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By Charles Rarick, Gregory Winter, Casimir Barczyk & Eric Merkt

Purdue University Calumet, United States

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Iraqi and Kurdish Cultural Values in the Semi-Autonomous State of Kurdistan

Charles Rarick ^α, Gregory Winter ^σ, Casimir Barczyk ^ρ & Eric Merkt ^ω

Abstract- This paper explores the cultural values of Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous region of Northern Iraq. An assessment of individuals from both Arab and Kurdish ethnicities was conducted using Hofstede's 5-D model of cultural values. Some significant differences were found between the two groups. The results of this study indicate that both ethnic groups in Kurdistan possess a low power distance and short-term orientation. Both ethnic groups rate relatively high on measures of individualism. However, the data revealed that there are significant differences between the two groups in terms of masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. Implications of Kurdistan's cultural composite relative to economic development, political progress, and management practice are discussed.

I. INTRODUCTION

a) The Region

Kurdistan is a semi-autonomous region in Northern Iraq whose mainly non-Arabic people possess their own distinctive language and culture. Because the region is situated within the country of Iraq, it is also home to Arabs who are Iraqi by nationality. The largest concentration of Kurdish people can be found in Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Armenia. They have longed for a separate state and have found one, to some extent, in a 15,000 square mile region in Iraq. The Kurdish diaspora have been disenfranchised and subjugated (Donovan, 2006), with a sizable number of people seeking a land to call their own for some time. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire the Kurds have had to struggle for recognition in countries in which they lived and have experienced many difficulties, especially in Turkey (Lerer, 2004). This Sunni minority in Iraq has finally established a degree of nationhood and has the promise of economic prosperity with sizable oil and gas reserves in their territory. Kurdistan has emerged as a possible transforming force in Middle East politics (Stansfield, 2013) showing prospects of a stable demo-

cracy and good relations with its neighbors. The constitution of Iraq, ratified in 2005, defines Iraqi Kurdistan. It is established as a federal entity of Iraq having a parliamentary democracy with a regional assembly. The constitution establishes Arabic and Kurdish as Iraq's joint official languages.

Kurdistan's ability to capitalize on its mineral wealth depends on the relationship it maintains with the local Arab and greater Iraqi populations. Major oil companies have signed contracts with the newly formed government of Kurdistan, resulting in tension between the semi-autonomous state and Baghdad (Hiltermann, 2012). The oil riches, believed to be very significant, cannot be fully realized until these tensions are resolved (Walt, 2013). A better appreciation for the cultures of the people living in Kurdistan is helpful to understand the mindset and politics of the area. Having greater awareness of Kurdish cultures has great potential implications for doing business in this newly formed state. It provides insight into the economic and political potential of the country and a guide to managing business operations in the area.

b) Hofstede's Cultural Values

The most popular and often cited research on cultural issues is that of Geert Hofstede and his associates. Dr. Hofstede, who was employed by IBM as an industrial psychologist during the late 1960s and early 1970s, administered a survey on values to employees in the subsidiaries of the company. From those data, Hofstede concluded that cultures differed on a number of dimensions. He proposed that management theories were not universal, but rather, were bound by culture. Management behavior deemed appropriate in one culture may be inappropriate in another culture (Hofstede, 1980a; Hofstede, 1980b; Hofstede, 1983; Hofstede, 1993; Hofstede, 1994; Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede's work has been widely cited in academic studies across disciplines (Kirkman, Lowe & Gibson, 2006) and often forms the basis for cross-cultural analysis in university business courses. Hofstede originally surveyed 72 countries and was able to profile 40 different cultures. Later research provided for the classification of 10 more countries and three regions (www.geert-hofstede.com, 2014).

Hofstede initially identified four dimensions of culture which include, power distance, uncertainty

Author ^α: College of Business Purdue University Calumet Hammond.
e-mail: crarick@purduecal.edu

Author ^σ: Business Department American University of Iraq Sulaimani,
Iraq. e-mail: eric.merkt@auis.edu.iq

Author ^ρ: College of Business Purdue University Calumet Hammond.
e-mail: barczyk@purduecal.edu

Author ^ω: Department of Business & Economics American University
of Afghanistan Darulaman Road Kabul, Afghanistan.
e-mail: gwinter@auaf.edu.af

avoidance, individualism, and masculinity. Power distance is a cultural value that accepts or rejects power differences in society. Individualism is the degree to which a society places importance on the individual over the group. Individualistic cultures elevate the prominence of individual rights and responsibilities and expect societal members to care for themselves. This is contrasted with collectivism in which the societal focus is on group membership. One's identity is determined by being part of a group, which aims to protect itself. Masculinity is the extent to which people value competition, assertiveness, and the acquisition of material goods. This is contrasted with femininity, which values nurturing, relationships, and a concern for others. Uncertainty avoidance measures the level of comfort a culture has with change and ambiguity. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures people establish rules and regulations to reduce the uncertainty of the future. They feel more comfortable in having some assurance of what will happen in the future, whereas in low uncertainty cultures change and ambiguity are not considered a threat.

An additional dimension was later added (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) now referred to as long-term orientation. That dimension reflects the extent to which a society encourages and rewards future-oriented behavior such as planning, delayed gratification, and investments in the future. The original term, Confucian Dynamism, grew out of a view that long-term orientation was unique to a specific region of the world, which later proved to be false. While high long-term orientation orientations can be found in Confucian cultures, they can also be found elsewhere. Further research into cultural values uncovered another dimension referred to as indulgence/restraint (Minkov & Hofstede, 2011; Minkov, 2013). This dimension measures the degree to which a society permits or suppresses the expression of human desires. Indulgence/restraint was not included as a variable in this study due to restrictions on instrumentation. As such, this study analyzed Kurdish culture using the five dimensional Hofstede model.

As Hofstede's work became very popular it also attracted a number of critics. Some have expressed concerns about the generalizability of his findings, the level of analysis, the equation of a country's political boundaries to culture, and the validity of his survey instrument itself (Blodgett, Bakir, and Rose, 2008; Mc Sweeney, 2002; Smith, 2002). Others have challenged the assumption of the homogeneity of each culture studied (Sivakumar & Nakata, 2001). Venaik and Brewer (2013) are critical of both Hofstede and the GLOBE investigations and caution against both for marketing management research and practice. Venaik, Zhu, and Brewer (2013) argue that Hofstede and GLOBE measure different aspects of time-orientation, with Hofstede measuring past versus future, and GLOBE measuring the present versus future. These measurement

differences call into question how time orientation is a matter of definition and a cultural value, which is interesting in itself. Grenness (2012) suggests that Hofstede's work suffers from the problem of ecological fallacy. The problem is an incorrect conclusion that predominant traits of a culture can be generalized to individuals within that cultural group without accounting for individual differences. While there is some validity to many of the concerns raised by Hofstede's critics, his research represents the oldest and most comprehensive analysis of cultural values. No theory of cultural classification is without its critics and possible limitations, and while Hofstede's approach may be "blunt" (Jackson, 2011), it nevertheless provides useful insight into understanding important cultural values.

This paper explores cultural values in the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan, a cultural area not previously studied by Hofstede or others. The paper adds to the literature on cultural classification by looking at the two ethnic groups that reside in the newly formed region of Kurdistan. The paper aims to determine the cultural values of the newly formed state and to investigate possible cultural differences between Arab and Kurdish subpopulations.

II. METHOD

a) Respondents

This investigation of cultural values was made using a sample of 91 students at a university in Kurdistan. The sample consisted of 56 Arabs (Iraqis) and 34 ethnic Kurds. The sample did not represent a perfect balance between ethnicities found in Kurdistan in that it had an overrepresentation of Arabs. The respondents were somewhat mixed in terms of being from urban and rural areas of the country. Among the participants in the Iraqi sample 70% were male and 30% female. In the Kurdish sample, 38% of the participants were male and 62% were female. The survey respondents were mostly young adults who volunteered to participate in the research study.

b) Survey Instrument

Cultural values were assessed using Hofstede's Values Survey Module 1994 (VSM 94). The survey items measured Iraqi and Kurdish cultures using Geert Hofstede's 5-D Model, which includes the variables known as power distance (PDI), masculinity (MAS), individualism (IDV), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and long-term orientation (LTO). Results were calculated using the index method found in the VSM 94 Manual. The scores for the five value dimensions obtained in this study were compared to the scores obtained by Hofstede (www.geert-hofstede.com, 2014) and the results of a similar investigation of Afghanistan (Rarick, Winter, Falk, Nickerson, & Barczyk, 2013). Comparisons were made with select countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and the USA. Scores for the

value dimensions from four of the mentioned countries, with the exception of LTO, were obtained from Hofstede's investigation. Since Hofstede did not investigate Afghanistan, and limited LTO data are available for countries in the region, the long term orientation score for Kurdistan was compared to the data for other countries reported by Rarick, et al (2013).

III. RESULTS

The data indicate that both Iraqi and Kurdish cultures can be characterized as being low in power

distance and short-term in time orientation. Both are prone to individualism with Iraqis being more individualistic. The culture of Iraq is masculine in nature, whereas Kurdish culture is more feminine. In terms of uncertainty avoidance, Iraqi culture is low, as contrasted with Kurdish culture, which is high. The sample shows an unusually low score for power distance, perhaps an indication of the age of the respondents and the unique conditions found in present day Kurdistan. Figure 1 shows the scores for Iraqis and Kurds in Kurdistan on all five cultural dimensions using the Hofstede 5-D Model.

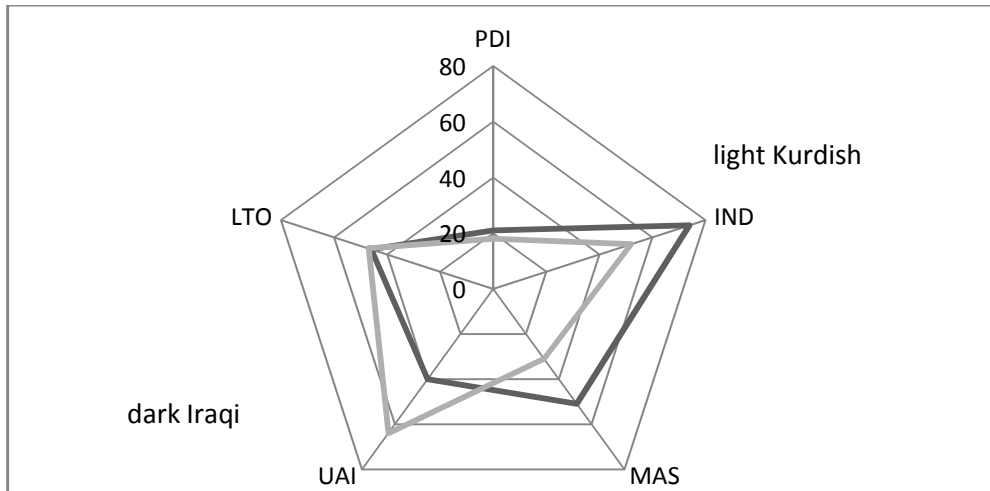


Figure 1 : Plot of the five cultural value dimensions for Iraqis and Kurds

a) Power Distance

The data indicate that Iraqis in Kurdistan have a PDI score of 21, whereas Kurds have a score of 18. This suggests that both groups have a low level of acceptance of inequality among societal members. Figure 2 shows the PDI scores for Iraqis and Kurds along with other select countries. The data reveal that

with respect to power distance, Kurdistan is much lower than that of some of its neighbors and even lower than that of the United States. These surprising findings may be attributed to the age of the survey respondents and reflect the unique current socio-political situation in Kurdistan.

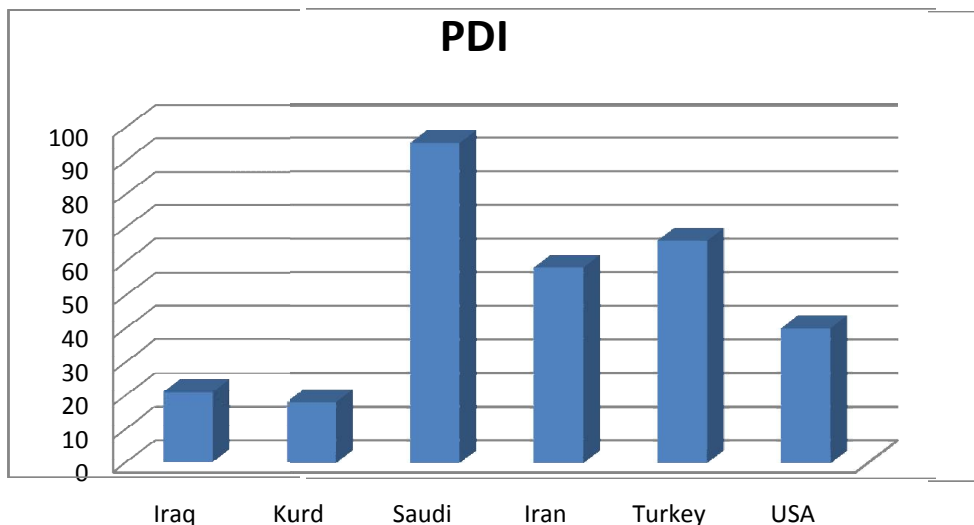


Figure 2 : Scores for power distance in select countries

b) *Masculinity*

The data indicate that the Iraqis in Kurdistan have a masculine orientation with a MAS score of 51, while the Kurds have a feminine orientation with a MAS score of 31. These scores suggest that Kurdistan is a country with differing cultures based upon ethnicity.

Figure 3 shows the MAS scores for Iraqis and Kurds, along with those for other select countries. The data reveal that Kurdistan's Iraqis and Kurds have a lower masculinity score than their neighbor, Saudi Arabia, yet not too different from that of Iran or Turkey.

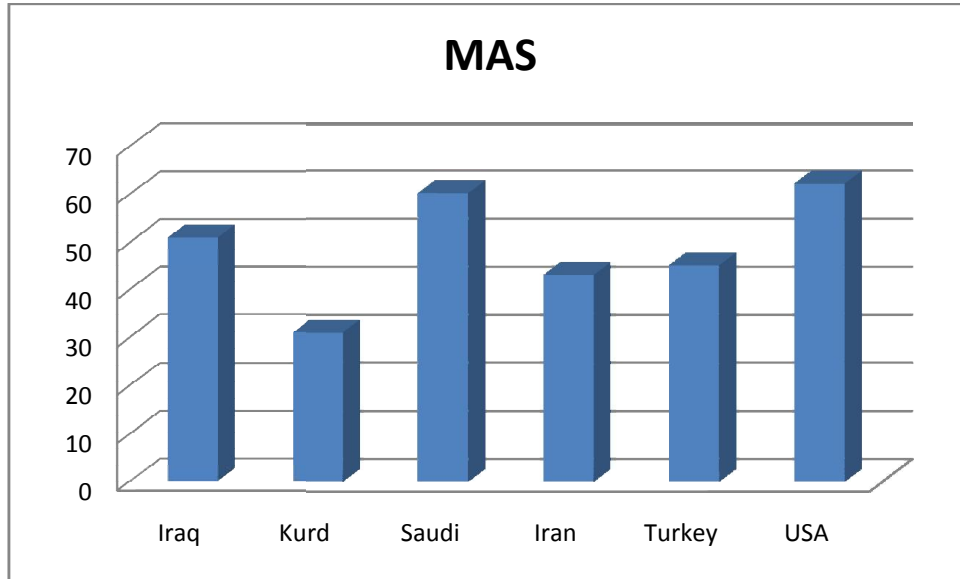


Figure 3 : Scores for masculinity in select countries

c) *Individualism*

The data indicate that Kurdistan's culture is primarily individualistic, with the IND score for Iraqis being significantly higher than that for the Kurds. The Iraqis have an IND score of 74 and the Kurds an INDV score of 52. Figure 4 shows the INDV scores for the Iraqis

and Kurds, along with those for select other countries. The Kurdish and Iraqi scores for individualism are higher than for other countries in the region, but lower than those for the United States, which is considered very high.

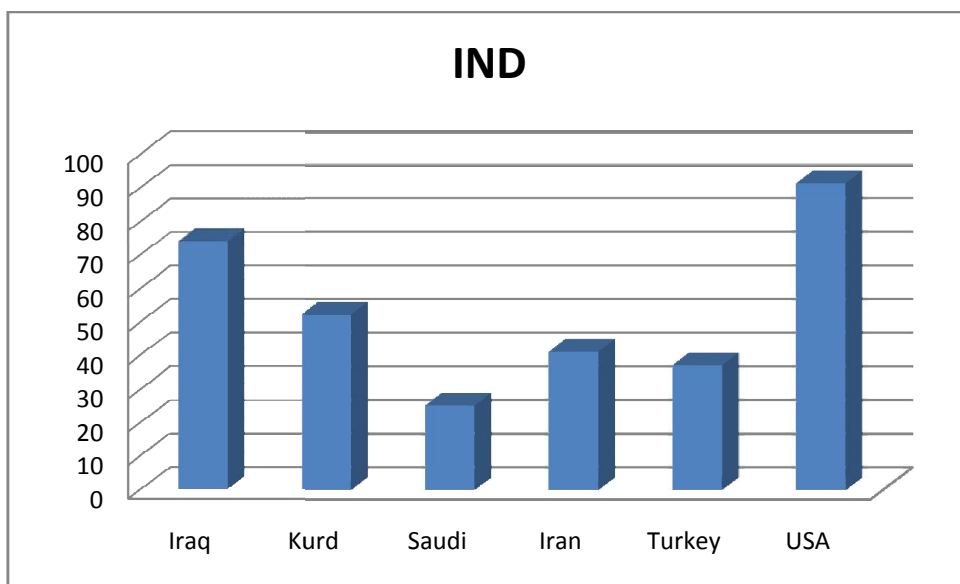


Figure 4 : Scores for individualism in select countries

d) *Uncertainty Avoidance*

The data again indicate that Kurdistan is divided culturally relative to uncertainty avoidance. Iraqis in Kurdistan are low in uncertainty avoidance, while the Kurds are high on this cultural dimension. The Iraqis have a UAI score of 40 compared to 64 for the Kurds. These scores suggest that Kurdistan's culture is

bimodal, with Iraqis having a relatively high tolerance for uncertainty, but Kurds having a low tolerance for uncertainty. As can be seen in Figure 5, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have higher UAI scores than those found for Kurdistan's Iraqis and Kurds. Iraqis in this region have slightly more tolerance for uncertainty than that typically found in the culture of the United States.

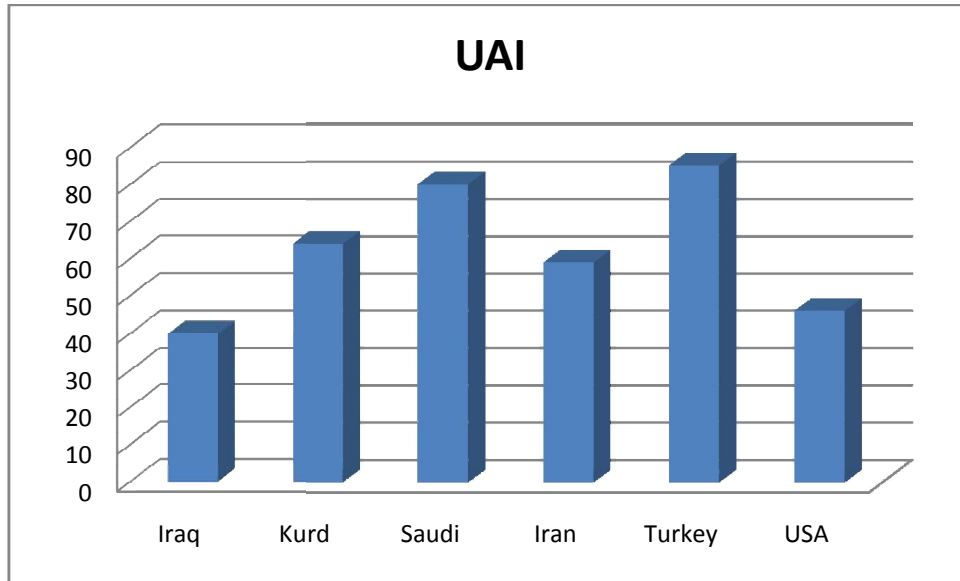


Figure 5 : Scores for uncertainty avoidance in select countries

e) *Long-Term Orientation*

The data indicate that both groups in Kurdistan have a relatively short-term orientation towards time. The Iraqi group had a LTO score of 46 and the Kurds had a score of 47, both of which are similar and interpreted as being consistent with a culture that is short-term in nature. As stated earlier in this paper, we have

comparative LTO data for relatively few countries. As such, comparisons of Kurdistan with the rest of the world are difficult and require country substitution for comparison. Figure 6 shows the LTO scores for the Iraqis and Kurds along with scores for Afghanistan, the United States, and Japan. Japan is included for comparison purposes due to its unusually high score.

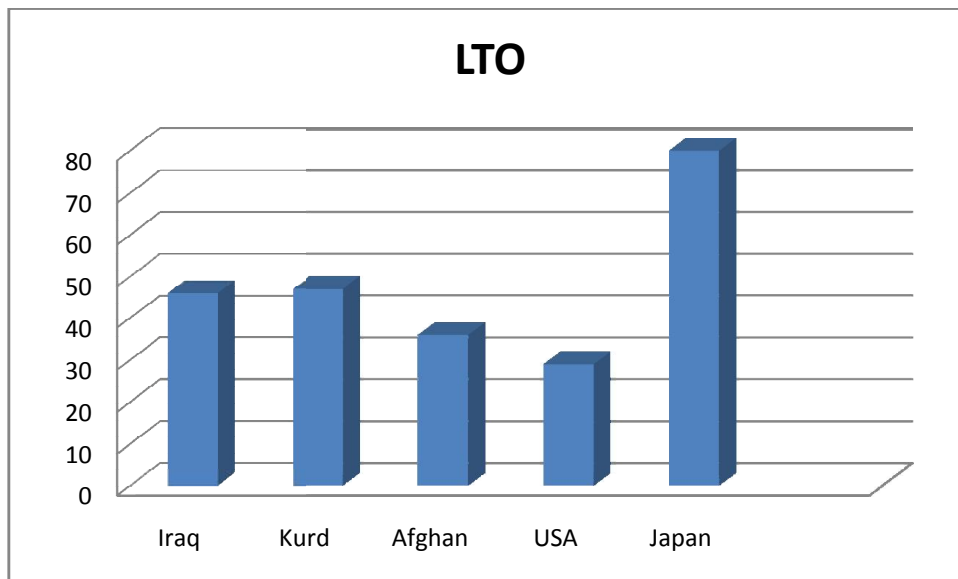


Figure 6 : Scores for long-term orientation in select countries

IV. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine the cultural values of present day Kurdistan and to ascertain whether there were differences between Arabs and Kurds living within Kurdistan. Limitations of this study are similar to most other cross-cultural comparative analyses. As with many investigations of cultural values, significant underreporting of less educated and more isolated members of the culture can occur. While this is also true of this study, the results provide a first attempt to gain a general cultural assessment of the cultures found in Kurdistan. Hofstede (2013) recommends using matched samples for country comparison. The current study does not use matched samples. Using matched samples with the original data set would be ideal for comparison. However, without some degree of generalizability of the original data set, the work of Geert Hofstede would have very limited application. The VSM used by Hofstede and others can only act as a "blunt instrument" in assessing national culture. Despite this limitation, useful insights and understandings of culture that would otherwise not be available can be studied.

Based upon this assessment, the culture of Kurdistan can be characterized as being somewhat divided between the Arab and Kurdish populations. Both are low in power distance, individualistic, and short-term time oriented. Iraqi Kurdistan is masculine and low in uncertainty avoidance while the Kurdish culture is more feminine and high in uncertainty avoidance. These cultural dimensions have implications for economic development, political stability, and business management.

National culture can be the major determinant of the success of a multinational organization (Dartey-Baah, 2013). Understanding the values, beliefs, and assumptions of the people with whom we do business is critical to fostering better understandings and the promotion of harmonious business relationships. These cultural values and their differences can present some challenges to doing business and managing inside Kurdistan. It should be remembered that people from cultures low in power distance prefer some form of power sharing and participation in the workplace. Having lived under the strong arm rule of a dictator for many years, the careful management of power sharing in Kurdistan is important. While both ethnicities show a low power distance score (especially among the younger population), developing a sense of trust will be an important role for managers working in Kurdistan. The split nature of Kurdistan's culture with respect to masculinity presents a unique set of challenges. The differences, however, are not extremely large between the two ethnic groups. However, it is large enough to require special attention. The more masculine Iraqis will prefer greater competition and material rewards in their business interactions. The more feminine Kurds will

prefer more cooperation and consensus in decision-making. The individualistic nature of both cultural groups means that people will want to be responsible for their own actions and rewarded for individual successes. Goals, measurement, and reward systems will need to be designed to accommodate their individualist nature. The split in high uncertainty avoidance will present some difficulties in terms of integration. Among the Kurds, with their tendency for high uncertainty avoidance, more direction and clear policies and procedures will need to be structured in the business infrastructure. The Iraqis will be more comfortable operating in an environment with fewer constraints. Integrating these two preferences will be a challenge to management in Kurdistan. The short term orientation of both ethnic groups would suggest that a focus on the present and more immediately realizable results would be considered more appropriate than organizational policies and procedures that emphasize the future and delayed gratification.

Hope for the future of Kurdistan and its economic progress and development depends more on people than resources. Many countries suffer from the "resource curse" in which the abundance of natural resources distorts and corrupts the marketplace and politics. With the abundance of oil and gas reserves it will be essential for Kurdistan to manage its economy and political institutions so that it will not become a victim of the resource curse. Like any other former totalitarian regime, Iraq requires three elements to succeed (Berman, Haber, & Weingast, 2003). First is literacy and individualism. Kurdistan is making progress in developing its human resource base and the combined scores of the two ethnic groups on the IND scale would indicate possible success in democratic nation building. The second element necessary to succeed is a system of government that contains checks and balances. This is especially true in the case of a country divided by ethnicity. The last element necessary for political success in Kurdistan is open markets and rule of law. Integrating two ethnic groups with different cultural values (and a history of mistrust) will be a challenge. With a Kurdish majority having a cultural orientation that values low power distance, moderate individualism, and feminine ideals, there is hope that all three elements for a successful political structure can materialize.

As globalization spreads, frontier markets will continue to be interesting to companies engaged in international business. All too often not much is known about the cultures of these more remote and isolated locations. To be successful in these and other markets, a better understanding of culture becomes essential. According to Bradley, Brown, and Rubach (2010), understanding culture involves looking at the past and the ingrained values of the present. Understanding Kurdistan requires an appreciation of its past and the

emerging values of the current ethnic composition. This paper provides much needed illumination on the cultural values of this promising frontier market.

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