

**Forum:** Special Conference on Southeast and Central Asia

**Issue:** The Situation in Kurdistan

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## Introduction

The Kurds, united by language and culture, inhabit in regions mainly in southeastern Turkey, and north-eastern Syria as well as part of Iraq. However, they do not have a state of their own. However, many Kurds expressed the need and want of establishing a state of their own. This is often referred to as Kurdistan. Yet, this idea faced many difficulties in the long run. Following the end of World War One, in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, the western allies provisioned a Kurdistan state and gave hope to many Kurds who have always wanted their own homeland. However, in the Treaty of Lausanne, the modern border of Turkey was set and left no room for an individual, self-governed state for the Kurds. In the later years, despite many calls for an established Kurd state, all of them has been quashed. Mainly, the idea of an independent Kurdistan was opposed by nations such as Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.

The Kurdistan conflict involves many countries but the main issues are focused on the conflict between Iraq and Turkey. The Kurdish-Turkish conflict involves the Kurds, as a minority ethnic group, fighting for a greater political right or even separate nation within the Republic of Turkey. The Kurdish-Iraqi conflict also involves the issue of political right but mainly revolves around the issue of oil control and the referendum that was hosted in 2017 despite international opposition.

## Definition of Key Terms

### **Kurd**

The Kurds are a group of indigenous people of the Middle East. They now live in countries including Turkey, Syria and Iraq as minority groups. Despite having the same ethnicity, they do not speak the same language. However, one dream is common amongst the Kurds, that is, have a country of their own; or at least, have the power to govern their own state.

### **Kurdistan**

Kurdistan is not a country defined by a border. The name Kurdistan means “homeland of the Kurds.” It is rather broadly defined as the regions in the Middle East, especially regions in Turkey and

Iraq with lots of Kurdish inhabitants. Additionally, it also refers to the movement of the Kurds righting for autonomy in their respective countries.



*Map of the Kurdistan region*

## **Turkey**

Before the end of World War One, Turkey was part of the Ottoman empire. Modern day Turkey (the Republic of Turkey) was established in the 1920s by nationalist leader Kemal Atatürk following the fall of the central powers in World War One. About 9% of the current population in Turkey are Kurds.

## **Iraq**

Iraq was under British rule until 1932. In 1979, Saddam Hussein came to power as president. It was at war with its eastern neighboring country, Iran, between 1980 to 1988. The US-led forces invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003 as it did not comply with one of the UN's resolutions for disarmament. U.S. forces remained in Iraq until 2017. However, an interim government also ruled beginning 2004. About 15-20% of the population in Iraq are Kurds.

## **PKK**

Kurdistan Worker's Party. The initial aim of PKK was to have an independent Kurdish state in Turkey. However, later it changed it to a demand for equal rights and Kurdish autonomy. Since 1986, the PKK has been involved in many armed conflicts with Turkey while fighting for autonomy. Many of such ways include suicide bombing and other violent attacks. Hence, the EU labeled it as a designated terrorist group in 2004.

## **YPG**

After the Civil War erupted in Syria and started to spill over into Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava), or Western Kurdistan, the People's Protection Units emerged. It acts as defence forces of the Kurdish area of Syria and is often regarded as one of the most effective forces in fighting against ISIS.

## **Islamic State (ISIS)**

An extremist terrorist group that is active in Syria and Iraq. Though not directly involved in the Kurdish Turkish or Kurdish Iraqi conflict, it still plays a fundamental role such that the Kurds accuse Turkey of using the “attacking” of ISIS as an excuse to actually attack PKK (Turkey) and YPG (Syria), both of whom are Kurdish parties.

### **Terrorism**

Terrorism can be broadly defined as any use of unlawful violence against civilians in order to achieve political aims. Such activities may include suicide bombing, mass shooting etc.

### **Insurgency**

Rebellions by the Turkish Kurds are often referred as insurgencies. These are revolts and uprising due to the dissatisfaction with the current ruling government.

### **Autonomy**

The ability to self-govern a state or region.

## **General Overview**

### **The Kurdish-Iraqi Conflict during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88)**

#### **The Al-Anfal Campaign (Genocide of Iraqi Kurds)**

During the years of the Iraq and Iran War between 1980-88, Saddam Hussein launched the ‘Al-Anfal Campaign. Led by Saddam’s cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, the campaign consisted a systematic genocide of the Kurds in Iran. Additionally, methods that violated human rights such as the use of chemical weapons (e.g. gases) were also brutally utilized to wipe out the Kurds population in Iraq. The genocide lasted around 3 years (1986-1989), where about 50000 and 182000 Kurds were inhumanly killed or murdered. More than 2000 villages were either burned, destroyed or demolished. An infamous incident of the genocide was the use of chemical weapon in the town of Halabja. 5000 thousand Kurds, including women and children, were instantly killed. Those who survived did not escape the hands of death either as they later suffered from severe health problems. Additionally, the target of the genocide was more of men and teenage boys, as they were viewed as possible insurgents. The Kurds inhabit regions in Iraq that is considered to be resource rich and land fertile. As a result, Arabization of Kirkuk, an oil-rich city, was also part of the campaign. Arabization refers to replacing local inhabitants (who are mainly Kurds) with Arab settlers from other parts of Iraq.

This campaign, also referred to by many as the genocide of the Kurds, has greatly violated human rights as it included the use of chemical weapons and an alternative form of colonization. During those years, countless Kurdish civilians were “wiped out”, brutalized and many became refugees, many of whom fled to Iran. After the war, Saddam Hussein was executed due to this campaign that violated human rights.

### **The referendum of 2017**

One of the other events that is crucial to the Kurdish Iraqi conflict is the referendum held in July 2014, in which the Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani spoke on behalf of the Iraqi Kurds and demanded independence of the Kurdish region. He stated that the Kurdish region is already “effectively partitioned”.

“From world war one until now, we are not a part of Iraq. It’s a theocratic, sectarian state. We have our geography, land and culture. We have our own language. We refuse to be subordinates.” Stated Massoud Barzani during the referendum.

The referendum really set an alarm to the neighboring countries who feared that the Kurds in their respective countries would demand the same autonomy. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, Iraqi forces recaptured the oil-rich city Kirkuk, then a Kurdish territory. Soon after, Barzani resigned as his opponents used this incident to question his presidency. After his resignation, another regional crisis was triggered and the situation in Kurdistan once again worsened. The hope for an independent Kurdish state again seemed far. Barzani, in his final address, blamed the US as he claimed that the Iraqi forces used US made weapons.

### **The city of Kirkuk and Oil**

The city of Kirkuk has always been fought over between different nations and ethnic groups such as Kurds, Arabs and Turks. Before the referendum of 2017, it was included as part of the Kurdish territory and was included in the referendum to be part of Kurdistan. However, this inclusion triggered conflict in many aspects and further deepened the conflict between the Iraqi Kurds and the rest of Iraq. Kirkuk is rich in natural resources, including fertile land and crude oil. About 550,000 barrels of oil are sent every day from Kurdistan to Turkey then the Black Sea. It is very important to the economy to both the Kurds and the Iraqi. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, it was taken by Iraqi forces who later consolidated their hold for this region. This further shattered the Kurds’ dream of establishing an autonomous state.

The city is vital for its rich resource in crude oil: about 550,000 barrels of oil flow from Kurdistan through Turkey to the port of Ceyhan on the Black Sea per day. However, due to the tension and dispute

over this region, the production of oil in the oil field has been severely affected which in turn can have long time effect on international oil prices. Furthermore, it also generates great international tension as countries such as the U.S. and Russia are involved.

## **The Kurdish-Turkish Conflict**

The majority of the Kurds live to the east and southeast of Turkey, but many are scattered around the country. However, the treatment of the Kurdish population in the Republic of Turkey has been frequently and internationally criticized. The Turkish-Kurds were originally promised a land of their own following the end of World War One by the Sevres Treaty. Yet, the founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, denied the treaty and urged many Turks to fight against. Eventually, it was replaced by Lausanne Treaty of 1923, which mentioned nothing about granting the Kurds autonomy, let alone independence. Soon after, many insurgencies from the Kurds arose but all have been brutally put down. Throughout 1930, the Turkish government passed various laws to deny the very existence of the Kurds. The language, cultural and numerous other aspects that the Kurds hold dear of are all eliminated and denied existence. The unfair and unjust segregation of the Kurds eventually brought international tension and still remains as one of the tensions between the Turkish Kurds and the Turkish government. Additionally, it also acts as incentives for the countless Kurdish insurgencies in forms of terrorism and violence that come later in time and still continues today.

## **PKK in the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict**

Similarly to the Kurdish Iraqi conflict, the main struggle in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict is again autonomy. Harsh treatments were brought to the Kurds in Turkey; even the very identity of theirs such as language and culture were also denied and eliminated. The PKK was led by Abdullah Ocalan and was established in 1978. The main aim for PKK is to call for an independent state for the Kurds within Turkey. Their struggle continues to present day. Throughout the course, they have launched numerous insurgencies and more than 40000 people have been killed and many displaced as a result. The United States, E.U. and Turkey have all listed PKK as a designated Terrorist group

The current aim of PKK has changed as it demands no longer independence from Turkey; Rather, free and equal treatment for all Kurds who inhabit Turkey. PKK's current military leader Cemil Bayi stated: "We don't want to separate from Turkey and set up a state". "We want to live within the borders of Turkey on our own land freely... The struggle will continue until the Kurds' innate rights are accepted,"

Still, PKK is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S. and EU as it has launched many violent attacks within Turkey.

## The Islamic States (ISIS) Crisis

Although not directly impacting the Turkish Kurdish nor the Iraqi Kurdish conflict, it plays an important role in the situation in Kurdistan. In mid-2013, it repeatedly attacked three Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria. However, it was forcefully defended by the Syrian Kurds, especially the People's Protection Unit (YPG) who is also an armed wing of Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). In 2014, the Kurds in Iraq were also drawn into the conflict as ISIS attacked Peshmerga, which was already abandoned by the Iraqi army. The Kurds, in both Syria and Iraq, have been fighting hard against this extremist terrorist group. However, Turkey refused and neglected many military needs from the Kurds. For instance, it denied attacking ISIS positions as well as allowing the YPG to cross the border to defend it. This triggers the tension between Turkey and the Turkish Kurds even more. Many Kurds blame Turkey for "supporting" ISIS.

## UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

### Security Council

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This resolution was issued on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1991. It condemned the repression of Iraqi Kurds as well as gave birth to a safe haven following international concern for the safety of Kurdish refugees. The U.S. and U.K. also established No-Fly zones to ensure the safety of refugees. However, it is to be understood that many other Kurdish populated regions are still under tension and are at risk of conflict.

It is to be noted that there is little UN involvement in the Kurdistan conflict as it is often treated as a domestic and civil conflict, meaning that therefore the United Nations is not to intervene. All UN could do is to encourage negotiations between neighboring countries and raise awareness of the issue. Additionally, the UN has long been neglecting the Kurd's struggle for autonomy. During the Kurdistan Referendum in 2017, the UN special mission to Iraq stated that "*it has no intention to be engaged in any way or form as concerns the referendum.*" In many ways, the Kurds are struggling alone for their independence.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1918	Following the defeat of Ottoman Empire in WWI, British forces occupied the Province of Mosul which brought an extensive amount of Kurdish population under British rule.

- 1919-1924 Mahmud Barzanji rebelled against British rule. During this time, he established the Kingdom of Kurdistan which lasted from September 1922-1924.
- 1932 The Kurdish demand for autonomy was ignored.
- 1943 Large areas of Irbil and Badinan were won through uprising led by Mullah Mustafa Barzani.
- August 1946 Kurdish rebels were forced by British RAF bombing forces into Iran. Later they joined the Iranian Kurds led by Qazi Mohamed and founded an independent Kurdish state in Mahabad.
- 1946 Within a month of creation, the "Mahabad Republic" ruled by Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was crushed by Iranian forces. Leader Mustafa Barzani fled to the Soviet Union.
- 1958 The traditional Iraqi monarchy was overthrown which allowed the open recognition of many Kurdish nationalists after years of hiding. Mustafa Barzani returns from exile as the new parliament recognizes the rights of the Kurdish people.
- 1961 Kurds rebelled in northern Iraq. As a result, KDP was dissolved by the Iraqi government
- March 1970 Iraqi government agreed on a peace accord as well as autonomy with the Kurds. Kurdish recognized as an official language.
- 1974-1984 The rise of the PKK in Turkey. At first, they demanded a separate state from Turkey. Following the rise of PKK, rebellions and protests in forms of violence took place and tension rose between Turkey and Turkish Kurds.
- April 1991 Based on UN resolution 688 and led by the United States, the creation of Safe Heaven was adopted. Later, the region was reconstructed by the regional Kurdish government.
- 1994-97 Civil war between different parties (KDP vs. PUK) of the Kurds.
- 2004 EU recognized PKK as a designated terrorist group as more insurgencies in forms of suicide bomb attacks from the Kurds took place in Turkey.
- 2005 The new Iraqi constitution designated the Kurds an autonomous federal region after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.
- 22 March 2015 The leader of PKK wrote a letter to the Turkish government, stating that the Kurds want autonomy instead of independence. This marks a new era for the Kurds and Turks as they both go against ISIS. However, peace did not last long between the two sides and seen the third wave of insurgency took place.
- 2017 The referendum for Iraqi Kurds independence was held after a long delay and was voted with an overwhelming majority for independence. However, the results were later annulled due to the pressure from the Iraqi government.

2017 October President Barzani (leader for the Kurds) resigned. The relationship between the Kurds in Iraq and the Iraqi government worsened and conflicts started to grow.

## Possible Solutions

The main issue surrounding the situation in Kurdistan is the question of autonomy for the Kurds. This can be complicated in nature as the Kurds do not speak the same language and the culture of each region is different. However, negotiation between countries, especially those in the pivotal role, can bring solutions to this issue. Additionally, different autonomy models around the world (e.g. Hong Kong) can be studied and applied to solve this problem. The feasibility of this solution should be adjusted accordingly based on the nation's situation. This means that countries such as Turkey and Iraq may have different ways of approaching this problem. However, no matter what solution is, equal treatment of the Kurds in different countries need to be promoted. The UN should take steps to urge these countries to do so, preferably through ways such as international negotiation as well as negotiations between different regional parties. Additionally, the UN should also take realistic measures to ensure the basic human rights of Kurds in countries such as Turkey and Iraq where these rights have been historically violated. The UN's Human Rights Council should urge these countries to follow the basic rules for human rights. Moreover, the language and culture of the Kurds should also be protected, preferably monitored by Human Rights Watch.

Terrorism has been surrounding the Middle East for quite a long time. Measures to eliminate terrorism will benefit many countries, including Turkey and Iraq, and therefore helps to establish a better foundation for international negotiation and peace treaties. Ways of eliminating terrorism such as forces collaboration and anti-terrorism education should be discussed internationally and corresponding efforts and actions should be taken as well.

The question of oil resources plays another important role in the Kurdistan issue. Oil resources are crucial for a country's economic development and generation of revenue and therefore should be protected against any terrorist groups (e.g. ISIS) for unjust uses. Such measures can only be successful when international collaboration is achieved. For instance, UN can take approaches to encourage the collaboration between the Kurds and Iraqis to together protect natural resources against terrorist groups.

The crisis of refugees is not to be ignored. As many refugees from the Kurdistan conflict currently inhabit in the Safe Haven or No-Fly Zone, it is crucial to investigate the safety as well as conditions in these places. Additionally, there are many other areas that are not No-Fly Zones yet still have many inhabitants.



In this case, effort should be done to protect the civilians in these regions. For instance, UN Peacekeeping forces can be sent to these zones to protect the civilians. Additionally, the UN should take fundamental and serious measures to combat any violence from either side of the conflict against innocent civilians.

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