

A note on language politics in Iraqi Kurdistan and their repercussions for pan-Kurdish cultural unity

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The partial autonomy of the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan could, in theory, provide the opportunity for the development and dissemination of a common Kurdish language and culture, thereby contributing towards pan-Kurdish cultural unity. However, recent developments in Iraqi Kurdistan, particular in the fields of language and education policy, paradoxically appear to be working in the opposite direction. Indeed, it seems that developing cultural and linguistic unity among the Kurds world-wide is simply not part of the agenda of the decision-makers in Iraqi Kurdistan. In this brief contribution, I will briefly outline some of the most striking developments, drawing particularly on a recent visit to Iraqi Kurdistan, where I had the opportunity of meeting with educationalists at a number of institutions in and around the city of Dohuk in North Iraq.

The majority of the Iraq's 4-6 million Kurds speak Sorani, or Central Kurdish. In the most northerly provinces, however, there are about one million speakers of Bahdînî Kurdish, a variety of Northern, or Kurmanji Kurdish. This variety is close to that spoken by the vast majority of Kurds outside Iraq, so that Bahdînî speakers have little difficulty communicating with other Kurmanji speakers. Thus the most salient cultural link between the non-Iraqi Kurds, and the Bahdînî speakers of Iraq, is the common Kurmanji or Northern Kurdish language. The main cultural fault line, and indeed probably the main obstacle to greater pan-national communication, is the use of different scripts: the Kurds of Iraq predominantly use the Arabic script, those of Turkey and the Caucasus use the Roman or the Cyrillic script. There have, at various times, been moves to switch to a Roman-based script for the Kurds of North Iraq, and indeed, a number of publications do appear in the Roman script. However, these efforts have remained half-hearted. In the core areas of primary education, and daily media, the Arabic script is dominant (see below). On the other side of the border, in Turkey, on the other hand, there has been no serious efforts to adopt the Arabic script for Kurdish.

Full fluency in the Arabic script includes, for example, the ability to read different varieties of the script, read hand-writing, the sub-titles on TV-programmes, or menus on cell-phones and computers etc. Unless these skills are acquired as part of primary education, they are extremely difficult to master. Few adults have the time and the commitment to do so. For the vast majority of Kurds in Turkey, the Arabic script remains an insurmountable obstacle, preventing full participation in the literary culture of their Kurdish relatives in North Iraq. The state border between Turkey and Iraq is thus underscored by a script border, making it a real cultural divide between the Roman-based script culture of Turkey, in which the Kurds of Turkey participate, and the Arabic-based script culture of Iraq. It is perhaps particularly ironic that Mustafa

Kemal's script reform in Turkey (1928) not only succeeded in cutting off the Turks culturally from their fellow Muslims in neighbouring countries (see Haig 1996, Lewis 2002). It also contributed to alienating the Kurds of Turkey from their relatives in Iraq and Iran.

It is not merely the script that is underscoring the differences between the Kurds of Turkey and those of Iraq. Language policy in Iraqi Kurdistan is now moving in the direction of elevating Sorani Kurdish to a privileged position as standard variety. For example, even the KDP-oriented newspaper *Xebat* is written mostly in Sorani (and of course the Arabic script), making it incomprehensible to all but a tiny minority of the Kurds of Turkey. Likewise in education, Sorani enjoys higher prestige (there is some talk of creating a blend of Sorani and Kurmanji, "Sormanj", but few people appear to take this option seriously). On a recent visit to schools in the town of Zakho I was able to discuss educational issues with a number of teachers and university lecturers. The general picture is that Bahdîni is used in primary schools, Sorani is used in intermediate schools and secondary schools, but with Arabic also playing a crucial role. In practice, this policy appears to be quite chaotic. For example, in the third year of primary schools, the books used for Kurdish contain texts in Bahdîni Kurdish, but they are interspersed with glossaries giving Sorani vocabulary, and exercises in Sorani grammar. In intermediate school, it appears that Bahdîni has virtually no presence in the written curriculum. In the textbooks for teaching English in schools, the vocabulary translations are into Arabic.

In discussions with pupils from the Bahdîni-speaking regions (Dohuk and Zakho), all the pupils expressed disappointment and frustration at the language policy in education. Most have no prior knowledge of Sorani, and simply do not understand the vocabulary with which subjects like geography or mathematics are taught. Some of the teachers are recruited from outside the Bahdîni region and do not speak Bahdîni at all. Given this situation, many pupils prefer to concentrate on Arabic, which at least possesses a stable standard, international status, enjoys wide media presence, and raises chances for professional advancement. At the University of Dohuk, which I also visited, Arabic also plays an important role, being generally permitted as the language for written assignments. In fact there are lecturers at the university who do not speak Kurdish at all, having been trained in Baghdad. Although it was extremely difficult to find anyone prepared to make a clear statement on language policy, it is quite evident that despite the pro-Kurdish rhetoric, Arabic continues to enjoy high prestige in higher education and commerce throughout Iraqi Kurdistan.

There are many reasons behind these developments, some practical, some ideological. Sorani already had a well-established written standard language, and a comparatively rich literary tradition, so it seems that policy-makers have taken the path of least resistance in adopting it as the standard for schools, rather than creating new pedagogical materials in Bahdîni. Likewise, the school books for English are essentially the same books that have always been used throughout Iraq (though the pictures of Saddam have been hastily replaced by pictures of Barzani). But the implications of these developments for pan-Kurdish cultural unity are far-reaching. By educating the next generation of Iraqi-Kurds through a basically Sorani/Arabic literary medium, the cultural schism dividing the Kurds of Turkey from those of Iraq will, if anything, be widened.

There is a bitter irony behind all this. Kurmanji Kurdish is the language spoken by the vast majority of Kurds world-wide, probably somewhere around 20 million speakers. For the vast majority of these people, basic linguistic rights such as education in their mother tongue, have consistently been denied (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak 1995, Haig 2003). Yet in Iraqi Kurdistan, the single place on the planet where compulsory education through the medium of Kurdish is actually practicable, speakers of Kurmanji Kurdish (the Bahdîni variety) still find themselves linguistically disadvantaged and discriminated, and obliged to acquire basic educational skills through the medium of other languages. Why, one wonders, are the decades of experience with the Roman-based script for Kurmanji not being utilized in education in Iraqi-Kurdistan? Teaching material has long since been available, for example in Sweden, using this medium. Whatever the reasons behind them may be, the decisions in favour of the Arabic script, and a Sorani-based standard, will result in the long-term cultural alienation of the Bahdîni speakers of Iraq from their linguistically closest relatives, the Kurds of Turkey. While such a development will surely be welcomed by Turkish politicians, the long-term consequences for pan-Kurdish cultural unity are likely to be disastrous, and irreversible.

Postscript

On April 20, 2008, the Kurdish weekly *Hawlati* (issue No. 415) published a petition signed by 53 academics and literary figures, in which they argued for the establishment of a single official language in Iraqi Kurdistan, namely Sorani. The petition and the ensuing debate is discussed in a paper by Hassan Ghazi (2009). I am extremely grateful to him for drawing this to my attention, and for enlightening discussion.

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