

## Original Paper

# The Effect of Religion on the Political Identity of Kurdish Youth (With a Focus on University Students)

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### Abstract

*This article studies the relationship between religion and political identity in Eastern Kurdistan located in Iran. For this purpose, it reviews at first the theoretical debates on social and political identities, the bases of Kurdish individual's political identity and the situation of religion in Kurdish society as one of them. Then, the quantitative and analytical methods are used to measure the effect of religion. The results show that religion and religious identity are still important determinants of political identity in Kurdistan that is affected by the situation of society. Because of both the influence of religion in this traditional society and the existence of a totalitarian religious government, the other social factors and identities cannot practically affect the political identity, though they are also important and powerful in the society, especially the Kurdish identity. Hence, the political identity of Kurdish youth is further affected by the government's politics and policies that reinforce both Iranian and religious identities and prevent the manifestation of the other identities in political arena.*

### Keywords

*Religion, political identity, Kurdish youth, Eastern Kurdistan, Iran*

### 1. Introduction

The constant search for identity is not only related to the Western culture. According to Manuel Castles, because of the more strong sentiment of social identity and the affinity of individual to family, there are various identities, and identity and meaning in life are searched in oriental countries too (Castells, 2005, p. 50). These various identities and factors affect the political stances and behaviors. In this regard, Iran is a multinational and multi-religious society with different and multilayer identities that they play an important role in the socio-political life of individuals. Based on the situation of society and individuals,

one of these identities is normally more effective. Subsequently, Eastern Kurdistan as a region located in Iran has also a special and different situation, since the Iranian identity has been imposed on it, on the one hand, and it has different ethnic and religious identities as primitive and traditional identities and many other new identities that have gradually emerged, on the other hand. These identities including religious one have effect on the political identity of youth in Kurdistan. In this relation, this article examines the opinions of a number of young people to clarify the effect of religion on political identity and its measure.

Concerning the above-mentioned issue, the main question is that, what is the relationship between religion and political identity in Eastern Kurdistan? It is supposed that religion like the other social factors affects the political identity and behavior, and its effect is considerable, since there is a totalitarian religious government and subsequently the lack of political liberty that as important factors do not allow the other factors and identities to affect in an open political space. Indeed, it is more difficult to clarify the real effects of social factors in such situation. The role and effect of various identities and factors on political identity can emerge further in an open political space. Therefore, according to the kind of government, the hypothesis is that there is a significant relationship between religion and political identity.

Studying the real political identity of individuals in closed societies is very difficult. So, about the literature review, it should be noted that there is no a direct research on this subject especially in Kurdistan and Iran. Nevertheless, there are some relevant researches like the works of Ibrahim Hajiyan (2009), “the sociology of Iranian identity”; Ahmad Rezaei et al. (2007), “the tendency to ethnic and national identity among Iranian Turkmens”; Somayeh Rahmani (2007), “Studying the attitude of Kurdish elites to Collective (national/ethnic) identity, a discourse analysis of national ethnic identity”; and so on.

However, in this article as a report of our research, to examining the effect of religion on political identity, we regard some parts including the theoretical parts on social and political identities, the bases of Kurdish individual’s political identity, the situation of religion in Kurdistan, methodology, findings and analysis of the data, discussion and conclusion. To discuss and explain the results, we further use the Jenkins’ social theory, since it is more applicable and relevant to this research than other theories. Therefore, it is necessary to have a glance on it at first.

### *1.1 Richard Jenkins’ Social Identity Theory*

The Jenkins’ theory and pattern to study the social identity is a combined theory, which has been adopted from the theoretical works of other sociologists like Berger, Cohen, Bourdieu, Giddens, Barth and some others. Jenkins (2004) defines social identity based on two concepts: Similarities and differences, namely “The ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. It is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectives, and between individuals and collectives, of relationships of similarity and difference” (p. 5). In his opinion, identity is the necessary condition for a social life and

without the social shield of others also is not meaningful. For him the most distinct difference between individual identity and collective identity is the emphasis on differences in the former type and on similarities in the second one. Nevertheless, the identity and selfhood of individuals also are generally constructed in society. Besides, the embodiment of social identity is another part of Jenkins' theory. For him, social identity is embodied within the framework of social action. Indeed, it is the merger of individual and collective aspects of social identity. Social identification is not imagined without embodiment (Jenkins, 2002, pp. 33-36, pp. 120-121). Based on his opinion, time and place or situation have important role in determining identity.

In association with situation, the role of power and its effect on the processes of social acceptance and resistance is one of the important points in the theories of most of the contemporary theorists. Jenkins mentions the role of power in the internal-external dialectic of identification, the part of its external definition and categorizing people. He distinguishes between the processes of determining collective identity and social categorization. This distinction shows the importance of power centrality and politics in the processes of social stability and change. In the political contexts, sometimes the collective identities are emphasized, advocated, imposed or resisted. Besides, Jenkins distinguishes between the nominal and real identities. Power and politics affect both the identities and play an important role in changing them by using the processes of social categorization (Jenkins, 2002, p. 40, p. 42).

In relation to the effect of politics and power on identity, also, the institutionalization of identity and the concept of institution as one of the important concepts of Jenkins' theory should be mentioned. The Institutions or the institutionalized models of practice have a power known as "way of performing works". He mentions "organization" as one of the respected institutions in sociology that is important regarding the processes of social categorization, making categories, their distribution, and the institutionalized ways of recruitment practices (Jenkins, 2002, pp. 42-43, p. 215). Institutionalization, in his opinion, is not a mono-model. It depends on the power source and the integration degree of the other aspects of individual's identity. In this respect, the political institutions have important role.

Jenkins mentions that the collective and individual identities—social identity—are two parts of internal-external dialectic process of identification and are regularly produced, reproduced and they are in relationships. Besides, individuals institutionalize the social identities but this process is considered within the power relations. In politics, identity is both means and aim. In his theory, the important role of power is emphasized in making the process related to identity and institutionalizing the identities, especially in the formal and informal organizations, and in the processes of social categorization and categorizing related to identity. For him, political power and government are the important types of effective and applied power. He emphasizes the relationship of each field with the "field of power" especially politics and political arena. However, government and its implemented policies are considered as most important external factors that affect identity. In this regard, political identity is more affected by them.

## 1.2 Political Identity

Based on what was mentioned especially about the similarities and differences, identity is often considered as the expression of a person's belief system and social affinity. Various factors including race, ethnicity, gender and others, can make an identity (Cristiano, 2017). In this relation, political identity is related to politics and it is "a social identity with political relevance" (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 4). Political identities may be best realized as forms of common social identities occurred in a political context. For example, according to Monroe, Hankin, and Van Vechten (2000), they are "the social categories, attributes, or components of the self-concept that are shared with others and therefore define individuals as being similar to others", resulting from the "interplay between cognitive processes and social or cultural influences" (Quoted by Nisbet & Myers, 2010). In one sense, political identities may be best viewed as forms of individual schemas that organize information about our political location, status, and social relationships and make some aspects of our collective life world like nation-state, culture, race, language, religion, gender, nationality, class, and so on more politically applicable than others (Nisbet & Myers, 2010).

However, the classical definitions of political identity emphasize a group affiliation and describe the ways in which because of being a member of a special group, a person might represent specific political opinions, attitudes and activities (Cristiano, 2017). In the other words, according to Campbell et al. (1960), it normally "entails an identity as part of a group with norms concerning shared political beliefs, and the 'correct' group position on a political candidate, political party, policy issue, or course of political action" (p. 4). Although this group-based definition of political identity is main and more effective, but the situation of politics and contemporary socio-political changes show that individual can earn a political identity based on either a common social identity or self-interest without a group affiliation. Thus, this new point of view can be added to the relevant definitions.

It should be also noted that the concept of political identity is broader than "politicization" which is restricted to groups engaged in a collective power struggle. Some identities are naturally political such as those based on a political party, ideology or issue, while some others rise from the social identities that have earned political content. Thus, a political identity is a social identity based on a common political view or it has clearly become political through the norms of a political group governing the view and action of its members. From this viewpoint, the concept of political identity paves a way to develop a group-based political solidarity and cohesion (Huddy, 2013, pp. 4-5). So, the political identity refers to a partisan politics namely a specific political party affiliation or partisan identity, which can be shaped by race, different economic class, colonialism and so on (Ramon, 2017).

In political science, identity is seen as a part of political perspective that is outlined in answer to the question, "Who am I?" The other main parts are "demands" and "expects", the former in answer to the question, "what do people like me want?" and the latter for the answer to the question, "which are our chances to get what we want, provided we are what are?" In this relation, territory, culture, religion, ideas, language, history and so on, may all serve as factors with which notions of political identity can

be established (Bryder, 2005). Besides, nowadays individuals have several identities, what is known as the multi-identity. Nevertheless, based on any society and the situation of individuals one or more of the identities may be important and top priorities for them to make the foundations of their political identities, and they see the prospect of politics from that viewpoint. In this regard, since the late 1960s, issues related to political identity have become a major characteristic of social life in all over the world. By transforming the issues of race, class, gender and so on into daily political life, the political perspective was deeply changed and it made dramatic changes in the world of knowledge and thoughts (Horton, 1996).

We have already mentioned some various socio-political factors that affect shaping and orientation of political identity. Here, it is necessary to mention some other factors also especially the level of political awareness of society and adults, government and its education system and media and its behavior with citizens, non-government media and so on. In association with these factors, according to Erikson (1968), the development of political commitment is a key aspect of identity formation in adolescence. Youth reflect on the traditions, values and ideologies of their communities and the possible roles they will tackle in adulthood (Quoted by Yates & Youniss, 1998). There is an interconnection between the level of political development and identity formation, and participation in social activities and services has impact on the formation of youth's political identity and finding their political role in society. Besides, three aspects of the experience including a heightened sense of self-understanding, social integration, and political awareness in adulthood help the formation of political identity. Therefore, the political and social-historical context, for instance in socio-political relationships and actions, plays a basic role in the process of shaping political identity and socialization (Yates & Youniss, 1998).

Governments also try to define the political identity of individuals in favor of themselves. Apart from education and media, they use force too. In this regard, it should be noted that seeing people as dangerous, torture and hurt are considered as both maker and destroyer of political identity. The product of torture is normally the ruined self, dignity or political identity of victim. It is performed to change the political identity and to create a new identity. But its opposite is also true. Torture may reinforce the same identity or produce a different sense that can be led to a different political identity. For some states, torture has been a means to destroy the political identity of victim to create and impose their favorite intended political identity, but its outcome has not always been in their favor (See parry, 2010, pp. 207-214). For example, torture and trouble have been tools in the hand of the ruling countries of Kurdistan to assimilate the Kurdish people in Kurdistan, but these have often had an opposite result. In the next parts, the political identity of Kurdish people is examined.

### *1.3 Bases of Kurdish Individual's Political Identity*

As it was already mentioned, in both the group-based politics and personalized politics the factors such as nation and ethnic, religion, personal interest, race and so on can play a role in determining the political identity. Either an individual is associated to a group or not, the individual's political behavior

and stance can be related to one of the above factors, though in collective political action, organization and the group-based identity is more effective. Based on our knowledge of the Kurdish society, Kurdish individual's political identity in Eastern Kurdistan is further affected by these factors: National or ethnic identity (Kurdish), Iranian identity and its relevant government and organizations, Islam and Islamic ideology, social class and Left ideology, gender, the Kurdish political organizations opposed to the Iranian government and their media. However, we only consider the role and effect of religion on the political identity of Kurdish youth.

#### *1.4 Religion in Kurdistan*

Kurdistan is still a traditional society and religion is a part of Kurdish culture as a whole. Moreover, there are various religions and sects in Kurdistan that each one has created a foundation for a distinct social identity. For the existence of political Islam and the political power of Shiite sect in Iran, the other religious groups have felt threatened. Since the formation of a Shiite Islamic state after the Islamic revolution 1979, the religious discrimination has increased against the other religions and sects including Sunni, Yarsan and Baha'i that Sunnis form a big part of Kurdish people and Yarasans have a considerable population among them. This situation has affected their political behavior, action and perspective. For instance, the Sunni Islamic political ideology has also developed against the dominant ideology and it has affected the political identity of a part of people, but because of its illegal and restricted activities, it has not practically been effective. Thus, the regime's Islamic political ideology as dominant ideology has generally had high effect on the political behavior of people, whilst there is no freedom for the other ideologies. It has generally reinforced the religious sense of people especially their conservative religious view. So, religion as a whole is one of the factors that has affected political identity and become a basis for the political identity of a part of Kurdish people. This effect is better clarified by the following findings of this research.

## **2. Methodology**

In this research, the quantitative and analytical methods have been used to measure the effect of religion, to collect, and to analyze the data. So, we determined the variables of the research and then the data were linked to our common subjects. For this purpose, and to examine the question and hypothesis of the research, a questionnaire related to the issues and common concepts was designed. The first part of the questionnaire was devoted to the personal characteristics of respondents including their sex, marital status, age, religion, degree and level of education, and field of study. The next parts were allocated to the definition of concepts including religious and political identities. The religious identity was asked and measured by three questions on being religious or not, the level of adherence to religion and their view on the necessity of religion in society. The questions related to political identity as dependent variable were asked in two parts: Political perspective including their view about civil liberties and interest in organized activity; and political behaviors and actions.

As it is clear, however, the statistical population of the research is Kurdish youth and the sample is a part of the youth in a Kurdish city, Sine (Sananadaj). Since they had to understand the concepts, we preferred to select them among the Kurdish Students through the sampling random method that the students were from different universities and subjects. At the next stages, at first a number of university students as statistical sample filled the questionnaire. Then, the completed questionnaires were analyzed by SPSS to find the correlation between variables and to explain the effect of the independent variable. The analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from the studied population were done by using descriptive and analytical (inferential) statistics. The collected data from the questionnaires for each variable were described in terms of statistical-numerical indexes, and an adequate knowledge of the dispersion and demographic features and description of respondents in various parts of the research was gained. Afterwards, the relationships between variables were examined and the hypothesis of the research was tested by appropriate statistical patterns. In the above stages, the appropriate statistical analysis methods and the confidence of accuracy and precision of the inferences were required that with a high sensitivity in the research process they were considered and reviewed. Eventually, to reach a conclusion the findings were analyzed and discussed.

### **3. Findings and Analysis of the Data**

As mentioned above, the research population is the student youth in Sine city. Our sample population includes 232 persons that their demographic features, their answers to some questions on religious and political identities and the analysis of hypothesis are as following:

#### *3.1 Description of Respondents' Demographic Features*

##### **Sex:**

Among the sample population 97 respondents (42.2%) are female and 133 respondents (57.8%) are male. Moreover, two persons have not answered the question. So, most of the respondents are male.

##### **Age:**

9.6% of the sample population is in the age range of 15-20 years old, 62.2% in the range of 21-30 and 28.3% in the range of 31-40. In addition, two persons have not answered the question. So, most of the respondents are in the age range of 21-30 years old.

##### **Marital status:**

Among the sample population 150 persons (64.7%) are unmarried and 80 persons (34.5%) are married. Moreover, two persons have not answered the question. Thus, most of them are unmarried.

##### **Level of education:**

The responds show that 15.09% of the sample population is associate students, 78.01% of it is bachelor students, and 6.9% of it is master and PhD students.

##### **Field of study:**

The study field of 172 respondents (74.1%) is humanities and of 60 respondents (25.9%) is non-humanities.

**Religion:**

The findings show that 205 respondents (88.4%) are Sunni Muslim, 21 respondents (9.1%) are Shiite Muslim, 2 respondents (0.9%) are Yarsan and 2 respondents (0.9%) have not declared their religion.

*3.2 The Answers of Questions Separately*

The answers to some important questions on religious and political identities are here described. In terms of being religious or not, the majority of the sample population, namely 181 respondents (78%) announce themselves as religious, 48 respondents (20.7%) as non-religious, and three people (1.3%) have not answered. About the adherence to religious rites, the answers show that 83 persons (35.8%) adhere to the rites very much and much, 85 persons (36.6%) adhere to them moderately, 15 persons (6.5%) adhere to them little and very little, and 49 persons (21.1%) have not answered. On the necessity of religion to society, the answers show that 143 respondents (61.7%) think it is very much and much necessary, 57 respondents (24.6%) think it is moderately necessary, 29 respondents (12.4%) think it is little and very little necessary, and 3 people (1.3%) have not answered. Therefore, the majority of respondents think religion is necessary to society.

In relation to the political identity, 114 respondents (49.1%) agree with the sentence, "I have often relationships with people who politically think like me", 76 respondents (32.8%) are without opinion, 34 respondents (14.7%) disagree with it, and 8 people have not answered the question. About introducing themselves, the answers show that 40 persons (17.2%) like to introduce themselves as Iranian, 109 persons (47%) as Kurdish, 19 persons (8.2%) as religious, 4 persons (1.7%) as rich man, 45 persons (19.4%) as other things, and 15 persons (6.5%) have not answered. So, most of them like to introduce themselves as Kurdish people. Besides, on their study and reading for pleasure, 33 people (14.2%) mention the religious studies, 8 people (3.4%) mention the Left studies, 37 people (15.9%) mention the Kurdish nationalist studies, 26 people (11.2%) mention the women studies, 110 people (47.4%) mention the other subjects or they have no study, and 18 persons (7.8%) have not answered.

In terms of their political thought, 20 respondents (8.6%) show tendency to the Iranian fundamentalist religious faction, 77 respondents (33.2%) to the Iranian reformist religious faction, 41 respondents (17.7%) to the Kurdish nationalists, 11 respondents (4.7%) to the socialists, 34 respondents (14.7%) to the Sunni Islamists, 49 people (21.1%) have not answered. About their criteria to select candidates in elections, 14 persons (6%) mention being religious, 44 persons (19%) mention being Kurdish, 3 persons (1.3%) mention being female, 130 persons (56.1%) mention the high level of education, background and good management, 11 persons (4.7%) mention the political faction and party of candidates, 30 persons (12.9%) have not answered. On their tendency practically to the political trends, 10 people (4.3%) show the tendency to the Iranian fundamentalist faction, 43 people (18.5%) to the Iranian reformist faction, 37 people (15.9%) to the Kurdish nationalists, 9 people (3.9%) to the socialists, 20 people (8.6%) to the Sunni Islamists, and 113 people (48.7%) have not answered.



### 3.3 Analysis of Hypothesis

In this part, the hypothesis of research and the relationship between the independent and dependent variables are examined to clarify the effects of religion and religious identity on the political identity. According to the normal distribution test of data, the obtained significance level for religion is less than 0.05. So, with 0.95 confidence, it can be said that the distribution of data related to the variable is non-normal. Besides, it is more than 0.05 for political identity. So, with 0.95 confidence, it can be said that the distribution of data related to the variable is normal.

About the hypothesis, the analysis shows that there is a meaningful correlation between the religious and political identities.

**Table 1. The Relationship between the Religious and Political Identities**

Political Identity				Variable
Coefficient of determination	Significance level	Correlation coefficient	Number	Religious identity
<b>58.982%</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.768**</b>	<b>232</b>	

*Note.* \*\* Significance at the level 0.001.

Based on the Spearman Test results, the obtained significance level is less than 0/05, so the hypothesis of zero is rejected and the opposite hypothesis is accepted. In the other words, with a confidence of 0.95 we can say that there is a significant correlation between the religious and political identities.

The results show that the significant correlation between the two variables is a positive and direct ( $r=0.768$ ). Besides, the coefficient of determination shows that 58/982% of political identity is explained by religion and religious identity and the residual is for the other factors. Hence, they support the hypothesis of the research.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This research totally shows that the Kurdish individual's identity is a multidimensional identity. Kurdish, religious, Iranian, gender, class and other identities, each one forms an aspect of this identity. These aspects affect the individual and collective political identity of Kurdish people that one or more of them can be more important based on the socio-political situation of society. In this regard, based on the Jenkins' theory, it can be said that the political identity like other social identities is also manifested in the socio-political practice and processes. So, when there is no any open space for the activities related to many aspects mentioned above because of the existence of a non-democratic government in Iran and subsequently a specific political situation in Eastern Kurdistan, the effects of these aspects on political identity are lesser, though they have more influence among the people and are socially important.

Indeed, the important role of political power in changing social identity, as Jenkins and others mention, is clearly seen in Iran. The Iranian government has not allowed the real identity groups such as the Kurdish nationalists and some others like the Sunni trends to have activity and to emerge in the political arena and to work institutionally and legally. Whilst the government has institutionally extended its favorite identities and has reinforced the relevant institutions to work through them, it has prohibited the political institutionalization of the other social identities so that there is no freedom for their relevant media and political parties. The government has attempted to reinforce and highlight the Iranian and religious identities, namely in fact Shiite Fars, and has emphasized and imposed them, while it has resisted against the other ethnic and religious identities. Thus, it has tried to change or, at least, weaken the other social identities. This manner has also had high effect on the political identity of individuals and society. When there is no any space for the activity of organizations associated with an identity, the identity is weak practically in the political arena. However, because of both the influence of religion in society and the existence of a totalitarian religious government, religion has generally affected the political identity of the country's people in different ways especially by the government itself, and it is more effective in the political arena.

On the other hand, the Kurdish society also is still a traditional one that the high influence of religion has an important contribution in determining the political identity. According to the mentioned findings, most of the respondents have announced themselves as religious, have moderately adhered to the religious rites and have seen religion as a necessity for society. It has been reflected in politics and the government has used it for several decades. In Kurdistan, there is no an equal opportunity for the various aspects of individual's identity especially the Kurdish identity to emerge in politics and the political practice and processes. On the contrary, the government has paved a way to extend the Iranian and religious identities. Even the Sunni identity has sometimes more opportunity to emerge in the socio-political space, since the government often uses it; especially it uses the Sunni conservative trends against Kurdish nationalism. Hence, in the current situation, religion is an important determinant of political identity in Eastern Kurdistan. Nevertheless, since the Kurdish identity is likely the strongest social identity, as the data also show, if the situation changes into a democratic space, it will probably become a more determinant factor of political identity than religious and Iranian identities.

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