ethnicity, or historical origins. In this refined understanding, the term “nation” can be redefined as the societal form that emerges when clans and kinship tribes evolve into entities defined by language and culture. National societies are broader in scope and larger in size than tribal and ethnic communities. They are assemblies linked by loose connections. Therefore, if a general definition is needed, it can be stated that a nation is a gathering of those who share a common mentality; it is a phenomenon that exists mentally. It is an abstract and imagined entity, sometimes also defined as a nation based on cultural foundations.⁸

This concept integrates all traditional elements that define a nation but without allowing any single factor to dominate in terms of sovereignty, comprehensiveness, and dominance. This approach aligns with the core principles of pluralism, diversity, and difference, highlighting a departure from other definitions that often rely on one or more elements as the sole basis for defining a unitary nation-state. Such traditional definitions typically reject any characteristic that conflicts with its unity.

8 Dr. Taha Ali Ahmed, *The Democratic Nation: Abdullah Ojral’s Guide to Co-existence among Peoples*, in a group of authors, Elhami El-Meligy, 2024, p. 115

The new definition introduces a novel form characterized by pluralism, partnership, diversity, and the acceptance of coexistence. The democratic nation extends beyond mere mental and cultural partnerships; it seeks to encapsulate its capabilities and the elements of its existence within the framework of semi-independent democratic self-administration. This form of administration is a fundamental condition for the existence of a democratic nation and provides a practical alternative to the existing nation-state model.

In this model, if the national mentality realizes itself within the confines of the nation-state, the democratic nation finds its expression in a self-administration that is semi-independent from the nation-state. This administration aims to reflect the will of groups of people who share a collective mentality. It is capable of conceiving mental concepts that foster the possibility of self-management in structures that articulate those shared perceptions and strive for their realization.⁹

The “democratic nation” fundamentally diverges from a state based on nationalism; it is not defined by a nation or nationality. Instead, it champions a model of democratic and semi-independent administration as the primary condition for its development, offering an alternative to the traditional nation-state model.¹⁰ This approach represents a quest for democratization outside the confines of the nation-state framework.¹¹

Ernest Renan (1823–1892), a French scholar and the first to propose a conceptual framework for the nation, elaborated on this in his 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne University, titled “What is a Nation?” Renan argued that the essence of nationhood hinges on the continuous

9 Democratic Nation, op. cit.

10 Abdullah Ocalan, the previously mentioned reference, p. 45

11 The same reference, p. 435

desire of its people to live together, positing that the existence of a nation is a continual choice. According to him, this choice is the right of individuals to freely determine their political destiny, thus suggesting that material conditions such as a homeland or a common market are not necessary for the establishment of a nation. He highlighted examples of nations that, despite prolonged periods of dispersion and lacking a homeland, have become formidable entities in global markets.¹²

Second: The “Kurdish” Nation–State

It is unfortunate that while the Kurds have alternatives to conflicts and disputes in the region, the Kurdish national elite still believes that the solution lies in the establishment of a Kurdish nation–state.

Throughout the twentieth century, attempts to establish a nation–state based on “Kurdish origin” have consistently failed. An international and regional consensus has been clearly established, revealing through the actions of stakeholders that the dream of establishing a Kurdish nation–state remains a distant prospect.

The Treaty of Sèvres, signed on August 20, 1920, was one of the treaties most sympathetic to Kurdish rights. Yet, it guaranteed the Kurds nothing more than the establishment of an area of local self–rule in regions inhabited by a Kurdish majority, located east of the Euphrates River, south of the Armenian border, and north of the borders between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.¹³ Nonetheless, the experience of self–rule in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is still considered nascent.

12 Dr. Taha Ali Ahmed, p. 113

13 Article 62 of the Treaty of Sèvres

The Autonomy Agreement for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was signed between the then Iraqi government and Mustafa Barzani on March 11, 1970.¹⁴ According to Article 116 of Chapter One in Part Five of the Iraqi Constitution, the federal system in the Republic of Iraq consists of the capital, regions, central governorates, and local administrations.¹⁵ Article 117 recognizes the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq, affirming the existing regional authorities upon the implementation of this constitution.¹⁶

The Kurdish elite unanimously view the establishment of a Kurdish state as a national, historical, and human right. However, international treaties have consistently disappointed them by dividing them across four neighboring countries: Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. The dream of establishing a Kurdish state has persisted among the Kurdish elite for decades, intertwined with armed struggle, escalating nationalist sentiments, a strong sense of distinction, and, on the other side, profound disillusionment and frustration over the unfulfilled demands.¹⁷

However, the establishment of a Kurdish state faces many obstacles, most notably the regional reluctance to cede parts of four countries to create a Kurdistan state. Additionally, the geopolitical nature of the Kurdistan region makes it risky to attempt such a move, a reality often overlooked by the Kurdish political elite, especially in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Furthermore, the absence of essential state-building components, such as infrastructure and political and

14 دیار غریب، خویندنه و هیه کی نوین بو مین ژووی کوردستان، شغان، ۲۰۱۶، ل ۵۸۸

15 Article 116 of the Permanent Iraqi Constitution, 2005

16 Article 117 of the Iraqi Constitution

17 Dr. Ali Taher Al-Hamood, *The Kurdish Elite: State, Identity, Citizenship*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Amman, 2019, p. 3

legal institutions, compounds these challenges. This was evident from the outcomes of the referendum held on September 25, 2017, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The aftermath of the referendum included actions by the federal government such as retaking control of Kirkuk, cutting salaries, and restricting Kurdistan's ability to operate international flights, among other punitive measures. The referendum was not deemed the best solution or option. Some Kurdish elites criticized it, suggesting that the "Kurdish political mentality is tribal," and the referendum was merely a reactionary tribal response to the Baghdad government's dismissal of the region's president's uncle, Finance Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, on corruption charges.¹⁸ Moreover, issues concerning minorities in Kurdistan, for whom the Kurdistan government has not provided guarantees within the framework of a Kurdish state, exacerbate the situation. There is also no assurance that these minorities will not seek to secede from any future Kurdish political entity.

Recognizing the Kurds' right to self-governance and to determine their own fate should be a fundamental requirement in any nation-state where Kurds reside. The Iraqi state, under the 2005 constitution, has managed to some extent to ensure the realization of a civil state and the coexistence of its citizens. It was a strategic error for the ruling elite in the Kurdistan Region to pursue the path of building a Kurdish nation-state. Today, the people prioritize their livelihood, security, and rights, which they feel can be better guaranteed by the Iraqi state than by pursuing the path of building a separate nation-state.

¹⁸ The same reference, p. 4.

Third: Moving Beyond the State Dream Towards the “Democratic Nation” Alternative

In contemporary political literature, the concept of the “democratic nation” is presented as a contrast to the traditional nation-state. This concept is grounded in the idea that people can achieve their national transformation through politicization, without relying on the authority of the state. A democratic nation is built through self-governing institutions that handle self-defense, economic, legal, social, diplomatic, and cultural areas, eschewing authoritarian transformation.

The “democratic nation” is envisaged as a society where marginalization and social exclusion vanish. In this society, neither geography nor language determines nationhood; instead, it is a nation characterized by its diversity and democratic management.

Democracy, fundamentally “the rule of the people,” implies the establishment of groups that manage themselves without state or authoritative interference, embodying decentralized administration.¹⁹ This concept has gained traction, especially after the crises known as the Arab Spring, signifying shared administration. Administrative functions are distributed among various regions and smaller administrative units, enhancing the role of civil society. This involves empowering local administrations that rely on councils and communes, practicing direct democracy to some extent, and restructuring social and power relations from the smallest social units up to major political, social, and economic institutions.²⁰

19 Abdullah Ocalan, previously cited reference, p. 33

20 Nourhat Haftaro, Decentralized Administration between History and Current Reality, Date of Visit 6/8/2024, Research Paper Published on the Website: <https://firatn.com/?p=1271>

Decentralization allows local authorities to enjoy administrative, economic, and service independence from central governance. It activates the role of communes, cooperatives, and local municipalities, involving the broadest possible number of people in decision-making, interaction, and participation. Decentralization also reduces the risks associated with poor decision-making, as any adverse outcomes are confined to the local sector where the decision was made, unlike in centralized systems where a single wrong decision can impact the entire system.²¹

The Kurds can coexist with various pluralities and ethnicities under the democratic nation model, allowing all societal components to freely practice their cultures and languages. The democratic nation can accommodate diverse identities, thereby uniting multiple nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and sects under the umbrella of community self-management. This approach may resemble a confederation within existing political borders and is capable of dismantling the stereotypical, combative, nationalistic, and gender-based mentalities often found in nation-states.

A democratic nation is defined not by strict political boundaries, a single language, culture, religion, or historical interpretation but by a pluralistic society where freedom and equality among citizens and communities prevail. This model fosters solidarity and is essential for achieving a truly democratic society.

21 Nourhat Haftaro, Reference Previously Cited

The democratic nation provides the Kurds with the right to transform into a nation whose aspirations are embodied in a semi-independent democratic body, open to other models of other nations, capable of including other nations within its folds, seeking to find factors of unity between the cultures of the peoples of the Middle East in the general perspective of the Kurdish issue as a nation distributed among nation-states that do not recognize the Kurdish presence within their borders. The process of searching for solutions to the issues of conflict and disagreement within these states will necessarily lead to finding a just and peaceful democratic solution to the Kurdish issue, and this search will necessarily require considering two basic dimensions: First, the two nations abandoning their statist tendencies and desires to monopolize the state and disregarding the recklessness and insistence that the state be a nation defined by definitions that indicate unilateralism, monopolization, and domination, and rejecting the different other; Second, the state's recognition and acceptance of the concept of semi-democratic independence as the only solution to resolve the outstanding issues while recognizing all cultures within the state's borders as the culture of the entire nation within the framework of a state of harmony. The state's refusal to accept this democratic solution based on the right to self-determination that allows the individual and society to manage themselves will lead to other options that reject the state's policies designed to nationalize the state and confront the solutions of genocide followed, and the continuation of wars and ongoing fighting.²²

It is worth noting that liberalism colors these forms of decentralized governance with a national or religious color under the name of 'individual rights', and instead of a political solution, the crisis deepens, and the situation gets worse. One of the worst applications of this abnormal and deviant model is the example of Iraq, where sectarian

²² Democratic Nation, *op. cit.*

and racist tendencies are still growing in these two countries, which have been destroyed by civil wars. The second point that must be addressed is liberalism's pushing of these administrations towards states, and here we see the model of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Catalonia in Spain, where the two regions' attempts at national mobilization and vulgar populist discourse failed, through which the democratic demands of society were grafted with the interests of the dominant bourgeois class, and this is what sparked a violent reaction from the central authorities, what we can call the sophistries of liberalism regarding the right to self-determination.

Nation-states are the root of the problems facing the Kurdish people in the Middle East. Establishing a separate Kurdish nation-state will not resolve the issues of the Kurdish people but will reproduce the same problems they currently suffer under the control of other nation-states. Over the past decades, the Kurds have struggled not only against oppression by dominant powers and demanded recognition of their existence but also to liberate their society from the grip of feudalism. Therefore, there is no point in replacing old chains with new ones or reinforcing oppression, which is what establishing a nation-state implies in the context of capitalist modernity. The alternative lies in the exercise of power jointly by local communities, not by a strong central government. Citizenship should be based on the principle of equal participation in political decision-making and the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation. Instead, a democratic confederal system based on local self-administration and direct popular participation should be adopted.²³

23 Hanifi Baris: sovereignty autonomy and citizenship in the Kurdish model of political community, in trevor stack and rose luminiello (edited): engaging authority citizenship and political community, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2022, pp 101-104

Thus, the Kurdish liberation movement has abandoned the principle of national self-determination and envisioned a political community other than the nation. Kurdish movements in Turkey and Syria have moved away from nation-state politics because they see the state, the nation-state, and the nation-state system as both the problem and the oppressive force.

Kurdistan is not solely the homeland of the Kurds; it is also home to many communities and peoples who consider it their homeland. They emphasize their desire to establish a democratic political environment for all.²⁴

Resolving the Kurdish issue in Kurdistan within the framework of the democratic nation will significantly contribute to addressing the nation-state crisis in the Middle East and the impasse it has created. It is evident that overcoming the conflicts, deadlocks, and crises caused by the nation-states in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey is only possible through the democratic nation solution. Insisting on the nation-state model leads to more issues, conflicts, and strife. Moreover, the creation of additional nation-states will not bring solutions but will only add new problems.²⁵

As observed, the democratic nation solution does not necessarily negate the existence of nation-states. Instead, the solution proposed by the democratic nation model requires nation-states to adhere to a democratic constitutional framework. The Kurdish project aims to strengthen local administrations to the extent that no law, language, culture, or worldview can be imposed from the top-down.²⁶

24 Hanifi Baris: op cit, pp 105-106

25 Abdullah Ocalan, previously cited reference.

26 Dr. Ahmed Anbioh, Re-reading the State According to the Concept of the Democratic Nation, Date of Visit: 6/11/2024, Research Paper Published on the Website: <https://www.atoonra.com/2024/05/18>

Conclusions And Recommendations:

By addressing the subject of the Kurds, from separation to the democratic nation, and after validating the hypothesis of the study, we have reached the following conclusions and recommendations:

Conclusions:

1. The definitions that determine the components of the nation-state, or the nation at its emergence—such as language, culture, market, land, and history—have been one of the reasons leading humanity into conflicts and wars, from which peoples and societies in our modern era have suffered.
2. To transform into a nation, it is sufficient for a common mental and cultural world to be formed, despite differences in class, gender, color, ethnicity, or even differences in the roots of the nation.
3. The concept of the nation-state in the Middle East is not a product of the struggles of nations and peoples but rather a product of capitalist modernity, which did not account for the diversity and multiplicity of those peoples.
4. The nationalist vision complicates the Kurdish issue rather than solving it. The results of the referendum held on September 25, 2017, demonstrated that the nationalist approach is not the best option for the Kurds, and achieving the dream of a nation-state is out of reach, thus necessitating the provision of alternatives.

Recommendations:

1. The right of nations to self-determination is not limited to establishing a nation-state; the democratic confederal approach also offers a new way to exercise this right.
2. Linking the solution of national and social problems to the nation-state represents the most tyrannical aspect of modernity. Thus, adopting a new administrative approach in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq serves as a tool for resolving outstanding issues with Baghdad.
3. Activation of constitutional articles related to organizing the relationship between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region, such as the oil and gas law, division of financial resources, and guaranteeing the rights of Iraqi components, is essential.
4. Reducing the influence of capitalist modernity by building strong international unity and solidarity with all forces of democratic modernity.