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The non-education of Kurds

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Abstract

On the basis of short summaries of the general position of Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, and their education in particular, the article concludes that Kurds are subjected to non-education in harsh submersion programmes. The educational provision in Kurdistan violates most of the language-in-education requirements of international law. The same is true for Kurds in diaspora in most parts of the world. Linguistic and cultural genocide is attempted, with the tacit complicity of the West. The future of Kurdish education depends to a large extent on the political situation in the Middle East. Political solutions are needed before educational problems can be tackled. Within international law, a new interpretation by the UN Human Rights Committee of Article 27 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN, 1966) might give grounds for hope for the future. An Appendix to the article provides a concrete example of an education system at work in Kurdistan.

Introduction

Kurdistan, the land of the Kurds, comprises an area of some 550.000 square kilometers. The Kurdish population has been estimated at between 25 and 40 million. The Kurds constitute the majority of the population in their homeland. Kurdistan is divided between/colonized by Iran (8 million), Iraq (5 million), Syria (1½ million) and Turkey (18-20 million); there are ½ million Kurds in ex-Soviet Union and nearly a million in diaspora, mostly settled in Western Europe (these last estimates come from the 65-member Kurdistan Parliament in Exile which started its official functions in April 1995.

Kurdish, an Indo-European language from the northwestern Iranian family, is closely related to (Iranian) Farsi/Persian. It is not related to Turkish (an Altaic non-Indo-European language) or to (Iraqi or Syrian) Arabic (a Semitic non-Indo-European language).

There are two main dialects/varieties of Kurdish, Kurmanji, spoken in Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan, in the northern parts of Iranian Kurdistan and western Iraqi Kurdistan and in (former Soviet) Armenia, and Sorani, spoken in the central parts of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan) and several smaller dialects/varieties (e.g. Zaza/Dimili).
In terms of the number of speakers, Kurdish ranks fortieth (based on data in Leclerc 1986: 55, 138) among the world's estimated 12- 14.000 languages (Sign languages are included; the estimate for oral languages is 6-7.000). This numerical strength is, however, undermined by the forcible division of Kurdistan among five neighbouring states which deny the Kurds national, linguistic and educational rights. Unlike many Western countries where the market to a large extent dictates the unequal distribution of linguistic power, in the Middle East the state uses legal, administrative, political and coercive power to implement varying levels of a policy of linguicide. In the Middle East, most of the Kurds are settled in their homeland Kurdistan (except in Turkey where almost half the population has been deported to or resettled in the west of Turkey. In the European diaspora the Kurds are a relatively new but sizeable minority scattered mostly in EU countries and primarily in Germany. Thus, unlike the indigenous ethnic/linguistic minorities such as the Welsh and Gaelic, they have no claim to land or territory - a situation which promotes linguistic assimilation. Kurdish is used rather extensively in international and national broadcasting, e.g. Voice of America, Radio Baghdad and Radio Iran and a dozen clandestine radio stations. It is also the language of a daily satellite TV programme launched by the Kurdish community in Europe in 1995.

The official situation of the Kurdish language

The official situation of the Kurdish language in Iran

The 1979 constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (amended in 1989) declares, like the first constitution of 1906, Persian (spoken as a native tongue by only half of Iran's population) "the official and common language and script of the people of iran" (Article 15). This article allows the "use of local and ethnic languages in the press and mass media". Kurdish is in fact used in book and magazine publishing (no daily or weekly papers) and broadcasting (which is a state monopoly). In 1992, Kurdish ranked second among the languages of external broadcasting originating from Tehran (1825 hours per year). In addition to this, radio stations from the Kurdistan province broadcast 1863 hours in Kurdish and Persian. The current policy of allowing the use of Kurdish in the media was adopted in the previous monarchical regime in the 1950s in response to developments in the political situation of the region, which Tehran considered a threat to its rule over Kurdistan (e.g. Egypt's radio programme in Kurdish, the 1958 coup in Iraq, the autonomist movement of 1961-75 in Iraqi Kurdistan; see Hassanpour 1992: 125-132, 284-291).

The official situation of the Kurdish language in Iraq

Iraq is the only country, besides the former Soviet Union, which has recognized Kurdish as a "local language" (the 1931 "Local Languages Law") and "official [language] ... in the Kurdish region." Both before and after the 1991 Gulf war, Kurdish was used, within the limits set by the state, in print and in broadcast media. In spite of official recognition, the state under the Ba'th Party pursued a long-term policy of Arabization and de- ethnicization of the Kurds (Hassanpour 1992: 119-125). In the territory controlled by the Regional Government of Kurdistan (formed in 1992 and protected by the U.S. and its Gulf War allies), Kurdish is the official language and is used extensively in print media and radio and television. In spite of paper shortages and a ruined economy, two daily papers produced by two major Kurdish political parties have appeared regularly.

The official situation of the Kurdish language in Syria

During most of the French Mandate (1920-46), writing, publishing, and broadcasting in Kurdish were freer in Syria than elsewhere. The Kurds were allowed to publish books and magazines until 1937 when this freedom was curtailed, apparently because the Kurds had supported the struggle for the independence of Syria. During WWII, when Kurdistan had considerable strategic significance, the French Mandate authorities allowed the resumption of journalistic activity and provided a radio programme in Kurdish (on Radio-Levant, 1941-1946), all aimed at war-related propaganda. The journals HAWAR and RONAHI appeared in the 1930's and 1940's, and altogether some 30 books were published between 1925 and 1959.

Beginning in the mid-1950's, after Syrian independence, the government seized and destroyed Kurdish publications. Schools built in Kurdish communities banned language instruction in any language other than Arabic, which is still true today (Middle East Watch, 1991:99; see also Sheikhmous 1993). Syria's policy vis-a-vis the Kurdish language can be characterized as linguicide, as part of the regime's de-ethnicization program (Middle East Watch, 1991:96).

The official situation of the Kurdish language in Turkey

Oppression of the Kurdish language, Turkish policy since the time of Atatürk and enshrined in the Constitution of 1923, has been intensified in recent years. The deprivation of linguistic human rights in Turkish Kurdistan has been formalized in the Turkish Constitution of 1982 and in several recent laws.

It is significant that Turkey has NOT signed some of the most central human rights instruments, for instance the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and The International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights or Civil and Political Rights.

The Turkish Constitution and the Law to Fight Terrorism (Law 3713) are in clear defiance of the Treaty of Lausanne (July 21, 1923), part of which (Section III Concerning Protection of Minorities) deals specifically with Turkey and guarantees several linguistic rights (e.g. Articles 37 and 39; see also all the articles 38-44).

Samples from the Turkish Constitution (1982) restricting Kurdish, still in force:

The state of Turkey is in its state territory and state citizens an indivisible whole. Its language is Turkish. (Art. 3).

Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk. (Art. 66, Para 1).

No language prohibited by law may be used for disclosure or publication of ideas and opinions. Written or printed materials, records, tapes, videotapes as well as other means of expression that are in violation of this prohibition will be confiscated. (Art. 26/3).

No publications or broadcasts may be made in any language prohibited by law. (Art. 28/2).

No language other than Turkish may be taught as a native language to citizens of Turkey in instructional and educational institutions. (Art. 42/9).

By annulling a few of the worst paragraphs in some other laws (12 April 1991) Turkey wanted the international opinion to believe that Kurdish can now be freely used. It is not true. Partly, the Constitution has not been changed and the opposition against changing it seems to be growing. Partly, the Law to Fight Terrorism of 12 April 1991 (Law No. 3713) recapitulates most of the prohibitions on the use of Kurdish in the earlier, annulled laws, but often in a more covert form. The only ban on the Kurdish language which has been lifted is that on private use, provided it does not fall under the other paragraphs. Thus Kurds are now allowed to speak Kurdish in their homes and sing Kurdish love songs in their gardens, but if a Kurdish child complains to a parent in a private garden, while picking beans, about not being allowed to speak Kurdish during the breaks in school, this act is still a terrorist crime. The notorious blanket Article 8, Propaganda against the indivisible unity of the State, from the Law 3713 stipulates

Written and oral propaganda and assemblies, meetings and demonstrations aiming at damaging the indivisible unity of the State of the Turkish Republic with its territory and nation are forbidden, regardless of the method, intention and ideas behind it.

Hundreds of people (writers, journalists, members of parliament, etc) have been imprisoned according to this Article, thousands have been fined, many have disappeared and been tortured and killed. Thousands of publications have been confiscated. Despite several protests from the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, both the physical genocide and the linguistic and cultural genocide against the Kurds in Turkey and in the Turkish part of Kurdistan continue unabated.

Educational rights

Educational rights in Iran(ian part of Kurdistan)

Kurds are constitutionally deprived of the right to education in their native tongue. The 1979 Constitution stipulates that "official documents, correspondence and statements, as well as textbooks shall be written in this [Persian] language and [Arabic] script." (Article 15). Although this article permits "the teaching of ethnic literature in the school together with Persian language instruction", the Islamic regime has refused to implement it. This can be explained by the fact that native tongue education is a most important goal of Kurdish nationalists, who consider it indispensable for the survival of the language and nation-building. The two apostles of Kurdish nationalism, Ahmad-e-Khani (1650-1706) and Haji Qadiri Koyi (1817-97) considered the pen and the sword as the two pillars of a Kurdish state. Under the political conditions of the 1970s, the Department of Linguistics of Tehran University offered, under recommendation of the government, two courses on Kurdish language.

Educational rights in Iraq(i part of Kurdistan)

Education has been the site of unceasing struggle between the Kurds and the Iraqi state since its establishment by Britain in the wake of WWI. Under British occupation and mandate (1918-32), Kurds demanded native tongue education on all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary. Although the League of Nations recognized the right of the Kurds to native tongue education, and recommended the British mandatory power to allow the use of Kurdish as "the official language" of "teaching in the schools", and although Britain gave "assurance" to carry out the recommendation, Kurdish education was limited to a dozen primary schools. The Kurds continued to pressure for

more schools and for secondary and higher education. Britain vehemently opposed these demands in Iraq and before the League's Permanent Mandates Commission. Britain refused even to allow bilingual (Kurdish and Arabic) education in secondary and higher education. The policy was clear - to "integrate" the Kurds into the Arab state and to prevent the consolidation of Kurdish nationalism and its spread into Iran, Turkey and Syria. This policy continued to be implemented by the monarchical regime and the various republican governments that came to power after 1958. The autonomist armed resistance movement of 1961-75 was able to wrest from the government limited secondary education in Kurdish and a university which used Kurdish only in the B.A. programme in Kurdish language and literature. By the early 1990s, all secondary school textbooks had been translated into Kurdish. However, almost half of Kurdistan was outside the "autonomous region" created by the government in 1974 and received no education in Kurdish. In the autonomous region too, a policy of Arabization was being implemented.

In the area controlled by the Regional Government of Kurdistan, the Kurdicization of the educational system suffered from the lack of financial resources , textbooks and teaching materials, teachers and teacher training programmes, and a situation of continuing internal and external wars and uncertain future.

Educational rights in Syria

Mother tongue education has never been authorized by any Syrian government (Hassanpour, 1992:333). According to Rondot (a French mandate official), use of the Kurdish language was free, without being official, in the region during the period of the French Mandate. Yet absence of school materials in the language and absence of popular demand made the organization of education hard (Hassanpour, 1992:137). According to Nazdar, however, in the Kurdish townships of Qamishli, Amuda, and Afrin, state education was in Arabic only, but Kurdish schoolbooks were circulated freely (Nazdar 1994, 198).

According to Zaza, the Mandate's refusal to permit mother tongue education was due to political considerations. The young Kurdish writer Mustafa Boti applied for permission to open a school with Kurdish as the language of instruction, but the Mandate authorities refused him permission.

Since 1963 school geography texts have dropped all mention of the Kurdish minority in Syria.

Educational rights in Turkey/Turkish part of Kurdistan

As is clear from the laws referred to above, it is illegal to teach the Kurdish language as a subject, or to teach through the medium of Kurdish in Turkey. Most Kurds cannot read or write their own language, and those who do, have learned it outside schools, with great danger to themselves. Many Kurdish children get no formal education whatsoever and many of those who do, are pushed out early. Many of the rest profit little from teaching in a language that they at least initially do not know. Boarding schools have been used extensively for assimilation. Several books on Kurdistan contain chapters describing this non-education. When the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities was adopted at the meeting of Minister's Deputies in Strasbourg on 10 November 1994, the Turkish delegation, "while insisting that Turkish guest workers in Germany constituted a national minority also insisted that there was no Kurdish minority in Turkey!" (as reported by the Secretary General of The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, Dónall ■ Riagáin, in Contact Bulletin 12:1, 1995, 1).

Educational rights in the diaspora

In many European countries, in Australia and North America minority students (in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools) enjoy the right to receive one, two or more hours of teaching in their native languages as a subject. However, budget cuts and the backlash against multiculturalism are threatening these programmes in many countries. These programmes are either part of the curriculum of a school (e.g. in Sweden though this is changing) or administered separately on a weekend day (e.g. in Canada). In the former case, the native tongue (which is often devalued or rejected by minority students taught in the dominant language) may receive some recognition or legitimacy in the eyes of the students since it is part of the school programme and is taught in the same school environment as other subjects.

In Canada, education is under provincial government jurisdiction, and funding is usually provided for a few hours per week of "heritage language" training (all languages other than official (i.e. English and French) or Aboriginal.

Many of these programmes are threatened by budget cuts. The small Kurdish community (1.160 persons according to the 1991 census), scattered throughout a vast country, cannot supply the minimum of 25 students required to offer 2½ hours of teaching in Ontario province.

Denmark and Sweden have sizable Kurdish populations, Finland, Iceland and Norway have very few. The education of Kurdish children is better in Scandinavia and Holland than anywhere else in the world - still it violates most of the basic linguistic human rights. The Kurdish language is used in a few day care institutions part of the time in Denmark and especially Sweden. It is not taught as a subject in schools in Denmark (the so called mother tongue teaching for those Kurdish children who get it in the first place, is given in Turkish, Farsi or Arabic) but Kurdish is used by a few teachers in explanations in elementary grades. Sweden has Kurdish mother tongue teaching and has had a few classes taught partly through the medium of Kurdish. In Sweden, various government agencies have funded the publication of no less than a dozen primary textbooks (language, history, geography, dictionaries, etc). Many libraries have Kurdish language collections of books and a few magazines. Also, a considerable number of children's stories have been translated into Kurdish. The Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) has funded the publication of children's books for use in Iraqi Kurdistan. Some funding was also provided for dubbing children's cartoons on video. Budget cuts have, however, reduced the scope of these efforts. The Kurdish studies programme in Uppsala University will contribute to the training of scholars specializing in Kurdish language and culture. With very modest government support, Sweden has emerged as an active centre of Kurdish publishing and culture activity. This is remarkable in contrast to Germany where the majority of the Kurds live in Europe. In Germany, the federal government has apparently a policy of appeasing the Turkish state, despite some support for Kurdish activities among politicians in several Länder (see e.g. Meyer-Ingwersen 1989, Paech 1994). Copenhagen University in Denmark has re-established the teaching of Turkish from the autumn of 1995 and there might be some teaching of Kurdish in the future. INALCO's (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) diploma programme in Kurdish in France and the educational activities of the Institut kurde de Paris' should likewise be mentioned.

Kurds are registered as Turks, Iranians etc in the census in the Middle East and, in most cases, in diaspora, i.e. their identity is denied. In Sweden the Kurdish school children's mother tongue is registered in schools if they (dare to) claim Kurdish. Attempts to train Kurdish teachers (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas 1984: 279- 280) or demand minimal mother-tongue related rights or even the registering of Kurdish names has on several occasions met resistance and threats from Turkish Embassies in Denmark and Germany.

While the Kurds are deprived of the right to mother tongue medium education and the teaching of their mother tongue as a subject in their homeland in Iran, Syria and Turkey, they have been able to build a school in the sky. The Kurdish satellite station, Med-TV, launched in 1995 in England by the Kurdish community and watched by Kurds in Europe and the Middle East has a daily feature, Roj bas Mamosta (Good Day, Teacher). This daily programme shows a primary school classroom where the teacher teaches Kurdish. In order to abort the project, the Turkish government has done everything possible, from smashing satellite dishes and arresting viewers in Kurdistan to diplomatic pressure on Britain to revoke the license.

Comparison with existing human rights conventions

Here we merely list a selection of paragraphs from international covenants and European resolutions/recommendations that Turkish language law is in defiance of (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak 1994). Most of the paragraphs mentioned can be found in the Appendix in Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson (Eds.) 1994.

Covenants:

- The Charter of the United Nations (1945), paragraphs 6.11, 55.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), paragraphs 2, 26.
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), paragraph 13.(1).
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Art. 27.
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Art. 30.

Resolutions etc:

- The Concluding Document, Vienna Meeting of Representatives of Participating States of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (the CSCE, now OSCE), January 1989, paragraph 45, in the section on "Information"; Document of the Copenhagen meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE,

1990, paragraphs 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 40; paragraph 40 states unambiguously that national minorities should have the right to maintain their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity, the right to seek voluntary and public assistance to do so in educational institutions, and should not be subjected to assimilation against their will: Charter of Paris for a New Europe, November 1990, CSCE.
- The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages has great symbolic value, but explicitly excludes migrant languages. In addition, the countries signing it can decide which minorities they want to apply it to, i.e. even if they accept that a group in their country is a minority, they do not necessarily need to extend the rights to this group. The European Parliament's Directive on the education of the children of migrant workers (77/466/EEC of 25.7.77) is fraught with difficulties of interpretation and implementation but might be of some support for immigrant and refugee Kurds in European countries, as might the recent UN Declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (18 December 1992) and the UN Convention on migrant workers and their families (which accords minimal rights to the mother tongues and is assimilation- oriented).

Future prospects

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Art. 27, grants the best binding minority language protection so far:

"In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language."

In the customary reading of Article 27, it only granted non- discrimination prescription, not rights, and only granted to individuals, not collectivities. And "persons belonging to ... minorities" only had these "rights" in states which accept that the minorities exist. This would not have helped the Kurds, neither in Kurdistan nor as immigrant minorities in other countries.

Recently (6 April 1994, Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.5) The UN Human Rights Committee adopted a General comment on Article 27 which interprets it in a substantially more positive way than earlier. The Committee sees the Article as
- recognizing the existence of a "right";
- imposing positive obligations on the States;
- protecting all individuals on the State's territory or under its jurisdiction (i.e. also immigrants and refugees), irrespective of whether they belong to the minorities specified in the Article or not;
- stating that the existence of a minority does not depend on a decision by the State but requires to be established by objective criteria.

It remains to be seen to what extent this General comment will influence the State parties. If the Committee's interpretation ("soft law") becomes the general norm, and if the countries presently occupying Kurdistan, and the countries where Kurds live as migrant and refugee minorities, start observing this norm, the linguistic rights of the Kurds might improve.

The Kurdish diaspora, enjoying (a considerable amount of) political freedom in the West, is active in literary and linguistic production. The exercise of this political freedom is, however, also restricted by the economic realities of refugee and immigrant life, which does not lend itself to a viable educational system to be built up. The formation of an active language academy is politically feasible in Europe, but financially not forthcoming. The same applies to the production of reference sources that are not available yet, e.g. a Kurdish encyclopedia, adequate monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, adequate Kurdish bibliographies, etc.

In spite of strict political restrictions placed by the Middle East states on the interaction between the West diaspora and Kurdistan, there is a lively interaction between the two worlds. For instance, a textbook of sociology written by a Kurdish professor from iran while he was a political refugee in Iraqi Kurdistan was published in Sweden. Print and (audio)visual media cross the controlled borders and Med-TV will leave its impact.

But none of these can be a substitute for a free, peaceful, democratic and prosperous life in Kurdistan, a precondition for a flourishing education and an option denied the Kurds by Middle Eastern states and the great world powers that support them. The future of Kurdish education depends to a large extent on the political situation in the Middle East - will the Kurds enjoy the right to self-determination in the form of a Kurdish state or genuine autonomy? The lines are clearly drawn. Education (through the medium of Kurdish, and with good teaching of other languages) is for the Kurds one powerful instrument for nation-building. Its denial is, for the Middle Eastern States,

a means of destroying the Kurds as a nation, a people.

Notes:
1. The estimates are notoriously difficult since the Kurds are not included as Kurds in the census. Many researcher's estimate is 12-18 million in Turkey and between 25 and 30 million altogether.

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Normand - if there is space, I would like you to add these into the bibliography even if they have not been directly referred to. I could add the references in the text if need be - I have certainly used them all in my mind even if they are not written down in the text:

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