

# The Kurds in Syria

## The Forgotten People

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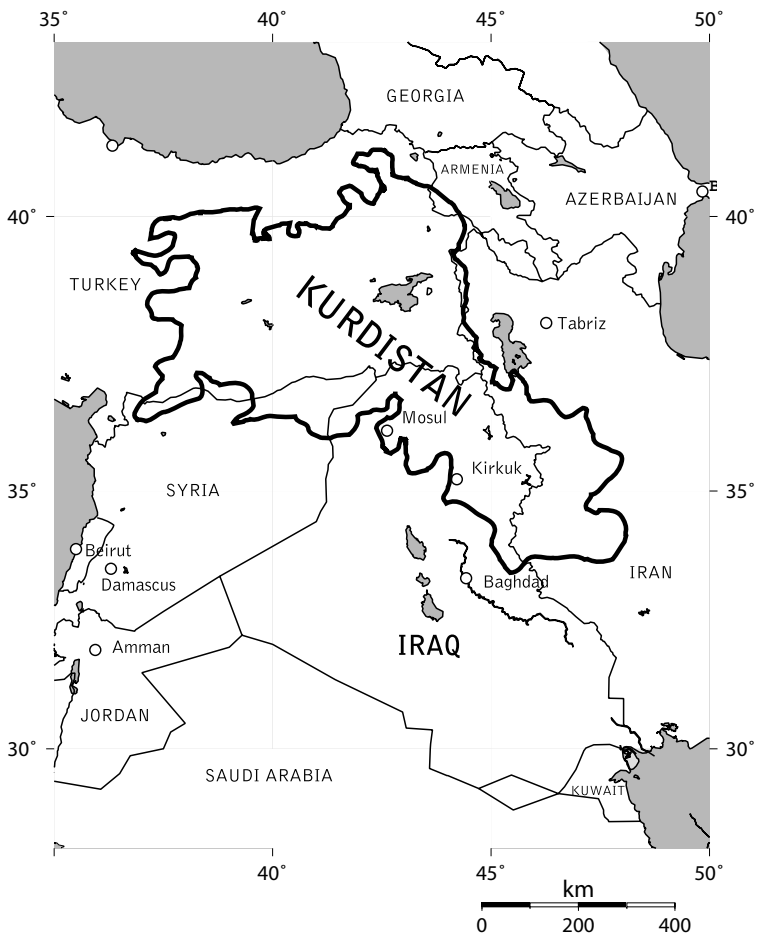
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Map of the area inhabited by Kurds

# Introduction

The Kurdish question is one determining the rights of a group of more than 30 million people, a group that is predicted to become the third largest national group in the Middle East. Comprising the world's largest stateless nation, the Kurds are a people whose population and lands form a contiguous geographical area divided between Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria with smaller numbers in the former Soviet Union.

Kurdish issues are not widely discussed or written about and existing literature has focused mainly on the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq. The plight of the large Kurdish population in these countries is relatively well-known due to the extent of the atrocities committed against them, their resort to armed struggle, and their international involvement in determining the political future of Iraq and Turkey's future status within the European Union. Whilst moderate attention has been given to the position of Kurds resident in Iran, there has been even less consideration for the Kurds in Syria. As must be acknowledged, this situation is somewhat explicable, not least because researchers face many difficulties in trying to obtain information on the subject of Kurds in Syria. Another underlying cause is that in comparison to other countries with Kurdish populations, the Kurdish population in Syria is relatively small, making the issues faced by their population ostensibly less vital to studies of Kurdish issues.

However, within Syria the Kurds compose almost 10 per cent of the population, a not-inconsiderable section of Syrian society with its own distinct language, culture and ethnic identity. Despite the size of this group, the Syrian state has not accorded the Kurds recognition as a native national or ethnic minority but instead perceives the Kurds as a threat to Syrian national security and unity. As a consequence, the Kurdish minority in Syria has been persecuted, suppressed and marginalized to the extent that even expressions of ethnic identity, such as language and cultural traditions, are illegal and given political meaning. In their attempts to control and contain the Kurdish identity and communities, the state's policy towards the Kurds has involved coercive force, socio-economic and political marginalization, and complex forms of co-option and divide-and-rule policies.

This study developed from the lack of available literature that provided both historical context and events together with the present-

## 2 The Kurds in Syria

day problems faced by Kurds in Syria. Incorporating Kurdish–Syrian relations, regional relations and international relations and issues, the book draws upon interviews with Kurds and other individuals both in Syria and in the diaspora. It draws together existing material on the subject and is intended to act as a platform from which further research and discussion can be launched.

The book seeks to highlight human rights issues pertaining to the Kurds of Syria, whilst contextualizing the Kurdish question in Syria and providing some explanation for its development. By placing the Kurdish predicament within its historical and regional context, the Syrian state's treatment of its Kurdish population can be more easily understood and compared to minimum standards demanded by international law.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which provides an introduction to the Kurds. In the second part, Syrian history and both regional and international relations are analysed, explaining many of the influences on the Kurdish question in Syria. Finally, part three discusses the discrimination suffered by Kurds in Syria both in the past and present. Examples used within the book are intended to illustrate the forms of discrimination that the Kurds encounter in Syria and the nature of the abuses of their human rights, rather than to provide an exhaustive account of the history of the persecution of the Kurds. Although one of the aims of this book is to provide a more detailed and comprehensive account of the Kurdish predicament in Syria, the nature of the Syrian state prevents the full documentation of the extent and depth of this issue. It is hoped that this book will stimulate further research and debate of the issues involved in both the Kurdish issue as it is defined by the Syrian state and as a wider nationally defined question.

# **Part One**

## **The Kurds**





# 1

## The Kurds

Comprising the largest stateless nation in the world, the Kurdish people are divided between the sovereign states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the former Soviet Union. Possessing a distinct language, culture and history, most Kurds retain a strong sense of national identity that extends beyond the borders of the states in which they live, despite attempts to assimilate them into the national identity of individual states.

Given the complex relations between states containing indigenous Kurdish minorities, the Kurdish identity has proved politically problematic. Consequently, the regimes and institutions within those states tasked with defining and describing the Kurds and Kurdistan have frequently been influenced by 'political' considerations.

It is generally agreed that the Kurds are a people of Indo-European origin who are believed to have settled in the area comprising Kurdistan over 4,000 years ago, although the earliest recorded inhabitants of the Kurdistan region are the cave inhabitants of circa 10,000 BC.<sup>1</sup> There exists archaeological evidence of a people who lived between 6000 and 5400 BC in the Kurdish mountain regions, sharing a distinct 'Halaf' culture. The boundaries of the Halaf culture are similar to the area today referred to as Kurdistan.<sup>2</sup>

Today's Kurdish population is believed to be descended from the Hurri, Guti, Kurti, Medes, Mittanni, Hittites, Mard, Carduchi, Gordyene, Adiabene, Zila and Khaldi kingdoms<sup>3</sup> that ruled the areas of Kurdistan at different times. Of these, the most influential appears to be that of the Hurrians, found in the Zagros, Taurus and Pontus mountains from around 4300 BC onwards. By approximately 2500 BC, the small Hurrian-founded states began to evolve into larger political entities, including the polities of Urartu, Mushq/Mushku, Urkish, Subar/Saubar, Bani, Guti/Qutil and Manna.<sup>4</sup> Qutil became a powerful Hurrian principality, and it is often thought that 'Kurd' is a derivation of 'Qutil'.<sup>5</sup> According to Mehrdad Izady, nearly two thirds of Kurdish clan names and roughly half of topographical and urban names are of Hurrian origin; and many tattoos worn by Kurds on their bodies are identical to motifs found on Hurrian figurines.<sup>6</sup>

Victory records of Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser I, who ruled between 1114 and 1076 BC, record the 'Kurti' or 'Qurtie' as a people located in Mt. Azu/Hazu, conquered by the King during his mountain campaigns. Alternatively, Professor Izady suggests that the name may be derived from the Akkadian 'Kurtei', 'an indeterminate portion or groups of inhabitants of the Zagros and eastern Taurus mountains', dating its usage back some 3,800 years. Whatever its origin, the name 'Kurd' (or 'Kurt') itself is thought to have been firmly established by the third century BC.<sup>7</sup>

### THE GEOGRAPHY OF KURDISTAN

Taken literally, Kurdistan means 'land of Kurds'. The name was first given to a province of the Turkish Suljuk created by Prince Sandjar in the mid-twelfth century AD, a province roughly coinciding with Kordistan in modern Iran.<sup>8</sup> Today, although it does not exist as an independent state, the name Kurdistan is used to refer to the geographical area within which Kurds form a majority. The borders of this area are not fixed and territorial claims vary between different organizations, groups and individuals according to political considerations. Even so, Kurdistan is a distinct and recognized area,<sup>9</sup> stretching from the Zagros and Taurus mountain chains which make up its backbone, extending south to the Mesopotamian plains and northwards to the steppes and plateaus of what was Armenian Anatolia.<sup>10</sup> The area was divided between the Persian and Ottoman empires in the sixteenth century after the battle of Chaldiran. Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1900s and the post-First World War settlements partitioning Ottoman territory between European imperial powers, Kurdistan was divided yet again between what are now the modern sovereign states of Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Kurdish communities can also be found through the Trans-Caucasian and Asian republics, in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirguz and Turkmenistan.<sup>11</sup>

The Kurds have traditionally taken to farming and agricultural production. Until the late nineteenth century, stockbreeding was the most important economic activity in the area of Kurdistan, with nomadic Kurds moving flocks of sheep and goats between the lower plains and higher pastures according to the season. With the advent of international borders, many of these nomadic farmers were forced to settle, although many of them continued their involvement in stockbreeding.<sup>12</sup>

Kurdish areas are agriculturally and mineral rich, producing tobacco, cotton and grain, copper, chrome, iron and lignite. The Kurdish regions account for 15 per cent of Turkish, 30 per cent of Iraqi and 35 per cent of Iranian cereal production.<sup>13</sup> Within the Kurdish areas, concentrations of oil can be found where the official territories of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq meet. Control over exploration, extraction and transportation of oil and the revenues accruing from these fields is a major source of tension between Kurds and the governments of these countries. The increasing importance of oil since the Second World War has meant that these states are reluctant to cede any territory to the Kurds; as a result much of the Arabization, Turkification and Islamification of Kurdish areas can be put down to economic considerations.

The area composing Kurdistan is also rich in water resources, placing it increasingly at the centre of regional disputes and conflicts. The construction of dams on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers has had devastating effects on the many thousands of Kurds who have been displaced.<sup>14</sup> These dams have also had serious effects further downstream in neighbouring states including Syria and Iraq; the issue of water flows between these countries has on occasion brought Iraq, Turkey and Syria to the brink of war.<sup>15</sup>

### THE KURDISH POPULATION

The absence of reliable figures for the Kurdish population is an area of considerable contention, intertwined with political considerations. Whilst Kurdish nationalist groups may exaggerate figures, governments of states containing minority Kurdish populations benefit from underestimating the number of Kurds, carrying out few official censuses which recognize ethnic identity as a legitimate category of registration. In Turkey, Ankara only recognized the existence of Kurds within the borders of Turkey in 1990, having previously referred to Kurds as 'mountain Turks' and the Kurdish language as a dialect of Turkish. In Syria, the government considers the Kurdish population to be a result of migration from Turkey and not an endogenous ethnic or national group.

Population estimates consequently rely on historical data, dating from the colonial period, the Ottoman *millet*<sup>16</sup> system and the *tanzimat* reforms of Ottoman Turkey.<sup>17</sup> Since then, rapid and uneven demographic change has occurred within the Middle East. In addition, due to the association of socio-economic marginalization

and poverty with higher population growth and fertility rates, the Kurdish population is considered to be growing faster than the Turkish population.

An estimate of the present Kurdish population hovers between 24 and 27 million, with 13 million Kurds in Turkey, 4.2 million in Iraq, 5.7 million in Iran, over 1 million in Syria (between 8.5 and 12 per cent of the Syrian population) and smaller populations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Kurdish diaspora.

## LANGUAGE

According to Merhdad Izady, there are two main branches of the Kurdish language. Firstly, the Kurmanji group, which consists of northern Kurmanji spoken mainly in northern Kurdistan, and Sorani, spoken in the south. Secondly, the Pahlawâni/Pahlawânîk group, which also consists of two main dialects, Dimli or Zaza which is spoken in north-west Kurdistan, and Gurâni,<sup>18</sup> spoken in enclaves of southern Kurdistan.<sup>19</sup> These main dialects are then subdivided into scores of more localized dialects.<sup>20</sup>

Despite this complexity, the more dominant group today is Kurmanj, with Kurmanji spoken in north, west and east Kurdistan and Sorani in southern Kurdistan. There are many similarities between the two dialects, such that understanding and communication between these dialects is reasonable.<sup>21</sup>

Between 1932 and 1943, Celadet Alî Bedir-Xan published the journal *Hawar*, in which he developed written Kurmanji using Roman script instead of Arabic/Persian.<sup>22</sup> Bedir-Xan's script was circulated clandestinely within Turkey, contributing to rising literacy levels within Kurdish communities there. Written Sorani, which had been used by poets and writers in southern Kurdistan during the nineteenth century, was further developed by Colonel Tawfiq Wahbi, who altered the script phonetically following the First World War. However, restrictions on the printing and use of the Kurdish language prevented the Kurds from learning their language and standardizing its use.<sup>23</sup>

Similar restrictions continue to obstruct Kurdish linguistic development and grammatic standardization today. The majority of Kurds are not taught to read or write in the Kurdish languages. In Turkey and Syria, the use of Kurdish in public has been restricted both by law and through intimidation. As a result, teaching and studying

of the Kurdish languages has become a clandestine affair for much of the Kurdish population in these two countries.

## RELIGION

Traditionally, the majority of Kurds followed the ancient Hurrian religion of Yazdanism and even today the influence of this ancient religion can be found in Kurdish popular culture and religious ritual. Around a third of Kurds still follow branches of Yazdanism, though the majority of Kurds today (approximately three fifths) are Muslim. Some Kurdish communities adhere to other religions and sects that draw elements from Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion dating back to around 500 BC, which is believed to have been deeply influenced by indigenous Kurdish religions; Yazdanism was seen as a contender to the ascendancy of early Zoroastrianism. Many significant Kurdish cultural practices, traditions and symbols can be traced to these two religions, including *Newroz* (the Kurdish New Year celebrated on 21 March), the worship of fire, the rising sun and others. Today, many of the religions practised by Kurdish communities throughout Kurdistan draw upon elements of these religions.<sup>24</sup>

### **Alevi and Ahl-I Haqq (Yarsanism)**

The Alevi religion is believed to have developed in the fifteenth century. Alevis can be found mainly in central Anatolia and there is a large overlap between Zaza speakers and adherents to the Alevi religion. This same overlap can be found with Gurâni speakers and the Ahl-I Haqq religion in southern Kurdistan. The two religions and languages are thought to share the same origins (and, therefore, the people) and that the movement of various peoples through the centre of Kurdistan divided them into two distinct groups. Both religions share the veneration of the Imam 'Ali and both are based on Zoroastrian religious ideas.<sup>25</sup> Non Kurdish Alevis and Ahl-I Haqq can also be found in the same areas.

### **Yezidi**

Around 2 per cent of Kurds are Yezidis, a religion described as a synthesis of pagan elements and other religions including Yazdanism and Zoroastrianism, and elements of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions.<sup>26</sup> Yezidi Kurds speak Kurmanji and can be found in areas of Syria, Armenia and the Mardin-Midyat area of Turkey. The small population of Yezidis is testament to the treatment endured by

followers of this religion. For believing in the god Shytan, Yezidis have been accused of being devil worshippers and on that basis have been subject to discrimination. As a result, many former followers have converted to mainstream religions such as Islam and Christianity to avoid persecution.

### **Muslim**

The majority of the Kurdish population converted to Islam between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Until this time Islam is said to have 'touched Kurdistan rather superficially, and primarily on its peripheries'.<sup>27</sup> Today, around three fifths of Kurds are Muslim, although for many it is seen as the religion of their oppressors. The majority of Muslim Kurds adhere to the Shafi'i school, a religious difference which demonstrates the relative resistance of Kurdish communities to Turkish and Arab penetration; the majority of Turks and Arabs of Mesopotamia adhered to the Hanafi school, which was the official religion of the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire.<sup>28</sup>

### **Shi'i**

Around 15 per cent of the Kurdish population are *Ithna 'Ashari* Shi'i. These Kurds are predominantly Sorani speakers living in Kirmanshah province in Iran, with smaller communities in Kordistan province. The Fayli Kurds, a group of approximately 150,000 Kurds expelled from Iraq to Iran in the 1970s and 1980s are also adherents to this sect.

### **Sufi**

The remainder of Muslim Kurds belong to one of the Sufi brotherhoods, whose traditions and rituals include fire-eating, self-mutilation and trances. These traditions suggest pre-Islamic roots and influences and signals the importance of social origins.

### **Other religions**

The remaining members of the Kurdish community are a mixture of Christians, Jews, Davidians (Kak'ai), Naqshabandi and Gelani Qadiri.

The main Christian communities in Kurdistan are the Armenians and the Assyrians. Although Armenians and Assyrians can be considered ethnically distinct from the Kurds, a number of communities have merged with Kurdish tribes, with records showing that some Kurdish communities have adhered to Christianity from the mid-twelfth

century. In addition, Christian missionaries targeted Yazdani and Zoroastrian Kurds in the eighteenth century, causing many Kurds to convert to Christianity.

Jews have been found in Kurdistan for more than 2,000 years,<sup>29</sup> although the majority of Jews emigrated to Israel following the events of the Second World War and an increase in anti-Semitism. There are around 150,000 Kurdish Jews in Jerusalem,<sup>30</sup> many of whom still identify themselves as Kurdish. Kurdish Jews can also be found in Iran.

## 2

# Kurdish History

‘Sykes-Picot Agreement: (May 9, 1916), secret convention made during World War I between Great Britain and France, with the assent of imperial Russia, for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.’

Encyclopaedia Britannica

For many Kurds, May 1916 denotes a turning point in Kurdish history. The Sykes-Picot Agreement set the stage for Kurdistan to be divided according to Western interests; interests which would ultimately deny the Kurds the right to self-determination promised to them in subsequent discussions and agreements.

Following the defeat of Turkish forces in 1918, the possibility to redefine national borders became a reality. Some progress had occurred on this prior to the end of the war, as Husayn, sharif of Mecca, entered into correspondence with Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner of Egypt, over the future of Ottoman Arab lands.<sup>1</sup>

In 1917, the Bolsheviks leaked details of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the result of secret negotiations between Britain and France in May 1916. The Agreement, negotiated by Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges Picot, removed most of Anatolia from Turkish control with Russia, Italy and Greece all receiving territory as a reward for cooperation. Following the Bolshevik withdrawal from the scheme, the Cossack territories and the Caucasus including Armenia, Georgia and Kurdistan were instead assigned to British influence.<sup>2</sup> The Agreement consequently partitioned Kurdish territory between several areas of influence, subordinating the Kurds and the region of Kurdistan to Allied interests in both Syria and Mesopotamia.

Having thus far tried and failed to achieve an end to the war in a way that would enable both sides to participate in building long-term peace, on 8 January 1918 US President Woodrow Wilson articulated the Fourteen Points, a programme that Wilson considered would form the basis of such a lasting peace. Covering such principles as



freedom of the sea and a League of Nations, Wilson also affirmed the principle of self-determination in his twelfth point,

XII. The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of an autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.<sup>3</sup>

This vision for the national groups contained within the former Ottoman Empire was rejected by Allied powers, and the Fourteen Points failed to become a pronouncement of Allied Policy.<sup>4</sup>

### THE TREATY OF SÈVRES

As British interest in the region shifted to Mosul for its potential to enhance the future economic and political values of Mesopotamia, Britain began to favour a redefinition of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which had originally provided for French control over Mosul vilayet.<sup>5</sup> Britain and France entered into negotiations over the extent and status of an autonomous Kurdistan.

Around the same time, fearful of Arab and Turkish rule and the division of land between the imperialist powers, Kurdish tribes began to organize themselves politically and negotiate with the various powers. Opinions within the Kurdish communities varied between those who supported the Western powers, those who were pro-Turkey and those who advocated complete independence. Many Kurds preferred not to commit to one particular standpoint among these different strands of thinking.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the rising power of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in Turkey, his demands for Turkish independence, his irredentist<sup>7</sup> ideology and his negotiations with the Bolsheviks gave rise to new British concerns about the area north of Mosul vilayet and the protection of their interests in Mesopotamia.<sup>8</sup> Mindful of the need for a buffer zone between the Turks and the British area of control, the creation of an Armenian state and a Kurdish state became of increasing strategic interest for the British. In November 1919, they persuaded respective representatives to sign a Kurdish–Armenian declaration of solidarity against the return of Turkish rule.<sup>9</sup> As the US withdrew from the