

## Kurdistan: The Next Flashpoint Between Turkey, Iraq, and the Syrian Revolt

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Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, right, holds joint news conference with Massoud Barzani, left, leader of Iraq's Kurdish region, on Oct. 21, 2007

In the wake of the steady disintegration of the Assad regime, Syrian opposition activists reported that several towns, such as Amouda and Qabani in Syria's Kurdish northeast, had passed in mid-July 2012 without a fight into the local hands of a group called the Free Kurdish Army. Thus emerged for the first time in modern Kurdish history the nucleus of an exclusively Kurdish-controlled enclave bordering the predominantly Kurdish areas of Turkey. After largely sitting on the sidelines of the Syrian revolution, political groups from Syria's Kurdish minority in the northeastern region appear to have moved decisively to claim control of the Kurdish-populated towns.

The Free Kurdish Army was formed from the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a group with historical links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK. The PKK, it should be remembered, is regarded by both Turkey and the United States as a terrorist organization fighting the Turkish government for Kurdish autonomy. The Kurds are reportedly concentrating their efforts on wresting control of Qamishli, the largest of the Kurdish cities, from the Syrian government. Kurdish forces have already captured the city of Ayn al-Arab in the Aleppo Governorate, where they are flying the Kurdish flag.

The Turks, who have been at war with the PKK for decades, have been monitoring developments in Syria with increasing concern. Thus a columnist for the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* wrote in late July: "Only a week ago we had a 400-kilometer 'Kurdish border.' Now, 800 kilometers have been added to this."<sup>1</sup> The Turkish government has bluntly warned: "We will not allow a terrorist group to establish camps in northern Syria and threaten Turkey."<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made clear that Turkey would take any step that is necessary against a terrorist presence in northern Syria.<sup>3</sup>

Turkish observers have commented that the geopolitics of the Middle East are now being reshaped as the emergence of a "Greater Kurdistan" is no longer a remote possibility, posing enormous challenges for all the states hosting large Kurdish populations: Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.<sup>4</sup> Kurdistan is a potential land bridge for many of the conflicts erupting in this part of the region. It provides a ground route for Iraqi Kurdistan to supply the Syrian Kurds as they seek greater autonomy from Damascus. But its use will depend on which power dominates the tri-border area between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. This area could equally provide Iran with a corridor for moving supplies to its Syrian surrogates and even to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Perhaps this is why some commentators see Kurdistan as the new regional flashpoint in the Middle East.

An overview of the Kurds and Kurdistan will help put these latest events in context.

### **The Kurds in Today's Middle East**

- The Kurds are an Indo-European people who immigrated to the Middle East, like the Iranians. They mostly inhabit a region known as Kurdistan that includes adjacent parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Kurds constitute 7 percent of the population in Iran, 15-20 percent in Iraq, perhaps 9 percent in Syria, and 20 percent in Turkey. In all of these countries except Iran, Kurds form the second largest ethnic group. Roughly 55 percent of the world's Kurds live in Turkey, about 18 percent each in Iran and Iraq, and slightly more than 5 percent in Syria.
- The number of Kurds living in Southwest Asia is estimated at 26 to 34 million, with another one or two million living in the diaspora. Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East after Arabs, Persians, and Turks.

- While Turkey hosts the largest Kurdish population in the Middle East, the question of Kurdish independence should be treated separately from the cases of Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Although Turkish-Israeli relations have deteriorated during the rule of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Israeli policy should be based on the eventual restoration of Israeli-Turkish strategic cooperation. Hence Israeli policy toward the Kurdish issue should not undermine the territorial integrity of the Turkish state, or be interpreted in that manner.
- The most likely candidate for Kurdish independence is the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq. The conflicts between the KRG and the central Iraqi government in Baghdad have been steadily growing over oil exploration agreements, the location of internal boundaries, and Kurdish rights under the Iraqi constitution. Iraqi Kurdish leaders warned in 2012 that they will seek independence if their differences with Baghdad are not addressed. In the meantime, with the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki backing the regime of Bashar Assad and the KRG helping the Syrian Kurds, Iraqi-Kurdish tensions have been steadily rising.
- Turkey, which in the past was the main constraint on the Iraqi Kurds, has become the dominant external economic force in the KRG. It has proposed new pipelines for Kurdish oil through Turkish territory. Turkey's objections to a KRG bid for independence are seen to be declining. This might change if the KRG became fully allied with the Syrian Kurdish insurrection, which includes parties that back the anti-Turkish PKK.
- The establishment of a viable, independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq could be a geopolitically positive development for Israel. Historical justice would dictate that, with 22 Arab states in the Middle East, the 35 million Kurds deserve at least one sovereign state of their own. Beyond Iraq, the emergence of more Kurdish independent areas is unlikely. The state system in the Middle East has been surprisingly robust since the advent of the Arab Spring; Syria might become a federated state, but is not expected to completely disintegrate.
- The Kurdish question places many Western states in a hypocritical position, especially given the efforts they constantly invest in the Palestinian issue. The millions of Kurds currently dispersed among Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Armenia do not benefit from the right of self-determination, granted to them over ninety years ago after World War I. Today the Kurds are the largest national grouping without a state of their own.

Nevertheless, despite the common goal of independent statehood, the Kurds in various countries are hardly unified. It was the constant rivalries between tribes, clans, families, and villages that caused Kurdistan's partition among Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria in the first place. The Kurds are also divided linguistically since they speak at least four different dialects of the Kurdish language. The Kurds have not yet understood the lessons of history, and their divisions are greater than the glue that can bind them together. Moreover, with adversaries such as

Turkey and Iran, it might be possible to consider a smaller independent Kurdish entity limited to Iraq, while Syrian Kurds achieve self-determination in the framework of a Syrian federal state.

### **Religion, Language, Geography**

The Kurds emerged as an ethnic group in the medieval period. They are believed to be of heterogeneous origins, combining a number of earlier tribal or ethnic groups including Median Semitic, Turkic, and Armenian elements. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims belonging to the Shafi'i school. Mystical practices and participation in Sufi orders are also widespread among Kurds. There is also a minority of Kurds who are Shia Muslims, primarily living in the Ilam and Kermanshah provinces of Iran and in central and southeastern Iraq (Fayli Kurds), and some who are Alawites, mostly living in Turkey.

The Kurdish language comprises the related dialects spoken by the Kurds.<sup>5</sup> A northern dialect of Kurdish called *Kurmanji* is spoken in Turkey, the Kurdish areas of Syria, and the most northern parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish language holds official status in Iraq as a national language along with Arabic; it is recognized in Iran as a regional language, though the Iranians regard Kurdish as a dialect of Persian. In Armenia it is a minority language.

In the southern areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as in western Iran, another dialect called *Surani* or central Kurdish is spoken. Speakers of *Kurmanji* and *Surani* can understand each other. A third Kurdish dialect, known as *Zaza*, is really a separate language. *Kurmanji* and *Surani* speakers usually cannot understand speakers of *Zaza*. A fourth linguistic group among the Kurds are speakers of *Gulani*, which is closer to *Zaza*. The Kurds also use different writing systems, relying on the Latin alphabet in Turkey. While they use an Arabic script in Iraq and Iran, a Cyrillic script is used in Armenia. For purposes of nation-building, the Kurds will need to produce a standardized Kurdish language.

The Kurdistan Region in Iraq is largely mountainous, with the highest point being a 3,611-meter (11,847-foot) summit known locally as Cheekah Dar (Black Tent). The mountains are part of the larger Zagros range, which is also part of Iran. Many rivers flow through the region's mountains, and the area is notable for its fertile land, plentiful water, and picturesque landscapes. The Great Zab and the Little Zab flow from east to west in the region. The Tigris River enters Iraq via the Kurdistan Region after flowing from Turkey.

The mountainous nature of Iraqi Kurdistan, the variance of temperatures in its different parts, and its wealth of water make it a land of agriculture and tourism. It is also rich in minerals and particularly oil, which for a long time was extracted via pipeline through Iraq. The largest lake in the region is Lake Dukan, and there are several smaller ones such as the Duhok Lake.

The western and southern sections of the Kurdistan Region are not as mountainous as the east. They are characterized by rolling hills and sometimes plains, and are greener than the rest of Iraq.

## Historical Background

After defeating Shah Ismail I in 1514, Ottoman Sultan Selim I annexed Armenia and Kurdistan and entrusted the disposition of the conquered territories to Idris, a historian who was a Kurd from Bitlis in Turkey. Idris divided the territory into sanjaks or districts and, making no attempt to interfere with the principle of heredity, installed the local chiefs as governors. He also resettled the rich pastoral country between Erzerum and Erivan, which had lain in waste since the conquests of Timur (Tamerlane), with Kurds from the Hakkari and Bohtan districts.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ottoman centralist policies aimed to remove power from the principalities and localities and this directly affected the Kurdish emirs. The first modern Kurdish nationalist movement emerged in 1880 with an uprising led by a Kurdish landowner and head of the powerful Shemdinan family, Sheikh Ubeydullah. He demanded political autonomy or outright independence for Kurds and the recognition of a Kurdistan state without interference from Turkish or Persian authorities. The uprising against Qajar Persia and the Ottoman Empire was ultimately suppressed by the Ottomans, and Ubeydullah, along with other notables, was exiled to Istanbul.

The Kurdish ethnonationalist movement that emerged following World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire was largely a reaction to the changes taking place in mainstream Turkey. These included radical secularization, which the strongly Muslim Kurds abhorred; a centralization of authority that threatened the power of local chieftains and Kurdish autonomy; and rampant Turkish nationalism in the new Turkish Republic, which threatened to marginalize the Kurds.

The Kurds, however, were also in internal conflict over the destiny of their country. Some, very open to the pan-Islamist ideology of the sultan-caliph, had seen the salvation of the Kurdish people in a status of cultural and administrative autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. Others, claiming to take inspiration from the principle of nationalities, the ideas of the French Revolution, and American President Woodrow Wilson, fought for Kurdistan's total independence.

The split was accentuated following the Ottoman defeat by the Allied Powers in 1918. Those fighting for independence hurriedly put together a delegation at the Versailles Conference to present "the claims of the Kurdish nation." This helped place the Kurdish national question on the international agenda. The Treaty of Sèvres, concluded on 10 August 1920 between the Allies – France, Great Britain, and the United States – and the Ottoman Empire, actually recommended, in section 111 (art. 64), the creation of a Kurdish state in part of Kurdistan:

If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 2 [i.e., Turkey] shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population

of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it shall be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.

This treaty, however, was superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne signed on 24 July 1923, which was concluded with modern Turkey after the Ottoman Empire's dissolution. The Treaty of Lausanne did not provide any guarantee of the Kurds' rights and handed the major part of Kurdistan over to the new Turkish state. Beforehand, in accordance with the Franco-Turkish Agreement of 20 October 1921, France had annexed the Kurdish provinces of Jazira and Kurd-Dagh to Syria, placing them under France's mandate. Iranian Kurdistan, of which a large part was controlled by the Kurdish leader Simko, lived in a state of near-dissidence vis-à-vis the Persian central government.

The fate of the petroleum-rich Kurdish province of Mosul, which is today part of Iraq, remained undecided. Both the Turks and the British claimed it. The Treaty of Sèvres also addressed the question of Iraqi Kurdistan, stating that "no objection will be raised by the Principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State [in Turkey] of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul Valiyet."

After the Treaty of Sèvres unraveled, Britain's imperial planners in the Colonial Office insisted on including Kurdistan in their mandate for Iraq so as to add to its Sunni population and offset the plurality of the Iraqi Shia. The League of Nations recognized the annexation of Kurdistan to Iraq in 1925. The British promised to make Iraqi Kurdistan autonomous once Iraq gained its independence. That commitment was not fulfilled either by the British or the Iraqi regime that succeeded their administration in 1932 as Iraq became independent.

Thus, at the end of 1925, the country of the Kurds, known since the twelfth century as Kurdistan, found itself divided between four states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

## **Kurdish Communities in West Asia**

### ***Iraq***

After the military coup by Abdul Karim Qasim in 1958, Mustafa Barzani, head of the Barzani clan, who had become the vocal advocate of Kurdish rights in Iraq, was invited by Qasim to return from his exile in the Soviet Union where he had been since 1945. Barzani was greeted with a hero's welcome in Iraq.

As part of the deal between Qasim and Barzani, the former promised to give the Kurds regional autonomy in return for Barzani's support for his policies. Meanwhile, during 1959-1960, Barzani became the head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which was granted legal status in 1960.

By early 1960, though, it was clear that Qasim would not fulfill his promise of regional autonomy. Hence, the KDP began to agitate for it. In the face of growing Kurdish dissent, as well as Barzani's personal power, Qasim began to incite the Barzanis' historical enemies, the Baradost and Zebari tribes, which led to intertribal warfare throughout 1960 and early 1961. By February 1961, Barzani had defeated the pro-government forces and consolidated his position as leader of the Kurds. At this point he ordered his forces to occupy all government offices in Kurdish territory and expel the officials. This was not received well in Baghdad, and Qasim began preparing for a military offensive to regain government control of the north.

Meanwhile, in June 1961, the KDP issued a detailed ultimatum to Qasim outlining Kurdish grievances and demanding rectification. Qasim ignored it and continued planning for war. It was not until 10 September, when an Iraqi army column was ambushed by a group of Kurds, that the Kurdish revolt truly began. Qasim reacted by ordering the Iraqi air force to indiscriminately bomb Kurdish villages, which ultimately served to rally the entire Kurdish population toward Barzani.

Qasim, however, profoundly distrusted the Iraqi army and purposely failed to adequately arm it, using ammunition rationing. Hence his government was not able to subdue the insurrection. This stalemate irritated powerful factions in the military and is said to be one of the main reasons the Ba'athists overthrew Qasim in February 1963.

In November 1963, after considerable infighting among the civilian and military wings of the Ba'athists, they were ousted by Abdul Salam Arif in another coup. Then, after another failed offensive against the Kurds, Arif declared a ceasefire in February 1964. This provoked a split between Kurdish urban radicals, on the one hand, and Peshmerga (freedom-fighter) forces led by Barzani, on the other. Barzani agreed to the ceasefire and deposed the radicals from the KPD.

Following the unexpected death of Arif, who was replaced by his brother Abdul Rahman Arif, the Iraqi government launched a last-ditch effort to overcome the Kurds. This campaign failed in May 1966 when Barzani's forces thoroughly defeated the Iraqi army at the Battle of Mount Handrin, near Rawanduz. It was said that the Kurds slaughtered an entire brigade. Recognizing the futility of continuing this campaign, Rahman Arif announced a twelve-point peace program in June 1966. It was not implemented, however, because of his overthrow by the Ba'ath Party in still another coup in 1968.

The Ba'ath government launched a new campaign to end the Kurdish insurrection, but it stalled in 1969. This can be attributed to the internal power struggle in Baghdad and also to tensions with Iran. Moreover, the Soviet Union pressured the Iraqis to come to terms with Barzani. A peace plan announced in March 1970 provided for broader Kurdish autonomy. The plan also gave Kurds representation in government bodies, to be implemented within four years. Nevertheless, in the same period, the Iraqi government embarked on an Arabization program in the oil-rich regions of Kirkuk and Khanaqin. In the following years the Baghdad government

overcame its internal divisions. It concluded a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in April 1972 and ended its isolation in the Arab world. The Kurds, for their part, remained dependent on Iranian military support and could do little to strengthen their forces.

In 1973, the United States made a secret agreement with the Shah of Iran to begin covertly funding Kurdish rebels against Baghdad through the CIA and in collaboration with Israel. Both are believed to be active in the country through the launch of the 2003 U.S. invasion and into the present. In 1974, the Iraqi government retaliated with a new offensive against the Kurds and pushed them close to the border with Iran. Iraq told Tehran it was willing to satisfy other Iranian demands if it would end its aid to the Kurds.

With mediation by Algerian President Houari Boumédiène, Iran and Iraq reached a comprehensive settlement in March 1975 known as the Algiers Pact. It left the Kurds helpless and Tehran cut off supplies to them. Barzani fled to Iran with many of his supporters. Others surrendered en masse and the rebellion ended after a few days. As a result, the Iraqi government extended its control over the northern region. To secure its influence, Iraq launched an Arabization program, moving Arabs to the vicinity of Kurdistan oil fields, particularly those around Kirkuk. The government's repressive measures against the Kurds after the Algiers Pact led to renewed clashes between the Iraqi army and Kurdish guerrillas in 1977. In 1978 and 1979, 600 Kurdish villages were burned down and approximately 200,000 Kurds were deported to the other parts of the country.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi government again implemented anti-Kurdish policies and a de facto civil war broke out. Iraq was widely condemned by the international community but never seriously punished for its actions, including the killing of thousands of Kurds with chemical weapons.

The first wave of attacks against the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War was carried out in 1982 when 8,000 Barzanis were arrested; their remains were returned to Kurdistan in 2008. The second wave was a campaign of systematic genocide against the Kurdish population. Between 29 March 1987 and 23 April 1989, the Anfal (Spoils of War) campaign involved the destruction of over 2,000 villages and the murder of 182,000 Kurdish civilians. The campaign, under the command of Ali Hassan al-Majid, encompassed ground offensives, aerial bombing, systematic destruction of communities, mass deportations, firing squads, and chemical attacks, including the infamous attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988 that killed 5,000 civilians instantly. The town of Qala Dizeh (population 70,000) was completely destroyed by the Iraqi army. The campaign also included the Arabization of Kirkuk; Kurds and other ethnic groups were driven out of the oil-rich city and replaced with Arab settlers from central and southern Iraq.

After the collapse of the Kurdish uprising of March 1991, which broke out after Saddam Hussein's defeat by the U.S.-led coalition, Iraqi troops recaptured most of the Kurdish areas and 1.5 million Kurds abandoned their homes and fled to the Turkish and Iranian borders. It is estimated that close to 20,000 Kurds died from exhaustion, hunger, cold, and disease. On 5 April 1991, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 688, which demanded that Iraq end its

measures against the Kurds and allow immediate access to international humanitarian organizations. This was the first international document to mention the Kurds by name since the League of Nations' arbitration of Mosul in 1925.

In mid-April, the U.S.-led coalition established safe havens within Iraqi borders and prohibited Iraqi planes from flying north of the 36th parallel. In October 1991, Kurdish guerrillas captured the cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah after a series of clashes with Iraqi troops. Late that month, the Iraqi government retaliated by slapping a food and fuel embargo on the Kurds and ceasing to pay civil servants in the Kurdish region. The embargo, however, backfired and in May 1992 the Kurds held parliamentary elections and established the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). An official internal boundary between the KRG and the rest of Iraq was established, though the KRG effectively administered Kurdish-populated areas beyond this line, over which there is to this day a territorial dispute between the Kurds and the Iraqi government. This dispute includes the city of Kirkuk.

The Kurdish population welcomed the American troops in 2003 with celebrations and dancing in the streets. The area controlled by the Peshmerga was expanded, and Kurds now had effective control in Kirkuk and parts of Mosul. The authority of the KRG and legality of its laws and regulations were recognized in articles 113 and 137 of the new Iraqi constitution ratified in 2005. By the beginning of 2006, the two Kurdish administrations of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah were unified.

Iraqi Kurds constitute 15-20 percent of Iraq's population. They are the majority in at least three provinces of northern Iraq, together known as Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurds also have a presence in Kirkuk, Mosul, Khanaqin, and Baghdad. Around 300,000 Kurds live in Baghdad, 50,000 in Mosul, and around 100,000 in southern Iraq.

Iraqi Kurdistan is a parliamentary democracy with a 111-seat regional assembly. Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party, was elected president of the new Iraqi administration, while KDP leader Massoud Barzani is president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The three governorates of Dahuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah comprise around 40,000 square kilometers (15,000 square miles) and have a population of around 4 million.

Since 1992, the KRG has been based in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The KRG's parliament, elected by popular vote, is called the Iraqi Kurdistan National Assembly, and its cabinet is composed of the KDP, the PUK, and their allies (the Iraqi Communist Party, the Socialist Party of Kurdistan, etc.). Structurally and officially, the two main parties exhibit few differences from each other. Their international organizations and structures of authority are similar.

Nechirvan Idris Barzani, Massoud's nephew, was prime minister of the KRG from 1999 to 2009, including presiding over the first KDP-PUK unified cabinet from 2006 to 2009. Masrour, Massoud's son, is now a member of the Political Bureau. Nechirvan, as prime minister, spearheaded unprecedented social and economic reforms, including attention to violence

against women, improvements in infrastructure, and a focus on the private sector and foreign investment. He has also been at the forefront of the rapprochement with Turkey and the development of oil and gas fields in the region.

Elections for the Kurdistan National Assembly are held every four years; the most recent were on 25 July 2009. The leading political alliance was the Kurdistan List. It consisted of the two main political parties, PUK and PDK, and won 59 seats. The newer and less popular competing movement, the Gorran (Change) List headed by Nawshirwan Mustafa, won 25 of the 111 seats. It had a strong showing in the city of Sulaymaniyah and the Sulaymaniyah Governorate, which was previously considered the PUK's stronghold. The Reform List, consisting of four parties, won 13 seats. In addition, the Islamic movement won 2, and 11 were reserved for the Turkmen (5 seats), Assyrian (5), and Armenian (1) minority parties.

Elections for the governorate councils are held every four years. Each council has forty-one members. The last governorate-council elections for Kurdistan were held in 2009.

Iraqi Kurdistan houses numerous consulates, embassy offices, trade offices, and honorary consulates of countries that want to increase their influence and cultivate better ties with the KRG. As of October 2010 there were twenty diplomatic representations in the region, including Turkey.

The KRG's representative to the United States, Qubad Talabani, is the youngest son of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. The KRG's high representative to the United Kingdom is Bayan Sami Abdul-Rahman, daughter of Kurdish leader Sami Abdul-Rahman, who was killed in a terrorist attack on Kurdish political party headquarters in Erbil in February 2004.

The Kurdistan Region's economy is dominated by the oil industry, agriculture, and tourism. Thanks to relative peace in the region, it has a more developed economy than other parts of Iraq. Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's administration and the subsequent violence, the three provinces fully under KRG control were the only three in Iraq to be ranked "secure" by the U.S. military. This relative stability has allowed the KRG to sign a number of investment contracts with foreign companies.

In 2006, the first new oil well since the invasion of Iraq was drilled in the Kurdistan Region by the Norwegian energy company DNO. Initial indications are that the oil field contains at least 100 million barrels of oil. The KRG has also signed exploration agreements with several other oil companies, including Canada's Western Oil Sands and the UK's Sterling Energy and Gulf Keystone Petroleum. The Iraqi government has blacklisted international oil giants like Chevron and Exxon Mobil that sign contracts with the KRG.<sup>6</sup> The Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki refuses to recognize the right of the KRG to unilaterally sign oil agreements with international companies, insisting that this is the responsibility of the central government in Baghdad. KRG President Massoud Barzani disagrees with al-Maliki.

It is noteworthy that in 2004, per capita income in the KRG was 25 percent higher than in the rest of Iraq. The government continues to receive a portion of the revenue from Iraq's oil exports, and it will soon implement a unified foreign investment law. The KRG also has plans to build a media city in Erbil and free trade zones near the borders of Turkey and Iran.

Since 2003, the stronger economy of Iraqi Kurdistan has attracted around 20,000 workers from other parts of Iraq. According to President Talabani, since 2003 the number of millionaires in Sulaymaniyah has increased from 12 to 2,000, reflecting the region's financial and economic growth.

Iraqi Kurdistan currently has the lowest poverty rates in Iraq. Moreover, according to the KRG website, not a single coalition soldier died nor was a single foreigner kidnapped since 2003 in KRG-administered areas.

Because of the devastation of the Iraqi army's campaigns under Saddam Hussein and previous regimes, the Kurdistan Region's infrastructure was never able to modernize. After the 1991 safe haven was established, the KRG launched projects to reconstruct the region. Since then, of the 4,500 villages destroyed by Saddam Hussein's regime, the KRG has succeeded in reconstructing 65 percent of them. Furthermore, since his regime was deposed in 2003, the KRG has been able to scale up its service delivery and infrastructure, which has been changing the region's economic landscape and facilitating investment projects.

Iraqi Kurdistan is accessible by land and air. By land it may be reached most easily from Turkey through the Habur Border Gate, the only border crossing between Kurdistan and Turkey. This gate can be reached by bus or taxi from airports in Turkey as close as the Mardin or Diyarbakir airports, as well as from Istanbul or Ankara. Iraqi Kurdistan has two border gates with Iran, the Haji Omeran gate and the Bashmeg gate near Sulaymaniyah. The region also has a border gate with Syria known as Faysh Khabur. From within Iraq, the Kurdistan Region can be reached by land from multiple roads.

Iraqi Kurdistan has opened its doors to the world with international airports in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Both operate flights to Middle Eastern and European destinations. The KRG has spent millions of dollars on these airports to attract international carriers, and currently Austrian Airlines, Lufthansa, Etihad, Royal Jordanian, Gulf Air, Middle East Airlines, Atlas Jet, and Fly Dubai all service the region. There are also at least two military airfields in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan has a growing set of grievances against the Iraqi central government. Speaking at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on 12 April 2012, Massoud Barzani listed the Kurdish complaints: "The constitution is breached on a daily basis, and the same individual [Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki] holds the powers of prime minister, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, defense minister, chief of intelligence, and interior minister." In his words, "the status quo in Iraq remains unacceptable." He hinted at the

need to hold a referendum on the future status of Iraqi Kurdistan, given what he regarded as the abuse of power in Baghdad.

The future of Iraqi Kurdistan is tied to the future of the Iraqi state. With the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011, friction has grown between the main Iraqi communities. Iraq's Sunni vice-president has sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan from Iraq's Shia prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. Should Iraq move toward political disintegration, then the emergence of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan will be inevitable. That will undoubtedly have implications for neighboring Kurdish communities, especially in Syria and Iran.

Developments with the Syrian Kurds are influencing the politics of Iraqi Kurdistan. While Barzani has been supportive of the Syrian Kurdish groups, al-Maliki, reflecting the wishes of his Iranian backers, has supported the continuing rule of the Assad regime. This has recently generated military tensions between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad. For example, al-Maliki's government decided to deploy the Iraqi Army in the area connecting Iraqi Kurdistan to the Kurdish areas of Syria, thereby giving Baghdad the ability to choke off KRG supplies to the Syrian Kurdish revolt. This area has been under the control of the KRG and is under dispute with the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. Barzani protested against al-Maliki's move and held this strategic area with his Kurdish Peshmerga units there instead.<sup>7</sup>

The most critical external factor influencing whether Iraqi Kurdistan decides to declare independence will be the policy of Turkey. Understandably, Turkey has traditionally feared a Kurdish state in northern Iraq because of its potential influence on Turkey's Kurds. But Turkish attitudes have evolved. Barzani has not been supportive of PKK operations against the Turkish army. At the same time, Turkish companies have become the largest international investors in the KRG's area of control. The Turks are also interested in Kurdish oil and gas and have proposed a new pipeline into Turkey for this purpose. As Ankara becomes more tolerant about Kurdish independence, then one of its major constraints will be removed.

### ***Turkey***

Presently, Turkey's population is approximately 75 million. Kurdish sources claim there are as many as 25 million Kurds in Turkey, but some Turkish demographers estimate that the number may actually be as high as 37 million Kurds, or at least half the Turkish population. In any case, Kurds are the country's largest minority group, and they have posed the most serious and persistent challenge to the official image of a homogeneous society. During the 1930s and 1940s, the government disguised the presence of the Kurds statistically by categorizing them as "Mountain Turks." This was changed to the new euphemism of "Eastern Turks" in 1980.

Historically, the Kurds have mostly been located in eastern Turkey. But there has been significant population movement within the country in recent decades. Today, significant Kurdish population concentrations are also located in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir.

The Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, put an end to the Ottoman caliphate and sultanate. Since then there have been several Kurdish rebellions: the Koçkiri, Sheikh Said, Dersim, and Ararat rebellions.

In 1937-1938, approximately 50,000-70,000 Alevi Kurds were killed and thousands went into exile. A key component of the Turkification process was massive population resettlement. The main policy document in this context was the 1934 law on resettlement. This policy targeted the region of Dersim as one of its first test cases, with disastrous consequences for the local population. The Dersim massacre is often confused with the Dersim Rebellion that took place during these events.

After the 1960 military coup, the State Planning Organization (DPT) was established under the Prime Ministry to solve the problem of Kurdish separatism and underdevelopment. In 1961, the DPT prepared a report titled "The Principles of the State's Development Plan for the East and Southeast," shortened to "Eastern Report." It proposed to defuse separatism by encouraging ethnic mixing through migration (to and from the southeast). This was not unlike the policies pursued by the Committee of Union and Progress under the Ottoman Empire. The labor minister at the time, Bülent Ecevit, was of Kurdish ancestry and criticized the report.

During the 1970s, the separatist movement coalesced into the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Many states and organizations, including the United States, United Nations, NATO, and the European Union, define it as a terrorist organization. From 1984 to 1999, the Turkish military was embroiled in a conflict with the PKK. During the guerrilla war much of the countryside in the southeast was depopulated, with Kurdish civilians moving to local defensible centers such as Diyarbakır, Van, and Şırnak, as well as cities of western Turkey and even to Western Europe.

Reasons for the depopulation included PKK atrocities against Kurdish clans they could not control as well as Turkish civilians and soldiers, the poverty of the southeast, and the Turkish state's military operations. Human Rights Watch has documented many instances where the Turkish army forcibly evacuated villages, destroying houses and equipment to prevent the inhabitants' return because of alleged – but unlikely – PKK membership. An estimated 300 Kurdish villages in Turkey were virtually wiped off the map, displacing over 378,000 people.

This conflict reached its epitome during the 1990s, when the National Security Council sanctioned a covert war using special forces, village guards, mafia, and contract killers while the PKK increasingly attacked the Turkish civilian population using, among other things, suicide bombings. The conflict tapered off after the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.

Officially protected death squads are accused in the disappearance of 3,200 Kurds and Assyrians in 1993 and 1994 in the so-called "mystery killings." The victims included Kurdish politicians, human rights activists, journalists, teachers, and other members of the intelligentsia. Virtually none of the perpetrators were investigated or punished. The Turkish government also encouraged the Islamic extremist group Hezbollah to assassinate suspected

PKK members and often ordinary Kurds. Azimet Köylüoğlu, the state minister for human rights, revealed the extent of the security forces' excesses in the fall of 1994: "While acts of terrorism in other regions are done by the PKK, in Tunceli province it is state terrorism. In Tunceli, it is the state that is evacuating and burning villages. In the southeast there are two million people left homeless."

Since the 2009 municipal elections, which gave the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) the majority in the Kurdish region, 9,000 people including elected officials, political militants, academics, and NGO workers have been arrested for allegedly having links to the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK). The KCK, a semiclandestine organization, is alleged to be the PKK's extension into civil society and politics. Turkey has declared war on this embryonic independent administration.

The KCK forms the militant base and controls the mayors and deputies of the legal party, the BDP. It also collects a revolutionary tax both in Turkey and abroad. According to a Finance Ministry audit, Kurdish municipalities have paid at least €12 million to the guerrillas.

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, Turkey has been held up as a blueprint for emergent Middle Eastern democracies. But many observers question whether its treatment of its Kurdish minority gives Turkey the right to be regarded as a role model.

In general, life has improved for Turkey's Kurds, particularly under Prime Minister Erdogan's conservative Justice and Development (AK) Party, which has ruled the country since 2002. Erdogan is the first Turkish leader to acknowledge the state's "mistakes" in its handling of the Kurds. In a slew of groundbreaking reforms, AK has eased restrictions on the Kurds' long-banned mother tongue, poured money into their impoverished region, and launched secret talks with the imprisoned Ocalan.

In 2009, a deal to disarm the rebels seemed within reach. It collapsed, however, after a string of deadly PKK attacks. Yet the government continued to talk with Ocalan who, despite having spent the last twelve years behind bars, has largely retained his grip on the PKK. But everything changed when the rebels escalated the violence, killing more than forty Turkish soldiers and policemen.

Erdogan has often acknowledged that the Kurdish problem cannot be solved by military means alone, and he has vowed to continue his reforms. Yet officials close to him say he is fed up with the Kurds' unrelenting demands.

### ***Iran***

The Kurdish area of Iran has been part of this country from historical times. Today the Kurds constitute about 7 percent of the overall population. The Persians, Kurds, and speakers of other

Indo-European languages in Iran are descendants of Aryan tribes that began migrating in the second millennium BCE from Central Asia into what is now Iran.

In the seventeenth century, a large number of Kurds were settled by Shah Abbas I in the cities of northern Khorasan province in eastern Iran (Quchan, Bojnurd, Shirvan, Daregaz, and Esfaraeen) to defend Iran's frontier against Uzbeks. Others migrated to Afghanistan where they took refuge. The Kurds of Khorasan, numbering around 700,000, still use the *Kurmanji* Kurdish dialect. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, successive Iranian governments crushed Kurdish revolts led by Kurdish notables such as Shaikh Ubaidullah (against the Qajars in 1880) and Simko (against the Pahlavis in the 1920s).

In January 1946, during the Soviet occupation of northwestern Iran, the Soviet-backed Kurdish Republic of Mahabad declared independence in parts of Iranian Kurdistan. But Soviet forces left Iran in May 1946, and the self-declared republic fell to the Iranian army after only a few months; its president, Qazi Muhammad, was hanged publicly in Mahabad. After the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was increasingly autocratic and suppressed most opposition including Kurdish political groups seeking greater rights for Iranian Kurds. He also prohibited any teaching of the Kurdish language.

Kurdish political organizations were enthusiastic supporters of the revolution against the Shah which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in February 1979. The Shah had shown himself to be no friend of Kurdish aspirations for greater autonomy and a loosening of Tehran's control over their affairs. Yet, since the early days of the revolution, relations between the central government and Kurdish organizations have been fraught with difficulties.

The Kurds, with their different language and traditions and their cross-border alliances, were seen as vulnerable to exploitation by foreign powers who sought to destabilize the young republic. Sunni Kurds, unlike the overwhelming majority of their countrymen, abstained from voting to endorse the creation of an Islamic Republic in April 1979. That referendum institutionalized Shia primacy and made no provision for regional autonomy.

The crisis deepened after Kurds were denied seats in the Assembly of Experts gathering in 1979, which was responsible for writing the new constitution. Khomeini barred Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the elected representative of the region, from participating in the Assembly of Experts' first meeting. Hence the new Iranian constitution deprived the mostly-Sunni Kurds of their political rights.

In early 1979, hostilities broke out between armed Kurdish factions and the Iranian revolutionary government's security forces. The Kurdish forces mainly included the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) and the leftist Komala (Revolutionary Organization of Kurdish Toilers).

The new leadership had little patience for Kurdish demands and opted to crush the unrest militarily. In a December 1979 speech, Khomeini said the concept of an ethnic minority ran

counter to Islamic doctrines. He also accused those who did not wish Muslim countries to be united of creating the issue of nationalism among minorities. His views were shared by many in the clerical leadership.

In the spring of 1980, government forces under the command of President Abolhassan Banisadr took back most of the Kurdish cities through a huge military campaign, sending in mechanized military divisions to Mahabad, Sanandaj, Pawe, Marivan, and others. Entire villages and towns were destroyed to force the Kurds into submission. Ayatollah Khalkhali sentenced thousands of men to execution after summary trials. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps fought to reestablish government control in the Kurdish regions. More than 10,000 Kurds were killed in the process.

In 1997, Sunni Kurds took part in the presidential election. Both civilian and military Kurdish opposition groups asked Kurds to do so. The winner, President Mohammad Khatami, praised the glory of Kurdish culture and history. From the Kurdish side, demands mainly concerned the Kurdish language and the appointment of top-level officials. In his first term, Khatami appointed Abdollah Ramezanzadeh to be the first Kurdish governor of the Iranian province of Kurdistan. He also appointed several Sunni and Shia Kurds as his own or cabinet members' advisers. In his second term Khatami had two Kurdish cabinet members, both of them Shia.

In February 1999, Kurdish nationalists staged massive protests in several cities such as Mahabad, Sanandaj, and Urmia opposing the government and supporting Abdullah Ocalan. This was viewed as "transnationalization" of the Kurdish movement and these protests were violently suppressed by government forces.

The increased presence of Kurdish representatives in the sixth parliament (elected in 2000) led to expectations that some of their constituents' demands would be met. After the first round, in which eighteen Kurds were elected, one candidate said he expected that there would be more Kurdish instruction at the university in Sanandaj, and he called on the Khatami government to appoint more Kurdish officials. Subsequently, a forty-member parliamentary faction was formed that represented the predominantly Kurdish provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshah. However, many other civilian Kurdish activists did not join the reform movement. Among the latter was Mohammad Sadiq Kaboudvand, who started an independent human rights association to defend Kurds' rights.

In present-day Iran, while Shia religious institutions are encouraged, Sunni institutions are suppressed. In 1993, a newly-constructed Sunni mosque in Sanandaj was destroyed by a mob of Shia zealots. Despite the fact that more than one million Sunnis live in Tehran, many of them Kurds, no Sunni mosque exists to serve their religious needs. In a rare public protest, eighteen Sunni parliamentarians wrote to the authorities in July 2003 to criticize the treatment of the Sunni Muslim community and the refusal to allow construction of a mosque in Tehran.

On 9 July 2005, the Kurdish opposition activist Shivan Qaderi (also known as Shwane Qadri or Sayed Kamal Asfaram) and two other Kurdish men were shot by Iranian security forces in

Mahabad. According to witnesses, the security forces then tied Qaderi's body to a Toyota jeep and dragged it through the streets. Iranian authorities confirmed that Qaderi, "who was on the run and wanted by the judiciary," was shot and killed while allegedly evading arrest.

For the next six weeks riots and protests erupted in Kurdish towns and villages throughout eastern Kurdistan such as Mahabad, Sinne (Sanandaj), Sardasht, Piranshahr (Xanê), Oshnavieh (Şino), Baneh, Bokeran, and Saqiz (and even inspiring protests in southwestern Iran and in Baluchistan in eastern Iran). Scores were killed and injured, and an untold number arrested without charge. The authorities also shut down several major Kurdish newspapers, arresting reporters and editors.

On 13 March 2006, Saleh Nikbakht, a well-known Iranian human rights lawyer who was Qaderi's attorney, announced that Qaderi's killer was a member of the police who shot the victim illegally. He added that the murderer and the one who ordered the act were under investigation and the judiciary system had so far been cooperative. Previously government authorities had accused Qaderi of "moral and financial violations"; Saleh Nikbakht rejected all these allegations.

Kurds have suffered a long history of discrimination in Iran. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of Kurdish activists, writers, and teachers were arrested for their activities and sentenced to death, while the Kurdish rebel group Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) took up arms against the state.

In November 2009, Iran executed Kurdish activist Ehsan Fattahian – the first of over a dozen political prisoners on death row – despite an international campaign calling for his release. The authorities had accused him of carrying arms for an "illegal organization" and given him a prison term. Fattahian never confessed to carrying arms. He was neither given a fair trial nor access to his lawyer, and the Komala – the illegal organization he was accused of associating with – claimed he had left the group a long time ago. When Fattahian attempted to appeal, he was sentenced to death for "enmity against God." His execution was condemned by international human rights groups and activists.

In January 2010, Iran executed a second Kurdish political prisoner, Fasih Yasamani, for "enmity against God." Like Fattahian, Yasamani was tortured and authorities tried to force him to confess but he refused. He was also denied a fair trial.

Without notifying their families or lawyers, Iranian authorities ordered the execution of five more Kurdish political prisoners: Ali Heydarian, Farhad Vakili, Mehdi Eslamian, Shirin Alam Hooli, and Farzad Kamangar, a teacher who received much international attention following his arrest on 9 May 2010. These five suffered severe torture and were also demanded to confess their membership in the illegal PJAK. None were given fair trials or access to their lawyers. Amnesty International described the executions as "a blatant attempt to intimidate members of the Kurdish minority." All the activists denied any links to the PJAK, and its leader denied any links to them.

Despite repeated international calls for the release or retrial of these five political prisoners, all were executed without prior notice. The Iranian authorities refused to return their bodies to their families.

As of May 2010, there were at least sixteen other Kurdish political prisoners on death row. Not one case has been reported as receiving a fair trial.

## **Syria**

Kurds account for roughly 9 percent of Syria's population, a total of perhaps 1.6 million people. This makes them the largest ethnic minority in the country. They are mostly concentrated in the northeast and the north, but there are also significant Kurdish populations in Aleppo, Damascus, and other urban centers. According to Syrian Kurdish sources, there are two Kurdish neighborhoods in Damascus that together have about 300,000 inhabitants. There is a much larger Kurdish community in Aleppo, where there are some 800,000 Kurds. Further eastward of Aleppo there are large Kurdish population centers like Qamishli near the Iraqi border. To the west of Aleppo there are a number of mixed Kurdish-Alawi villages.

Syrian Kurds often speak Kurdish in public, unless those present do not. The Syrian Kurds speak *Kurmanji*, like the Kurds of Turkey and the northernmost areas of the KRG. According to Amnesty International, Syrian Kurdish human rights activists suffer persecution. No political parties are allowed for any group, Kurdish or otherwise.

Most of the Kurds in Syria originally came from Turkey in the 1920s. The community in Syria is quite small compared to their compatriots in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. However, beginning in 1980, Kurds in Syria changed their tactics. Violent clashes with authorities resulted in mass arrests and deaths in 1986 and 1992.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. State Department and CIA did not acknowledge the existence of the Kurds in Syria. To this day the Syrian government does not officially acknowledge their existence. Given the lack of any transparent census in Syria, it is difficult to assess their actual percentage of the population.

Kurds mostly live in a geocultural region in northeastern Syria. This area covers most of the governorate of Al-Hasakah, also inhabited by many Assyrians. The main cities in this region are Al-Qamishli and Al-Hasakah. Another region with a significant Kurdish population is Kobany (Ain al-Arab) in northern Syria near the town of Jarabluss. In Kurdish, the Kurdish-inhabited northern and northeastern parts of Syria are called *Kurdistana Binxetê*. An area of Kurdish concentration is Kurd-Dagh in the northwest, around the town of Afrin in the Aleppo governorate, a region that extends to the Turkish districts of Islahiye and Kırıkhan. As noted, many Kurds also live in metropolitan areas.

In 1957, the activists Osman Sabri and Daham Miro, along with some Kurdish politicians, founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS). Its objectives were to promote Kurdish cultural rights, economic progress, and democratic change. KDPS was never legally recognized by the Syrian state and remains an underground organization, especially since a crackdown in 1960 during which several of its leaders were arrested, charged with separatism, and imprisoned.

After the failure of the Syrian political union with Egypt in 1961, Syria was declared an Arab Republic in the interim constitution. On 23 August 1962, the government conducted a special population census only for the province of Jazira, which was predominantly Kurdish. As a result, around 120,000 Kurds there were arbitrarily categorized as aliens. In fact, the inhabitants had Syrian identity cards and were told to hand them over for renewal. However, those Kurds who submitted their cards received nothing in return. Indeed, a media campaign was launched against the Kurds with slogans such as “Save Arabism in Jazira!” and “Fight the Kurdish threat!”

These policies coincided with the beginning of Barzani’s uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan and the discovery of oil in the Kurdish-inhabited areas of Syria. In June 1963, Syria took part in the Iraqi military campaign against the Kurds by providing aircraft, armored vehicles, and 6,000 troops. Syrian soldiers crossed the Iraqi border and moved into the Kurdish town of Zakho in pursuit of Barzani’s fighters.

In 1962, 20 percent of Syria’s Kurdish population was stripped of its citizenship following a controversial census that raised the concern of human rights groups. The Syrian government claimed this move was necessary because groups of Kurds had illegally infiltrated the Al-Hasakah governorate in 1945 from neighboring countries, especially Turkey. The government said these Kurds had gradually settled in cities of the region, such as Amuda and Al-Qamishli, until they made up the majority in some of them. The government also claimed that many Kurds were able to enter themselves illegally onto the Syrian civil registers. The government further conjectured that Kurds aimed to acquire property, especially after the agricultural reform law was enacted, so as to benefit from land redistribution. Human Rights Watch, however, asserted that the government had lied in claiming that many of the Kurds who were original inhabitants were foreigners, and had violated their human rights by revoking their Syrian citizenship.

On 5 October 1962, the government decided to conduct a general census in the governorate. It claimed its sole purpose was to purify registers and eliminate alien infiltrators. As a result, the verified details of Syrian citizens were included in the new civil registers, while 100,000 Kurds were listed as foreigners in special registers. Many others did not participate in the census through choice or other circumstances; they are known as “unrecorded.” Since then the number of stateless Kurds in Syria has grown; Refugees International puts it at about 300,000, but Kurds say it is even higher at 500,000. A recent independent report has confirmed that there are at least 300,000 stateless Kurds in the country.

In 1965, the Syrian government decided to create an Arab cordon in the Jazira region along the Turkish border. The cordon would be 300 kilometers (186 miles) long and 10 to 15 kilometers (6 to 9 miles) wide, stretching from the Iraqi border in the east to Ras al-Ain in the west. Implementation of the plan began in 1973 as Bedouin Arabs were brought in and resettled in Kurdish areas, while village names were Arabized.

According to the original plan, some 140,000 Kurds were to be deported to the southern desert near Al-Raad. Although Kurdish farmers were dispossessed of their lands, they refused to move and give up their houses. Among these Kurdish villagers, those who were designated as alien are not allowed to own property, repair a crumbling house, or build a new one. In Syria, other than in the Al-Hasakah Governorate, foreigners cannot be employed in government agencies and state-owned enterprises; nor can they legally marry Syrian citizens. Kurds with foreigner status cannot vote in elections or run for public office, and when they attend universities they are often persecuted and denied degrees. Stateless Kurds in Syria also are not awarded school certificates and often are unable to travel outside of their provinces.

Kurdish human rights organizations and others decry Syrian Arab racism and apartheid, especially against the Kurdish minority. Techniques used to suppress the Kurds' ethnic identity include various bans on the Kurdish language, refusing to register children with Kurdish names, replacing Kurdish place names with Arabic ones, and prohibiting businesses that do not have Arabic names, Kurdish private schools, and books and other materials written in Kurdish. Having been denied the right to Syrian nationality, around 300,000 Kurds have been deprived of any social rights, in violation of international law. These Kurds are, in effect, trapped within Syria.

In March 2011, in part to prevent further unrest from spreading across Syria, the government promised to tackle the issue and grant Syrian citizenship to these 300,000 Kurds. In April 2011, President Bashar al-Assad signed Decree 49, which provides citizenship for Kurds who were registered as foreigners in Al-Hasakah. However, a recent independent report indicates that the actual number of stateless Kurds who have obtained national ID cards since the decree does not exceed 6,000, leaving the rest in limbo.

Following the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, activists used Facebook to declare 4 February 2011 a "Day of Rage" in Syria. Few turned out to protest, but among them were Kurds in the northeast of the country. On 7 October 2011, Kurdish leader Mashaal Tammo was gunned down in his apartment by masked men widely believed to be regime agents. During Tammo's funeral procession the next day in Qamishli, security forces fired into a crowd of more than 50,000 mourners, killing five. Tammo's son, Fares, asserted: "My father's assassination is a nail in the regime's coffin. They made a big mistake by killing my father."

Indeed, beyond the issues of military-civilian relations, the revolt against Assad will succeed only if growing segments of the population join the fight. One such group is the Kurds, who are already sizably involved in the insurrection. Some even assess that they hold the key to the fate of this struggle, in which Kurds have taken part since its outbreak. Tammo's assassination

hardened many Kurds' resolve against the regime. Nevertheless, the Kurds have been very suspicious of the anti-regime Syrian National Council (SNC). The Kurds were denied proper representation in the SNC's council and general assembly, receiving only 4 of 29 seats in the former and 22 of 230 in the latter.

The Syrian revolt has undoubtedly prompted an escalation of Kurdish demands in Syria. Many Kurds speak of a "federal solution" for the country's future in which the Kurds acquire autonomy. The Syrian Kurds are also reaching out to their Kurdish neighbors. Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, invited the Syrian Kurdish parties to a meeting in Erbil, Iraq, on 28 January 2012. The purpose of the meeting was to call for the overthrow of the Assad regime, against the advice of Iran and the PKK. By mid-July 2012, Kurdish sources were estimating that as many as 9,000 Kurdish refugees from Syria were living in camps in Iraqi Kurdistan.

At present, the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq is training Syrian Kurdish fighters to help defend their territories within Syria. This was confirmed by Massoud Barzani in late July. Barzani has played an important role in brokering a reconciliation agreement between the two main Syrian Kurdish factions, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the People's Council for Western Kurdistan (PCWK). He has also persuaded anti-Turkish Syrian Kurdish factions to stop fighting Turkey and concentrate their efforts against the Assad regime.

The internal politics of the Syrian Kurds pose a special challenge for Turkey. One of the main constituent organizations of the PCWR is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has a close affiliation with the PKK, the main Kurdish group fighting Turkey and regarded as a terrorist organization in the West. Some regard the PYD to be a branch of the PKK. As noted earlier, the Free Kurdish Army, which was operating in mid-2012 in Syrian Kurdish towns, was formed by the PYD. Ironically, Turkey's policies toward Assad's regime have unleashed forces among the Syrian Kurds which are inimical to Turkey's own national security interests.

### ***Armenia***

From the 1930s to the 1980s, Armenia was part of the Soviet Union, within which Kurds, like other ethnic groups, had the status of a protected minority. Armenian Kurds were permitted their own state-sponsored newspaper, radio broadcasts, and cultural events. During the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, many non-Yazidi Kurds were forced to leave their homes since both the Azeri and non-Yazidi Kurds were Muslim.

### ***Azerbaijan***

In 1920, two Kurdish-inhabited areas of Jewanshir (capital Kalbajar) and eastern Zangazur (capital Lachin) were combined to form the Kurdistan Okrug (or Red Kurdistan). The Kurdish administrative unit, however, did not last beyond 1929. Kurds subsequently faced many

repressive measures, including deportations, imposed by the Soviet government. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has led to the destruction of many Kurdish areas, and since 1988 separatist Armenian forces have deported more than 150,000 Kurds.

### ***Lebanon***

The Kurds in Lebanon have not received public or official attention except at times when young Kurds were needed to fight a certain battle for a certain area, or when Kurdish votes were needed by a local leader. Virtually nothing has been published on the Kurds in Lebanon, with the Kurdish community failing to provide the necessary information. Kurds in Lebanon are considered Sunni Muslims with no special ethnic status. Before 1985 they were estimated to number 60,000-90,000.

### ***Georgia***

In the early twentieth century, most Kurds undergoing religious persecution in the Ottoman Empire fled to the Russian Empire. The Kurds in Georgia mainly live in Tbilisi, the capital, and in Rustavi. Georgia's Kurds enjoy a higher standard of living than those in Turkey and Iran and face no discrimination. The Kurds also have their own schools, schoolbooks, and a printing press. Illiteracy among them disappeared in the early 1900s. According to a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report from 1998, about 80 percent of Kurds in Georgia are Yazidis. Although the community is politically neutral, in 1999 they staged a huge demonstration in Tbilisi demanding Ocalan's release. The Kurds in Georgia use Cyrillic; earlier, in the 1920s, they used the Latin script.

### ***Diaspora***

According to a report by the Council of Europe, approximately 1.3 million Kurds live in Western Europe, with roughly 800,000 Kurds in Germany alone. The earliest immigrants were Kurds from Turkey who settled in Germany, Austria, the Benelux countries, Britain, Switzerland, and France in the 1960s. During the 1980s and 1990s, Middle Eastern political and social turmoil brought new waves of Kurdish refugees to Europe, mostly from Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In recent years many Kurdish asylum-seekers from both Iran and Iraq have settled in the United Kingdom (especially in the town of Dewsbury and in some northern areas of London), sometimes sparking media controversy over their right to remain. There have been tensions between Kurds and the established Muslim community in Dewsbury, which is home to very traditional mosques such as the Markazi.

There has also been substantial Kurdish immigration to North America, mainly as political refugees and economic immigrants. An estimated 100,000 Kurds are known to live in the United States, with 50,000 in Canada and fewer than 15,000 in Australia.

## Israel and the Kurds

Massoud Barzani said in 2005 that “establishing relations between the Kurds and Israel is not a crime since many Arab countries have ties with the Jewish state.”

According to Eliezer Tsafir, a former senior Mossad official, during 1963-1975 Israel had military advisers at the headquarters of Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani, and trained and supplied Kurdish units with firearms, field artillery, and anti-aircraft guns. According to a former director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, this was part of a strategy of seeking alliances with other non-Arab nations in the region. Pro-Kurdish feelings were also reinforced by the assistance the Kurds provided in the 1950s when Iraqi Jews were fleeing to Israel.

Israel’s clandestine relations with the Kurds were officially acknowledged in 1980 by Prime Minister Menachem Begin. He confirmed that Israel had sent not only humanitarian aid but also military advisers and weapons. Even today, the state-owned Israeli communications company Bezek transmits evening broadcasts on behalf of the KDP in northern Iraq.

During the First Gulf War, Jewish organizations launched lobbying campaigns worldwide to aid the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan and stop the government’s persecutions there. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, during a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, called on the United States to defend the Kurds.

In 1999, some Kurds accused the Mossad of providing information that led to Ocalan’s arrest in Kenya. Kurdish protesters in Berlin attacked the Israeli embassy, and the Israeli security forces fired at the crowd. Hundreds also stormed the Israeli consulate, resulting in three protesters killed and another sixteen protesters and twenty-seven police officers wounded. Efraim Halevy, then head of the Mossad, took the unprecedented step of publicly disassociating Israel from Ocalan’s capture. The Mossad does not usually comment publicly on intelligence matters.

In 2004, Israeli media reported about Israeli officials’ meetings with Kurdish political leaders when Massoud Barzani, Jalal Talabani, and then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon publicly confirmed Israel’s good relations with Iraqi Kurdistan.

According to Israeli newspapers, dozens of Israelis with a background in elite combat training have been working for private Israeli companies in northern Iraq, helping Kurds there establish elite antiterror units. Reports say that the Kurdish government contracted Israeli security and communications companies to train Kurdish security forces and provide them with advanced equipment.

Motorola Inc. (which has a branch in Israel) and Magalcom Communications and Computers have won contracts with the Kurdish government to the tune of hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars. The flagship of these contracts is the construction of an international airport in the

northern Kurdish city of Erbil, a stepping stone toward fulfilling Kurdish aspirations for independence.

In addition to Motorola and Magalcom, a company owned by Israeli entrepreneur Shlomi Michaels is in full business partnership with the Kurdish government, providing strategic consultation on economic and security issues. The strategic consultation company was initially established by former Mossad chief Danny Yatom and Michaels, but Yatom sold his shares upon his election to the Knesset.

Tons of equipment, including motorcycles, tractors, sniffer dogs, systems to upgrade Kalashnikov rifles, bulletproof vests, and first-aid items have been shipped to Iraq's northern region, with most products stamped "Made in Israel."

The Kurds had insisted that the cooperation be kept secret, fearing that exposure of the projects would motivate terror groups to target their Jewish guests. Recent warnings that Al-Qaeda might be planning an attack on Kurdish training camps prompted a hasty exit of all Israeli trainers from the northern region. In response to the report, the Defense Ministry said: "We haven't allowed Israelis to work in Iraq, and each activity, if performed, was a private initiative, without our authorization, and is under the responsibility of the employers and the employees involved."

### **Kurds in Israel**

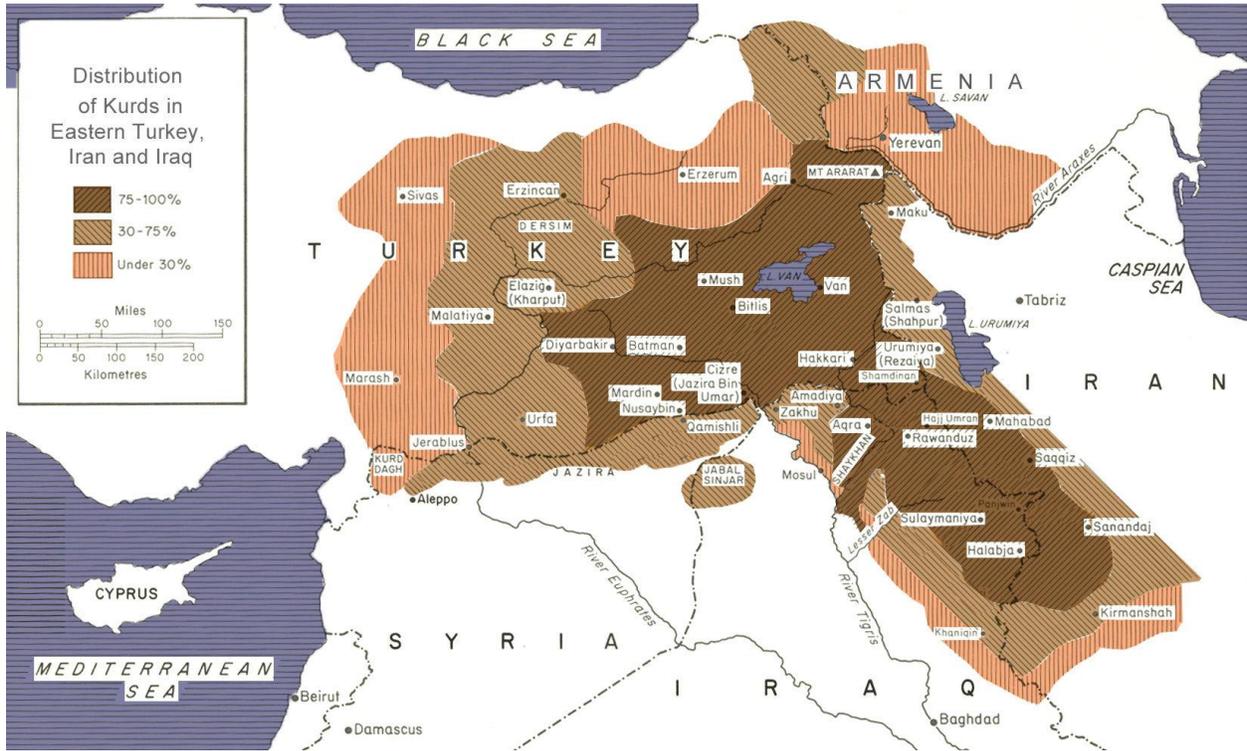
Jewish immigration from Kurdistan to Israel began in the sixteenth century, with the initial Jewish immigrants settling in Safed. Later on, Kurdish Jewish immigrants arrived in the 1920s and 1930s, and by 1948 there were some 8,000 Kurdish Jews in Israel. After statehood was declared that year, masses of Jews from all four parts of Kurdistan moved to the country. Today Israel's Kurdish Jewish population numbers over 150,000, with the largest concentration around Jerusalem. The Kurdish Jewish immigrants have generally sustained the cultural heritage of Jewish Kurdistan with their distinctive cuisine, music, and traditions.

### **The Future of Kurdistan**

For decades, both the United States and Israel have been reluctant to support any manifestation of Kurdish independence for fear of upsetting the Turkish government. But given the increasing signs of the political disintegration of the Iraqi state, the outbreak of the Syrian revolt, and the possibility of a concerted international action against Iran's nuclear facilities, understanding the rapidly changing developments across Kurdistan has become critical. Israel has no interest in assisting a process of political disintegration and national fragmentation in the Middle East. But at a time when new groups are rising that seek political expression, it would be a mistake to confine Israel's diplomatic contacts to nation-states alone, which are losing their exclusive claim to represent the peoples of the Middle East in this new era.

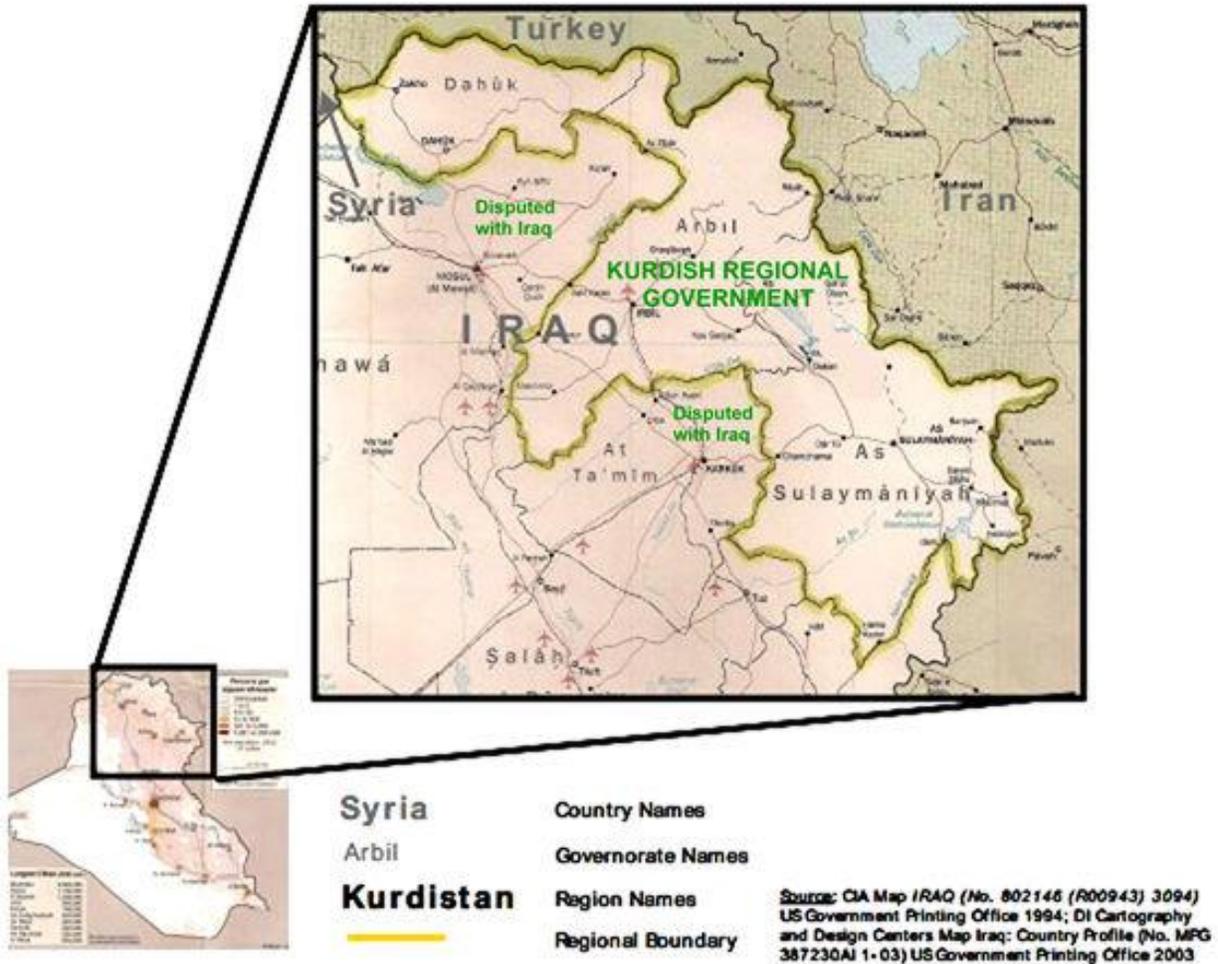
Map 1

Kurdish Populations in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Syria



Map 2

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq



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Notes

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### **About the Author**

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