



The Kurdish Question



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Who are the Kurds?

The Kurds are a nomadic people indigenous to a mountain region in the northern middle east, and currently the 4th largest ethnic group in the region and the largest stateless nation in the world.

Kurds have a distinct community, united by race, culture and language - although several dialects exist. Due to the cross-border nature of their nation since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Arabic and Turkish are also widely spoken. They have a long history of political marginalisation and persecution, and have repeatedly risen up, particularly in Iraq and Turkey, in pursuit of greater autonomy or complete independence.

They claim authority on the region they call Kurdistan, which is located between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, although it is very hard to define its borders. These maps show how much the borders can vary, depending on who draws them.



The question of their autonomy has arisen to public attention in the last decade: with their increasingly relevant involvement in the battle against the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS), the destabilization of Iraq and the war in Syria, they have had both the resources and the freedom to bring up the issue.

Moreover, the intense emigration to Europe (particularly Germany) and to the United States of America (Nashville) is a key factor to consider to understand how the discussion has gained momentum. It should also be taken into consideration when discussing the Kurdish question as a whole. It is highly suggested to read this article on the matter: [here](#)

To learn more:

On who the [Kurds](#) are

On their [languages](#)

On the situation [here](#) and [here](#)

On Kurdish emigration [here](#) and [here](#)

Why should we discuss this topic?

There are in the world a multiplicity of countries in the world with internal frictions, and Turkey is of particular interest because it presents a fascinating range of issues that have considerable general applicability to conflict situations in the rest of the world.¹

Turkey's key internal conflict centers on the presence of an ethnically and linguistically distinct people, the Kurds, in a country that constitutionally consists only in "citizens of Turkey" (i.e. Turks), with no recognition whatsoever.

Bearers of a distinct culture for perhaps two millennia, they are now striving for legal recognition and for the rights deriving therefrom. Since most countries in the world are multiethnic, even though they do not declare themselves as such, Turkey's situation is broadly representative of what many countries are facing, or will face.

The question raises many problems related to multiculturalism:

- Is it desirable to seek assimilation of minorities, when they wish to keep their own culture and language?
- Is it understandable or anachronistic that minorities want to preserve their identity?
- How much can a state impose assimilation, particularly when it threatens the loss of distinct culture and ethnicity?

Secondly, Turkey's Kurds are only 50% of the total Kurdish population, making the Kurdish question an international problem as well as a national one. Kurds are especially present in Iran and Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Syria. Other peoples in the same situation include Baluch, Punjabis, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hungarians, Albanians, Mayas, Mongols, and many African peoples, to name just a few.²

The pretensions to ethnic unification of one people not only implies separatism of territory from one country, but also an extensive redrawing of all international borders. Therefore, it is understandable that states in the same region will cooperate to counteract separatist pulls.

¹ Henri J. Barkey, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1. Jan. 2000

² Henri J. Barkey, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1. Jan. 2000

History

To learn more:

A “brief” summary of the history of the Kurds, by the Kurdish Institute in Paris

http://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/who_are_the_kurds.php

And one by an American journalist

<http://prospect.org/article/kurdish-question>

The current situation, by Al Jazeera <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/kurds-170516072934887.html>

The origins of the Kurdish questions date back to 1920, when the treaty of Sèvres was signed. Its objective was to split the territories of the collapsed Ottoman Empire into different sovereign States, assigning a territory to each of the peoples in the area. Originally, the Sevres treaty included a new country for the Kurdish people (namely, Kurdistan); however, it was rejected, and when the treaty of Lausanne replaced it in 1923, it divided the Kurdish area into three parts, each governed by a different Nation: Syria, Iraq and the newly recognized nation of Turkey.

In the new countries, and especially in Turkey, the Kurdish population struggled to gain recognition as an ethnic minority. They had different traditions, a different language and different lifestyles; nevertheless, they were not considered as a minority. The Turkish laws on the matter have been inherited from the fallen Ottoman Empire, which defined minorities in religious terms; i.e., a group of people is considered a minority only if its religion differs from the majority.³ Following this definition, Kurds are not a minority, since they are Muslims in a Muslim country.

In the following decades, many different governments have enforced different laws, imposing more or fewer restrictions depending on their political orientation, yet they have never succeeded in eradicating the problem, nor have they ever considered the option of supporting the Kurds’ wish for cultural independence. We should not forget that, on the other side, Kurdish extremist groups have a history of terrorist attacks, which makes it hard to defend their cause.

Here is a very brief introduction to the situation of the Kurdish question in each of the involved countries, followed by a few links to further research.

Iraq

The northern territories of Iraq are officially recognized as “the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan” since 2005, when Masoud Barzani became president. The situation has been more or less stable in the following decade, with only some quarrels regarding some disputed territories. The important contribution of the Kurdish people in the fight against ISIL, however, has made it possible for nationalistic feelings to arise and to gain strength, and in 2017 a referendum for independence took place and passed with an overwhelming majority. Iraqi armed forces immediately occupied Kirkuk (rich oil fields) and Barzani preferred to resign.

The position by important countries on the question:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_Kurdistan_independence_referendum,_2017

More information on the [BBC - Iraqi Kurdistan Profile](#)

Further research on the consequences of the war against ISIL on an [Al-Jazeera article](#)

Iran

Iranian Kurdistan is also called Rojhelat and borders with Turkey and Iraq. To this day, the relationship between the Kurds of western Iran and the Iranian government remains tense. As of 2015, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) is an active political and militant organization,

³ <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0231.xml>

based on the Iraq-Iran border that is pushing for Kurdish autonomy in the Iranian provinces of Kordestan, Kermanshah and West Azerbaijan. It is an Iranian Kurdish guerrilla group formed in 2004 as an offshoot of the Turkish PKK, with whom it shares some bases and resources in Iraqi Kurdistan. It claims to have three thousand fighters and has been designated a terrorist organization by both Iran and the United States, though reportedly, the United States and Israel had previously provided it with clandestine support. In 2011, following a government offensive that killed hundreds of PJAK fighters, the group signed a cease-fire with Iran negotiated by Kurdistan Regional Government leader As a consequence of the Iraqi Kurdistan referendum, Iranian Kurds have grown more restless, giving the central government reason to send tanks to the area. They fear that their foes, Israel and Saudi Arabia, might use Kurdistan to cause unrest in Iran, and they also wish to contain the separatist pulls of other minorities.

More information on the site of [The Kurdish Project](#) and on [the Economist](#)
Further research on the military intervention by the government by [Reuters](#)

Syria

The Kurds in Syria played a central role both in the civil war and in the war against ISIL, probably hoping that their participation will be taken into account and that their claims over the territories of northeastern Syria (Rojava) will be recognized. In fact, the area of Rojava has nearly tripled while fighting ISIL in 2015. The YPG (Kurdish People's Protection Units), along with the KNC (Kurdish National Council) are the most prominent political parties in Kurdish Syria, and are considered terrorist groups by Ankara because they are seen as an extension of the PKK.

Acts of ethnic cleansing have been reported. By expelling Arabs and other ethnic groups the Kurds could claim the areas. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/u-s-coalition-cleansing-raqqa-of-arabs-to-expand-kurdish-autonomous-region/5595558>

Moreover, in the areas controlled by Kurdish fighters several US bases were created without the consent of the Syrian government violating thus international laws. http://orient-news.net/en/news_show/138956/0/AAs-map-of-US-bases-in-Syria-infuriates-Penatgon

Further information on the site of [The Kurdish Project](#), the BBC [here](#) and [here](#)
An article regarding the expansion of the Rojava territory on [Vice News](#)

Turkey

Turkey is the country in which the Kurdish presence is largest: about 18 million people. Their shared history is dramatic and violent; both sides have many reasons to be wary of each other. The most recent developments regard the Syrian war, in which the Turkish government has taken the side of the Syrian one (and is therefore against the Kurdish militias, allied with USA, Canada, UK, France, the Netherlands and Israel), and the stiffening of Erdogan's policies, who has even suggested attacking a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria to "purge the Turkish southern border from terror". In apparent contradiction to this line of thought, the current Turkish government is also pursuing a conciliatory policy with Iraqi Kurdistan. This is due to the fact that Turkey needs their oil and natural gas in order not to rely entirely on Russian resources for their economic growth.

To read more about the threat to the enclave, here is an article on [the Guardian](#)
Further information on Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan on [the MEPC website](#)
A book on the matter (the introduction is heartily recommended): "Turkey's Kurdish Question" by Henri J. Barkey

Possible policies

While focusing on the Kurdish question in particular, it is important to keep in mind that the policies and the solution applied to this case will set a precedent to tackle similar problems all over the world.

The two main alternatives are:

- a. Applying the principle of the self-determination of peoples, thus moving in the direction of forming a new Kurdish state through treaties and international collaboration,
[main supporters: Kurds, Israel, which is so far the only country to openly declare its approval of an independent Kurdish state]
- b. Seeking a compromise with the existing governments, thus avoiding potential conflict.
[main supporters: USA, Turkey (obviously), Iraq and their allies]

Both have many advantages and downsides, and neither is perfect. However, it is clear that at present it is unrealistic to create a Kurdish independent state, given how many countries are against it. So please be realistic while writing your draft resolution or clauses, in order to make the debate as fruitful and interesting as possible. Also, please do keep in mind that this is the Political Committee and not the Security Council, so it is not in order to declare war against other member states, even though your country's policy might inspire you to do so.

Insofar as the current Turkish policy is concerned, assimilation has been the only strategy which has ever been taken into consideration, since the Turkish state itself is based on the concept of "Turkishness". A similar, yet more inclusive alternative is integration.

Here are the disadvantages of both.

The limits of assimilation are:

- The remoteness of the Kurdish region
- The relative economic backwardness on the region
- The lack of resources to finance the integration and education of the Kurdish inhabitants.

The limits of integration are:

- The fact that, to the eyes of the Turkish public, it would imply some degree of approval of the unacceptable acts of terrorism which were done in the name of the Kurdish cause
- The necessity for mentality to change on a nationwide level (if not on an international level) in order for the Kurds not to be portrayed as traitors, rebels or terrorists
- The difficulties of restoring the pre-existing Kurdish culture, given that the language has been almost eradicated.

Important vocabulary

In order to be prepared for the debate and to fully understand what is being said, please revise the definitions of the following terms, which could be mistaken for synonyms:

Integration
Assimilation
Ethnicity
Citizenship
Autonomy
Independence

Bibliography and links for research

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