

THE IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS ON THE SPREAD AND DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGES IN NORTHERN IRAQ

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Abstract

The geography of language addresses one of the geopolitical pillars in the region, given its significance as a source of strength for the state in promoting national identity and fostering interaction among the population in the northern region. Language affects the strength of the state in terms of social cohesion, promoting cultural awareness, and instilling a sense of belonging and identity in order to strengthen international relations. It also leads to economic development within the state's borders and is not merely a means of communication from a geopolitical perspective. where linguistic expansion represents a geopolitical calendar that strengthens social bonds and political and economic ties between nationalities and religions alike. We recognize the reality of the diverse social and cultural fabric in the study area. This study aims to highlight the research problem in the geographical factor of language spread and its dimensions in the Kurdistan Region and the provinces of Kirkuk and Mosul, focusing on understanding how geographical factors such as terrain, location, administrative and natural boundaries, and population distribution on the spread and use of languages in these areas, which are characterized by clear linguistic and ethnic diversity. The study aims to identify patterns of language spread in northern Iraq and determine the factors influencing this spread, while examining the dimensions of coexistence and stability among the components. The study reached a number of conclusions, most notably that the linguistic diversity of the population in the northern region is consistent with geographical diversity, such as terrain, and that language in this case is a reflection of the prevailing geographical region. Furthermore, proximity to regional borders has reinforced linguistic diversity in the northern region near Turkey, Iran, and Syria, leading to linguistic and cultural overlap. The most important proposals are to treat the geographical factor not as an obstacle to communication between the components, but as a unique opportunity to promote linguistic diversity and cultural integration while preserving the local identity of each linguistic group in northern Iraq. It also proposes adopting a system of linguistic decentralization in the administration of cultural and linguistic affairs locally, according to the needs of each region.

Keywords: Linguistic geography, linguistic diversity, political geography, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kirkuk, Nineveh, social coexistence.

1. The research problem

Selecting and accurately defining the research problem is the main step in scientific research, as researchers emphasize that selecting and defining the research problem is more difficult than finding solutions. This is because this definition and selection will determine the research plan, tools, and nature of the methodology that the researcher will follow to obtain the desired results. The problem is based on the following questions:

1. How have natural and human factors affected the spread or decline of certain languages in the northern region?
2. What is the relationship between linguistic diversity and social stability in these regions?
3. Are there areas of linguistic contact? How do they affect interaction between the components?

2. Research hypothesis

The hypothesis consists of proposed solutions and paths that the researcher follows in the study in order to arrive at the required facts according to a scientific methodology based on official documents and data, where the scientific assumptions embody the following:

1. Natural and human factors have influenced cultural identity and social stability among the different components, and geographical factors have influenced the distribution and spread of languages in this region.
2. The relationship between linguistic diversity and social stability in the northern region is complex and multidimensional and may be positive or negative depending on the political and social context and the nature of the policies pursued in managing this diversity.
3. There is linguistic contact in the northern region that reflects ethnic and cultural diversity and could be a meeting point for linguistic groups if fair language policies are implemented, or a point of conflict if it is exploited politically and the rights of different groups are neglected.

3. Importance of the research

The importance of the research lies in the impact of the geopolitical factor on the spread of languages and their dimensions in northern Iraq, and their future dimensions on the nature of the relationship between the components of the region, their political, economic, and social importance, and their reflection on the strength of the state.

4. Research objectives

1. To identify the patterns of language spread in northern Iraq and determine the factors influencing this spread, while studying its implications for coexistence and stability among the components.
2. To analyze the impact of geographical factors (topography, geographical location, administrative boundaries, and climate) on the formation of the linguistic map in the northern region.

5. Boundaries of the research area

1. Spatial boundaries: The boundaries of the study area are represented by the administrative boundaries, which are located astronomically within the geographical coordinates between two latitudes.
Spatially, it is bordered by Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, Syria to the west, and the central provinces to the south. See Map (1).
2. Temporal boundaries: The period from 1990 to 2024 was chosen to identify the political changes that affected the spread of languages in the northern region and their impact on the demarcation of spatial boundaries during that period.

6. Research methodology:

The study methodology is the scientific basis used by the researcher to analyze the causes of the problem and arrive at the most important conclusions. The study relied on several methodologies, including the morphological approach, which explains the spread of integration. It also relied on the functional approach in analyzing the role of the state in preserving the social fabric of the diverse components in the study area, as

well as the historical approach to identify the changes that occurred in the languages in the study area.

1.1. Population distribution and linguistic distribution in the northern region: By analyzing Table 1 and Map 2 on the distribution of languages in the northern region, it can be seen that the percentage of Arabic speakers in Nineveh Governorate is 57%. They are of Arab nationality and are concentrated around the Tigris River basin and the Jazira region (Rabia and Hadar), as well as the city center, where the cultural and civilizational character of the population prevails. The reason for the concentration and spread of Arabs in these areas is their proximity to Syria in the north, Salah al-Din province in the south, and a large part of western Kirkuk province, which has an Arab majority. This feature is one of the pillars of the state's political strength and the achievement of stability and security in the province. This is reflected in their winning the majority of seats in the parliamentary elections, as well as the majority of seats in the provincial council. The percentage of the population that speaks Kurdish in the province is around 20%. , concentrated in the district of Sheikhan in the northeast of the province, the districts of Fayda and Semil in the north of the province, and the center of the province, with a relative Kurdish minority speaking Kurdish in the district of Sinjar in the west of the province, as well as in the district of Makhmur in the southeast of the province and a number of villages in the Zammar and Mosul Dam area, locally known as Badush Dam. This diversity faced some challenges after 2003, such as social and political tensions, particularly in some cities adjacent to the Kurdistan Region whose inhabitants speak Kurdish. These areas later became known as disputed territories between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government. However, this diversity can also be a source of strength and cooperation. The number of Turkmen speakers in the province is estimated at 19% of the total population. They are concentrated in the center of Mosul, specifically in the Turkmen-majority area of Al-Rashidiya, and a large number of them are concentrated in the district of Tal Afar in the west of the province and in the subdistricts of Al-Mahaliya and Al-Ayadiya. They are Muslims. It should be noted that sectarian differences, despite their common language, have caused a major rift between them in the district of Tal Afar, leading to the migration of a significant number of them to different areas within and outside the province. In addition, Syriac speakers in this province constitute 23% of the total population of the province. 23% of the total population of the province. They speak Syriac, but most of them also speak other languages in the province and are concentrated in the districts of Tal Afar and Hamdaniya and the sub-districts of Bartella and Ba'shiqa, with others concentrated in the city of Mosul, the center of Nineveh province. The Syriacs represent an important part of the cultural and religious heritage of the province of Nineveh and have contributed to the cultural diversity of the region. The Syriacs in Nineveh have suffered significant displacement due to wars and unrest. In addition to the languages spoken by the inhabitants of Nineveh province, there are languages such as Shabak, which are spoken in various cities and towns of the province. The Shabak are geographically concentrated in the Nineveh Plain, Bartella, Ba'shiqa, Fadiliya, and Kokjali, and they speak a language that is distinct from Kurdish and Arabic, with a dialect that retains many ancient words. There are no official statistics on the number of Shabak, but estimates issued by international organizations put their number at around 250,000. In addition to the Shabak, there is a religious minority, the Yazidis, who also have their own language, but it is very close to Kurdish. They are concentrated in the districts of Sheikhan, Sinjar, and Tal Kaif in the province of

Nineveh. They are a religious sect that deviates from Islam and has its own religious rituals. In addition to the two minorities mentioned above, there is another minority in the province, the Jarjariya, who are concentrated in the Zammar district in the northwest of the province. They embrace Islam and have their own language. Some sources indicate that they are of Arab nationality, while others indicate that they are of Kurdish origin.

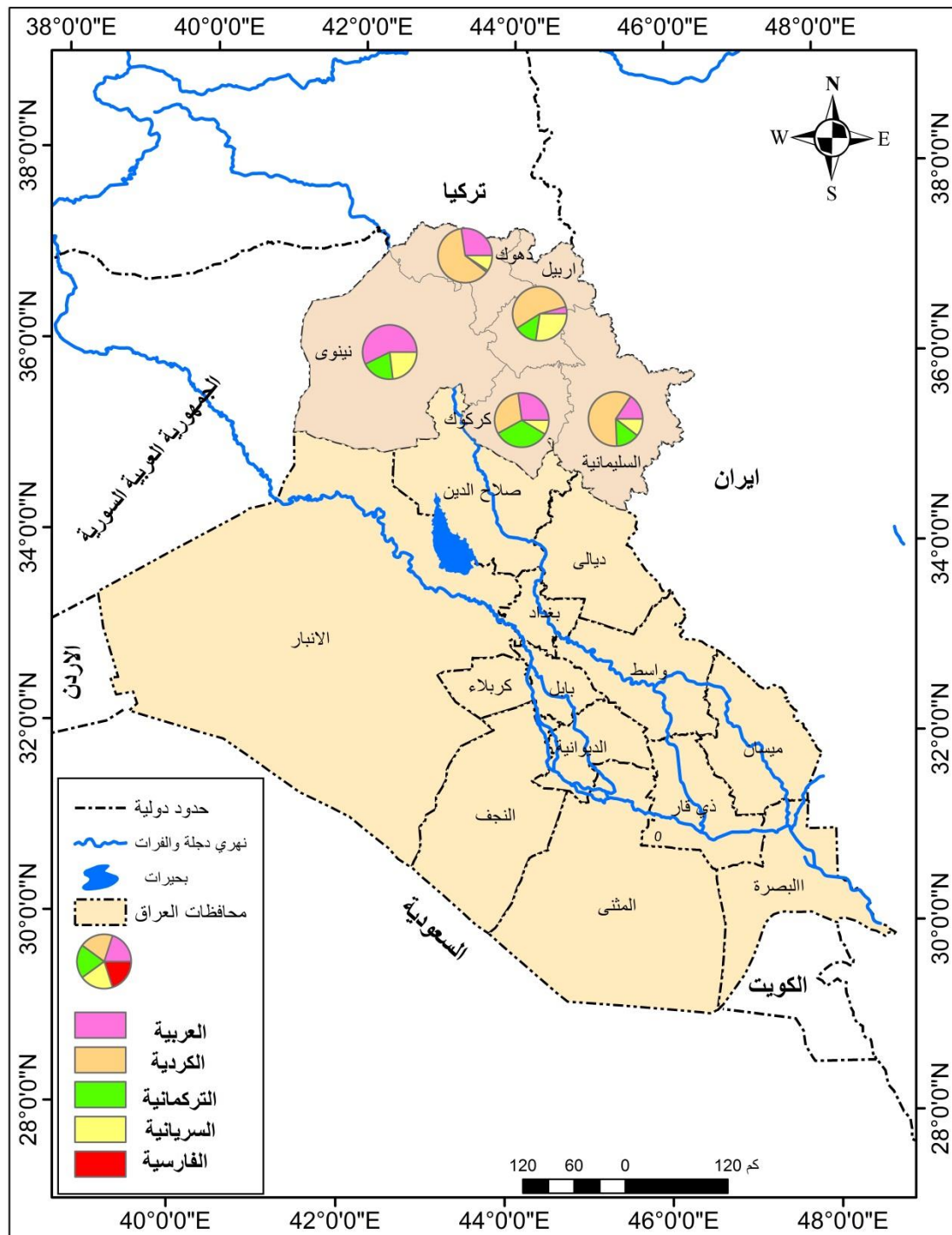
Table (1) The geopolitical importance of language types in northern Iraq in 2024

Nationalism	%	Number of speaking population	the language	Governo rate	T
Arabic	57.1	3,358,921	Arabic	Nineveh	1
Kurdish	0.2	6710	Kurdish		
Turkmen	19.6	1,57901	Turkmen		
Christianity	23.1	136444	Syriac		
Nationalism	100	5887972	the total		
Arabic	4.2	94549	Arabic	Erbil	2
Kurdish	54.8	1198670	Kurdish		
Christianity	27.3	597640	Syriac		
Persian	0.1	241	Persian		
Turkmen	13.6	296650	Turkmen		
Nationalism	100	2,187,750	the total		
Arabic	27.2	349100	Arabic	Dohuk	3
Kurdish	62.1	788539	Kurdish		
Christianity	9.2	117707	Syriac		
Turkmen	1,2	2787	Turkmen		
Persian	0.3	567	Persian		
Nationalism	100	1258700	the total		
Arabic	15.5	387171	Arabic	Sulayma niyah	4
Kurdish	60	1,493,779	Kurdish		
Persian	0.3	3478	Syriac		
Christianity	10.3	261714	Persian		
Turkmen	13.9	347169	Turkmen		
Nationalism	100	2492502	the total		
Arabic	24.4	590791	Arabic	Kirkuk	5
Kurdish	27.9	479485	Kurdish		
Turkmen	29.9	513858	Turkmen		
Christians	7.8	131471	Syriac		
Nationalism	100	1,715,605	the total		

Source: Researcher's work based on:

- (1) Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, Central Statistics Organization, Statistics Department, Electronic Data Division, 2024 Population Census Data.
- (2) Field study questionnaire in the northern regions dated 1/2/2024-1/2/2025.

Map (2) Geopolitical importance of language types in northern Iraq in 2024



Source: Based on Table (1) and Arc Map 10.8 software

All of the above shows us that this linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity has imposed itself on political and social life and is a source of strength for peaceful coexistence among all components of the province, despite its multiculturalism. It has lived within the framework of Iraqi political unity since ancient times. despite the province's exposure to campaigns of displacement and widespread migration of the population due to wars and conflicts, not for social or cultural reasons, but because of differences between the ruling policies in the province. As for the province of Erbil, the number of Arabic-speaking residents is barely more than 4%, Most of them are

Arab displaced persons who entered the province after 2003 due to sectarian conflicts in their cities. The majority of them are from the central provinces and part of the Arabs of Kirkuk and Nineveh, and they are concentrated in the center of the province and its affiliated towns. They enjoy their normal lives alongside their Kurdish brothers. More than 54% of the province's population speaks Kurdish, and most of them are Muslims. This province is part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and its capital is also part of the geography and history of Kurdistan, which gained special status in a federal region after 1991. They are authentic Iraqi citizens who preserve their cultural and linguistic identity and share with other Iraqi groups their belonging to the Iraqi nation. They have the right to participate in the leadership of the Iraqi state and all administrative bodies despite their linguistic differences, as they are historically and geographically the heirs of the Mesopotamian civilization. The Syriac population of the province is more than 27% and is concentrated in the Ain Kawa area in the center of the province and in the districts of Dianna Koysanj and Shiklawa. They are Christian and speak Syriac as well as Kurdish and have been integrated into the local Kurdish culture. As for the Turkmen, they make up no more than 13% of the population and are concentrated in the old city of Erbil, specifically in the castle, the housing neighborhoods, Taajil, and the Arab quarter. They speak Turkmen as well as Kurdish and have their own heritage and culture mixed with Kurdish culture and some customs and traditions. They participate in political life with their Kurdish brothers and have proportional representation in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament. In addition to the languages spoken in the province, there is Persian, which accounts for 1.0% of the population. (They are of Persian nationality who migrated to the province due to political and economic circumstances and assimilated into the Kurdish community in the province. The linguistic division in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has played a fundamental role in the political division between the two main parties in the region, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Most of the population of Sulaymaniyah and part of Erbil speak the Sorani dialect, while most of the population of Dohuk and most of the districts of Erbil province speak the Bahdinani dialect. As for Sulaymaniyah province, Kurdish speakers are the vast majority, estimated at 60%. They are of Kurdish nationality, and the reason for this high concentration of Kurdish speakers is their isolation in the highlands and mountains, which become increasingly rugged as we head north towards the Iranian border..⁽¹⁾

The province's terrain has formed natural barriers and reserves, and the Sourani dialect has prevailed culturally, religiously, and linguistically. The Kurdish language is the official language of the province, which is considered part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Arabs constitute 15% of the total speakers in the province, where they are found in the areas, cities, and towns adjacent to Diyala province, specifically in the areas of Kalar, Kifri, and Khanaqin, which have diverse cultures, customs, and traditions. The Turkmen language is spoken by 13% of the population, most of whom live in the district of Kifri, which is considered a disputed area under Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution..⁽²⁾

As for the Syriac-speaking population, who are Christian and estimated to make up 10% of the population in the province, are spread throughout the center of

⁽¹⁾Manar Muhammad Ibrahim, Political-Geographical Analysis of the Administrative Divisions of the Provinces of Salah al-Din and Kirkuk and the Demarcation of Their Administrative Boundaries, Master's thesis (unpublished), Faculty of Education for Humanities, University of Tikrit, 2021, p. 8.
⁽²⁾ Republic of Iraq, Permanent Constitution of Iraq, 2005, Article 140.

Sulaymaniyah and are culturally and socially integrated with the Kurds. Although they are proud of their local language, they also speak and write Kurdish. As for Persian, only a small number of people have moved to the province for economic reasons, accounting for 0.3% They are Muslims and have assimilated into the Kurdish community in the province. The linguistic diversity in Kirkuk province is characterized by the presence of several languages, including Arabic, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Syriac. Arabic speakers account for 34% They are counted among the total number of speakers in the province and are spread throughout the city center and the northwestern and southwestern parts of the province. Their presence in Kirkuk is historical, alongside other ethnic groups in the province. This presence has been of two types: the first is the Arab tribal diversity in Kirkuk and its outskirts, specifically in the districts of Debis and Hawija and their surrounding areas and villages. The second type of Arab presence in the city center is functional Arabs who moved there from the central and southern regions at the end of the 1950s, along with the rest of the Kurds, Turkmen, and Syriacs who also moved from other northern provinces, as it was a city that offered job opportunities after oil extraction, and this advantage increased the diversity of the province's population..⁽³⁾

As for the Turkmen, speakers of the Turkmen language account for approximately 29% of the total population of the province. They migrated to Iraq from ancient geographical areas and historical eras and are considered one of the oldest population groups in the city since the days of the Seljuk Empire, when they established the Bani Qafjaq emirate in Kirkuk in early 1508..⁽⁴⁾

They are concentrated in the city center and part of the districts of Debs and Daquq, in the subdistricts of Taza and Yaji, in the subdistrict of Tun Kubri, and in the villages and towns scattered across southwestern Kirkuk. Some Turkmen believe that Kirkuk should not be an independent region, as it is an essential component of the province and should be jointly administered by Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds. the Turkmen language is officially taught in a significant number of schools in the city and its suburbs. In addition, there is considerable political controversy between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, with the latter demanding that the province be annexed to its region. It has been considered a disputed area under Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution. Therefore, it can be said that the option of establishing an independent Kirkuk region is the middle ground that all components of the province can agree on, because it is neither possible nor reasonable for this province to remain in a state of endless conflict..⁽⁵⁾

As for Kurdish speakers, who make up 27% of the population, Kurds are spread across the north and east of the province as well as the city center. They are one of the main components of the province and have been used since the beginning of 1930, after the discovery of oil in Kirkuk. Some sources indicate that the Kurds were present before Christ in the area between the Tigris River, the Lower Euphrates, and the Sirwan River, currently Diyala, with the city of Kirkuk at its heart..⁽⁶⁾It is worth mentioning that there are Kurdish schools in the province where Kurdish is taught

⁽³⁾Ahmad Kamal Mazhar, *Kirkuk and its Dependencies*, Iraqi Kurdistan, no year of publication, p. 71.

⁽⁴⁾ Bandar Oglu, Abdul Latif, *History of the Turkmen in Iraq*, Dar al-Tadhamun Publishing House, Baghdad, no year of publication, p. 10.

⁽⁵⁾Tariq Abdul Hafiz al-Zubaidi, *The Idea of the Kirkuk Region Project: Between Rejection and Acceptance*, vol. 1, Qanadeel Publishing House, Baghdad, 2017, p. 42.

⁽⁶⁾Tariq Abdul Hafiz al-Zubaidi, *The Idea of the Kirkuk Region Project: Between Rejection and Acceptance*, vol. 1, Qanadeel Publishing House, Baghdad, 2017, p. 42.

alongside Arabic, Turkmen, and Syriac. As for the Syriac-speaking population, they constitute approximately 7% of the total population. . They are Christian and are concentrated in the center of the province in general. It is worth mentioning that Syriac replaced Aramaic and became the classical language of Christians throughout the Levant, from the Gulf of Basra to Sinai, which gave the Syriac language a geopolitical dimension in terms of its orientation and linguistic spread, and gave this language geopolitical dimensions and was used as an effective tool for international powers within the geographical theater of the study area..⁽⁷⁾

It should be noted that the Syriacs also speak Arabic and Kurdish in addition to their native language, as they are also an integral part of Kirkuk province. After 2003, a number of Syriac-speaking schools were opened in the city center. This ethnographic diversity in the province has made the distribution of parliamentary seats and local councils equal and balanced among the components. The terrain in the northern region not only played a role in dividing the population and linguistic diversity, but also gave political forces a geographical space to engage in armed violence against the central state at the time, with the border mountains serving as a refuge for Muslims until the start of the Second Gulf War.

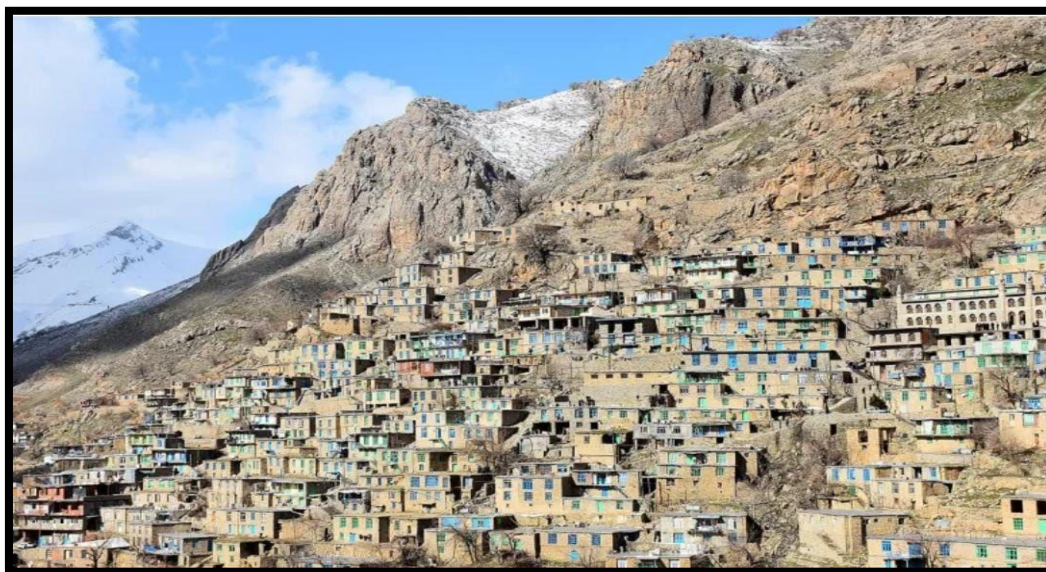
Image No. (1) The impact of urbanization on language diffusion in northern Iraq



Source: See website <https://www.google.com/search>

⁽⁷⁾Salim Matar, former source, p. 179.

Image No. (2) Lifestyle of the population in the northern regions of Iraq



Source: See website <https://www.google.com/search>

Conclusions:

1. The linguistic diversity of the population in the northern region is consistent with geographical diversity, such as terrain features, and language in this case is a reflection of the prevailing geographical region.
2. Proximity to regional borders has reinforced linguistic diversity in the northern region near Turkey, Iran, and Syria, leading to linguistic and cultural overlap.
3. Geographical factors and trade openness facilitated the spread of languages in major cities such as Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah, leading to the spread of Arabic as a common language alongside Kurdish for communication between different communities.
4. Mountain roads and passes have influenced the spread and exchange of languages, as well as facilitating cultural and linguistic exchange between cities and towns in the study area, allowing for the existence of bilingual or multilingual areas.

Proposals:

1. Treating the geographical factor as an obstacle to communication between communities, but also as a unique opportunity to promote linguistic diversity and cultural integration while preserving the local identity of each linguistic group in northern Iraq.
2. Adopting a system of linguistic decentralization in the administration of cultural and linguistic affairs locally, according to the needs of each region.
3. Supporting local media, including radio stations and satellite channels that broadcast in minority languages.

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