

## Perceived Threat among University Students of Ethnic Diversity

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to determine the extent of the impact of perceived threat, both symbolic and realistic, on the students of the University of Kirkuk. The study sought to clarify the feelings of threat or lack of security among the students of the University of Kirkuk and its effect on their social, cultural, and physical life paths, and whether these factors could directly or indirectly influence the student's psychological state. The importance of this study stems from the reality of the ethnic diversity that characterizes Kirkuk Governorate, where differences in the levels of perceived threat among the ethnic groups are observed. This necessitates studying the psychological and social factors underlying this variation. The current study aims to: 1. Identify the level of perceived threat among university students. 2. Identify the differences in the degree of perceived threat (both symbolic and realistic) according to the variable of ethnicity (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish). To achieve this goal, the researcher divided it into two branches: a. Identify the differences in the degree of perceived symbolic threat according to the variable of ethnicity (Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen). b. Identify the differences in the degree of perceived realistic threat according to the variable of ethnicity (Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen). The study relied on the descriptive method, with data analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. As for the measurement tool, the researcher developed a Perceived Threat Scale based on the Integrated Threat Theory, which was adopted for both construction and interpretation. The research findings revealed the following: 1. University students experience both symbolic and realistic perceived threats, and the value of the symbolic threat was higher than that of the realistic threat. 2. Regarding differences among ethnic groups, the results of the study showed that: a. There are statistically significant differences among the ethnic groups (Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen) in symbolic perceived threat, in favor of the Arab group. b. There are no statistically significant differences among the ethnic groups (Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen) in the level of realistic perceived threat.

**Keywords:** threat, perceived, students, university, ethnicities.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Section One: First – The Problem:

For more than twenty years, the Iraqi people have suffered — and continue to suffer — from successive wars and the political and economic changes that occurred after 2003, which have had a profound impact on the life of the Iraqi individual and the satisfaction of their needs and concepts; particularly under the conditions of the American occupation, which seeks to export ideas, principles, and opinions according to the American vision and what it wishes Iraq to become. All of this may negatively affect the concepts of the Iraqi individual (Rahim, 2011, p. 2).

The literature indicates that self-perception of threat is the main driver of individuals' preventive actions. Models of perceived threat suggest that it influences preventive behaviors — or more specifically, that perceived threat is positively associated with people's intentions to take preventive action (Brewer et al., 2007; Sheeran et al., 2014).

Borkovec, Alcaine, and Behar (2004) stated that “perceived threat is associated with high levels of anxiety.” Through two studies conducted on university students, they found that the relationship between perceived threat and anxiety is linked to maladaptive anxiety beliefs and the desire for predictability. The relationship between anxiety, anxiety beliefs, and the desire for predictability was moderated by perceived threat. Higher levels of perceived likelihood were associated with less positive self- and other-perceptions, while higher levels of perceived cost were associated with higher standards.

Previous research found that individuals who believe that undesirable outcomes are more likely to occur tend to have higher levels of anxiety. The second study concluded that there is a relationship between the perceived cost of undesirable events and anxiety, and it also indicated that individuals who believe that undesirable outcomes would be more costly tend to have higher levels of anxiety (Berenbaum et al., 2007, pp. 2473–2482). The researcher believes that when an individual perceives a threat in the social environment in which they live, they may resort to seeking subgroups to which they can belong. This leads to ethnic and racial diversity, which in turn creates real challenges for the ruling political system if not handled carefully, as disagreement may lead to conflicts and divisions within society, ultimately affecting social identity. This has been indicated by some studies that have pointed to instances of aggression among members of the same society. One such study is Al-Assaf (2010), which aimed to reveal the effect of ethnic groups on the stability of the nation-state. The study concluded that emphasizing Kurdish ethnicity contributes to destabilizing the state and spreading chaos within it, resulting in the loss of a sense of social identity (Al-Assaf, 2010, p. 118).

The Iraqi society, following the U.S. occupation of Iraq after 2003, witnessed a wave of violence and tension among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, which threatened the stability and security of Iraq. This gave rise to numerous problems, including people fleeing from conflicts — known as forced migration — as they searched for safety and stability elsewhere.

This was confirmed by Al-Mahdawi (2021), who found that the ongoing political conflict, the emergence of terrorist organizations in Iraq, the existence of racial infiltration within the social structure, and the escalation of regional and international interventions have all led to the problem of migration of religious and ethnic groups from Iraq, resulting in the disappearance of diversity. All of this occurred due to terrorism, discrimination, and displacement policies following the 2003 occupation of Iraq, which ultimately created future scenarios threatening the reality of ethnic groups. (<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/5029>)

## Second: Importance

The literature in the field of health risks indicates that self-perception of threat is the main driver of individuals' preventive actions, and that perceiving threat is a key factor in motivating people toward preventive behaviors. Brewer et al. (2007), in a study on the relationship between risk perception and health behavior such as vaccination, pointed out that perceived threat is a fundamental component in many theories of health behavior. However, the relationship between risk perception and behavior — often confounded by inappropriate evaluation and analysis conditions — tends to appear weak. The study concluded that the relationship between risk perception and behavior was stronger in studies that were prospective, or had higher-quality risk measures, or had non-biased measures of risk or behavior. It was inferred that the consistent relationships between risk perceptions and behavior, which were stronger than those suggested by previous meta-analyses, indicate that risk perceptions are rightfully positioned as core concepts in health behavior theories. (<https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.26.2.136>)

Hawi (2024) explained that perception influences a wide range of outcomes, from intergroup hostility to collective action. Issues such as climate change, migration, and teamwork illustrate how security perceptions are framed within different contexts. Beliefs about climate change and the extent to which it is perceived as a threat to environmental security influence the behavioral decisions made by individuals and communities, including personal sacrifices. However, while information about climate change is readily available, the degree to which this information affects perceived threat, or changes in attitudes and behavior, varies significantly as a function of framing, social identities, need for certainty, and several other psychological factors.

The unwillingness to interact with members of the outgroup is a form of bias. Gerry et al. (2018) conducted two studies on the effect of perceived warmth and competence on realistic threat and the willingness for intergroup contact. The unwillingness to engage with outgroup members represents a type of prejudice.

In the two studies, the authors tested the proposition that perceived competence has an indirect effect on the willingness for intergroup contact through its influence on realistic threat, and that perceived warmth moderates this relationship.

In the first study, Hong Kong students evaluated the perceived warmth and competence of an outgroup, as well as the extent to which they viewed the group as a realistic threat and their willingness to engage in contact with them.

In the second study, warmth (high vs. low) and competence (high vs. low) were experimentally manipulated for an unfamiliar outgroup, and the effects on realistic threat and willingness for intergroup contact were examined. In both studies, an interaction effect between warmth and competence was found in predicting realistic threat. When the outgroup was perceived as warm, competence was negatively associated with realistic threat (Study 1). Conversely, when the outgroup was perceived as lacking warmth, competence was positively associated with realistic threat (Study 2).

Across both studies, perceived warmth mitigated the indirect effect of perceived competence on the willingness for intergroup contact. The implications of these findings were discussed regarding the role of warmth and competence stereotypes in perceived threat and prejudice. (Gerry et al., 2018, pp. 857–870).

### **Third: Research Objectives:**

1. To identify the level of perceived threat among university students.
2. To identify the differences in the degree of perceived threat (both symbolic and realistic) according to the variable of ethnicity (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish).

### **Fourth: Research Limits:**

The current research is limited to students of the University of Kirkuk from both humanities and scientific disciplines, and for both genders (males and females) in Kirkuk Governorate for the academic year 2024–2025.

### **Section Two: Definition of Terms**

Below are the definitions of the terms that appeared in the current research: **Perceived Threat**

Williams and Keith (1988): The individual's self-perception of the amount of danger or challenge faced in a particular situation. (Williams and Keith, 1988, p. 247)

**Witte, K. (1992):** The individual's perceptions or thoughts about danger or harm existing in the environment, which includes two dimensions:

**Perceived severity:** individuals' beliefs about the magnitude and importance of the threat. (Williams, and Keith, 1988, p: 247)

Perceived susceptibility: individuals' beliefs about their risk of being exposed to the threat. (Kuang, 2020, p. 399)

**Shilling (1992):** The extent to which an individual perceives that their abilities, qualities, or skills are insufficient to succeed in a particular task. (Shilling, 1992, p. 67)

**Stephan and Stephan (2000):** Includes all the threats that group members believe they face, regardless of whether those threats actually exist or not (Stephan, Walter et al., 2009, p. 44).

**These Threats include:** Realistic threats, which pose danger to the safety of the group and may include threats to physical safety, health, economic and political power, or even the group's existence. (Stephan&Stephan, 2000, pp. 23–45) Symbolic threats, which involve perceived differences between groups in morals, values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes. Symbolic threats are threats to the ingroup's worldview. These threats arise partly because the ingroup believes in the moral righteousness of its own value system. (Walter G. Stephan, C. W., 2000, pp. 25–26)

Hale and Ruse (2008): The self-interpretation of potential harm or threat that an individual is exposed to in a particular situation. (Hale and Ruse, 2008, p. 117)

**Theoretical Definition:** The researcher adopted the definition of Stephan and Stephan (2000) according to the Integrated Threat Theory, which was used for the purpose of construction and interpretation of results.

**Operational Definition:** It is the score obtained by the respondent on the Perceived Threat Scale prepared for this purpose.

**Nationalities / Nationalism:** It is the feeling of belonging and loyalty to a unified group that shares a common ethnic origin, historical ties, and a common language, even if their homelands differ (Abd Al-Aal, 2013, p. 170).

Thus, it is a social and political bond, consisting of a set of moral characteristics and attributes that distinguish members of a society—such as kinship, religion, and language—which in turn lead to the cohesion of society's members under one flag within a single territory known as a community (Maghnia, 2019, p. 18). **The researcher identified** three nationalities—Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen—as the most prevalent in Kirkuk Governorate compared to other ethnic groups.

## **SECTION TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CONCEPT OF PERCEIVED THREAT.**

The researcher adopted the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT), which originally appeared as the Integrated Threat Theory of Prejudice, a branch of research on intergroup anxiety in the works of Stephan and Stephan (1985, 1989). Their research focused on the antecedents and consequences of the anxiety and prejudice people experience when interacting with outgroup members. The intergroup anxiety model suggested that when intergroup anxiety is high, exaggerated responses typically appear, usually negative, and are based on perception. (Walter G. Stephan, C. W., 1999, pp. 613–628)

This theory was later named the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT). The basic threat model currently includes four types of threats believed to contribute to prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. (Walter G. Stephan, C. W., 2000, p. 25) Stephan and Renfro (2002) later condensed these four components into two main types: realistic threats and symbolic threats, removing the categories of negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety from the core framework of the theory. They found that these could be better understood as subtypes of threat that may lead to realistic or symbolic threats, rather than standing as separate categories. For example, intergroup anxiety can depend on expectations of physical danger (realistic threat) as well as expectations of harm to individual identity (symbolic threat). (Stephan & Renfro, 2002, pp. 191–207)

**Realistic Threats:** These are threats to a group's power, resources, status, or general welfare.

**Symbolic Threats:** These are threats to a group's religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or worldview. Individual-level realistic threats relate to actual physical or material harm to a member of the group, whereas individual-level symbolic threats relate to humiliation, disrespect, or dehumanization experienced by individuals from members of the outgroup. (Stephan & Renfro, 2002, pp. 191–208).

The theory views the primary defensive mechanism as the belief among group members that their lives are threatened or targeted by other groups, reflecting the group's collective concern for their general fate and future (Abdullah, 1989, p. 95). From this, it can be inferred that the theory relies on the framework of intergroup conflict, where the key explanatory mechanism is the belief of one group's members that their lives are threatened or targeted by other groups. This reflects collective concern for the group's overall fate and future, rather than self-interest, which represents the concerns of individuals according to their personal desires and wishes, as self-interest has faced numerous criticisms (Abd Al-Sahib, 2011, pp. 38–39).

In the modified theory, collective realistic threats are threats to the group's power, resources, status, or general welfare, while symbolic threats are threats to the group's religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or external worldview (Crisp, Stone et al., 2006, pp. 230–243). This aligns with the ethnic groups comprising the society of Kirkuk city, which is why the researcher adopted the Integrated Threat Theory, as it is the most comprehensive and recent framework, and used it in constructing the scale and interpreting the results.

## **SECTION THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES**

### **First: Method of Research**

To achieve the research objectives, the researcher determined the research methodology, population, and selection of a representative sample. When adopting the research scale, the researcher ensured that it was appropriate for the research population and met scientific and objective criteria. The current study relied on the descriptive method for data collection and analysis, as it is a suitable method that seeks to identify the current status of the studied phenomenon. This method is also distinguished by not only describing the phenomenon but also interpreting and predicting it (Lamar, 2000, p. 1).

### **Second: Population of Research**

The original population of the current research consisted of undergraduate students at the University of Kirkuk for the academic year 2024–2025, totaling 20,612 students. The population is composed of multiple ethnic groups, namely Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen.

### **Third: Sample of Research**

The sample is a part of the population selected by the researcher to conduct the study. The sample of the current research consisted of 400 students from the ethnic groups Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen. They were selected using stratified random sampling from the colleges of the University of Kirkuk, including the College of Education, College of Medicine, College of Science, and College of Agriculture for the academic year 2024–2025, as shown in Table (1).

**Table (1)** Distribution of the Research Sample by College and Ethnicity

Total	Turkmen	Arab	Kurdish	Colleges	No.
121	30	56	35	College of Education	1
66	20	20	26	College of Medicine	2
103	30	43	30	College of Science	3
110	49	45	16	College of Agriculture	4
400	129	164	107		Total

The psychometric properties of the scales (validity and reliability) were also extracted.

#### A. Validity:

Validity is one of the important requirements in constructing psychological scales. It refers to the ability of the instrument to measure what it is actually intended to measure (Al-Amiri, 2018, p. 137). The researcher relied on the following method to establish the validity of the scales:

#### *Construct Validity:*

This refers to determining the scale scores based on the intended psychological construct to be measured within the framework of a specific psychological concept (Al-Amiri, 2018, p. 138). This type of validity was verified in the current scale through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

#### *Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA):*

Researchers typically use EFA to analyze the response data of participants. EFA is employed to estimate factorial validity and to uncover the factor structure — including the number of factors and the pattern of item loadings on the scale used (Laoun&Ayesh, 2016, pp. 96–97).

The researcher used the Principal Component Method, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity on the research sample of 400 students from the three ethnic groups. The KMO value was 0.92, which is higher than the cutoff value of 0.50, while Bartlett's test value was 5951.549, as shown in Table (2).

**Table (2):** KMO and Bartlett's Test for the Perceived Threat Scale

KMO and Bartlett's Test	
.920	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.
5951.549	Aprox. Chi-Square
276	Df
.000	Sig.
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	

This indicates the adequacy and suitability of the research sample size. After conducting the factor analysis of the scale items, two factors were extracted: the first factor had an eigenvalue of 6.45 and explained 26.87% of the total variance, while the second factor had an eigenvalue of 5.98 and explained 24.94% of the total variance. The researcher then applied the Varimax rotation method to determine the item loadings on the factors. Based on Thurstone's criterion, the results showed that all items of the first domain (symbolic threat) were significantly loaded, and all items of the second factor (realistic perceived threat) were also significantly loaded according to the criterion mentioned above (see Table 3).

**Table (3):** Factor Loadings for the Perceived Threat Scale

Significance	Factor 2	Item No.	Factor 1	Item No.
Significant	0.71	13	0.61	1
Significant	0.42	14	0.74	2
Significant	0.41	15	0.74	3
Significant	0.59	16	0.77	4
Significant	0.65	17	0.71	5
Significant	0.63	18	0.59	6
Significant	0.63	19	0.67	7
			0.67	8
Significant	0.64	21	0.57	9
Significant	0.50	22	0.73	10
Significant	0.65	23	0.75	11
Significant	0.53	24	0.69	12
			0.46	20

	5.98	Eigenvalue Factor	6.54	Eigenvalue Factor
	24.94	Total Variance Explained Factor	26.87	Total Variance Explained Factor

From the above, it is evident that the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) of the Perceived Threat Scale yielded two factors, with the first factor explaining 26.87% of the total variance and the second factor explaining 24.94% of the total variance.

## B. Reliability

One of the requirements for a good scale is that it should have high reliability. Reliability refers to the ability of the test to produce the same results if applied again to the same group of individuals under the same conditions, or to maintain consistency in responses across items for the same individual (Al-Amiri, 2018, p. 139). The researcher calculated the reliability index of the research scale using two methods.

### *Alpha Coefficient for Internal Consistency:*

This method relies on the consistency of an individual's performance across items, providing a good estimate of reliability in most situations (Al-Amiri, 2018, p. 140). To calculate reliability using this method, the Cronbach's Alpha formula was applied to the responses of the 400-student sample from the three ethnic groups (Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen). The results indicated that the realistic perceived threat scale had a reliability of 0.89, and the symbolic perceived threat scale had a reliability of 0.91. These high values demonstrate that the scale possesses strong internal consistency.

**Half-Split Method:** This method is primarily used to measure reliability indices by dividing the scale items into two equal halves, typically separating odd-numbered and even-numbered items, and then calculating the correlation coefficient between the scores on the two halves (Azim, 2017, p. 99). The researcher calculated the correlation between the odd and even scores for the 400-student sample, and this correlation represents split-half consistency (Şencan, 2005, p. 24).

Using this method, the Pearson correlation coefficient for the symbolic perceived threat scale was 0.76, and after applying the corrected Spearman-Brown formula, it reached 0.86. For the realistic perceived threat scale, the Pearson correlation was 0.68, and after the Spearman-Brown correction, it increased to 0.81. These results indicate that the research scale exhibits very high reliability and is considered highly consistent when compared to absolute standards.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS:

This chapter presents the results obtained in the study according to its objectives, discusses and interprets these results in light of previous studies and the adopted theoretical framework, and then provides recommendations based on the findings.

### **Objective One: To Identify the Level of Perceived Threat (Symbolic and Realistic) among University Students.**

The results showed that the arithmetic mean of the scores of the 400-student sample on the first domain (symbolic perceived threat) of the scale was 45.63, with a standard deviation of 10.71. When compared to the hypothetical mean of the scale (39), the sample mean was higher. Testing the significance of the difference between the two means using the one-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of the sample mean, with a calculated t-value of 12.38, which is higher than the tabular t-value of 1.96 at a significance level of 0.05 and 399 degrees of freedom, as shown in Table 4.

**Table (4)** Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-Value for the First Domain (Symbolic Perceived Threat) among University Students

Significance Level	Tabular t	Calculated t	Hypothetical Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Sample Size
0.05	1.96	12.38	39	10.71	45.63	400

The results indicate that students at the University of Kirkuk feel a symbolic threat, as the calculated t-value (12.38) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. As for the second domain (realistic perceived threat), the results showed that

the arithmetic mean of the scores for the 400-student sample was 32.00, with a standard deviation of 9.41. When compared to the hypothetical mean of the scale (27), the sample mean was higher. Testing the significance of the difference between the two means using the one-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of the sample mean, with a calculated t-value of 10.63, which is higher than the tabular t-value of 1.96 at a significance level of 0.05 and 399 degrees of freedom.

**Table (5)** Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-Value for the Second Domain (Realistic Perceived Threat) among University Students

Significance Level	Tabular t	Calculated t	Hypothetical Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Sample Size
0.05	1.96	10.63	27	9.41	32.00	400

The results indicate that students at the University of Kirkuk feel a realistic threat, as the calculated t-value (10.63) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Thus, the findings suggest that students experience both symbolic and realistic perceived threats, with the symbolic threat being higher than the realistic threat. Accordingly, it can be said that the symbolic threat is relatively high, while the realistic threat is relatively moderate, reflecting a state of anxiety and tension. These results are consistent with the study by Makashvili et al. (2018), which found that both symbolic and realistic threats had a significant impact on Georgian students' attitudes toward other groups, indicating that participants perceived symbolic threat at a high level and realistic threat at a moderate level. Similarly, Schweitzer et al. (2005) concluded that students perceived both real and imagined threats in their environment from refugees. Additionally, Charles-Toussaint & Crowson (2010) reported a high perception of both symbolic and realistic threats among students.

This objective can be interpreted based on the theoretical framework adopted in this study, the Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 1996), which emphasizes intergroup anxiety and bias experienced by members of the ingroup when interacting with the outgroup. The theory provides a precise interpretation of negative emotions and tensions between different groups. These biases lead to feelings of threat, whether realistic (Realistic Threat)—referring to the group's perception of direct material danger from another group, such as physical or material harm to a member of the group—or symbolic (Symbolic Threat)—referring to threats to the group's religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, ethics, or worldview, i.e., threats that endanger their status, economic benefits, values, or rights.

The researcher interprets the results of the first objective in light of the theory as revealing high levels of both symbolic and realistic threats among the sample members, which aligns closely with the Integrated Threat Theory. Students' sense that their cultural values are threatened constitutes the symbolic threat, while the realistic threat reflects a psychological and social environment dominated by anxiety about "the other."

**Objective Two: To Identify the Differences in the Level of Perceived Threat (Symbolic and Realistic) According to the Nationality Variable (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish). To Achieve this Objective, the Researcher divided it into two sub-goals:**

**A. Identifying** individual differences in the level of symbolic perceived threat according to nationality (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish).

The arithmetic means and standard deviations for the three nationalities (Arab, Turkmen, and Kurdish students) on the first domain (symbolic perceived threat) were calculated, as shown in Table (6).

**Table (6)** Means and Standard Deviations of the Three Nationalities (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish) on the Symbolic Perceived Threat Scale

Standard Deviation of Symbolic Threat	Mean of Symbolic Threat	Sample Size	Nationality
10.79110	47.5061	164	Arab
10.16580	44.0155	129	Turkmen
10.90315	44.7290	107	Kurdish
10.71509	45.6375	400	Total

The researcher then used one-way ANOVA to examine the significance of differences in the perception of symbolic threat according to the three nationalities. The statistical results showed that the calculated F-value was  $F = 4.431$  with degrees of freedom (399) and a significance level (Sig = 0.012), indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the means of the nationalities in the level of symbolic threat, as shown in Table (7).

**Table (7)** One-Way ANOVA for Symbolic Perceived Threat Scores According to the Three Nationalities

Significance (Sig)	F-value	Mean Square (M.S)	d.F	Sum of Squares (S.S)	Source
0.12 Significant	4.431	500.167	2	1000.334	Between Group
		112.872	397	44810.103	Within Group
			399	45810.438	Total

Based on the data in Table 7, the statistical results indicate that there are statistically significant differences in the perception of symbolic threat according to the three nationalities. Comparing the calculated F-value ( $F = 4.431$ ) with the critical F-value at the 0.05 significance level (approximately 3.02) shows that the calculated F is greater than the critical value, confirming the presence of significant differences between the nationalities for this variable. To identify the precise locations of these differences, the researcher employed post hoc tests using the Scheffé method for multiple comparisons, as shown in Table (8).

**Table (8)** Scheffé Post Hoc Test Results for Symbolic Perceived Threat Variable

Result	Standard Error	Mean Difference	Comparison Between Nationalities		Threat Type
Significant in favor of Arabs	1.250	3.49	Kurdish	Arab	Symbolic
Significant in favor of Arabs	1.320	2.77	Turkmen	Arab	
No significant difference between	1.389	-7.134	Turkmen	Kurdish	

It is evident from Table (8) that there are statistically significant differences in symbolic threat at the (0.05) level between the Arab and Kurdish nationalities, in favor of the Arab nationality, as well as between the Arab and Turkmen nationalities, also in favor of the Arab nationality. There were no significant differences between the Kurdish and Turkmen nationalities.

This result indicates that Arabs perceive symbolic threat more strongly than the other nationalities present in the research population (University of Kirkuk). The researcher explains this result in light of political analyses concerning the city of Kirkuk. The perspectives of the Arab population in Kirkuk gained significance due to the security changes in the governorate in 2014, particularly when large parts of the governorate came under Kurdish forces' control. This had a strong impact on the local population, leading Arabs to believe that Kurdish political parties aimed for full control over Kirkuk. They also perceived themselves as excluded from decision-making and feared gradual marginalization, which explains the Arab stance against any project attempting to alter geographic boundaries (Middle East Research Institute – MERI, 2015, p. 25).

The researcher believes that the reason for the significant differences in perceived symbolic threat in favor of the Arab ethnicity is that the Arabs feel they might be victims of the political conflict in the country and could be used as a bargaining tool in political transformations. On the other hand, the increasing demands of other ethnic groups for political and social influence may provoke a sense of threat among the Arabs. This threat stems from their perception of losing political control or influence, or from the belief that their rights are being taken away, generating a feeling of marginalization even if it is not actual. Moreover, the majority of those in positions of power belong to the Kurdish and Turkmen ethnicities, which has further heightened the Arabs' sense of symbolic threat.

### **B. Identifying Differences in the Degree of Perceived Realistic Threat According to Ethnicity (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish)**

The means and standard deviations for the three ethnic groups (Arabs, Turkmen, and Kurds) were calculated, as shown in Table (9).

**Table (9)** Means and Standard Deviations for the Three Ethnic Groups (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish) According to the Perceived Realistic Threat Scale

Standard Deviation of Symbolic Threat	Mean of Symbolic Threat	Sample Size	Nationality
10.07270	33.1585	164	Arab
8.56056	30.8295	129	Turkmen
9.21878	31.6449	107	Kurdish
9.41084	32.0025	400	Total

The researcher also employed a one-way ANOVA to examine the significance of differences in perceived realistic threat across ethnic groups. The calculated F-value was  $F = 2.332$  with degrees of freedom (399) and a significance level  $Sig = 0.98$ , indicating that there were no statistically significant differences between the means of the ethnic groups regarding perceived realistic threat, as shown In Table (10).

**Table (10)** One-Way ANOVA for Perceived Realistic Threat Scores According to the Three Ethnic Groups

Significance (Sig)	F-value	Mean Square (M.S)	d.F	Sum of Squares (S.S)	Source
0.98 Not Significant	2.332	205.183	2	410.367	Between Group
		87.976	397	34926.631	Within Group
			399	35336.998	Total

Based on the data in Table (10), the statistical results indicate no significant differences in perceived realistic threat among the three ethnic groups. Comparing the calculated F-value ( $F = 2.332$ ) with the critical F-value at the 0.05 significance level, which is approximately 3.02, It is clear that the calculated F is smaller than the critical value. This indicates that there are no statistically significant differences between the ethnic groups on this variable.

This result is consistent with the study by Karina Velasco Gonzalez (2010), which found that negative feelings toward Muslims did not stem from economic or security concerns (realistic threat), but rather from the perception that Muslims threaten Dutch cultural values (symbolic threat), which poses a greater risk than realistic threat. It also aligns with the study by Ana Makashvili et al. (2018), which concluded that symbolic threat had a stronger impact on the research sample than realistic threat, showing that university students from the Georgian majority exhibited high levels of concern regarding perceived threats to their cultural, religious, and social values from minority groups (Muslims and immigrants). The researcher's findings regarding perceived threat (both types) can be interpreted through the lens of the Integrated Threat Theory, which posits that symbolic threats are more salient in culturally diverse environments where there is an Imbalance among ethnic groups. Symbolic threats reflect the group's perception of the world and are closely linked to the strength of the group's identity. These threats arise partly because the ingroup believes in the moral correctness of Its value system. Such differences can lead the ingroup to perceive the outgroup as posing a threat to the Ingroup's morals, standards, beliefs, and attitudes.

The researcher notes that the Iraqi society, which comprises multiple ethnic groups classified as distinct from one another—specifically the three ethnic groups in this study (Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen)—coexist in an interwoven manner. This intermingling can generate heightened feelings of symbolic threat among some groups, especially when they perceive disparities in power, wealth, capability, and numbers among these groups. Such perceptions drive members to consolidate, unite, and align with their ingroup while exhibiting bias against outgroups, in order to preserve the group's status, prestige, and positive image against perceived external threats . The researcher further asserts that these threats, whether symbolic or realistic, represent psychological and social phenomena associated with each ethnic group. The findings of this study indicate that symbolic threat has a stronger influence in intergroup relations than realistic threat, reflecting the political and social composition of Iraqi society. It appears that ethnic affiliation is more closely tied to individuals' perception of threats to cultural identity than to competition over material resources.

Based on this, it can be stated that the symbolic threat variable contributes more significantly to the overall perception of threat than the realistic threat variable, as It represents an important psychological factor reflecting general tendencies, attitudes, and inclinations toward inequality among members of different ethnic groups. The absence of significant differences between ethnic groups regarding realistic threat may be attributed to the fact that all groups share critical historical and geographical relationships. The perceived threat is not general but rather depends on the level of social and historical actors, reflecting the extent to which a given group feels threatened.

The researcher emphasizes that such a result highlights the importance of promoting a culture of pluralism and respect for ethnic diversity, indicating widespread cultural awareness, openness to others, and acceptance of social perspectives that aim to reduce hostility and bias between different groups (ethnicities). This, in turn, fosters social cohesion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The researcher recommends emphasizing the continuation of academic support and the importance of collective and institutional efforts to reduce the phenomenon of perceived threats. This can be achieved by enhancing students' cultural understanding and intercultural dialogue among different ethnic groups, which will promote equal academic and social opportunities, strengthen a safe and inclusive educational

and social environment, respect other ethnicities, foster cooperation, and encourage positive behavior among members of the Iraqi society.

- The results of this study also highlight the importance of designing and implementing psychological support programs that take into account the cultural and ethnic differences among students.

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