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Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Who Are the Kurds?

Where:

Kurds live in a mountainous area of eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, and small parts of northern Syria and Armenia. “Kurdistan” (which is not a recognized country but divided among the countries listed above) is an area of 230,000 square miles, an area about as big as Texas. See the map at:

<http://media.independent.com/img/photos/2012/12/12/kurdish-occupancy-map.jpg>

Who:

Kurds are predominantly Indo-European and speak a language in the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. In other words, Kurdish is related to Persian, not to Arabic or Turkish. Most are Sunni Muslims.

How many:

Authorities disagree completely on the issue of how many Kurds there are, giving figures from 15-27 million.

Why the discrepancy? For one thing, it can be hard to determine ethnicity, especially for people of mixed heritage or who live/work amid the majority population group. Mostly, however, the problems come because of political reasons. The governments of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey usually cite lower numbers of Kurds because they have an interest in downplaying the numbers of its minority populations and/or because Kurdish citizens of these countries may not identify themselves as Kurds for fear of discrimination. Kurdish sources usually give much higher numbers, which may be inflated to increase their political clout. Finally, Kurds have frequently become refugees, moving from one country to another to escape war or persecution. Therefore, the number of Kurds in a particular country may vary greatly from one year to the next, making overall numbers more difficult to calculate.

About half the Kurds (8-12 million) live in Turkey, where they make up more than 18-20% of the Turkish population. There are approximately 7 million in Iran (10% of Iran's population), and 4-5 million in Iraq (23% of Iraq's population). Others live in Syria (about 10% of the population). *Note: All these figures are controversial!

Modern history:

When the Ottoman Empire fell, Kurds were NOT given their own state. Turkey, Iran and Iraq each agreed not to recognize an independent Kurdish state, and all tried to limit the spread of Kurdish nationalism. Kurds have been rebelling ever since.

The Turkish government has denied Kurds living in Turkey any separate status. (Ataturk labeled them as “Mountain Turks.”) Until recently, Kurds were forbidden to speak their language, wear traditional Kurdish clothing, or even to give their children Kurdish names. In modern times, the Turkish army has fought against guerilla forces of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

The Kurds of Iraq have also engaged in a struggle against their government. The low point came under Saddam Hussein when the Iraqi government engaged in outright genocide against parts of the Kurdish population. During the Anfal Campaign, Iraqi forces attacked rural Kurds, burned Kurdish villages, and even used chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians in 1988. During this time period, more than 100,000 civilians were killed; 1.5 million people were left homeless; and thousands fled into Turkey. Three years later, when the U.S.-led coalition defeated Iraq in the first Persian Gulf War, the Kurds revolted, only to be crushed again by Iraqi troops. Only after the Second Gulf War (2003) have the Kurds received autonomy in Iraq. Since then, Iraqi Kurdistan has been a fairly stable area in a country plagued by unrest. The region has had some foreign policy success as well: Iraq Kurds have been at the forefront of the struggle against fundamentalist ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) forces, also known as ISIS (Independent State of Iraq and Syria).. In 2017 Iraqi Kurds voted for an independent Kurdistan, which would be separate from Iraq. The move has met with opposition from Iraq, Turkey, and Iran – and has not been widely supported outside the region.

Iran has also seen several Kurdish revolts (1946, 1979). Both revolts were suppressed.

In Syria, the government sought to “Arabize” some of the Kurds (similar to the Turkification efforts in Turkey). Other Syrian Kurds were deprived of citizenship, a move that rendered them stateless people without rights.

Today, there are many Kurdish refugees living in various places within and outside of the Middle East. The Kurds remain divided by international borders and internal divisions.

Timeline:

1919-1923: World War I treaties create Middle Eastern countries (no Kurdistan), and France and Great Britain get mandates over Syria and Iraq, respectively.

1920: Treaty of Sevres, dividing up the Ottoman Empire, allows for the possibility of a Kurdish state.

1923: Treaty of Lausanne recognizes the formation of the Turkish Republic. No provision is made for Kurdish autonomy.

1919-1927: Kurds rebel in Iraq under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji.

1925: Kurds rebel against the Turkish government. The uprising is suppressed.

1930s – 1970s: Iraqi Kurds, under Mustafa Barzani, rebel intermittently.

1946: With Soviet help, Iranian Kurds set up the “Mahabad Republic,” which is quickly put down by the Iranian government.

1962: Many Kurds in Syria (possibly over 200,000) lose their status as Syrian citizens and become stateless people without rights. (Education, employment, property ownership, political participation, and legal marriage are severely limited.)

1974: After the breakdown of an agreement between Iraqi Kurds and the government in Baghdad, new clashes erupt, and 130,000 Kurds flee into Iran.

1979: As Iran falls into chaos during the Iranian Revolution, the Kurds set up their own area free of Iranian government control. This autonomy does not last long as the Iranian government reestablishes its rule in the area.

1984: Abdullah Ocalan’s Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey touches off a rebellion against Turkish oppression that lasts for over a decade and eventually costs about 30,000 lives.

1986-1989: Iraqis launch the Anfal campaign against the Kurds of northern Iraq, killing more than 100,000 civilians. (The most infamous episode was the poison-gas attack against the Kurdish town of Halabja, killing 5,000.) About 1.5 million people are left homeless, and thousands flee into Turkey.

1991: After the Gulf War, Iraqi Kurds rebel against Saddam Hussein, encouraged by the U.S. The U.S., however, does not aid the rebels, and the Iraqi government puts down the rebellion. Millions of Iraqi Kurds flee toward the Turkish border. Eventually, the U.N. establishes a “No Fly” zone to assist the Kurds and demands that Iraq make accommodations.

1991: Turkey repeals the law that it is illegal to speak Kurdish. Although Kurdish may now be spoken in private, it remains illegal to speak it in public life.

1991-1994: Fighting in Turkey continues to escalate. Some 3,000 villages are destroyed by the military in an effort to rout out PKK sympathizers, creating more than 2 million refugees.

1994: Leyla Zana, a Kurdish woman who in 1991 had become the first Kurdish woman to win a seat in the Turkish parliament, is arrested ostensibly for treason. (She had irritated Turkish nationalists by giving a speech in parliament in the Kurdish language.) Her years in prison lead to an international outcry and several international awards. She was released from prison in 2004.

2003: The U.S. invasion of Iraq overthrows Saddam Hussein. The Kurds receive greater autonomy over a wider area and now have an elected parliament. Massoud Barzani (Mulla Mustafa’s son) is the president.

2004: Kurds in Syria riot, Syria's worst unrest in decades.

2011: Civil war breaks out in Syria. Syrian Kurds are caught up in the conflict.

2013: The Kurds become important in the fight against ISOL (also called ISIS).

2017: Kurds in Iraq vote for independence.