

The Tangled Web: An Examination of Kurdish-Turkmen Relations from the Ottoman Era to the Present

I. Introduction

The relationship between the Kurdish and Turkmen peoples represents a complex tapestry woven through centuries of coexistence, competition, and conflict across the volatile landscape of the Middle East. Shaped by imperial legacies, the rise of nationalism, the drawing of modern state borders, and the enduring influence of external powers, their interactions in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria offer a critical lens through which to understand the region's intricate ethno-political dynamics. This report provides an in-depth analysis of the historical trajectory and contemporary state of Kurdish-Turkmen relations, focusing on key flashpoints and the underlying drivers of both cooperation and antagonism.

A. Defining the Peoples: Kurds and Turkmen

Kurds: The Kurds are an Iranic ethnic group indigenous to a mountainous region historically known as Kurdistan, which encompasses parts of modern-day southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northern Syria.¹ They constitute the fourth largest ethnic group in West Asia, following Arabs, Persians, and Turks.² Population estimates vary significantly, ranging from 30 to 45 million globally.² Significant populations reside in Turkey (estimated 14.3–20 million, 18–25% of the population), Iran (8.2–12 million, ~10%), Iraq (5.6–8.5 million, 15–20%), and Syria (1.5–3.6 million, ~9%).² Kurdish is a West Iranian language with several major dialects, primarily Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) and Sorani (Central Kurdish).¹ Historically, many Kurds followed a nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle centered around sheep and goat herding, utilizing the mountainous terrain for refuge.³ While tribal structures led by sheikhs or agas were traditionally central³, the enforcement of national boundaries after World War I forced many towards settled agriculture and urban life.³ Despite their large numbers and distinct identity, recognized by Arab geographers since the 10th century², Kurds remain one of the world's largest stateless nations, their aspirations for statehood or autonomy repeatedly thwarted since the unratified Treaty of Sèvres in 1920.² Religiously, most Kurds are Muslims, predominantly Sunni, with significant Shia, Alevi, Yazidi, Yarsan, and smaller Christian and Zoroastrian communities.²

Turkmen: The term "Turkmen" historically referred broadly to Oghuz Turkic tribes who migrated westward from Central Asia (from the Altai Mountains region or possibly further east) starting around the 11th century and converted to Islam.⁷ This historical usage distinguishes the Turkmen populations of Iraq and Syria from the citizens of modern Turkmenistan, although they share Oghuz Turkic roots.⁷ Iraqi Turkmen, estimated to number

between 2 and 3 million ¹², and Syrian Turkmen, with estimates ranging widely from 500,000 to 3 million ¹³, are largely descendants of Turkic peoples who settled in Mesopotamia and the Levant during the Seljuk (11th-12th centuries), Mamluk (13th-15th centuries), and particularly the Ottoman (16th-20th centuries) periods.⁷ These migrations were often state-sponsored, establishing garrisons, securing trade routes, or acting as counterweights to other local groups.⁹ Iraqi and Syrian Turkmen speak distinct Oghuz Turkic dialects, influenced historically by Ottoman Turkish and Azerbaijani, and increasingly by modern Standard Turkish due to media exposure and education, especially since 2005 in Iraq.⁹ Iraqi Turkmen exhibit significant religious diversity, roughly split between Sunni and Shia Muslims, with a small Christian minority.¹² Syrian Turkmen are predominantly Sunni Muslims.¹⁵ The identity of Iraqi Turkmen is particularly nuanced; they often feel culturally closer to Azerbaijani Turks than to Anatolian Turks and resist being categorized merely as remnants of the Ottoman Empire, a label sometimes used against them politically.¹² Their historical presence is often linked to specific regions, forming a belt across northern Iraq sometimes referred to as "Turkmeneli".⁹ The very definition and self-identification of "Turkmen" in Iraq and Syria thus carry historical weight distinct from both Ottoman-era Turkish identity and modern Central Asian Turkmen identity, influencing their political stances and interactions.⁷

Table 1: Estimated Kurdish and Turkmen Populations by Country (Range)

| Country | Estimated Kurdish Population | Estimated Turkmen Population | Key Sources |
|-------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------|
| Turkey | 14.3 – 20 million | ~150,000 (Central Asia origin) + others | ² |
| Iraq | 5.6 – 8.5 million | 2 – 3 million | ² |
| Iran | 8.2 – 12 million | ~1 million (NE Iran) + others | ² |
| Syria | 1.5 – 3.6 million | 0.5 – 3 million | ² |
| Germany | 1.2 – 1.5 million | Significant diaspora | ² |
| Azerbaijan | 150,000 – 180,000 | - | ² |
| Afghanistan | - | ~650,000 (NW Afghanistan) | ¹¹ |

Note: Population figures are estimates and subject to variation based on source and methodology. Turkmen figures in Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan often refer to specific communities, distinct from the Iraqi/Syrian Turkmen discussed primarily in this report.

B. The Significance of the Kurdish-Turkmen Relationship

The relationship between Kurds and Turkmen is significant due to their overlapping geographical presence, particularly in northern Iraq and Syria, where Kurdish regions intersect

with areas of historical Turkmen settlement.⁴ Their histories are intertwined through centuries of coexistence within large empires, most notably the Ottoman Empire.⁴ The dissolution of these empires and the imposition of modern nation-state boundaries arbitrarily divided both populations, transforming them into minority groups within new political entities.² Their interactions have spanned the spectrum from cooperation and alliance, particularly during the early Ottoman period against common rivals²¹, to intense friction and conflict. These tensions are often fueled by competing claims over territory and resources, particularly acute in ethnically mixed and resource-rich areas like Kirkuk.¹⁴ Furthermore, both groups have endured periods of marginalization, forced assimilation (through policies like Turkification or Arabization), denial of cultural and political rights, and state-sponsored violence at the hands of the dominant powers in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.⁵ However, this shared experience of vulnerability has not consistently translated into solidarity, as their relationship has frequently been shaped, and often manipulated, by the policies of the states they inhabit and the interventions of powerful regional and international actors.¹⁴ Understanding their dynamic is therefore crucial for comprehending the stability and political future of these key Middle Eastern states.

C. Report Aims and Structure

This report aims to provide a comprehensive, expert-level analysis of the historical evolution and contemporary dynamics of Kurdish-Turkmen relations. It will trace their interactions from the Ottoman period through the establishment of modern nation-states to the present day, including developments up to 2024-2025. The geographical focus encompasses Turkey, Iraq (with a detailed examination of the critical Kirkuk governorate), and Syria. Thematically, the report will explore patterns of coexistence; the drivers of conflict, including identity politics, nationalism, resource competition, and territorial disputes; the impact of state policies such as assimilation, suppression, and co-option; and the significant role played by external actors like Turkey, Iran, the United States, and Russia. The analysis relies on the synthesis of the provided research materials¹, ensuring rigorous citation and maintaining an objective, scholarly assessment throughout.

The report is structured chronologically and thematically, beginning with historical foundations, moving through the impacts of 20th-century nation-state formation, analyzing contemporary dynamics and flashpoints in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, examining the role of external powers, and concluding with a synthesis of patterns and future prospects.

II. Historical Foundations: Coexistence and Emerging Fault Lines (Pre-20th Century)

The historical relationship between Kurds and Turkmen before the 20th century was forged within the context of large, multi-ethnic empires and characterized by both periods of interaction and the gradual establishment of settlement patterns that would later become sources of contention. Their encounters were shaped by migrations, imperial strategies, and the shifting political landscape of the Middle East.

A. Early Encounters and Settlement Patterns

Kurdish presence in their mountainous homeland dates back millennia, with potential links to ancient peoples mentioned in Mesopotamian records like the Guti or the Kardouchoi encountered by Xenophon in 401 BCE.³ The consolidation of a distinct Kurdish identity is often associated with their conversion to Islam in the 7th century CE.³

Significant Turkic migrations into the Middle East, primarily by Oghuz tribes who would become known as Turkmen upon converting to Islam, commenced in the 11th century with the rise of the Seljuk Empire.⁷ The Seljuks played a crucial role in establishing Turkmen communities in strategic locations. In 1055, Sultan Tughril Bey's invasion led to large-scale Turkmen settlement along key routes in northern Iraq, including areas like Tal Afar, Erbil, and notably Kirkuk, laying the foundation for the region later termed Turkmeneli.⁹ Similarly, Seljuk expansion into Syria facilitated Turkmen settlement there from the 11th century onwards.¹⁵ Subsequent dynasties continued this pattern. The Turkic Zengids in the 12th century settled Turkmen in the Aleppo region partly to counter Crusader threats.¹⁵ The Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517), ruled by Turkic and Circassian elites, also utilized Turkmen troops and settled them in various parts of Syria, including Damascus, Aleppo, Qara, and coastal areas, often in return for military service or to protect strategic points.¹⁵ By the 15th century, Turkmen soldiers formed significant contingents in the Mamluk armies of Syria.¹⁵

The Ottoman conquest of the region, beginning with Syria (1516) and Iraq (1534), marked another major phase of Turkmen settlement.⁹ The Ottomans actively encouraged migration from Anatolia, settling Turkmen families in rural hinterlands and strategic locations across Syria and northern Iraq.⁹ This was often done for administrative control, to secure communication routes (especially towards southern Mesopotamia), to counter Bedouin tribal power in Syria, or to serve as garrisons.⁹ In Kirkuk, Ottoman rule solidified Turkish influence, with the city becoming an important administrative and cultural center where Turkmen played key roles.⁹

These overlapping settlement patterns, driven by migration and imperial strategy over centuries, created ethnically mixed zones, particularly in northern Iraq (Mosul, Erbil, Kirkuk regions) and northern Syria (Aleppo, Latakia regions), setting the stage for future interactions, both cooperative and conflictual.⁴

B. The Ottoman Context (1514 - c. 1900)

The long period of Ottoman rule profoundly shaped Kurdish-Turkmen relations, establishing patterns of alliance, governance, and underlying tensions that would resonate long after the empire's collapse.

Kurdish-Ottoman Relations: The initial phase of Ottoman rule in Kurdish-inhabited lands was marked by a strategic alliance. Predominantly Sunni Kurds, led by figures like Idris Bitlisi, sided with the Sunni Ottomans under Sultan Selim I against the rival Shia Safavid Empire of Persia.²¹ Kurdish forces were instrumental in the pivotal Ottoman victory at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 and the subsequent capture of Diyarbakir and other parts of Eastern

Anatolia from the Safavids.²¹

As a reward for this crucial support, and as a pragmatic means of governing rugged terrain and securing a volatile frontier, the Ottomans granted considerable semi-autonomy to numerous Kurdish emirates.²¹ These emirates enjoyed hereditary rule, often with exemptions from taxes and military conscription, and their status was officially recognized and protected by the central government.²¹ This system of indirect rule persisted for over three centuries, from 1514 until the mid-1800s, fostering a period where Kurdish political structures and identity were acknowledged within the imperial framework.²¹ This arrangement, however, was fundamentally pragmatic, contingent on the Kurds serving Ottoman strategic interests, primarily defense against Persia. It was not based on an inherent recognition of Kurdish national rights in the modern sense.

Relations began to deteriorate significantly in the mid-19th century, particularly from the 1830s onwards, during the Tanzimat era of reforms under Sultan Mahmud II.²¹ These reforms aimed to centralize the empire, modernize its administration and military, and foster a sense of Ottoman identity (Ottomanism). This directly threatened the autonomy of the Kurdish emirates and interfered with traditional tribal systems.²¹ The attempts to dismantle Kurdish autonomy and impose direct rule from Istanbul sparked widespread Kurdish resistance and numerous revolts throughout the 19th century.²² These uprisings, however, were generally localized reactions against specific policies or governors, rather than coordinated expressions of modern Kurdish nationalism, which was still nascent.²² The erosion of the autonomy granted in the 16th century demonstrated that Kurdish status was ultimately subject to the shifting priorities of the Ottoman state.

A temporary improvement in relations occurred under Sultan Abdul Hamid II (reigned 1876–1909).²¹ His emphasis on Pan-Islamism over Ottomanism resonated with many Sunni Kurds.²¹ He famously incorporated Kurdish tribesmen into the state-sponsored Hamidiye cavalry regiments, intended to police the eastern frontiers and potentially counter Armenian nationalist aspirations.²¹ While this fostered loyalty among participating tribes, it also granted significant power to certain Kurdish tribal leaders, sometimes leading to internal conflicts and abuses of power that the central government struggled to control.³⁵

Turkmen Role and Status: Turkmen communities, viewed as part of the broader Turkic element within the empire, generally saw their numbers and influence increase during the Ottoman period.⁹ They were often settled in strategic areas, sometimes serving in garrisons or helping to maintain security along important routes.⁹ In key urban centers like Kirkuk, Turkmen became prominent in local administration, commerce, and cultural life, benefiting from the Ottoman state's reinforcement of Turkish identity and Hanafi Sunni Islam in the province.⁹ While Kurds possessed formalized, albeit conditional, autonomy through their emirates, Turkmen communities appear to have been integrated more directly as settlers, soldiers, and administrators, often perceived as being closer to the Ottoman ruling structure.⁹ This differential relationship with the state likely influenced their respective positions and potential rivalries as the empire weakened. The Ottomans themselves made distinctions, referring to Kurds as the "Black Nation" (Kara Millet) and Turkomans as the "Grey Nation" (Boz Millet).²¹

Seeds of Tension: Several factors within the Ottoman system laid the groundwork for future Kurdish-Turkmen friction. The Ottoman strategy of utilizing one group against another, such as inciting Kurds against Safavids³¹ or potentially using Turkmen settlements as a check on Kurdish or Bedouin influence¹⁴, created potential for resentment and mistrust. The explicit settlement of Turkmen in some areas as 'pacifiers' or buffers near Kurdish territories established a historical basis for later disputes over land and influence, particularly evident in the context of Kirkuk.¹⁴ Furthermore, the 19th-century centralization policies, by dismantling the long-standing system of Kurdish autonomy, removed the foundation of the earlier accommodation and created grievances that would fuel future conflict.²¹

III. The Nation-State Era: Division, Nationalism, and Conflict (20th Century)

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the subsequent formation of modern nation-states in the Middle East fundamentally reshaped the political landscape for both Kurds and Turkmen. Arbitrary borders divided communities, new nationalist ideologies prioritized ethnic homogeneity, and both groups found themselves minorities facing unprecedented pressures from centralized states.

A. Impact of Ottoman Collapse and New Borders

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I unleashed a wave of nationalist aspirations among its diverse constituent peoples, including Turks, Arabs, Kurds, and Armenians, who sought national homelands after centuries of imperial rule.² The victorious Allied powers initially addressed Kurdish aspirations in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which proposed the creation of an autonomous, potentially independent, Kurdish state in eastern Anatolia.² However, this provision was fiercely rejected by the Turkish National Movement led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which fought to establish a new Turkish republic within revised borders.²² The Treaty of Sèvres was never ratified.² Instead, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne established the boundaries of modern Turkey and recognized its sovereignty but made no mention of Kurdish autonomy or rights.⁵ This treaty effectively partitioned the historical region of Kurdistan among four newly formed or redefined states: Turkey, Iraq (under British mandate), Iran (Pahlavi dynasty), and Syria (under French mandate).²

The consequences were profound. The Kurds became one of the world's largest stateless nations, constituting significant minorities in each of these countries.² Turkmen communities, particularly those established during the Ottoman era in northern Iraq and Syria, also found themselves minorities within new Arab-dominated states, cut off from the Turkish heartland with which many felt historical or cultural affinity.⁹ The new borders disrupted traditional nomadic migration patterns³ and subjected both groups to the policies of nascent nation-states often intent on forging unified national identities.

B. Turkey: Turkification and the Kurdish Conflict

The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 ushered in an era of radical transformation based on secularism and an assertive Turkish nationalism under Atatürk.²⁵ This Kemalist ideology prioritized a unitary Turkish political and cultural identity, viewing ethnic and linguistic distinctions as belonging solely to the private sphere, if acknowledged at all.²⁵ This state-building project had devastating consequences for the Kurds. Despite earlier promises of autonomy made by Atatürk during the War of Independence to secure Kurdish support²², the new republic embarked on a policy of systematic denial and suppression of Kurdish identity.³⁰ Kurds were officially categorized as "Mountain Turks," supposedly of Turanian origin, who had merely forgotten their Turkishness.³⁰ The very words "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" were banned from public discourse and official use, as was the Kurdish language in administration, education, and public life.⁵ Kurdish schools, cultural organizations, and publications were prohibited.²⁴ This policy of denial was not merely political suppression but a foundational element of the Turkish nation-state project, aimed at achieving ethnic homogeneity by erasing Kurdish distinctiveness.²⁴

These policies were enforced through legislation and state action. The 1924 constitution enshrined Turkish as the sole official language.²⁴ Laws were passed allowing the expropriation of land from Kurdish owners for redistribution to Turkish speakers.²⁴ The 1934 Resettlement Law provided the legal framework for the forced relocation of Kurdish populations away from their homeland and the settlement of Turks in Kurdish areas, aiming to break up Kurdish communities and accelerate assimilation.²⁴ The Tunceli Law of 1935 specifically targeted the Dersim region (a Kurdish and Zaza Alevi stronghold) for pacification and Turkification, including sending Kurdish children to boarding schools outside the region to be assimilated.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, these policies provoked resistance. Several major Kurdish revolts erupted in the 1920s and 1930s, including the Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925), the Ararat Rebellion (1930), and the Dersim Rebellion (1937-38).⁵ These uprisings, often led by traditional religious or tribal figures reacting against secularization and the assault on Kurdish identity and autonomy, were brutally suppressed by the Turkish military.²⁵ The state response involved massacres (such as the Zilan Massacre during the Ararat revolt and widespread killings in Dersim), executions of leaders, mass deportations, and the destruction of villages.⁵

While Kurdish resistance existed earlier, the modern, sustained Kurdish-Turkish conflict, particularly the insurgency launched by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1984, emerged directly from this decades-long context of state repression, denial of fundamental rights, and forced assimilation.⁵ The conflict, demanding greater cultural and political rights and evolving from separatism towards autonomy, resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, widespread displacement, the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages, and the implementation of controversial counter-insurgency measures like the state-armed village guard system, which pitted Kurd against Kurd.³⁰

C. Iraq: Mandate, State Formation, and Kirkuk Tensions

The creation of the modern Iraqi state under British Mandate also set the stage for enduring ethnic tensions involving Kurds and Turkmen, particularly centered on the oil-rich province of

Kirkuk. The British incorporated the former Ottoman Mosul Vilayet, including Kirkuk, into Iraq despite competing claims from Turkey and resistance from local populations, including Turkmen who rejected inclusion in Iraq in a 1921 referendum.²³ Early British administrators viewed the Turkmen population with suspicion, considering them potential agents of the former Ottoman regime or the new Turkish Republic.¹²

Initially, the Iraqi constitution of 1925 recognized Turkmen as a constitutive entity alongside Arabs and Kurds.⁹ The Local Languages Law of 1931 designated both Kurdish and Turkish as official languages in the Kirkuk and Kifri districts, acknowledging the region's multi-ethnic character.²³ However, this formal recognition of Turkmen status was gradually eroded by successive Iraqi governments.⁹

Kirkuk immediately became a focal point of contention. In the early years of the Iraqi state, Turkmen often dominated the city's administration and commerce, reflecting their Ottoman-era prominence.²³ However, the demographics began to shift, particularly from the 1950s onwards, driven partly by the burgeoning oil industry which attracted Kurdish workers from surrounding rural areas.¹⁴ The 1957 census, considered the most reliable, reflected this complexity: Turkmen formed the largest group within Kirkuk city itself (37.6%), followed closely by Kurds (33.3%) and Arabs (22.5%), while Kurds constituted the majority in the wider Kirkuk Governorate.²⁸

This demographic flux and competition for influence and resources created a volatile environment. These underlying tensions erupted violently in July 1959, when riots instigated by communists and involving Kurdish elements targeted Turkmen leaders and prosperous families in Kirkuk, resulting in a massacre that left a lasting legacy of bitterness and mistrust between the communities.¹² This event predated the intense Ba'athist Arabization campaigns, indicating that conflict drivers related to demographic change and control over the city and its resources were already present, later to be systematically exploited by the state.

Simultaneously, Iraqi Kurds engaged in their own struggles for autonomy against the central government in Baghdad, beginning with early revolts led by figures like Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji and the Barzani clan.³⁸ The relationship between Baghdad and the Kurds cycled through periods of intense conflict (e.g., the First Iraqi–Kurdish War, 1961–1970) and failed negotiations over autonomy (e.g., the collapse of the 1970 Autonomy Agreement in 1974, leading to the Second Iraqi–Kurdish War).³⁸

Under the Ba'athist regime, particularly from the late 1960s onwards, the state implemented systematic "Arabization" policies in Kirkuk and other parts of northern Iraq.¹⁴ These campaigns aimed to alter the region's demographic makeup to ensure Arab dominance, especially in oil-rich Kirkuk. Methods included the forced displacement and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Turkmen, confiscation of their lands and properties, the redrawing of administrative boundaries to dilute non-Arab populations, and the settlement of Arab families brought from southern and central Iraq with government incentives.²⁷ Non-Arabs were pressured to officially change their ethnicity to Arab ("nationality correction") to access basic rights and employment.²⁷ During this period, the Turkmen community also suffered targeted purges, assassinations of leaders, and denial of cultural and political rights.¹⁴

D. Syria: Mandate, Minorities, and Arabization

In Syria, established under French Mandate, the new borders also divided ethnic communities. While the French authorities granted citizenship to some Kurdish refugees who fled persecution in Turkey during the 1920s, contributing to the Kurdish population in the Jazira region ⁴⁰, neither Kurds nor Turkmen received constitutional guarantees for their linguistic or cultural rights.¹⁵

Following Syria's independence, successive governments pursued Arab nationalist ideologies and policies that marginalized non-Arab minorities.⁴² Both Kurdish and Turkmen languages and cultures faced assimilation pressures under state-sponsored "Arabization" campaigns.⁴¹ The Syrian government under Hafez al-Assad banned publications in Turkish.¹⁵ Kurds faced particular discrimination; a controversial census conducted in the predominantly Kurdish Al-Hasakah governorate in 1962 arbitrarily stripped tens of thousands of Kurds of their Syrian citizenship, rendering them stateless ('ajanib' or 'maktumin') – a status that persisted for decades.³

Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, both Kurds and Turkmen existed as largely unrecognized minorities, concentrated mainly in northern regions along the Turkish border.¹³ They faced varying degrees of cultural suppression, political exclusion, and economic disadvantage within a centralized, authoritarian state dominated by the Ba'ath party and the Alawite minority.³

Across all three countries – Turkey, Iraq, and Syria – the 20th century saw the newly established nation-states consistently prioritize centralized authority and the promotion of a dominant national identity (Turkish or Arab) over the recognition or accommodation of Kurdish and Turkmen diversity.³ This shared experience of state-led marginalization and assimilation pressure, however, did not automatically forge a united Kurdish-Turkmen front. Their specific historical trajectories, differing relationships with state power (e.g., Kurdish autonomy struggles vs. Turkmen integration attempts), competing local interests (especially in Kirkuk), and divergent external alignments often kept them apart or placed them in opposition, despite facing similar challenges from the central states.⁶

IV. Contemporary Dynamics and Flashpoints (Late 20th Century - Present)

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed continued and often intensified struggles for rights, recognition, and resources involving Kurdish and Turkmen communities, set against a backdrop of regional wars, state collapse, external interventions, and shifting political landscapes in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

A. Iraq

The situation in Iraq, particularly concerning the multi-ethnic province of Kirkuk, remains a microcosm of the complex interplay between Kurdish and Turkmen aspirations, historical

grievances, resource competition, and external manipulation.

1. The Kirkuk Nexus: Contested Identity, Resources, and Power

Kirkuk stands as the most potent symbol and flashpoint in Iraqi Kurdish-Turkmen relations. Its significance stems from deeply rooted, competing historical narratives and its immense oil wealth.

- **Competing Claims:** Kurdish political discourse frequently refers to Kirkuk as the "Jerusalem of Kurdistan," emphasizing its historical and cultural centrality to Kurdish identity.⁶ They often point to historical Kurdish presence and the Kurdish majority in the *governorate* according to the 1957 census as justification for its inclusion in the Kurdistan Region.¹⁸ Conversely, Iraqi Turkmen regard Kirkuk as their historical and cultural capital, highlighting their dominance in the city during the Ottoman era and their plurality within the *city* itself in the 1957 census.¹⁴ Arab communities also assert significant historical ties and demographic weight, further bolstered by decades of Ba'athist settlement policies.²⁷
- **Arabization and its Aftermath:** The Ba'ath regime's systematic Arabization campaigns from the 1960s to 2003 forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Turkmen, replacing them with Arab settlers and altering administrative boundaries to ensure Arab majorities.¹⁴ Following the US-led invasion in 2003, a significant number of displaced Kurds returned to Kirkuk.³⁷ Efforts were made to reverse the effects of Arabization, but these sometimes led to accusations of "Kurdification," involving the alleged intimidation or forced displacement of Arab residents who had settled during the Ba'ath era.⁶
- **Shifting Control Post-2003:** The fall of Saddam Hussein created a power vacuum in Kirkuk. Kurdish Peshmerga forces gradually increased their influence, culminating in de facto control of the city and surrounding areas between 2014 and 2017 after the Iraqi army retreated in the face of the ISIS offensive.¹⁴ This period saw heightened Kurdish political dominance but was also marked by reports of marginalization, abduction, and displacement targeting Arab and Turkmen communities by Kurdish forces.⁹
- **The 2017 Referendum Crisis:** The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) decision to include Kirkuk in its controversial independence referendum in September 2017 provoked a decisive response from Baghdad. In October 2017, Iraqi federal forces, alongside elements of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU/Hashd al-Shaabi), which included Shia Turkmen militias backed by Iran, swiftly retook control of Kirkuk and other disputed territories.²⁷ This resulted in the withdrawal of Peshmerga forces, the displacement of tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians fearing reprisals, and a significant shift in the balance of power back towards federal authorities, often perceived locally as empowering Arab and Turkmen elements aligned with Baghdad or Tehran at the expense of the Kurds.²⁷ Since 2017, concerns about renewed Arabization policies under federal control have been frequently raised by Kurdish and Turkmen groups opposed to Baghdad's allies.²⁷
- **Article 140 Stalemate:** The Iraqi Constitution's Article 140 outlines a three-stage process (normalization, census, referendum) to determine the final status of Kirkuk and

other disputed territories.⁴⁶ However, due to political deadlock and resistance from various factions, this mechanism has never been fully implemented.⁴⁵ The failure to resolve the status of these territories remains a major source of instability and tension.⁵⁰ Ongoing disputes over land ownership, stemming from Ba'ath-era confiscations and complicated by post-2003 returns and counter-claims, continue to trigger localized clashes, particularly between Kurdish farmers seeking restitution and Arab settlers or state security forces.⁴⁸

- **The Role of Oil:** Kirkuk sits atop some of Iraq's largest oil fields.⁵² Control over these reserves and the associated revenue is a critical dimension of the conflict, fueling competition between the KRG and the federal government in Baghdad, and adding significant economic stakes to the ethno-political struggle for dominance in the province.¹⁴

Table 2: Kirkuk Governorate Provincial Election Results (December 2023)

| Alliance/Party | Affiliation/Main Group | Votes (approx.) | Seats Won | Key Sources |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------|
| Kirkuk is Our Strength and Will Alliance | PUK (Kurdish) | 157,000 | 5 | ⁴⁷ |
| Arab Alliance | Arab | 102,000 | 3 | ⁴⁷ |
| Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) | Turkmen (Turkey-backed) | 75,000 | 2 | ⁴⁷ |
| Leadership (Qiyada) Alliance | Arab (Sunni) | 61,000 | 2 | ⁴⁷ |
| Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) | KDP (Kurdish) | 52,000 | 2 | ⁴⁷ |
| Al-Uruba (Arabism) Alliance | Arab | 47,000 | 1 | ⁴⁷ |
| Babylon Movement | Christian (Quota) | - | 1 | ⁴⁷ |
| Total Seats | | | 16 | |

Note: Vote counts are approximate. Alliances represent coalitions of parties. The results highlight the fragmentation of political power among Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen blocs, with internal divisions also present within each group.

2. Political Landscape & Inter-Group Relations

The political environment in Kirkuk and northern Iraq is characterized by complex and often antagonistic relationships, both between and within ethnic groups.

- **KRG-Turkmen Relations:** Relations between the KRG (particularly the KDP) and the

main Iraqi Turkmen political body, the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF), are generally fraught with tension.⁹ The ITF, which receives significant political support from Turkey, staunchly opposes Kurdish control over Kirkuk and views KRG policies as expansionist.¹⁴ Historically, Kurdish parties (KDP and PUK) have sought to marginalize the ITF, sometimes by promoting rival Turkmen factions perceived as more amenable to Kurdish interests.⁹ Incidents of harassment and clashes involving ITF activists and Kurdish security forces were reported, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁹ Despite this overarching antagonism, some Turkmen politicians and voters do participate within the KRG's political system, often finding representation through Kurdish party lists or smaller allied parties, reflecting the complex reality of coexistence and political calculation.⁹

- **Intra-Turkmen Divisions:** The Turkmen community itself is far from monolithic. Deep political divisions exist between the predominantly Sunni, Turkey-aligned ITF and other Turkmen factions, including Shia Turkmen groups often aligned with powerful Shia parties in Baghdad and backed by Iran.¹⁷ Religious divisions between the Sunni and Shia Turkmen communities further complicate efforts towards unified political action.¹² This internal fragmentation significantly weakens the Turkmen community's collective bargaining power and makes them susceptible to manipulation by larger Iraqi factions and external powers.¹²
- **Intra-Kurdish Divisions (KDP vs. PUK):** The long-standing rivalry between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), dominant in Erbil and Duhok, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), influential in Sulaimani and parts of Kirkuk, profoundly impacts the political dynamics of Kirkuk.¹⁸ The two parties often compete fiercely for influence in the province, seeking alliances with different Arab and Turkmen factions to bolster their positions.⁴⁶ Their differing relationships with Baghdad, Turkey, and Iran also play out in Kirkuk, affecting governance and stability.³³
- **Impact of ISIS:** The rise of ISIS in 2014 had a devastating impact on all communities in northern Iraq. However, Iraqi Turkmen were subjected to specific atrocities, including mass killings, abductions, systematic rape, sexual slavery, and the targeted destruction of their cultural and religious heritage, which have been recognized by some as constituting genocide.²⁹ While the fight against ISIS necessitated some level of cooperation between Peshmerga, Iraqi forces, and local militias, it also created opportunities for territorial shifts. The KRG's Peshmerga forces filled the vacuum left by the retreating Iraqi army in 2014, establishing control over Kirkuk until 2017.¹⁴ In the post-ISIS environment, security remains precarious, with various armed actors, including PMU factions (some comprising Turkmen), wielding significant influence, particularly in areas retaken from the extremist group.³²

3. Current Situation (2024-2025)

The political situation in Kirkuk remains highly volatile and unresolved following the December 2023 provincial elections.

- **Governance Deadlock and Contested Leadership:** The elections failed to produce a

clear majority or consensus, leading to a prolonged deadlock over the formation of a local government.⁴⁷ Intense negotiations and political maneuvering ensued over the key positions of governor and provincial council speaker.⁴⁴ In August 2024, a controversial session held in Baghdad, attended by the PUK, some Arab factions, and the Christian quota representative (totaling 9 out of 16 council members), elected a PUK member, Rebwar Taha, as governor.¹⁸ This meeting was boycotted by the KDP, the ITF, and the main Sunni Arab alliance, who deemed the session illegal and continue to challenge its legitimacy, effectively paralyzing the provincial council.¹⁸

- **Rotating Governorship Proposal:** As a potential solution to the impasse, the ITF, supported by the KDP and some Arab factions, has advocated for a system where the governorship rotates between Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen representatives every two years.⁴⁴ This proposal has also received endorsement from Turkish officials.⁴⁴ However, the PUK, currently holding the governorship, and its allies have resisted this arrangement.¹⁸
- **Census Controversy (November 2024):** Plans by the Iraqi federal government to conduct the first national census since 1997 in November 2024 sparked significant controversy and protests in Kirkuk.³⁹ Arab and Turkmen political groups alleged that the process was being manipulated through the influx of families (presumably Kurds) from outside the province to artificially inflate the Kurdish population figures. They called for the census to be suspended in Kirkuk due to its "sensitive nature".⁵² The methodology involved assigning enumerators based on the ethnicity of the area (Kurds in Kurdish areas, etc.), potentially reinforcing segregation rather than providing an objective count.⁵²
- **Ongoing Land Disputes:** Clashes related to land ownership continue to erupt, particularly in agricultural areas affected by historical Arabization policies.⁴⁸ Despite the passage of a property restitution law in early 2024, aimed at returning confiscated land to original Kurdish and Turkmen owners, implementation has been fraught with difficulty. Incidents occurred where Iraqi army units physically prevented Kurdish farmers from accessing or cultivating lands they claimed under the new law, leading to confrontations and condemnation.⁴⁹
- **Persistent External Influence:** Kirkuk remains a key arena for regional power competition. Turkey maintains close contact with the ITF and Sunni Arab politicians, actively engaging on issues related to Kirkuk's governance and Turkmen rights.⁴⁴ Iran continues to exert considerable influence through its allies among Shia political parties (including Shia Turkmen factions) and the significant presence of PMU militias in and around the province.³² This external involvement often fuels internal divisions and hinders local solutions. The fragmentation within Kirkuk is thus not merely an internal affair but is actively exploited by regional powers pursuing their own strategic interests.³²

B. Syria

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, dramatically altered the situation for both Kurds and Turkmen, leading to new forms of political organization, armed conflict, and external intervention.

1. Impact of the Civil War

- **Turkmen Opposition Role:** The majority of Syrian Turkmen communities aligned themselves with the opposition against the Assad regime early in the conflict.¹³ Numerous armed brigades with predominantly Turkmen fighters were formed, such as the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Abdulhamid Han Brigade, and others concentrated in northern Syria, particularly in Aleppo and Latakia provinces.¹³ These groups often espouse strong Turkish nationalist ideologies, display Ottoman symbols, receive political and military support from Turkey, and many eventually integrated into the broader Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).¹³
- **Rise of Kurdish Autonomy (AANES/Rojava):** In the vacuum created by the receding power of the Assad regime in northern Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), ideologically linked to the PKK, established a de facto autonomous administration in 2012, eventually evolving into the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), often referred to as Rojava.⁶ The PYD's armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), formed the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic military coalition created in 2015 with significant backing from the United States to combat ISIS.⁵⁹
- **SDF Composition:** While Kurdish fighters form the core leadership and largest component of the SDF, the alliance deliberately incorporated fighters from other ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs (who constitute a large portion, especially in areas like Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor), Assyrians/Syriacs, and smaller numbers of Armenians, Chechens, and Turkmen.⁶⁰ Groups like the Seljuk Brigade represent Turkmen participation within the SDF framework.
- **Kurdish-Turkmen Relations in Syria:** The relationship in the Syrian context became largely defined by the overarching conflict between Turkey and the PYD/SDF. Turkish-backed Turkmen brigades within the SNA frequently clash with the SDF along front lines in northern Syria.⁵⁸ Turkey views the SDF as indistinguishable from the PKK, labeling it a terrorist organization and an existential threat to its national security.⁶¹ Consequently, Turkmen groups aligned with Ankara adopt this hostile stance.¹³ However, the situation is not entirely monolithic. Some Turkmen communities reside within AANES-controlled territories, and some Turkmen individuals and units have chosen to align with the SDF.⁶⁰ This suggests that local dynamics, perceived security guarantees, or ideological disagreements with Turkish-backed groups can lead some Turkmen to coexist or cooperate with the Kurdish-led administration. Nevertheless, reports have also surfaced alleging displacement or mistreatment of Turkmen civilians by YPG forces in certain contested areas. The relationship is therefore complex, heavily influenced by the Turkey-PKK/SDF conflict nexus, rather than solely an intrinsic Turkmen-Kurdish dynamic within Syria.¹³
- **Turkish Interventions:** Viewing the consolidation of Kurdish control along its southern

border as unacceptable, Turkey launched a series of major military interventions into northern Syria starting in 2016: Operation Euphrates Shield (2016-17), Operation Olive Branch (2018, capturing Afrin), and Operation Peace Spring (2019).³⁶ These operations aimed to push SDF forces away from the border, disrupt the contiguity of AANES territory, and establish buffer zones controlled by the Turkish military and its SNA proxies, which include numerous Turkmen brigades.¹³ These occupied zones have faced criticism regarding human rights abuses and demographic changes.

2. Kurdish Autonomy and Turkmen Perspectives

- **AANES Governance Model:** The AANES project is based on the political philosophy of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, known as "Democratic Confederalism" or "Democratic Nation".⁴⁰ It advocates for radical decentralization, direct democracy through local communes and councils, multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistence, ecological principles, and places a strong emphasis on gender equality (e.g., establishing co-presidency systems and women's rights far exceeding those in surrounding areas).⁴⁰ The administration has consciously tried to move beyond the ethnically Kurdish label of "Rojava" to emphasize its multi-ethnic character, particularly as it expanded into Arab-majority areas.⁴⁰ It operates its own security forces (Asayish police, SDF military) and judicial system, which has abolished the death penalty but faced criticism regarding due process.⁴⁰
- **Turkmen Views on Autonomy:** Direct perspectives from Turkmen living within AANES or aligned with the SDF are scarce in the provided materials. However, it can be inferred that views are likely polarized. Turkmen affiliated with the SNA and backed by Turkey vehemently oppose the AANES/SDF, viewing it through Ankara's lens as a PKK-driven entity and a security threat.¹³ Their participation in Turkish operations against the SDF underscores this opposition. For Turkmen residing within AANES territories, their perspective might depend on their specific experiences with the administration compared to the alternatives (Assad regime, ISIS, or SNA rule). The AANES's official commitment to multi-ethnic inclusion and minority rights⁴⁰ might appeal to some, while others may remain wary of Kurdish dominance or maintain ties to Turkey. The lack of unified Turkmen representation or voice regarding the AANES project makes it difficult to generalize their perspective.

3. Current Situation (2024-2025)

The dramatic collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 introduced significant uncertainty and realignment in Syria.

- **Post-Assad Transition:** Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate, led the opposition offensive that ousted Assad and established an interim government in Damascus, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa.⁶¹ This created a new, complex political landscape.
- **SDF-Damascus Agreement (March 2025):** After months of negotiations, reportedly facilitated by the US, SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloun Abdi and interim Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa signed a landmark agreement on March 10, 2025.⁶⁰ This agreement outlines the integration of the SDF into the new Syrian state's institutions, including the national military. Committees were formed to implement the deal, aiming to begin in

early April 2025.⁶⁰ The agreement was publicly welcomed by the US and EU.⁶² However, significant challenges remain, including reconciling the SDF's desire for continued local command and decentralization with the interim government's likely preference for centralization, and navigating Turkey's deep-seated opposition to the SDF's core components.⁶²

- **Turkish Policy Adjustment:** Turkey initially reacted cautiously to the SDF-Damascus deal, expressing concerns about future threats while monitoring implementation closely.⁶⁴ Ankara has engaged significantly with the new HTS-led government in Damascus, viewing it as a potential partner for stabilizing Syria, facilitating the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey, and, crucially, containing or dismantling the SDF/PKK structure in the northeast.⁶¹ Turkey continues to insist that YPG/PKK elements must be eliminated or fully integrated and disarmed.⁶¹ While offering military training support to the new Syrian army ⁶⁶, Turkey also continues its own military operations and pressure against SDF-held areas.⁵⁸ There are also reports of "serious efforts" involving international actors to broker a ceasefire between Turkey and the SDF.⁶³
- **Ongoing Conflict:** Despite the political shifts, fighting has continued between the SDF and Turkish/SNA forces. Turkey and the SNA launched "Operation Dawn of Freedom" starting in late November 2024, aiming to capture areas like Manbij and Tel Rifaat, with clashes reported near Kobani as well, continuing into 2025.⁵⁸ The future stability of northern Syria remains precarious, dependent on the successful implementation of the SDF integration agreement and the evolution of Turkey's posture.

C. Turkey

The domestic situation in Turkey regarding its own Kurdish population remains a critical factor influencing its regional policies and, consequently, its relationship with both Kurds and Turkmen in neighboring countries.

1. The Enduring Kurdish Question

The conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish groups, primarily the PKK, has persisted for four decades.³⁰ State policies have involved large-scale military operations, significant restrictions on Kurdish political expression and cultural rights, the banning of pro-Kurdish political parties, and the routine replacement of democratically elected Kurdish mayors with state-appointed trustees, often justified under broad anti-terrorism legislation.²⁶ Despite this sustained pressure, Kurdish political movements have endured, adapting their demands over time from outright independence to calls for greater cultural rights, democratic reforms, and varying degrees of autonomy or decentralization within Turkey.³⁰

2. Recent Peace Overtures (2024-2025)

Following years of escalated conflict after the collapse of the 2013-2015 peace process, signs of a renewed effort towards dialogue emerged in late 2024 and early 2025.³⁶

- **Ocalan's Role:** The process centered around renewed engagement between the Turkish government and the imprisoned founder of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, facilitated through visits by delegations from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy

Party (DEM Party).⁶⁸

- **Call for Disarmament:** In late February 2025, Ocalan issued a historic call for the PKK to end its armed struggle and disarm.³⁶
- **PKK Ceasefire:** Following Ocalan's call, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire on March 1, 2025.³⁶
- **Motivations and Context:** The motivations behind this renewed push appear complex. For President Erdoğan's government, it might represent a political maneuver to regain initiative, potentially consolidate power, or respond to shifting regional dynamics (like the changes in Syria).⁶⁹ The surprising acquiescence of Erdoğan's ultra-nationalist coalition partner, the MHP, suggested a significant shift or a coordinated strategy.⁶⁹ For the Kurdish movement, the burden of decades of armed conflict, increasing state repression limiting political action, and the effectiveness of Turkish military technology (especially drones) likely contributed to a willingness to explore a political solution.⁶⁹ Ending the armed conflict could remove the state's primary pretext for suppressing peaceful Kurdish political activity.⁶⁹
- **Challenges and Skepticism:** Despite the positive steps, significant hurdles and deep mistrust remain. Previous peace processes collapsed acrimoniously.⁶⁹ There is currently no clear, publicly articulated roadmap for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of PKK fighters.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the Turkish military has continued its cross-border operations against alleged PKK targets in Iraq and SDF positions in Syria even amidst the peace talks, raising questions about the government's commitment.⁶⁷

3. Implications for Turkmen

The trajectory of the Kurdish issue within Turkey has direct implications for Turkish foreign policy and its engagement with Turkmen communities abroad.

- **Strategic Calculation:** Turkey's support for Iraqi and Syrian Turkmen groups has often been framed, at least partially, as a counterweight to Kurdish influence (PKK/KRG/SDF) in those countries.¹⁴ Turkmen communities are seen as strategic allies in areas contested with Kurdish groups.
- **Potential Shift:** A successful and lasting peace settlement between Turkey and the PKK could fundamentally alter Ankara's regional threat perception. If the perceived threat from Kurdish groups diminishes significantly, Turkey's strategic reliance on Turkmen proxies as anti-Kurdish assets might decrease.⁶⁹ This could lead to a recalibration of Turkish support for groups like the ITF or Turkmen brigades in the SNA, potentially changing their political weight and leverage in Iraq and Syria. Conversely, a collapse of the peace process could lead to intensified conflict and potentially increased Turkish reliance on Turkmen allies in its regional strategy. The outcome of Turkey's internal Kurdish question is therefore intrinsically linked to the future political positioning and security of Turkmen communities in neighboring states.

The recent developments in Turkey and Syria – the peace overtures and the SDF integration talks – represent potentially pivotal moments.³⁶ However, their success is far from guaranteed, depending heavily on navigating decades of accumulated mistrust, the intricate details of

implementation (DDR, decentralization), and the volatile interplay of domestic politics within Turkey and Syria with the broader regional power dynamics involving Iran, the US, and Russia.⁶⁴ Failure in either process risks not only a return to previous levels of violence but potentially a more dangerous escalation across multiple fronts.

V. The Role of External Powers

The relationship between Kurds and Turkmen does not exist in a vacuum but is profoundly influenced by the strategic interests and interventions of regional and international powers. Turkey, Iran, the United States, and Russia have all played significant roles in shaping the dynamics between and within these communities, often using them as proxies or factoring them into larger geopolitical calculations.

A. Turkey

Turkey's involvement is arguably the most direct and impactful, driven by national security concerns, historical ties, and regional ambitions.

- **Strategic Imperatives:** Ankara's primary concerns include preventing the consolidation of autonomous Kurdish entities linked to the PKK along its southern border (particularly the SDF/YPG in Syria), ensuring the security of its borders, projecting influence in former Ottoman territories, managing the large Syrian refugee population within Turkey, protecting perceived rights and interests of Turkmen communities ("kin state" policy), and securing vital economic interests, such as the flow of Iraqi oil through the pipeline to its Ceyhan port.⁴⁶
- **Policy Towards Turkmen:** Turkey views Iraqi and Syrian Turkmen as ethnic kin and important strategic partners.⁴⁶ It provides substantial political backing, financial aid, and, in Syria, military support to Turkmen organizations like the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) and various Turkmen brigades within the Syrian National Army (SNA).¹³ Ankara actively lobbies for Turkmen political representation, particularly in Kirkuk, and often frames its involvement as protecting Turkmen rights.⁴⁴ The Turkmen issue also serves as a popular cause for nationalist mobilization within Turkish domestic politics.⁴⁶
- **Policy Towards Kurds:** Turkey's policy is sharply bifurcated. It designates the PKK and its alleged affiliates (YPG/SDF) as terrorist organizations and existential threats, engaging in extensive military campaigns against them within Turkey and conducting cross-border operations in Iraq and Syria.³⁶ Simultaneously, Ankara maintains a pragmatic, albeit often strained, relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, particularly the KDP, based on shared economic interests (oil trade) and a common adversary in the PKK.³³ Relations with the PUK, however, are generally hostile, with Turkey accusing the Sulaimani-based party of actively supporting the PKK, leading to measures like flight bans.³³ The renewed peace talks initiated in early 2025 represent a potential, though uncertain, shift away from a purely militaristic approach towards the PKK, but Ankara's fundamental opposition to the SDF's current structure in Syria remains firm.³⁶

- **Post-Assad Syria Policy:** Following the fall of the Assad regime, Turkey has quickly engaged with the new HTS-led transitional government in Damascus.⁶⁵ Ankara sees an opportunity to achieve key objectives: stabilizing Syria to prevent further refugee flows and facilitate returns, consolidating the influence of its SNA proxies, and working with the new authorities to dismantle or neutralize the SDF/YPG presence in the northeast.⁶¹ Turkey has offered military training assistance to the new Syrian army and appears poised to play a major role in Syria's reconstruction and political future.⁶⁶

B. Iran

Iran exerts significant influence, particularly in Iraq, driven by its goals of projecting power, supporting Shia allies, countering US and Israeli presence, and competing with Turkey for regional hegemony.

- **Strategic Goals:** Tehran seeks to maintain its "axis of resistance" and land corridor connecting Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. It aims to bolster Shia political power in Iraq, counter Sunni influence (including Turkish influence), and limit Kurdish autonomy aspirations that could inspire its own Kurdish population.³²
- **Role in Iraq:** Iran wields considerable influence over the Iraqi central government through its close ties with major Shia political parties and armed groups within the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU/Hashd al-Shaabi) framework.³² In Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran traditionally supports the PUK as a counterbalance to the KDP, which is perceived as closer to Turkey and the West.³³ Iran's influence is strongly felt in Kirkuk through its backing of Shia Turkmen factions and PMU units stationed in the province, which played a key role in the 2017 takeover.³² Recent decisions by Iraq's Federal Supreme Court, perceived by some as influenced by Iran-backed parties, have aimed to curtail the KRG's autonomy and potentially shift power dynamics within Kurdistan, including regarding minority representation quotas.³³
- **Impact on Kurdish-Turkmen Relations:** Iran's strategy of backing specific factions – notably the PUK among Kurds and Shia militias (including some Turkmen units) – actively exacerbates internal divisions within both communities.³² Kirkuk, in particular, serves as an arena where the Iran-Turkey rivalry plays out through local proxies, making genuine reconciliation between Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen groups exceedingly difficult as local disputes become entangled in regional power struggles.³³

C. United States

US policy in the region is primarily driven by counter-terrorism goals, efforts to ensure regional stability, managing complex alliances, and containing Iranian influence.

- **Strategic Objectives:** The core focus has been the defeat of ISIS, preventing its resurgence, maintaining stability in Iraq and Syria, supporting partners like the KRG and SDF, balancing the critical but often challenging relationship with NATO ally Turkey, and countering Iran's regional activities.⁵⁹
- **Policy Towards Kurds:** The US developed a close military partnership with the Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF), whose Kurdish YPG component proved the most effective ground force against ISIS in Syria.⁶ This partnership involved providing arms, training, funding, and crucial air support.⁵⁹ However, this direct support for the YPG created major friction with Turkey, which views the group as inseparable from the PKK.³⁴ In Iraq, the US maintains a long-standing partnership with the KRG, viewing it as a key ally for stability and counter-terrorism, providing assistance to the Peshmerga forces.⁵⁹ Regarding disputed territories like Kirkuk, the US generally supports dialogue and the implementation of the Iraqi constitution (Article 140) but has avoided direct intervention in the complex ethnic power struggles.⁴⁷ The US policy faces an inherent contradiction: its reliance on the SDF in Syria directly clashes with the security concerns of its NATO ally, Turkey, forcing Washington into a difficult balancing act that often leaves both partners dissatisfied.⁵⁹

- **Policy Towards Turkmen:** There is no evidence of a distinct US policy specifically targeting Iraqi or Syrian Turkmen. Their situation is generally addressed within the broader context of US policy towards Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The strong US partnership with the SDF in Syria likely marginalizes Turkish-backed Turkmen opposition groups from direct US engagement.
- **Current Posture (2024-2025):** The US actively supported the negotiations leading to the March 2025 agreement between the SDF and the new Syrian interim government, viewing integration as key to stabilizing northeastern Syria.⁶² It continues to maintain a military presence in northeastern Syria to advise and assist the SDF against ISIS, although discussions about potential troop reductions have occurred.⁶³ The US seeks to manage the transition in Syria while navigating Turkish security concerns and preventing a resurgence of instability or ISIS.⁵⁹

D. Russia

Russia's involvement, particularly its military intervention in Syria from 2015, significantly altered the regional balance, primarily aimed at preserving its influence and countering US objectives.

- **Strategic Aims:** Moscow sought to prop up its long-time ally, the Assad regime, maintain its strategic military bases (Tartus naval facility, Khmeimim airbase), assert itself as a major power broker in the Middle East, push back against US influence, and manage complex relationships with regional players like Turkey and Iran.³⁴
- **Role in Syria:** Russia's airpower and ground support were decisive in preventing the collapse of the Assad regime.⁷² While its primary alliance was with Damascus, Russia engaged pragmatically with the Syrian Kurds (SDF/YPG). It sometimes acted as a mediator or buffer between the SDF and Turkish forces, allowed the opening of an unofficial Kurdish representative office in Moscow, and sought Kurdish cooperation in ceasefire arrangements, while ultimately prioritizing the territorial integrity of the Syrian state under Assad.⁷³ Following the fall of Assad in late 2024, Russia's position in Syria has been significantly weakened, losing its main state ally and potentially requiring

Turkish cooperation for troop redeployments or withdrawals.³⁴

- **Impact on Kurdish-Turkmen Relations:** Russia's impact has been largely indirect. Its support for the Assad regime affected all opposition groups, including Turkmen brigades. Its complex maneuvering between the SDF and Turkey influenced the dynamics on the ground in northern Syria.⁷³ With its diminished leverage post-Assad, Russia's direct ability to shape Kurdish-Turkmen interactions is likely reduced.³⁴

The interventions and competing interests of these external powers demonstrate how local Kurdish-Turkmen relations are deeply intertwined with regional geopolitics. Conflicts like the one in Kirkuk become proxy battlegrounds where Turkey and Iran leverage internal Iraqi divisions (KDP vs. PUK, ITF vs. Shia Turkmen) to advance their respective interests.³² Similarly, the US partnership with the SDF in Syria creates unavoidable friction with Turkey, impacting Ankara's policies towards Kurds and its support for Turkmen opposition groups.⁵⁹ The recent shifts – the fall of Assad and the potential Turkey-PKK peace process – have the potential to significantly reconfigure these external dynamics and, consequently, the context for Kurdish-Turkmen relations across the region.³⁴ A potential decrease in the Turkey-PKK conflict could lessen Ankara's perceived need for Turkmen groups solely as anti-Kurdish proxies, possibly altering their strategic value and necessitating new political alignments for these communities.

VI. Conclusion: Patterns, Drivers, and Future Prospects

The relationship between Kurdish and Turkmen peoples across Turkey, Iraq, and Syria is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon shaped by centuries of interaction within shifting political structures. It is a relationship marked by periods of pragmatic coexistence and alliance, but more frequently characterized by tension, competition, and conflict, often fueled or exacerbated by state policies and external interference.

A. Synthesis of Historical Patterns

Several recurring patterns emerge from the historical analysis:

1. **Coexistence and Conflict:** Kurds and Turkmen have shared overlapping territories for centuries, leading to inevitable interaction. While peaceful coexistence has occurred, competition over resources (pastureland, agricultural land, water, and later, oil, especially in Kirkuk), demographic shifts, and struggles for political influence have frequently led to friction and violence.⁴
2. **State Instrumentalization:** From the Ottomans using Kurds against Safavids or settling Turkmen as buffers, to modern states employing policies of assimilation, suppression, or co-option, both groups have often been treated as instruments by ruling powers to achieve broader strategic goals, rather than as communities with inherent rights.¹⁴
3. **Impact of Nationalism:** The rise of exclusive Turkish and Arab nationalism in the 20th century proved particularly detrimental, leading to the denial of distinct Kurdish and Turkmen identities, suppression of languages and cultures, and violent crackdowns on

resistance movements. This fueled the development of modern Kurdish nationalism as a major political force, while Turkmen political identity often remained more localized or tied to Turkish patronage.⁵

4. **Internal Fragmentation:** Both Kurdish and Turkmen societies exhibit significant internal diversity along political, tribal, linguistic, and sectarian lines. This fragmentation has often prevented the formation of unified fronts, weakened their collective bargaining power, and made them vulnerable to divide-and-rule tactics by states and external powers.¹⁷

B. Analysis of Key Drivers

The contemporary dynamics of Kurdish-Turkmen relations are propelled by several interconnected factors:

1. **Identity Politics and Territorial Claims:** Competing ethno-national narratives and aspirations remain potent drivers, particularly in contested territories. The struggle over the identity and control of Kirkuk exemplifies this, with Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs all invoking historical rights and demographic arguments.⁶ Concepts like "Kurdistan" and "Turkmeneli" represent overlapping and often conflicting territorial visions.
2. **State Policies and Governance:** The actions of central governments in Ankara, Baghdad, and Damascus (both past and present) continue to be paramount. Policies relating to minority rights, decentralization, security control, resource distribution, and responses to political dissent fundamentally shape the environment in which Kurdish-Turkmen relations unfold.⁵ Lack of inclusive governance fuels grievances and conflict.
3. **Resource Competition:** Control over valuable natural resources, most notably the vast oil reserves beneath Kirkuk, adds a powerful economic dimension to political and ethnic rivalries, raising the stakes significantly.¹⁴
4. **Geopolitics and External Interference:** The strategic interests and interventions of regional powers, especially Turkey and Iran, and to a lesser extent the US and Russia, profoundly influence local dynamics. These powers often support proxy factions, exploit internal divisions, and pursue agendas that override local concerns, making conflicts harder to resolve.³²

C. Multi-layered Insights and Implications

The analysis reveals several crucial underlying realities. Firstly, the Kurdish-Turkmen relationship is rarely a simple bilateral dynamic. It is deeply embedded within, and often subordinate to, larger power struggles – intra-state conflicts (e.g., KDP vs. PUK in Iraq), state-minority conflicts (e.g., Turkey vs. PKK), and regional rivalries (e.g., Turkey vs. Iran). Local grievances and interactions are consistently amplified, manipulated, or overshadowed by these broader forces.

Secondly, the unresolved status of Kirkuk remains a critical fault line with the potential to destabilize not only Iraq but the wider region. The failure to implement constitutional solutions like Article 140, coupled with the deep-seated competing claims and the constant

interference of external actors exploiting internal fragmentation, perpetuates a cycle of tension and mistrust.⁴⁵ The recent census attempt underscored the extreme sensitivity surrounding demographics and the potential for manipulation to ignite conflict.⁵² Kirkuk serves as a barometer for the health of inter-ethnic relations and federalism in Iraq.

Thirdly, the current period (2024-2025) represents a moment of significant potential flux. The transitions underway in Syria (post-Assad integration efforts) and Turkey (renewed peace overtures with the PKK) are interconnected and could fundamentally reshape the regional landscape for both Kurds and Turkmen.⁶² Success could reduce cross-border conflict and alter strategic alignments, potentially diminishing the role of Turkmen groups as Turkish proxies. Failure, however, risks renewed and possibly intensified violence across multiple interconnected arenas.

D. Analytical Conclusions and Future Prospects

The future trajectory of Kurdish-Turkmen relations hinges critically on the possibility of achieving broader political settlements within Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Sustainable improvement requires addressing the root causes of conflict, moving beyond zero-sum identity politics towards mutual recognition and accommodation.

In Iraq, resolving the Kirkuk deadlock is paramount. This likely necessitates a combination of factors: genuine implementation of constitutional mechanisms like Article 140 to address historical grievances and determine final status; the establishment of a functional and inclusive local governance structure, potentially involving power-sharing arrangements like the proposed (though contentious) rotating governorship⁴⁴; and a concerted effort to insulate local negotiations from the detrimental proxy politics of Turkey and Iran.⁴⁶ Without progress on these fronts, Kirkuk will remain a source of instability.

In Syria, the success of the SDF integration process and the nature of the post-Assad political order will define the future for both Kurds and Turkmen.⁶¹ An inclusive, decentralized system that respects minority rights and allows for local self-governance could foster coexistence. Conversely, a return to centralized authoritarianism, or a breakdown of the integration process leading to renewed conflict potentially involving Turkish intervention, would perpetuate insecurity and division.

In Turkey, the fate of the nascent peace process with the PKK holds regional significance.⁶⁷ A durable settlement that addresses Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights could dramatically reduce tensions across borders, potentially leading to a normalization of relations between Ankara and Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq, and altering Turkey's strategic calculations regarding Turkmen communities. Failure, however, risks reinforcing hardline policies and continued cross-border conflict.

Ultimately, fostering positive and stable relations between Kurdish and Turkmen communities requires a fundamental shift away from policies of denial, suppression, and manipulation towards frameworks that guarantee political representation, security, cultural rights, and equitable economic opportunities for all groups within stable and inclusive state structures. Mitigating the negative impact of external power rivalries, while challenging, is also essential for allowing local communities the space to negotiate their own terms of coexistence.

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