The Kurdish Tapestry: Navigating Identity, Conflict, and Aspirations in the Middle East

Section I: Introduction: The Kurdish People and the Concept of Kurdistan

The Kurdish people, an ancient and resilient ethnic and linguistic group, are indigenous to a vast, mountainous territory in the heart of the Middle East, often referred to as Kurdistan.[1] Their enduring presence and complex interactions with the dominant powers and states of the region form a critical, yet often fraught, narrative in Middle Eastern history and contemporary geopolitics. This report seeks to elucidate the multifaceted relationship between the Kurds and the Middle East, examining their origins, cultural identity, the historical trajectory of their political aspirations, and their current status within the nation-states that encompass their ancestral lands: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The Kurdish story is one of remarkable cultural persistence, a continuous struggle for recognition and self-determination against a backdrop of imperial designs, colonial partitions, and the rise of modern nation-states often hostile to their distinct identity.[3]

A. Defining the Kurds: Origins, Identity, Culture, Language, and Religion

The Kurds are a distinct ethnic group whose origins are subject to scholarly debate, though their historical presence in the Middle East is undeniable.[1] They are primarily concentrated in a contiguous mountainous region where the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria converge, an area broadly known as Kurdistan, or "Land of the Kurds".[1]

Origins and Ancient Roots:

The precise prehistory of the Kurdish people remains somewhat obscure, though their ancestors are believed to have inhabited the same upland regions for many centuries, if not millennia.1 Various theories link the Kurds to ancient peoples of Mesopotamia and the Zagros highlands. Some scholars suggest connections to the Guti, a mountain tribe mentioned in Mesopotamian records from the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, or the Kardouchoi, who harried Xenophon's "Ten Thousand" near modern Zākhū, Iraq, in 401 BCE.1 However, these historical connections, including potential links to the Medes, are subjects of ongoing scholarly discussion and are not universally accepted.1 The etymology of the name "Kurd" itself is uncertain, with possible derivations from ancient terms like "Cyrtii" or the land of "Corduene".5 What is historically certain is that the ethnonym "Kurd" became clearly associated with the group by the time of their conversion to Islam in the 7th century CE.1 The

ambiguity surrounding their precise origins, often documented through the lens of external and sometimes unsympathetic sources, highlights the inherent complexities in tracing the historical narrative of a people who have long been without a state to champion their own history.5 This emphasis on deep historical roots, connecting to ancient civilizations of the region, serves not only as a point of historical inquiry but also as a foundational element of modern Kurdish identity, underpinning their claims to indigenous status and territorial belonging in the face of dominant national narratives.1

Cultural Identity:

Kurdish culture is rich and distinct, marked by unique traditions, vibrant traditional dress, and significant cultural celebrations, most notably Nowruz, the vernal equinox festival celebrated as the New Year.2 This festival, also observed by Iranians and other cultures following the Persian calendar, underscores shared ancient cultural ties while also being a distinctly Kurdish national celebration. Traditionally, the Kurdish way of life was predominantly nomadic or semi-nomadic, centered around the herding of sheep and goats across the Mesopotamian plains and the highland pastures of Turkey and Iran.1 Agriculture was, for many, a marginal activity. This pastoral lifestyle was profoundly disrupted by the imposition of rigid national borders following World War I, which impeded traditional seasonal migrations. Consequently, most Kurds were compelled to transition to settled village life, adopt farming as a primary livelihood, or seek employment in non-traditional sectors.1 This forced sedentarization had far-reaching socio-economic and political consequences, altering traditional social structures and economic patterns. Despite these transformations, a strong sense of distinct cultural identity persists, forming a cornerstone of Kurdish national consciousness and their assertion of a unique heritage separate from the Arab, Turkish, and Persian cultures that dominate the states in which they reside.

Language:

The Kurdish language, known as Kurdî (کوردی), is a member of the West Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian languages, itself part of the larger Indo-European family.1 It is closely related to Persian (Farsi) and Pashto, and is spoken by an estimated 26 to 29 million people, though figures vary.1 Kurdish is not a monolithic entity but rather a continuum of dialects, some of which exhibit limited mutual intelligibility.8 The principal dialect groups are:

- **Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish):** This is the most widely spoken dialect, with an estimated 15 to 20 million speakers across Turkey, Syria, northern Iraq, and parts of northwestern and northeastern Iran.[8] Kurmanji is predominantly written using the Hawar alphabet, a Latin-based script, particularly in Turkey and Syria.[8]
- **Sorani (Central Kurdish):** Spoken by an estimated 6 to 7 million Kurds, primarily in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Kurdistan Province of Iran.[8] Sorani is typically written using a modified Perso-Arabic script known as the Sorani alphabet.[8] It holds official status in Iraq, alongside Arabic, and is the primary language of administration and education in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).[8]
- **Southern Kurdish (Pehlewani or Xwarîn):** This group of dialects is spoken in western Iran, in provinces such as Kermanshah, Ilam, and parts of Lorestan, as well as in the Khanaqin district of eastern Iraq.[8]

- **Laki:** While often grouped with Southern Kurdish, its precise classification as a distinct dialect or a separate language remains a subject of linguistic debate, though its differences from other Southern Kurdish dialects are often considered minimal.[8]

It is also important to note the Zaza-Gorani languages, which are Northwestern Iranian languages distinct from the main Kurdish dialects. Spoken by several million ethnic Kurds, particularly Zaza in Turkey and Gorani (including Hawrami) in parts of Iraq and Iran, their speakers often identify culturally and politically as Kurds, even if their languages are not linguistically classified as Kurdish dialects.[8]

The status and use of the Kurdish language vary dramatically across the region, reflecting the political climate in each state. In Iraq, Sorani Kurdish enjoys official status.[8] In Turkey, the Kurdish language was historically subjected to severe repression, with outright bans on its public use and in education.[8] While some restrictions have eased in recent decades, allowing for limited broadcasts and elective language courses, significant limitations persist, and the use of Kurdish in official or educational capacities remains highly restricted.[13] In Iran, Kurdish is used in some local media and publications, but it is not a language of instruction in public schools.[8] In Syria, the Kurdish language experienced a significant revival in areas under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), where it was introduced into the education system; however, its future status under the new Syrian transitional government remains uncertain.[8] The persistent struggles for linguistic rights, particularly the right to mother-tongue education, underscore the centrality of language not merely for cultural preservation but as a potent symbol of Kurdish identity and a fundamental demand for political recognition. State policies regarding the Kurdish language often serve as a direct barometer of their broader approach to Kurdish rights and autonomy.

Religion:

The majority of Kurds are adherents of Sunni Islam, predominantly following the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence.1 Within the Sunni Kurdish population, Sufism and various mystical orders also have a significant presence and historical importance.1

Beyond Sunni Islam, there is notable religious diversity among Kurds. Significant communities of Shia Muslims exist, particularly in Iran, where Feyli Kurds in the provinces of Kermanshah and Ilam, and the Kurds of Khorasan in the northeast, are predominantly Shia.4

Yarsanism, also known as Ahl-e Haqq ("People of Truth"), is an indigenous syncretic faith found among Kurds, particularly in western Iran and parts of Iraqi Kurdistan.10 The Kaka'i community in Iraqi Kurdistan is closely associated with or considered a branch of Yarsanism.10

Historically, there were also Kurdish Jewish communities, and smaller numbers of Kurds adhere to Christianity and other beliefs.18 This religious diversity, especially the Sunni-Shia split within the Kurdish population of Iran, has at times influenced their relationship with the Iranian state, where Shia Islam is the official religion. While religious identity can sometimes offer avenues for integration, it has also been a factor in sectarian dynamics and state policies towards Kurdish communities.

The confluence of a distinct language, a rich cultural heritage, a shared historical narrative often marked by resilience in the face of adversity, and a strong attachment to their ancestral lands, despite internal linguistic and religious diversities, has forged a powerful collective

Kurdish identity. This identity is central to their enduring quest for recognition and self-determination in the complex political landscape of the Middle East.

B. The Geographical and Demographical Landscape of Kurdistan

The term "Kurdistan," literally meaning "Land of the Kurds," refers to a broadly contiguous, predominantly mountainous geo-cultural region in the Middle East that the Kurdish people claim as their ancestral homeland.[1] While not a politically recognized sovereign state, Kurdistan encompasses significant portions of southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria, with smaller Kurdish communities in Armenia and Azerbaijan.[1]

Geographical Significance and Extent:

"Great Kurdistan," as conceptualized by Kurdish nationalists and some scholars, is strategically positioned in southwestern Asia, acting as a geographical nexus connecting the Arabian, Eurasian, and Iranian plateaus.27 This location has historically rendered the region a zone of interaction, contestation, and strategic importance for various empires and modern states. The terrain is characterized by rugged mountain ranges, notably the Taurus Mountains in Anatolia and the Zagros Mountains in Iran and Iraq.1 The total area of this envisioned "Great Kurdistan" is estimated to be approximately 409,650 square kilometers.27 Its dimensions are roughly 1000 to 1300 kilometers from north to south and varying from 250 to 750 kilometers from east to west.27

Partition and Modern Borders:

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and subsequent treaties, particularly the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the traditional Kurdish homeland was formally divided among four newly established or reconfigured nation-states 4:

- **Turkey (North Kurdistan):** This constitutes the largest portion, estimated at 194,400 km², or approximately 47.50% of the total area of Great Kurdistan.[27]
- **Iran (East Kurdistan):** This part covers an estimated 124,950 km², or about 30.50%.[27] Iran officially recognizes a province named Kordestān.[1]
- **Iraq (South Kurdistan):** This segment is estimated at 72,000 km², representing around 17.50%.[27] Within Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) enjoys formal autonomy, with its officially recognized area stated as 40,643 km².[1]
- **Syria (West Kurdistan):** This is the smallest portion, estimated at 18,300 km², or roughly 4.50%.[27]

The precise demarcation of "Great Kurdistan's" boundaries remains a politically charged and sensitive issue due to this historical partition and the differing interpretations of historical Kurdish settlement patterns.[27] The mountainous and often remote nature of these borderlands has historically served as both a refuge for Kurdish culture and a factor contributing to their political fragmentation and economic marginalization by central governments.[3] While providing a degree of natural defense, these imposed borders have also severed traditional migratory routes and kinship ties, hindering unified Kurdish political development.

Population Estimates:

Estimating the total Kurdish population is fraught with challenges due to varying criteria for

ethnicity, language, and religion, as well as the potential for political manipulation of census data by states.1 Figures range widely, from a conservative 20 million 30 to upwards of 30 million 2, with some estimates from the mid-2010s suggesting between 36 and 46 million.1 Distribution by country (approximate):

- **Turkey:** Kurds constitute the largest ethnic minority, estimated at 15-20% of the total population [12], translating to roughly 12-20 million people.[15]
- **Iran:** Approximately 9-10 million Kurds, making up around 10% of the Iranian population.[18]
- **Iraq:** Kurds are the largest non-Arab minority, forming the overwhelming majority in the KRG provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk, and likely a majority in the disputed oil-rich Kirkuk region.[26]
- **Syria:** Around 2.5 million Kurds, constituting roughly 10% of the pre-civil war population.[33]
- **Diaspora:** A significant Kurdish diaspora, estimated at around two million, resides primarily in European countries (especially Germany) and nations of the former Soviet Union.[1]

The wide variations in these demographic figures and the politically sensitive nature of defining Kurdistan's precise borders underscore how such data often become instrumentalized in the political discourse surrounding Kurdish identity and rights. For a stateless people, establishing recognized population numbers and territorial claims is integral to their assertions of nationhood, while states encompassing Kurdish populations may downplay these figures to diminish such claims.

Key Urban Centers:

Numerous cities across Kurdistan serve as important cultural, political, and economic hubs for the Kurdish population. These include Diyarbakır (Amed), Van, and Erzurum in Turkey; Kermanshah, Sanandaj (Sna), and Mahabad in Iran; Erbil (Hawler), Sulaymaniyah, and Kirkuk in Iraq; and Qamishli, Afrin, and Kobane in Syria.27

Natural Resources:

The Kurdistan region, particularly in Iraq, is endowed with significant natural resources, including substantial reserves of petroleum and natural gas, as well as phosphates and sulphur.29 Control over and revenue from these resources are major points of contention, especially between the KRG and the federal government of Iraq.35

Table 1: Estimated Kurdish Population Distribution by Country/Region (c. 2024-2025)

Country/Region	Estimated Kurdish Population (Range)	Percentage of Country's Total Population (Approx.)	Primary Kurdish Dialects Spoken	Key Kurdish-Inhabited Areas
Turkey	12-20 million	15-20%	Kurmanji, Zaza	Southeastern Anatolia (e.g., Diyarbakır, Van, Mardin, Şırnak, Hakkari)

Iran	9-10 million	10%	Sorani, Kurmanji, Southern Kurdish (Pehlewani), Laki, Gorani (Hawrami)	Kordestān Province, West Azerbaijan Province, Kermanshah Province, Ilam Province, parts of Lorestan, North Khorasan
Iraq	5-7 million (KRG focused)	15-20% (of total Iraq)	Sorani, Kurmanji, Southern Kurdish (Feyli)	Kurdistan Region (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk), Kirkuk, Nineveh Plains, Khanaqin
Syria	2-2.5 million	~10% (pre-war)	Kurmanji	Northeastern Syria (Al-Hasakah, Qamishli, Kobanî), Afrin region
Diaspora	~2 million	N/A	Kurmanji, Sorani, Zaza	Europe (esp. Germany, France, Sweden, UK), former Soviet Union countries, North America, Australia

Sources:.[1] Note: Population figures are estimates and subject to variation.

C. The Enduring Quest for Self-Determination: An Overview

The Kurds stand as one of the largest ethnic groups in the world without a sovereign nation-state of their own.[2] Their collective history across the Middle East is profoundly shaped by an unyielding quest for recognition, political rights, varying degrees of autonomy, and, for significant segments of their population at different times, the aspiration for complete independence.[2] This pursuit of self-determination became particularly salient in the 20th century, catalyzed by the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent redrawing of the Middle Eastern political map, which largely ignored Kurdish aspirations.[2]

The struggle has manifested in diverse forms across the four primary states encompassing Kurdistan. It has involved peaceful political organizing, the establishment of cultural and linguistic revival movements, diplomatic overtures on the international stage, and, frequently, armed rebellions and protracted insurgencies against central governments perceived as

oppressive or assimilationist.[3]
However, it is crucial to recognize that the Kurdish national movement is not monolithic. Despite a shared overarching desire for greater rights and self-governance, Kurdish communities and political entities exhibit considerable diversity in their specific goals, strategies, and internal political dynamics. Tribal loyalties, regional differences, ideological leanings (ranging from leftist secularism to conservative traditionalism), and pragmatic political interests often lead to internal divisions and complex, sometimes conflicting, relationships with the respective host governments and with each other.[2] For instance, the approach of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which operates within a federal system, differs significantly from the democratic confederalism advocated by Abdullah Öcalan and movements aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and Syria.[2]
This enduring quest, in all its varied expressions, forms the central axis around which the Kurdish relationship with the Middle East revolves. It explains their often-contentious interactions with regional states, their complex alliances, their engagement with international powers, and their persistent resilience in the face of immense historical and ongoing challenges. The historical Kurdish adage, "No friends but the mountains" [3], encapsulates a profound sense of self-reliance born from a history often marked by betrayal and the prioritization of external powers' interests over Kurdish aspirations. This experience has deeply ingrained a cautious, pragmatic, and sometimes opportunistic approach to alliances within Kurdish political strategy, while simultaneously making them susceptible to manipulation by larger regional and international actors who have historically played Kurdish groups against regional rivals or their own central governments.[2]
Furthermore, the very concept of "self-determination" for the Kurds has evolved. While the dream of an independent, unified Kurdistan was a potent force, particularly in the early to mid-20th century, contemporary Kurdish political thought and action increasingly reflect a diversification of goals. Significant movements and entities, such as the KRG in Iraq with its established federal autonomy, and the AANES in Syria with its model of democratic confederalism inspired by Öcalan, emphasize forms of internal self-determination.[2] These approaches often prioritize cultural rights, linguistic freedom, local self-governance, and decentralized political structures within the existing borders of the states they inhabit. This strategic shift acknowledges the formidable geopolitical obstacles to outright secession and seeks to carve out viable spaces for Kurdish identity and self-rule through alternative political frameworks. This evolution represents both a pragmatic adaptation to regional and international realities and a source of innovative political thinking, offering potential pathways for Kurdish aspirations that move beyond the traditional nation-state model, yet also introducing new layers of complexity in their relationships with host states and among Kurdish groups themselves.

Section II: Historical Context: From Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Middle East

The historical narrative of the Kurdish people is deeply embedded in the ancient lands of

Mesopotamia and the surrounding mountainous regions. Their interactions with successive empires and their experiences leading up to the modern era have profoundly shaped their identity and political consciousness.

A. Early Kurdish Presence and Interactions in Mesopotamia

The historical presence of communities identifiable as ancestral to the modern Kurds stretches back millennia in the upland regions of the Middle East.[1] While definitive links are debated, ancient Mesopotamian records refer to mountain tribes, such as the Guti in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, whose territories align with areas later known for Kurdish inhabitation.[1] Greek historian Xenophon, in his *Anabasis*, described the Kardouchoi, a fierce mountain people who attacked the retreating "Ten Thousand" Greek mercenaries near present-day Zākhū in northern Iraq in 401 BCE; some scholars suggest these Kardouchoi may have been precursors to the Kurds, though this claim is also contested.[1]

Archaeological evidence further illuminates the antiquity of settlement in Kurdish-inhabited lands. Excavations at sites such as Kurd Qaburstan in the Erbil region of northeastern Iraq have unearthed artifacts from a Middle Bronze Age city (circa 1800 BCE), possibly the ancient city of Qabra mentioned in Old Babylonian texts.[7] Such findings indicate the presence of established urban civilizations within the broader Kurdish homeland from very early periods.

The term "Kurd" itself, while its etymology is uncertain, began to acquire a more distinct socio-economic and possibly ethnic connotation by the time of the Islamic conquests in the 7th century CE.[1] Early Arab and Persian writers used the term, sometimes ambiguously, to describe nomadic or semi-nomadic groups residing on the western fringes of the Iranian plateau and potentially tribes that had been aligned with the Sasanian Empire in Mesopotamia.[5] There was initial confusion among these chroniclers as to whether "Kurd" denoted a specific ethnic and linguistic group, a particular nomadic lifestyle, or simply inhabitants of a certain rugged environment. However, analysis of historical texts, particularly from the 12th to 14th centuries, suggests that by this period, the Kurds were increasingly recognized as a distinct ethnic group, albeit one divided into numerous tribes.[5]

The emphasis on these ancient origins and long historical presence in the region is not merely an academic exercise for Kurdish historiography. It forms a crucial part of the legitimizing narrative for contemporary Kurdish identity and their claims to indigenous status in their ancestral lands. By tracing their lineage to ancient peoples and established civilizations within Mesopotamia and the Zagros-Taurus mountain systems, Kurds assert a historical continuity that predates many of the modern states in the region. This narrative implicitly challenges state-sponsored histories that might seek to marginalize Kurdish claims or portray them as later arrivals, thereby bolstering their moral and historical case for self-determination and rights.

B. The Kurds under Empires: Interactions with Persians, Arabs, Seljuks, Mongols, and Ottomans

The geographical area known as Kurdistan, due to its strategic location as a mountainous buffer and a crossroads between major civilizational centers, has been subjected to a long

succession of external rulers and conquerors throughout history.[3] These interactions with various empires—including ancient Persians, Alexander the Great's Macedonians, Muslim Arabs from the 7th century, Seljuk Turks from the 11th century, Mongols in the 13th century, medieval Persian dynasties (like the Safavids), and finally the Ottoman Turks from the 16th century—profoundly shaped Kurdish society, political structures, and their strategies for survival and autonomy.[3]

In response to these waves of conquest and cultural influence, the Kurds demonstrated remarkable adaptability. Following the Arab conquests, the majority of Kurds converted to Islam.[3] Later, under the influence of the predominantly Sunni Ottoman Empire, most Kurds solidified their Sunni Muslim identity, although significant Kurdish communities in areas under Persian Safavid influence adopted or maintained Shia Islam.[3] This religious alignment often played a role in their relations with these competing empires.

The Ottoman Era:

The relationship with the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the largest part of Kurdistan for over four centuries, was particularly formative.

- **Early Alliance and Autonomy (16th - mid-19th Century):** The initial phase of Ottoman-Kurdish relations was largely positive. In a pivotal moment, Kurdish tribes, under the leadership of the scholar and statesman Idris Bitlisi, allied with the Ottoman Sultan Selim I against the Safavid Empire of Persia. This alliance was instrumental in the Ottoman victory at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, which secured Ottoman control over Eastern Anatolia and parts of Northern Iraq, areas with significant Kurdish populations.[48] As a reward for their loyalty and strategic importance as a buffer against Safavid Iran, the Ottomans granted many Kurdish principalities (emirates) a significant degree of semi-autonomous status. These emirates were often ruled by hereditary Kurdish tribal leaders who enjoyed exemptions from certain taxes and military conscription, and managed their internal affairs with considerable freedom.[48] This system of indirect rule through local Kurdish notables persisted for several centuries. Kurdistan was cherished by Ottoman rulers like Murad IV as a vital "iron castle" protecting the empire from Iran.[49]
- **Deterioration and Centralization (Mid-19th Century Onwards):** Relations began to deteriorate from the mid-1800s as the Ottoman Empire embarked on a series of centralization reforms known as the Tanzimat. These reforms aimed to modernize the state and strengthen direct imperial control over all provinces, inevitably clashing with the entrenched autonomy of the Kurdish emirates.[4] Figures like Bedir Khan Beg of Botan launched rebellions in an attempt to preserve their autonomy (e.g., 1847), but these were ultimately suppressed by the modernized Ottoman army.[48] The Ottomans briefly established an administrative unit known as the Kurdistan Eyalet (1846-1867), but direct central control gradually increased.[48]
- **Abdul Hamid II's Reign (1876-1909):** There was a temporary improvement in relations under Sultan Abdul Hamid II. He pursued Pan-Islamist policies to counter rising ethnic nationalism within the empire and sought to co-opt Kurdish loyalty.[48] A key instrument of this policy was the creation of the Hamidiye cavalry in 1890, regiments composed primarily of Kurdish tribesmen. While intended to bolster imperial authority and provide

a loyal force, the Hamidiye were also implicated in the persecution and massacres of other minority groups, notably Armenians and Assyrians, during the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s.[12] Despite this, Abdul Hamid II was viewed favorably by some Kurds, earning the moniker "Bavê Kurdan" (Father of the Kurds).[48]

- **Young Turks, World War I, and Ottoman Collapse:** The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 ushered in an era of intensified Turkish nationalism, which was often exclusionary and challenged the previous Pan-Islamist framework.[4] During World War I, Kurdish loyalties were divided. Some Kurdish tribes and individuals collaborated with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government, including in the Armenian Genocide that began in 1915, while others opposed these actions or sought to protect Armenian neighbors.[4] The war years also saw increased hardship for Kurds, including forced deportations by Ottoman authorities starting in 1916, aimed at diluting Kurdish populations in certain areas or punishing perceived disloyalty. It is estimated that up to 700,000 Kurds were forcibly displaced, with a significant number perishing due to harsh conditions, famine, or violence.[41]

This long history of interaction with empires, characterized by periods of autonomy leveraged through strategic alliances and periods of suppression under centralizing states, deeply influenced Kurdish political culture. It fostered a tradition of tribal leadership and local power centers, but also highlighted the vulnerabilities of relying on imperial favor. The patterns of alliance and resistance established during these centuries, particularly under the Ottomans, laid some of the groundwork for the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism in the face of the empire's final collapse. The periods of autonomy, however conditional, were often tied to the strategic needs of the ruling empire, such as border defense or internal security against other groups. This reliance on imperial patronage, while offering temporary advantages, ultimately hindered the development of independent, unified Kurdish political institutions. When imperial policies shifted towards centralization or when empires themselves disintegrated, Kurdish communities were often left vulnerable, their autonomy curtailed, and their populations subjected to repression. This historical experience created a legacy of political pragmatism but also one of vulnerability and a recurring pattern of seeking external support, which could be, and often was, withdrawn based on the shifting interests of larger powers.

C. The Post-World War I Settlement: Sykes-Picot, Sèvres, and the Treaty of Lausanne – The Division of Kurdistan

The aftermath of World War I marked a cataclysmic turning point for the Kurdish people, transforming them from a significant ethno-linguistic group within a multi-ethnic empire into a stateless nation divided among newly formed or reconfigured nation-states. The diplomatic machinations of the victorious Allied powers, driven by their own colonial interests, largely sealed this fate, overriding nascent Kurdish aspirations for self-determination.

- **The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916):** Even before the Ottoman Empire's final defeat, Great Britain and France, in a secret understanding known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, had laid out plans to partition the Ottoman Arab territories into their

respective spheres of influence.[3] While primarily focused on the Arab provinces, this agreement prefigured the dismemberment of the empire and the drawing of new borders that would inevitably cut across Kurdish-inhabited lands, including strategically important areas like the Mosul Vilayet (province), rich in oil.[3]

- The Treaty of Sèvres (1920): The Treaty of Sèvres, one of the series of treaties that formally concluded World War I, was signed between the Allied Powers and the defeated Ottoman government on August 10, 1920. For the Kurds, this treaty initially offered a glimmer of hope. Articles 62, 63, and 64 of Section III of the treaty provided for a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas east of the Euphrates, south of the (then) southern boundary of Armenia, and north of the Syrian and Mesopotamian frontier.3 Crucially, Article 64 stipulated that if, within one year, the Kurdish people in these areas demonstrated a desire for independence from Turkey, and if the Council of the League of Nations then considered them capable of such independence and recommended it, Turkey would agree to execute such a recommendation and renounce all rights over these areas. The treaty also mentioned the possibility of Kurds in the Mosul Vilayet voluntarily adhering to this independent Kurdish state.41 These provisions significantly bolstered Kurdish nationalist aspirations, and Kurdish representatives, notably Şerif Pasha, actively lobbied for Kurdish claims at the Paris Peace Conference.4

  However, from a Kurdish perspective, the Treaty of Sèvres was not without its flaws. It excluded certain Kurdish-inhabited territories, such as those in what would become French Mandate Syria and parts of the Dersim region west of the Euphrates, and it failed to clearly demarcate the boundaries between the envisioned Kurdish entity and a proposed Armenian state.41

  Ultimately, the Treaty of Sèvres was never ratified and remained a dead letter.3 Its non-ratification was primarily due to the vigorous and successful military and political opposition mounted by the Turkish nationalist movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The Turkish nationalists, based in Ankara, rejected the dismemberment of Anatolia and fought a war of independence against Allied-backed forces and the weakened Istanbul-based Ottoman government, which had signed the treaty under duress and lacked widespread legitimacy.41 Shifting British policy, which grew wary of the costs of enforcing Sèvres and increasingly prioritized a stable relationship with the emerging Turkish power, also contributed to the treaty's demise.41
- The Treaty of Lausanne (1923): The military victories of the Turkish nationalists led to a renegotiation of the post-war settlement, culminating in the Treaty of Lausanne, signed on July 24, 1923, between Turkey and the Allied Powers.3 This treaty was a disaster for Kurdish aspirations. It made no mention whatsoever of the Kurds, Kurdistan, or any form of Kurdish autonomy or rights.3 Instead, it recognized the sovereignty of the new Republic of Turkey within its current borders, which encompassed the majority of Ottoman Kurdistan.

  The Treaty of Lausanne effectively formalized the division of the Kurdish ancestral homeland among four states: Turkey, Iran (which had its own historical Kurdish population and borders defined by earlier Russo-Persian and Ottoman-Persian treaties),

the British Mandate of Iraq (to which the oil-rich Mosul Vilayet was controversially attached, despite Kurdish and Turkish claims), and the French Mandate of Syria.3 This partition is viewed by many Kurds as a profound historical injustice and a "Great Betrayal" by the colonial powers, who had initially dangled the prospect of self-determination.28 British policy, in particular, had shifted significantly from the promises of Sèvres. The desire for a stable peace with Atatürk's Turkey, strategic concerns about regional stability, and crucial economic interests, especially the oil reserves in the Mosul region, led Britain to prioritize the integrity of Iraq under its mandate, incorporating Kurdish areas into it, rather than championing an independent Kurdish state.41

The post-World War I treaties, and particularly the Treaty of Lausanne, thus had a defining and devastating impact on the Kurdish people. They institutionalized the Kurds' status as a stateless nation, fragmented across multiple, often hostile, nation-states. This division laid the foundation for a century of struggles for cultural survival, political rights, and self-determination in each of these countries. The memory of Sèvres' unfulfilled promises and Lausanne's definitive denial of their national aspirations became a central and enduring grievance in modern Kurdish political consciousness, fueling subsequent waves of nationalism and resistance. This period represents a foundational trauma, the repercussions of which continue to resonate deeply in the Kurdish relationship with the Middle East and the wider world, shaping their collective identity and their enduring quest for justice and recognition.

Table 2: Key Treaties and Agreements Affecting Kurdish Political Status (Post-WWI)

Treaty/Agreement Name	Year	Key Signatories/Actors	Provisions Concerning Kurds (or lack thereof)	Outcome/Impact on Kurds
Sykes-Picot Agreement	1916	Great Britain, France (with Russian assent)	Secretly planned division of Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence; allocated Kurdish-inhabited areas (e.g., Mosul Vilayet) to future British/French control/influence.	Prefigured the partition of Kurdish lands without Kurdish consultation; laid groundwork for future divisions. [3]
Treaty of Sèvres	1920	Allied Powers, Ottoman Government	Articles 62-64 provided for local autonomy for Kurds in eastern Anatolia and a referendum within	Bolstered Kurdish nationalist hopes for statehood; Şerif Pasha represented Kurdish claims.

			one year for independence, potentially including Mosul Kurds.	However, the treaty was never ratified due to Turkish nationalist opposition and shifting Allied priorities. [3]
Treaty of Lausanne	1923	Allied Powers, Republic of Turkey	Made no mention of Kurds, Kurdistan, or Kurdish autonomy/rights. Recognized Turkey's sovereignty over most of Anatolian Kurdistan.	Sealed the division of Kurdistan among Turkey, Iran, British Mandate of Iraq, and French Mandate of Syria. Led to Kurdish statelessness and became a source of profound historical grievance ("Great Betrayal"). [3]
Ankara Agreement (1926)	1926	Turkey, Great Britain (representing Mandate of Iraq)	Formally assigned the Mosul Vilayet (with its significant Kurdish population and oil reserves) to the British Mandate of Iraq, settling the border dispute with Turkey.	Cemented the inclusion of major Kurdish areas (Southern Kurdistan) within Iraq, further solidifying the post-Lausanne partition. Often seen as another blow to Kurdish aspirations for unity or inclusion in Turkey. [3]

Sources:.[3]

Section III: The Kurdish Relationship with Turkey

The relationship between the Kurds and the modern Turkish state has been one of the most protracted and violent in the Middle East, characterized by systematic state policies of assimilation and denial of Kurdish identity, met with persistent Kurdish resistance in cultural, political, and, most significantly, armed forms.

A. The Turkish Republic and the Denial of Kurdish Identity

The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, following the Treaty of Lausanne, marked a critical juncture for the Kurdish population within its new borders. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the nascent republic embarked on an ambitious project of nation-building centered on a singular, secular Turkish national identity.[4] This ideology, often referred to as Kemalism, inherently conflicted with the existence of a large, distinct Kurdish minority with its own language, culture, and historical consciousness. Consequently, state policy was directed towards the suppression and assimilation of Kurdish identity.[4]

A core tenet of this policy was the outright denial of a separate Kurdish ethnicity. Kurds were officially categorized as "Mountain Turks," a label designed to erase their distinctiveness and absorb them into the broader Turkish nation.[11] The very terms "Kurds," "Kurdistan," and "Kurdish" were expunged from official discourse and public use.[13] This linguistic erasure was accompanied by a comprehensive ban on the Kurdish language in public life, education, and media. Kurdish traditional dress, folklore, and even the giving of Kurdish names to children were prohibited or severely restricted.[4] The state actively promoted the slogan "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" to enforce linguistic homogeneity.[13]

Beyond cultural and linguistic suppression, Kurdish-majority regions, primarily in the eastern and southeastern parts of the country, were subjected to harsh administrative measures. Martial law was frequently imposed, and the state undertook policies of forced displacement and deportation of Kurdish populations, aimed at breaking up traditional social structures and diluting Kurdish demographic concentrations.[13] These repressive measures were often met with Kurdish uprisings, which were brutally suppressed by the Turkish military, leading to significant loss of life and further entrenching Kurdish grievances. Notable instances of extreme state violence include the Dersim massacre (1937-1938) and the Zilan massacre (1930), where tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians were reportedly killed.[13]

This foundational period of denial and forced assimilation established a deep-seated antagonism between the Turkish state and a significant portion of its Kurdish population. The Kemalist project, while aiming to forge a modern and unified nation, paradoxically sowed the seeds of enduring Kurdish resistance by attempting to eradicate a deeply rooted ethnic identity. This inherent contradiction—the drive for national unity through the denial of diversity—became the primary fault line in Turkish-Kurdish relations, fueling a cycle of rebellion and repression that would define much of the republic's history. The state's refusal to acknowledge Kurdish distinctiveness was not merely a passive omission but an active, often violent, campaign of cultural and political erasure, which, in turn, became a powerful catalyst for the development and persistence of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey.

B. The Rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Decades-Long Conflict

The systematic suppression of Kurdish identity and the lack of avenues for peaceful political expression created fertile ground for more radical forms of resistance. The Kurdistan Workers'

Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê - PKK) emerged from this context, founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan and a group of Kurdish students.[11] Initially, the PKK's ideology was a blend of Marxist-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism, with the stated goal of establishing an independent, socialist Kurdish state, primarily in response to the severe oppression faced by Kurds in Turkey.[11]

The PKK launched its full-scale armed insurgency against the Turkish state on August 15, 1984.[11] This marked the beginning of a brutal and protracted conflict that has spanned over four decades, exacting an immense human and economic toll. Estimates suggest the conflict has resulted in over 40,000 deaths, including militants, security forces, and civilians, with more than 7,000 fatalities occurring since the collapse of a peace process in mid-2015 alone.[11] The economic cost to Turkey has been estimated to be between $300 billion and $450 billion, primarily in military expenditures, and has also negatively impacted sectors like tourism.[11]

The conflict has been characterized by intense guerrilla warfare, primarily in the mountainous regions of southeastern Turkey, as well as PKK attacks on Turkish security forces, government institutions, and sometimes civilian targets perceived as collaborators.[46] The Turkish state responded with large-scale counterinsurgency operations, often involving heavy military deployments, the establishment of a village guard system (pro-government Kurdish militias), widespread human rights abuses, and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians from their villages.[13] By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Turkish military had significantly degraded the PKK's operational capacity within Turkey, pushing many of its fighters and its leadership cadres into the rugged Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq, which became the PKK's main headquarters.[31]

The Turkish government, along with the United States and the European Union, officially designated the PKK as a terrorist organization.[39] This designation has had significant international implications, shaping diplomatic relations and counter-terrorism cooperation.

The PKK's armed struggle and the state's relentless counter-insurgency campaign led to a profound securitization of the entire Kurdish issue in Turkey. Any expression of Kurdish identity, culture, or political demands, however peaceful, became susceptible to being labeled as "separatist terrorism" or support for the PKK.[13] This environment severely constricted the space for legitimate Kurdish political activity and dialogue, making it exceedingly difficult to address the underlying grievances through democratic channels. Anti-terror laws and constitutional provisions against undermining national unity were broadly applied to suppress Kurdish activists, journalists, and politicians.[4] This securitization not only justified widespread human rights violations but also perpetuated the cycle of violence by closing off avenues for peaceful resolution, thereby reinforcing the PKK's narrative that armed struggle was the only viable path to achieving Kurdish rights.

C. Kurdish Political Movements and Parties in Turkey (HEP, DEP, HADEP, DTP, BDP, HDP/DEM)

Despite the dominance of the armed conflict and the severe restrictions on political

expression, Kurds in Turkey have persistently sought to voice their demands and pursue their rights through parliamentary politics. This effort has been characterized by a succession of pro-Kurdish political parties, each attempting to navigate the narrow and often treacherous political landscape, and almost invariably facing state suppression, including harassment, arrests of members and leaders, and eventual closure by the Constitutional Court on charges of separatism or alleged links to the PKK.[4] This cycle of formation, limited operation, and proscription has been a defining feature of Kurdish political participation in Turkey.
The lineage of major pro-Kurdish parties includes:

- **People's Labor Party (HEP - Halkın Emek Partisi):** Founded in June 1990 by seven Kurdish MPs expelled from the Social Democratic People's Party (SHP), HEP was the first significant legal party to openly champion Kurdish rights.[56] It was banned by the Constitutional Court in July 1993 for allegedly promoting separatism.[56]
- **Democracy Party (DEP - Demokrasi Partisi):** Established in May 1993 as HEP's successor, DEP suffered a similar fate, being banned in June 1994 for promoting Kurdish nationalism.[56] Several of its MPs, including Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle, Orhan Doğan, and Selim Sadak, were controversially stripped of their parliamentary immunity, arrested, and sentenced to lengthy prison terms for their political activities.[56] Leyla Zana, the first Kurdish woman elected to the Turkish parliament, sparked a major outcry when she took her parliamentary oath in Turkish but concluded it with a sentence in Kurdish expressing hope for Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood.[56]
- **People's Democracy Party (HADEP - Halkın Demokrasi Partisi):** Formed in May 1994, HADEP managed to build a significant electoral base, particularly in Kurdish-majority provinces, and won control of 37 municipalities in the 1999 local elections.[56] Despite failing to cross the national 10% electoral threshold to enter parliament as a party in general elections, its local successes demonstrated considerable grassroots support. HADEP was eventually banned in March 2003 on grounds of aiding the PKK.[56] The European Court of Human Rights later ruled this ban a violation of freedom of association.[56]
- **Democratic People's Party (DEHAP - Demokratik Halk Partisi):** Founded in 1997, DEHAP largely succeeded HADEP. It garnered over 6% of the national vote in the 2002 general elections but again fell short of the parliamentary threshold.[56] It later merged with other groups to form the DTP.
- **Democratic Society Party (DTP - Demokratik Toplum Partisi):** Established in 2005, the DTP adopted the strategy of running its candidates as independents in the 2007 general elections to bypass the 10% threshold, successfully electing a group of MPs to parliament.[56] The DTP also performed well in the 2009 local elections, increasing its number of municipalities. However, it too was banned by the Constitutional Court in December 2009 for alleged links to the PKK, with its leaders Ahmet Türk and Aysel Tuğluk expelled from parliament.[56]
- **Peace and Democracy Party (BDP - Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi):** The BDP emerged as the successor to the DTP, continuing the strategy of electoral alliances (e.g., the Labour, Democracy and Freedom Bloc) and running independent candidates to secure

parliamentary representation, which it achieved in the 2011 elections.[56]

- **Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP - Halkların Demokratik Partisi):** Founded in 2012, the HDP represented a significant evolution in Kurdish political strategy. It sought to broaden its appeal beyond a purely Kurdish nationalist base by forming a coalition of various leftist, feminist, environmentalist, and minority rights movements from across Turkey.[4] This strategy proved successful when, in the June 2015 general election, the HDP, running as a party, surpassed the 10% threshold and entered parliament with a substantial number of seats, a historic achievement for the Kurdish political movement.[4] The HDP continued to maintain parliamentary representation in subsequent elections despite facing immense state pressure, including the arrest and imprisonment of its co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, numerous MPs, and local officials, as well as an ongoing closure case.[31]
- **Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party - Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi):** As the HDP faced the growing likelihood of being banned, its members and supporters began to rally around the DEM Party (formerly the Green Left Party) as its successor, ensuring the continuity of the political movement.[31]

The core demands of these parties have generally centered on the recognition of Kurdish identity, full cultural and linguistic rights (including mother-tongue education), an end to discriminatory practices, greater regional autonomy or decentralization, democratization of the Turkish state, and a peaceful, political resolution to the long-standing Kurdish conflict.[4] The persistent cycle of party formation and state-led dissolution underscores a fundamental dynamic in Turkish politics: the unwavering determination of a significant segment of the Kurdish population to seek political representation and achieve their rights through democratic channels, juxtaposed with the Turkish state's deep-seated reluctance to fully accommodate these aspirations within its traditional understanding of national unity and security. This resilience, despite decades of severe repression, indicates a robust underlying social movement and a refusal by the Kurdish electorate in many regions to be politically disenfranchised. It has consistently forced the Turkish state to confront organized Kurdish political demands, even as it has sought to dismantle the vehicles for that expression.

D. Demands for Cultural Rights, Autonomy, and Recent Developments (PKK Dissolution)

The demands of Kurds in Turkey have consistently revolved around the recognition and protection of their cultural and linguistic rights, alongside calls for greater political autonomy or decentralization. These aspirations have been at the heart of both political activism and armed struggle. Recent developments, particularly the call for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to disarm and disband, have introduced a potentially transformative dynamic into this long-standing conflict.

Cultural and Linguistic Rights:

A central and enduring demand has been the right to education in the Kurdish language, the official use of Kurdish in regions with significant Kurdish populations, and the freedom to express and promote Kurdish culture without restriction.13 Historically, Turkish state policy

enforced strict prohibitions on the Kurdish language in public life and education.4 While some reforms in the early 2000s, partly driven by Turkey's EU accession process, led to a relaxation of these restrictions—allowing for Kurdish language television broadcasts, the publication of Kurdish literature, and the introduction of Kurdish as an elective subject in some schools—significant limitations remain.4 Kurdish language activists and cultural organizations continue to face pressure, and prosecutions for Kurdish language activities, sometimes equated with support for terrorism, have been reported.14 The fundamental demand for mother-tongue education as a primary right, rather than an optional extra, remains largely unfulfilled.

Autonomy and Decentralization:

While the PKK's initial objective included the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, its declared aims, particularly under the influence of Abdullah Öcalan's evolving ideology, shifted towards "democratic confederalism" or "democratic autonomy".4 This model emphasizes grassroots democracy, decentralization of political power, gender equality, and ecological principles, to be implemented within existing state borders rather than through secession. Pro-Kurdish political parties have generally echoed demands for greater local governance and a devolution of power to regional authorities.

Peace Processes and Their Collapse:

Throughout the conflict, there have been several attempts at peace negotiations and ceasefires between the Turkish state and the PKK. Notable efforts include unilateral ceasefires by the PKK (e.g., after Öcalan's capture in 1999) and state-initiated processes, such as the "Kurdish Opening" or "Democratic Opening" (2009-2011) and the more structured "Solution Process" (Çözüm Süreci) from 2013 to 2015.31 These processes often involved indirect talks with Öcalan and aimed at PKK disarmament in exchange for democratic reforms and enhanced Kurdish rights. However, all these initiatives ultimately collapsed due to a combination of factors, including mutual distrust, continued violence by hardline factions, domestic political pressures on the Turkish government, and disagreements over the scope and implementation of reforms. The collapse of the 2013-2015 peace process, for instance, was followed by a particularly brutal resurgence of violence in urban areas of southeastern Turkey.31

Recent Developments (2024-2025) - The PKK's Call for Disbandment:

A series of significant events unfolded in late 2024 and early 2025, signaling a potential paradigm shift:

- In October 2024, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and a key coalition partner of President Erdoğan's government, made surprising public statements suggesting that Abdullah Öcalan might call on the PKK to disband in exchange for potential leniency or parole.[31] This was seen as a possible government-sanctioned feeler.
- On February 27, 2025, Abdullah Öcalan, through a letter read out by a pro-Kurdish DEM Party delegation that had been allowed to visit him in prison, issued a historic call for the PKK to lay down its arms and dissolve its organizational structure. He argued that the armed struggle had become obsolete and that the path forward lay in democratic politics.[31]

- The PKK's leadership in the Qandil Mountains responded swiftly, declaring a unilateral ceasefire on March 1, 2025.[31]
- Following an internal congress, the PKK formally announced on May 12, 2025, its decision to disband its organization and end the armed struggle, heeding Öcalan's call.[31]

The Turkish government's response has been cautiously welcoming. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the PKK's decision as a "critical threshold" and the "beginning of a new era".[31] However, Ankara has also maintained a firm stance, warning that military operations against any remaining armed elements would resume if disarmament efforts falter and emphasizing that the dissolution must encompass all PKK-affiliated structures, including those in Syria and Iraq.[53]

In exchange for this demobilization, Kurdish representatives and the PKK are expected to seek significant concessions. These likely include amnesty for many PKK fighters, the release of thousands of political prisoners (including imprisoned DEM Party politicians), and potentially the conditional release of Öcalan himself, perhaps to house arrest.[31] Crucially, substantive constitutional and legal reforms to guarantee Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights, particularly the right to mother-tongue education in Kurdish, and to ensure greater democratic participation and local governance, will be paramount demands.[16]

This call for the PKK's disbandment represents the most significant opportunity for peace in decades. However, the path forward is laden with challenges. The success of this process will depend on the genuine commitment of both sides to a negotiated settlement, the establishment of credible mechanisms for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), and the Turkish state's willingness to enact far-reaching democratic reforms that address the historical grievances of its Kurdish population. The enduring influence of Abdullah Öcalan, even from prison, is evident in these developments. His ability to command the PKK's adherence to such a momentous decision underscores his pivotal, almost indispensable, role in the Kurdish movement in Turkey. Yet, this very centrality also highlights a potential vulnerability: the entire peace initiative appears heavily reliant on his personal authority and continued ability to communicate and guide the process. Past peace efforts have often faltered due to a lack of broader institutionalized mechanisms for dialogue that can withstand political pressures or leadership changes.

Furthermore, the timing of such peace initiatives in Turkey often appears closely linked to the domestic political calculations of the ruling government. The current overtures are occurring in a context where President Erdoğan may be seeking support from Kurdish voters or the DEM Party for constitutional amendments that could, among other things, allow him to extend his rule.[50] The collapse of the 2015 peace process coincided with a shift in Erdoğan's political alliances and his pursuit of an executive presidency.[54] This history suggests that for a peace process to be sustainable, it must be anchored in genuine, rights-based reforms that are somewhat shielded from the vagaries of short-term political opportunism, a condition that has been notably absent in many previous attempts. The international community, including the EU and the US, has welcomed the PKK's decision and urged all parties to seize this historic opportunity for peace.[59] The potential dissolution of the PKK could transform Turkey's

domestic politics by deprioritizing security, foster a more democratic public sphere, and significantly reshape its foreign policy, particularly its relations with regional Kurds in Iraq and Syria, and its broader engagements with the US, Russia, and Iran.[50]

E. Human Rights Situation and Socio-Economic Conditions

The human rights situation for Kurds in Turkey has been a matter of grave concern for decades, extensively documented by domestic and international human rights organizations. This is intrinsically linked to the socio-economic conditions in the predominantly Kurdish southeastern region, which has historically been underdeveloped compared to the western parts of the country.

Systematic Human Rights Abuses:

Kurds in Turkey have faced a long history of discrimination and human rights violations.12 In the early decades of the Republic, this included state-perpetrated massacres such as those in Dersim (1937-38) and Zilan (1930).13 During the peak of the PKK conflict, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, abuses were rampant. These included systematic extrajudicial executions of Kurdish civilians, widespread use of torture in detention, forced disappearances of activists and political figures, and the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages (an estimated 4,000 by 1999), leading to the internal displacement of millions of people.13 The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has condemned Turkey in thousands of cases related to these violations.13 Arbitrary arrests of journalists, activists, and politicians advocating for Kurdish rights have been commonplace.13

Restrictions on Cultural and Linguistic Rights:

As detailed earlier, the Kurdish language was banned in public life and education for many years.11 While some restrictions were eased in the 2000s, such as allowing private Kurdish language courses and television broadcasts, the right to education in Kurdish as a primary language in public schools remains denied.13 Human Rights Watch reported in late 2024/early 2025 that Turkish authorities continue to prosecute individuals for Kurdish language activities, with police and prosecutors interpreting the promotion of Kurdish linguistic rights as evidence of links to terrorism.14 Associations offering Kurdish language classes, like Med-Der, have seen their members face charges despite operating legally.14

Suppression of Political Representation and Dissent:

Pro-Kurdish political parties and their elected officials have faced continuous pressure. Mayors and municipal council members from parties like the HDP (and now DEM Party) in Kurdish-majority areas have been routinely removed from office by the Ministry of Interior and replaced with state-appointed trustees, often based on unsubstantiated terrorism-related accusations.31 Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly for Kurds advocating their rights remains severely curtailed. Protests are often banned, and individuals expressing critical opinions online or in public statements face criminal investigations and detentions.61 Amnesty International has documented crackdowns on peaceful dissent, particularly following events perceived as critical of state actions.61

Socio-Economic Conditions:

The southeastern region of Turkey, where the majority of Kurds live, has historically lagged behind the western parts of the country in terms of economic development, infrastructure,

education, and health services.12 This underdevelopment is partly a legacy of decades of conflict, which has devastated local economies, disrupted agriculture, and discouraged investment. It is also attributed by some to deliberate state neglect or discriminatory resource allocation. The conflict itself has imposed a massive economic burden on the Turkish state, diverting resources that could have been used for development.11

Per capita income in Kurdish regions is significantly lower than the national average.62 In response to these disparities and potentially as part of a broader strategy linked to the peace process, the Turkish government announced a $14 billion "regional development" plan in early 2025, known as the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) Action Plan. This plan aims to fund 198 projects by 2028, focusing on infrastructure, agriculture, education, healthcare, and industrial development, with the stated goal of increasing per capita income and bridging the economic gap.62

However, such development initiatives, while potentially beneficial, are sometimes viewed with skepticism by Kurdish communities if they are not accompanied by genuine political and cultural rights. There are concerns that these plans might prioritize security objectives or demographic engineering over equitable development and local empowerment. The success of economic development in fostering peace and reconciliation will heavily depend on whether these initiatives are implemented transparently, with meaningful Kurdish participation, and as part of a broader package that addresses the core political and cultural grievances of the Kurdish population. Without this holistic approach, economic investments alone are unlikely to resolve a conflict rooted deeply in identity, rights, and historical injustice.

Human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Minority Rights Group International, and the Kurdish Human Rights Watch (KHRW) continue to monitor and report on the situation, advocating for an end to abuses and the protection of Kurdish rights.[12] Addressing these long-standing human rights issues and socio-economic disparities is considered essential for any sustainable peace and reconciliation in Turkey.

Section IV: The Kurdish Experience in Iraq: The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

The Kurds in Iraq have carved out the most significant degree of formal self-governance among Kurdish populations in the Middle East, culminating in the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Their journey has been marked by decades of rebellion, immense suffering, and pivotal geopolitical shifts.

A. Path to Autonomy: From Rebellions to the Establishment of the KRG

The pursuit of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq has a long and often bloody history, characterized by persistent rebellions against successive Iraqi regimes that largely denied Kurdish political and cultural rights.[26] One of the most prominent early figures in this struggle was Mullah Mustafa Barzani, who founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1946 and led significant armed uprisings against the central government in Baghdad throughout the 1960s.[39] These revolts

aimed to secure self-rule and recognition for the Kurdish people.

In 1970, a landmark agreement was reached between the Iraqi government (then under Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, with Saddam Hussein as a rising figure) and the Kurdish leadership, which formally promised autonomy to the Kurds.[26] This agreement, mediated in part by the Soviet Union [66], was seen as a major breakthrough. However, it was never fully or genuinely implemented by the Baathist regime, which gradually eroded its provisions. Disagreements over the extent of the autonomous region (particularly concerning the oil-rich Kirkuk province) and the sincerity of Baghdad's commitment led to renewed conflict by 1974.[26] The Kurdish revolt suffered a devastating blow in 1975 with the signing of the Algiers Accord between Iraq and Iran. In this agreement, Iran, which had been a key supporter of Barzani's rebellion, agreed to cease its aid in exchange for territorial concessions from Iraq along the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Deprived of Iranian support, the Kurdish movement collapsed.[39] This period also saw the formation of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975, founded by Jalal Talabani and other intellectuals, partly in response to the KDP's setback and offering an alternative vision for the Kurdish struggle.[39]

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) provided both an opportunity for renewed Kurdish insurgency and a pretext for unprecedented brutality by Saddam Hussein's regime against the Kurdish population. Viewing the Kurds as collaborators with Iran, the Iraqi government unleashed a genocidal campaign known as the Anfal. Between 1987 and 1989, an estimated 180,000 Kurdish civilians were systematically killed, thousands of villages (around 4,000 out of 5,000) were razed to the ground, and vast numbers of people were forcibly displaced.[3] The Anfal campaign culminated in the infamous chemical weapons attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja in March 1988, where approximately 5,000 civilians were killed in a single day.[3]

The turning point for Iraqi Kurds came in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. Following Iraq's defeat in Kuwait, popular uprisings erupted across Iraq, including in the Kurdish north. Saddam Hussein's regime responded with brutal force, leading to a massive refugee crisis as hundreds of thousands of Kurds fled towards the borders with Turkey and Iran. In response to this humanitarian catastrophe and to prevent further atrocities, the United States and its allies established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq (north of the 36th parallel).[2] This intervention effectively created a safe haven, allowing the Kurds to establish de facto autonomy, free from Baghdad's direct control.

Within this protected zone, the Iraqi Kurdistan Front, an alliance of major Kurdish political parties, organized parliamentary and presidential elections in May 1992. These elections led to the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the first formal Kurdish self-governing entity in Iraq.[9] The KRG's autonomy was further solidified and officially recognized within Iraq's federal structure following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which overthrew Saddam Hussein. The new Iraqi constitution, ratified in a national referendum in 2005, formally acknowledged the KRG as a semi-autonomous federal region with its own parliament, government, and security forces (Peshmerga).[2]

The establishment and formal recognition of the KRG represent the most significant achievement of Kurdish aspirations for self-governance in the contemporary Middle East. It has provided a degree of security, cultural expression, and political participation for Iraqi

Kurds that is largely unmatched for Kurdish populations in neighboring countries. However, this autonomy was born from a confluence of decades of internal Kurdish resilience and armed struggle, often at immense human cost, and critical external interventions at key geopolitical junctures. This dual genesis underscores both the KRG's inherent strengths, such as its battle-hardened Peshmerga forces and a strong sense of national identity, and its inherent vulnerabilities, including a degree of dependence on external patrons and susceptibility to the shifting tides of regional power dynamics and the policies of the central government in Baghdad.

B. Governance, Political Dynamics (KDP-PUK), and Internal Challenges

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) operates as a parliamentary democracy within the federal framework of Iraq.[67] Its governance structure includes a unicameral parliament, the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, which originally had 111 seats (though this has been subject to legal challenges regarding minority representation [68]); an elected President of the Kurdistan Region, who serves as head of state and commander-in-chief of the Peshmerga; and a Prime Minister and Council of Ministers (cabinet) accountable to the parliament.[9] A provisional constitution for the Kurdistan Region was drafted in 1996 and has guided its governance, although a fully ratified permanent constitution has remained an ongoing project.[67]

The political landscape of the KRG has been overwhelmingly dominated by two major parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), historically led by the Barzani family, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), founded by Jalal Talabani and historically associated with his family.[3] While these parties were allies in the Iraqi Kurdistan Front that established the KRG, their deep-seated rivalry and competition for power and resources led to a devastating intra-Kurdish civil war from 1994 to 1998.[3] This conflict resulted in the de facto division of the KRG into two separate administrations: one controlled by the KDP in Erbil and Dohuk provinces, and another by the PUK in Sulaymaniyah province.[3] The civil war was eventually ended by the US-brokered Washington Agreement in 1998, leading to a unified KRG administration.[3]

Despite the formal unification, the legacy of the civil war and the underlying partisan divisions have continued to pose significant internal challenges to the KRG's stability and effectiveness. Factionalism persists, with the KDP and PUK maintaining distinct zones of influence (often referred to as the "yellow zone" for KDP and "green zone" for PUK) and separate Peshmerga forces that have not been fully unified under the command of the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.[69] This lack of complete security sector integration and persistent partisan control over resources and patronage networks has hampered governance, weakened the KRG's negotiating position with Baghdad on critical issues such as oil revenue sharing and disputed territories, and occasionally led to political crises.[71] The inconclusive results of the KRG's October 2024 parliamentary elections, for example, and subsequent difficulties in forming a new government, highlighted these enduring tensions and the potential for renewed political fragmentation.[70] These internal divisions represent a primary vulnerability for the KRG, often exploited by external actors and undermining its capacity to act as a cohesive and effective autonomous region.

The KRG's legal jurisdiction initially covered the provinces of Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah. However, following the collapse of the Iraqi army in northern Iraq during the ISIS offensive in 2014, Peshmerga forces took control of additional territories, including the oil-rich Kirkuk province and parts of Nineveh and Diyala provinces, which are claimed by both Erbil and Baghdad.[26] The status of these "disputed territories" remains a major point of contention between the KRG and the federal Iraqi government, with Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which outlines a process for resolving their status, yet to be fully implemented.

C. The KRG's Relationship with Baghdad: Oil, Budget, and Sovereignty

The relationship between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government in Baghdad has been consistently fraught with tension, primarily revolving around the control and export of oil, the sharing of national revenues (budget allocations), and the precise extent of the KRG's sovereignty within the Iraqi federal system.[9] These disputes are not merely technical or economic; they touch upon fundamental questions of power, resource distribution, and the interpretation of Iraq's federal constitution.

Oil and Gas Resources: The KRG administers territories rich in oil and natural gas, and the independent development and export of these resources have been a cornerstone of its economic strategy and a major assertion of its autonomy.[35] The KRG has signed numerous production-sharing contracts with international oil companies and, for a significant period, exported crude oil independently via a pipeline through Turkey to the port of Ceyhan.[35] Baghdad has consistently viewed these independent exports and contracts as unconstitutional, arguing that all oil revenues should be managed centrally by the federal government and the state-owned State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO).[35] The KRG, conversely, has cited Article 112 of the Iraqi Constitution, which allows for the management of current oil fields in cooperation with the federal government and implies regional authority over new discoveries, to justify its actions.[35] The oil sector accounts for over 80% of the KRG's revenue, making these disputes existential for its economy.[35]

Budget Allocations and Revenue Sharing: The Iraqi constitution stipulates a share of the national budget for the KRG. However, the actual disbursement of these funds has been erratic and a constant source of conflict. Baghdad has frequently withheld or reduced budget transfers, accusing the KRG of not remitting its agreed-upon share of oil and non-oil revenues to the federal treasury.35 The KRG, in turn, has accused Baghdad of unfairly reducing its allocated share and using budget payments as political leverage.35 This has led to recurring fiscal crises in the KRG, most notably the inability to consistently pay salaries to its large public sector workforce, causing widespread discontent and protests.36

A major escalation occurred in March 2023 when an international arbitration ruling by the International Chamber of Commerce (in a case brought by Iraq against Turkey regarding KRG oil exports) led to the suspension of the KRG's independent oil exports via the Turkish pipeline.35 This dealt a severe blow to the KRG's finances. Subsequent negotiations led to a new agreement in 2024 aimed at resolving these disputes, under which the KRG would remit oil revenues to Baghdad in exchange for more predictable budget allocations. However, implementation has been fraught with challenges, and large-scale oil exports from the region

had not fully resumed as of early-mid 2025.35

Sovereignty and Legal Disputes: Beyond oil and budget, broader issues of sovereignty persist. Iraq's Federal Supreme Court (FSC) has issued several rulings that the KRG perceives as undermining its autonomy. These include decisions deeming the KRG's 2007 oil and gas law unconstitutional and, more recently, altering the KRG's election law by deeming minority quota seats in the Kurdistan Parliament unconstitutional.[68] These legal challenges from Baghdad are seen by Erbil as attempts to centralize power and roll back Kurdish federal rights.

Recent Escalations (2025): Tensions remained high into 2025. In May-June, Kurdish political parties threatened to withdraw from the federal government in Baghdad over the continued impasse on unpaid salaries and oil revenue disputes.[36] The KRG's signing of new oil and gas exploration contracts with US companies in May 2025 further strained relations, with Baghdad viewing these deals as a provocation and initiating legal proceedings against them.[36]

The KRG's economic viability and political stability are thus intrinsically tied to its complex and often adversarial relationship with the federal government. While its oil resources provide a potential path to prosperity and a degree of leverage, its landlocked geography (requiring cooperation from neighbors like Turkey for export routes) and its constitutional entanglement within the Iraqi federal system create significant vulnerabilities. This dynamic forces the KRG into a perpetual balancing act: asserting its autonomous rights while simultaneously needing to secure a functional fiscal relationship with Baghdad to ensure its survival and the well-being of its population. The ongoing disputes reflect not just competing economic interests but also fundamentally different visions of federalism and resource control in post-Saddam Iraq.

D. Socio-Economic Profile and Human Rights

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has, since gaining de facto autonomy in 1991 and formal recognition in 2005, made notable strides in socio-economic development and establishing governance structures, though significant challenges persist, often exacerbated by conflict and disputes with Baghdad.

Socio-Economic Conditions:

The KRG has actively pursued economic development, with a primary focus on its significant oil and gas reserves. Efforts have also been directed towards diversifying the economy through sectors like tourism, agriculture, and fostering private sector growth, attracting considerable foreign investment despite regional instability.35 In 2012, the KRG's Human Development Index (HDI) was reported at 0.750, which would have ranked it 73rd globally if it were an independent country, notably higher than Iraq's overall HDI of 0.694 at the time. Key indicators from that period showed a per capita income (PPP) in the KRG of $22,783 compared to $12,783 for Iraq as a whole, and a life expectancy of 71 years versus 69 for Iraq.75

However, the region's economy remains heavily reliant on oil revenues (over 80%) and thus susceptible to global price fluctuations and, critically, the political relationship with Baghdad.35 The ongoing disputes over budget allocations and oil revenue sharing have led to severe economic strains, including frequent delays in paying public sector salaries, which

form a substantial part of the KRG's economy.35 Conflicts, such as the war against ISIS, also placed immense burdens on the KRG's resources, leading to a large population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking refuge in the region.3

As of 2023, UN data for Iraq indicated that 2.5 million people required urgent food and livelihood assistance, and 1.2 million remained internally displaced.76 Youth unemployment is a particularly significant challenge within the KRG, driven by factors such as over-reliance on the petroleum industry, a mismatch between education and labor market needs, and dependence on public sector employment.77 While Iraq's overall poverty rate reportedly declined in 2023 78, regional disparities and vulnerabilities within the KRI likely persist, necessitating ongoing social safety net programs, some supported by international bodies like the World Bank.79

Human Rights:

The KRG's provisional constitution and subsequent legislation aim to uphold civil rights, including for women and ethnic and religious minorities.3 The region is home to diverse communities, including Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Turkmen, Yazidis, and others, whose rights to representation and cultural expression are, in principle, protected. The KRG has a National Human Rights Action Plan (2021–2025) and has been engaging with international partners like the European Union on initiatives related to human rights, good governance, anti-trafficking measures, and media freedom.80

However, challenges remain. The legacy of Saddam Hussein's regime saw severe repression of groups like the Faili Kurds (a Shi'a Kurdish community), who faced deportations and denial of citizenship; while their situation has improved, some continue to face vulnerabilities.26 The KRG has also faced scrutiny from human rights organizations regarding issues such as freedom of expression, treatment of journalists and activists, and conditions in detention facilities, particularly in the context of counter-terrorism efforts. The fight against ISIS and the subsequent displacement crisis also brought significant human rights challenges related to the protection of civilians, IDPs, and those suspected of affiliation with extremist groups.

The KRG's socio-economic development and its human rights record are intrinsically linked to its security environment and political stability. Periods of heightened conflict or intense political disputes with Baghdad directly impact economic progress, divert resources from development and social services, and can exacerbate human rights challenges, such as those related to IDPs or strained public services. Conversely, greater economic stability and improved governance can bolster the KRG's resilience against both internal and external pressures, contributing to a more secure and rights-respecting environment for its diverse population. The ability of the KRG to manage these interconnected issues is crucial for its long-term legitimacy and the well-being of its citizens.

E. KRG's Foreign Relations and Regional Role

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) navigates a complex and often precarious set of foreign relations, balancing its aspirations for greater autonomy and international recognition with the geopolitical realities of a turbulent Middle East. Its interactions are shaped by its landlocked position, economic dependencies, internal political dynamics, and the security concerns of its powerful neighbors: Turkey and Iran, as well as its constitutional relationship

with the federal government in Baghdad and its ties with international powers like the United States.

Relations with Turkey:

The KRG's relationship with Turkey is multifaceted and marked by both cooperation and tension. Economically, Turkey is a vital partner, serving as the primary conduit for KRG oil exports to international markets via the pipeline to Ceyhan.35 This has fostered close ties, particularly between Ankara and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which controls the territory through which the pipeline runs. However, Turkey's deep-seated security concerns regarding the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it considers a terrorist organization and which maintains bases in the mountainous regions of the KRG, are a major source of friction.31

Turkey frequently conducts military operations, including air and ground incursions, against PKK targets within KRG territory.31 These operations, while often tacitly tolerated or even supported by the KDP, are condemned by Baghdad as violations of Iraqi sovereignty and can strain relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which Turkey perceives as being more tolerant of PKK activities in its areas of influence, particularly in Sulaymaniyah.69 Turkey has, at times, imposed measures like flight bans to Sulaymaniyah to pressure the PUK.69 The recent (May 2025) decision by the PKK to disband, if fully implemented, has the potential to significantly transform these dynamics, possibly reducing a major irritant in Turkey-KRG relations and Turkey-Iraq relations more broadly.58

Relations with Iran:

Iran wields considerable influence within Iraq, including in the Kurdistan Region, primarily through its historical and political ties with the PUK, as well as various Shia political factions in Baghdad.58 Iran also shares a long border with the KRG and is a significant trading partner.74 However, similar to Turkey, Iran has major security concerns regarding Iranian Kurdish opposition groups—such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Komala, and PJAK (the PKK's Iranian affiliate)—that have historically maintained bases in KRG territory.39 Iran has conducted cross-border military strikes, including missile and drone attacks, against the bases of these groups.39 A security agreement between Iran and Iraq in 2023 has put pressure on Baghdad and Erbil to disarm and relocate these Iranian Kurdish groups away from the border.85 The KRG thus has to perform a delicate balancing act, maintaining economic and political ties with Tehran while managing Iranian security demands.

Relations with Syrian Kurds (AANES/Rojava):

The KRG's relationship with the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), often referred to as Rojava, has been complex and at times strained. Ideological differences exist, with the KDP (dominant in KRG) generally aligning with more conservative nationalism and maintaining ties with Turkey, while the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the leading political force in AANES, is ideologically aligned with the PKK's democratic confederalism and viewed with hostility by Ankara.87 These differences have led to border closures and political tensions. However, there is also a shared sense of Kurdish identity and common challenges. Recent high-level meetings between KRG officials, including President Nechirvan Barzani, and AANES representatives in late 2024 and early 2025 indicate efforts to strengthen Kurdish unity, coordinate responses to regional threats like ISIS, and discuss

Kurdish participation in the evolving Syrian political landscape following the fall of the Assad regime.87

Relations with the United States:

The United States has been a crucial international partner for the KRG. The US-led no-fly zone in 1991 was instrumental in the KRG's establishment, and US support was vital in the fight against ISIS, with Peshmerga forces playing a key role on the ground.2 The US maintains a consulate in Erbil and provides security assistance and training to the Peshmerga. However, KRG leaders have at times expressed feelings of abandonment by the US, particularly when US policy appears to prioritize relations with Baghdad or Ankara over Kurdish interests.71 US policy generally aims to support a strong KRG within a unified, federal Iraq, encouraging dialogue and resolution of disputes between Erbil and Baghdad.90 Recent US energy company investments in the KRG in May 2025, despite Baghdad's objections, signal continued US economic and strategic interest in the region.74

Relations with other International Actors:

The European Union engages with the KRG on issues of human rights, good governance, humanitarian aid, and regional stability, maintaining a liaison office in Erbil.80 Russia also has historical ties with Iraqi Kurds, dating back to the Soviet era's support for Mullah Mustafa Barzani, and continues to engage with the KRG, balancing its interests in the wider region.60

The KRG's foreign relations are thus a complex tapestry woven from economic necessities, security imperatives, ideological affinities and differences, and the overarching quest for preserving its autonomy and advancing Kurdish interests. Its strategic location, oil wealth, and role in regional security (particularly against extremist groups like ISIS) grant it a degree of geopolitical significance. However, its internal KDP-PUK divisions, economic vulnerabilities tied to oil exports and Baghdad's budget, and its landlocked position surrounded by powerful and often wary neighbors, mean that the KRG frequently operates as both a pivot and a pawn in the larger geopolitical chessboard of the Middle East. Its foreign policy is, therefore, a continuous exercise in navigating these competing pressures and opportunities.

Section V: The Kurds in Iran: A Century of Struggle

The experience of Kurds in Iran, while sharing common threads of aspiration for cultural recognition and self-governance with Kurds in other parts of the Middle East, has been uniquely shaped by Iran's distinct historical trajectory, its predominantly Shia religious identity, and the specific nature of its state structures.

A. Historical Overview: From Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic

The relationship between the Iranian state and its Kurdish population has fluctuated significantly over time, influenced by the prevailing political ideologies and the state's approach to ethnic and religious diversity.

- **Qajar Empire (late 18th century - 1925):** During the Qajar dynasty, Iranian societal and political identification was largely based on religious affiliation, with Shia Islam being the dominant and state-endorsed sect.[4] Within this framework, Kurds, who are predominantly Sunni but also include a significant Shia minority (especially Feyli Kurds

and those in Khorasan), were generally treated as part of the broader Muslim majority.[4] Consequently, they often enjoyed extensive citizenship rights and were not subjected to the same pressures of ethnic assimilation seen elsewhere. Kurdish tribal leaders and notables could attain prominent military, political, and diplomatic positions within the Qajar state, often in exchange for ensuring security in their regions, without being forced to deny their Kurdish ethnicity or cultural practices.[4] The nationalist reform movement that emerged in Iran in the late 19th and early 20th centuries also developed a concept of Iranian identity that was not exclusively defined as ethnically Persian, which initially benefited the Kurds.[4]

- Pahlavi Era (1925-1979): The rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi and the establishment of a centralized, modernizing monarchy brought a significant shift. The Pahlavi dynasty promoted an exclusionary Iranian nationalism based on a secular, ethnically Persian identity.4 This led to the suppression of non-Persian cultural expressions, including the Kurdish language, which was banned in public administration and education.4 Despite this, Kurds were sometimes afforded a somewhat special position in the official ethnic-based nationalism due to their perceived cultural and linguistic proximity to Persians (both being Iranian peoples) and their non-Arab identity.4
  A pivotal moment during this era was the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad in 1946.4 This short-lived Kurdish republic, centered in the city of Mahabad in northwestern Iran, was declared by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) under the leadership of Qazi Muhammad. It received backing from the Soviet Union, which occupied parts of northern Iran at the time. However, the Mahabad Republic was small, unable to incorporate all Iranian Kurdish territories or gain widespread tribal support beyond its immediate vicinity. It collapsed within a year after Soviet forces withdrew from Iran, and the Iranian army reasserted control, leading to the execution of its leaders.4 The post-Mahabad period saw a decline in overt Kurdish political influence, with the state co-opting tribal leadership and land reforms in the 1960s diminishing the power of traditional Kurdish landowners.19
- Islamic Republic (1979-Present): The 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah initially raised hopes among Iranian Kurds for greater autonomy and recognition of their rights.39 Kurdish political groups, including the KDPI and Komala, were active during the revolution. However, these hopes were quickly dashed as the new theocratic regime, under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, consolidated power and established a state based on a conservative interpretation of Shia Islam.4
  Khomeini declared a "holy war" (jihad) against Kurdish groups demanding autonomy in August 1979, and warned that any attempts at independence would be met with the harshest response.19 A widespread Kurdish rebellion ensued in 1979, involving the KDPI, Komala, and other factions, but it was forcibly suppressed by the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guards, resulting in significant casualties and displacement.4
  Under the Islamic Republic, Sunni Kurds, in particular, have faced exclusion from many government positions and continued cultural and political repression, as the state's identity became more narrowly defined by Shia Islam.4 The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

further complicated the situation, with Kurdish areas along the border becoming battlegrounds and both states attempting to manipulate Kurdish groups in the neighboring country.19

The historical trajectory of Iranian Kurds thus reveals a complex interplay of religious and ethnic identity politics. During periods when the Iranian state's identity was more broadly defined by Islam (as under the Qajars), Muslim Kurds found avenues for inclusion. However, when the state prioritized a more exclusive Persian ethnic nationalism (Pahlavis) or a specific Shia sectarian nationalism (Islamic Republic), Sunni Kurds and those asserting a distinct Kurdish ethno-national identity faced heightened repression. This dynamic distinguishes the Iranian Kurdish experience from that of Kurds in Turkey (dominated by Turkish ethnic nationalism) or Baathist Iraq and Syria (Arab nationalism).

B. Kurdish Political Organizations (KDPI, Komala, PJAK) and Armed Resistance

The struggle for Kurdish rights and autonomy in Iran has been spearheaded by several political organizations, some of which have engaged in armed resistance against the central government. These groups have faced severe repression but have persisted in various forms.

- **Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI or PDKI):** Established in 1945 by Qazi Muhammad, the KDPI is one of the oldest Kurdish political parties in Iran.[85] It was the leading force behind the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946.[43] Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the KDPI was a major participant in the Kurdish rebellion for autonomy, which was brutally suppressed.[19] The party has since operated largely from exile, primarily in Iraqi Kurdistan. Its leaders have been targets of assassination, most notably Abdol Rahman Ghassemlou in Vienna in 1989, and his successor Sadegh Sharafkandi in Berlin in 1992, attacks widely attributed to Iranian state agents.[19] While the KDPI has a history of armed struggle, it has also reportedly expressed a willingness to pursue a federal solution for Iran through political means.[19] However, sporadic clashes between its peshmerga forces and Iranian security forces have continued.[94] Along with other Iranian Kurdish opposition groups, the KDPI has faced increased pressure from a 2023 security pact between Iran and Iraq, which mandates the disarmament and relocation of these groups from the border areas within Iraqi Kurdistan.[85]
- **Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala):** Emerging around the time of the 1979 revolution, Komala initially had Marxist-Leninist leanings and was also a key player in the post-revolutionary Kurdish uprising.[19] The party has since undergone several splits. One prominent faction, led by Abdullah Mohtadi, has reportedly renounced armed struggle and is actively seeking international engagement, including with the United States, to support democratic change in Iran and achieve a form of self-rule for Iranian Kurds, envisioning a united Kurdish front and drawing inspiration from models like the KRG in Iraq and AANES in Syria.[94] This faction of Komala has been involved in promoting civil disobedience and played a role in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protest movement that

erupted in 2022, sparked by the death in custody of Mahsa Jina Amini, an Iranian Kurdish woman.[85] Like the KDPI, Komala factions are primarily based in Iraqi Kurdistan and are affected by the Iran-Iraq security agreement.[86]

- Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK - Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê): Founded in 2004, PJAK is widely considered the Iranian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and shares its ideology of democratic confederalism.4 PJAK's stated aim is to achieve an autonomous Kurdish region within a federal Iranian state.85 It has engaged in an intermittent armed struggle against Iranian security forces, operating from bases in the mountainous border regions of Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly the Qandil Mountains, which also serve as PKK headquarters.43
  Following the PKK's announcement in May 2025 that it would disband its organizational structure and end its armed struggle against Turkey, PJAK's stance became a subject of keen interest. Initially, on May 13, 2025, PJAK issued a statement endorsing the PKK's decision as the "right path" for the current stage, emphasizing a continued struggle within a political and democratic framework.85 However, about a week later, PJAK co-chairman Amir Karimi clarified that PJAK "will neither lay down arms nor dissolve ourselves." He asserted that the PKK's decision was its own and did not apply to PJAK, while reiterating that PJAK has maintained a ceasefire since 2011 and its weapons are for "self-defence," not "classical national armed struggle".85 This position suggests PJAK intends to maintain its operational capacity, potentially as a strategic asset for the broader PKK-aligned movement or as a latent force, even if its direct military engagement with Iran remains limited.

These Iranian Kurdish organizations, despite their differing ideologies and strategies, represent the main vehicles for Kurdish political and, at times, military expression in Iran. Their reliance on bases in Iraqi Kurdistan has been a critical factor for their survival but also a significant vulnerability. This "external bastion" in Iraqi Kurdistan has allowed them to continue their activities away from the direct daily repression of the Iranian state, but it has also made them targets for Iranian cross-border military operations and subjects of diplomatic pressure by Tehran on both the KRG and the federal government in Baghdad. The 2023 Iran-Iraq security pact, aimed at disarming and relocating these groups from border areas, underscores this precarious situation, highlighting how their fate is often intertwined with the complex regional dynamics and the KRG's own constrained foreign policy options.

C. Iranian State Policies: Repression, Cultural Rights, and Socio-Economic Conditions

The policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards its Kurdish population have been characterized by a combination of severe repression of political dissent and cultural expression, systemic discrimination, and socio-economic neglect in Kurdish-majority regions.
Repression and Human Rights Violations:
Human rights organizations have consistently documented widespread and systematic violations against Kurds in Iran. These include:

- **Discrimination:** Kurds, particularly Sunni Kurds, face systemic discrimination in access

to education, employment (especially in the public sector), adequate housing, and political office.[19]

- **Suppression of Fundamental Freedoms:** The rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly are severely curtailed. Kurdish activists, journalists, lawyers, teachers, and cultural figures who advocate for Kurdish rights or criticize state policies are frequently subjected to arbitrary arrest, interrogation, harassment, and unjust prosecution on vaguely defined national security charges.[19]
- **Detention, Torture, and Unfair Trials:** Arbitrary detention, often incommunicado and without access to legal counsel, is common. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including to extract forced "confessions" (sometimes aired on state television), are reported to be widespread and systematic.[96] Trials, especially in Revolutionary Courts, consistently fall short of international fair trial standards.[96] Several prisoners have died in custody under suspicious circumstances, with credible reports of torture and denial of medical care.[73]
- **Death Penalty:** Iran has one of the highest rates of execution in the world, and a disproportionate number of those executed or on death row for political or security-related offenses are reported to be Kurds.[19] In 2023 alone, the Hengaw Organization for Human Rights documented 901 executions in Iran, including 183 Kurds; 13 of the total were executed for political or religious activities.[73] The UN Human Rights Council's Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, whose mandate was expanded in April 2025 to investigate ongoing serious human rights violations beyond the 2022 protests, continues to scrutinize these practices.[101]
- **Targeting of *Kulbars*:** Unarmed Kurdish cross-border couriers, known as *kulbars*, who transport goods across the treacherous Iran-Iraq and Iran-Turkey borders due to a lack of other employment opportunities, are frequently targeted by Iranian border guards and security forces. Many *kulbars* are killed or severely injured each year by direct fire, with little to no accountability for the perpetrators.[19] In 2023, 339 *kulbars* were reported killed or injured, with 81% of these incidents attributed to Iranian armed forces.[73] This phenomenon is a stark indicator of the extreme economic hardship and lack of viable livelihoods in the Kurdish border regions, forcing individuals into perilous work, and the state's response often treats them as security threats rather than addressing the underlying socio-economic causes.

Cultural and Linguistic Rights:

Despite Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution, which permits the use of regional and ethnic languages in the press and mass media, and for teaching their literature in schools (alongside Persian), its implementation has been severely lacking, especially in education.19

- Persian remains the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary public schools across Iran, including in Kurdish-majority areas.[4] Demands for mother-tongue education in Kurdish have been consistently ignored or suppressed.
- In February 2025, the Iranian Parliament rejected a proposal to introduce the teaching of non-Persian languages in schools, with opponents arguing it could undermine national unity, particularly in border regions where ethnic minorities are concentrated.[22]

- While some Kurdish publications and broadcasts are tolerated, they operate under strict state control and censorship.[8] In 2014, reports indicated bans on Kurdish-language publications and penalties for journalists criticizing government policies.[19]
- Restrictions on choosing Kurdish names for children have also been reported.[19]

Socio-Economic Conditions:
Kurdish-majority provinces in western and northwestern Iran are among the most economically underdeveloped and impoverished regions in the country.19 This is attributed to decades of systematic neglect, under-investment by the central government, and discriminatory policies that limit economic opportunities.19

- Unemployment rates in Kurdish regions are consistently among the highest in Iran.[37] Industrial projects are often limited or prohibited, and the profits from natural resources extracted from Kurdish areas (such as oil and gold) reportedly do not significantly benefit local communities.[37]
- Kurds often experience poor housing conditions, and there have been reports of forced resettlement and expropriation of rural land for large-scale agricultural or industrial projects, which can also lead to environmental degradation.[19] Environmental policies, such as water resource diversion, have also negatively impacted Kurdish areas, contributing to issues like the drying of Lake Urmia.[37]
- While Iran's overall national poverty rate saw a decrease between 2020 and 2022 (from 29.3% to 21.9% using the $6.85/day upper-middle-income poverty line) [103], significant regional disparities persist, with Kurdish areas often bearing a disproportionate burden of poverty and lack of opportunity. The Iranian Majlis Research Center reported that the national poverty rate had been increasing since 2006, exceeding 30% by 2021.[102] Factors contributing to poverty in Iran include mismanagement, sanctions, conflict, low education levels, lack of jobs, corruption, and unequal distribution of resources.[102]

The combination of political repression, denial of cultural and linguistic rights, and severe socio-economic marginalization has created a deeply challenging environment for Kurds in Iran, fueling long-standing grievances and contributing to the persistence of Kurdish opposition movements. The Iranian government's approach has largely prioritized security and centralization over addressing the root causes of Kurdish discontent.

Section VI: The Kurds in Syria: Emergence of Rojava/AANES

The Kurdish experience in Syria has been marked by decades of marginalization and denial of rights under Baathist rule, followed by a dramatic shift during the Syrian Civil War, which allowed for the emergence of a de facto autonomous Kurdish-led region in the north and northeast, known as Rojava or the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The recent overthrow of the Assad regime in December 2024 has ushered in a new period of uncertainty and negotiation for Syrian Kurds.

A. Historical Context: Repression under Baathist Rule and the Syrian

Civil War

Kurds constitute the largest ethnic minority in Syria, with a population of around 2 to 2.5 million, primarily concentrated in three main areas: the Jazira region in the northeast (Al-Hasakah Governorate), the area around Kobanî (Ayn al-Arab), and the Kurd Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds) region around Afrin, northwest of Aleppo.[33] While some Kurdish communities, like those in Kurd Dagh, have a centuries-long presence and are more assimilated, a significant portion of the Kurdish population in Jazira consists of descendants of those who fled persecution in Turkey during the 1920s.[33]

Repression under Baathist Rule (1963-2011):

Following the Baath Party's rise to power in 1963, Syrian Kurds faced systematic discrimination and repression aimed at Arabization and the denial of their distinct ethnic identity.4

- **Denial of Citizenship:** A particularly egregious measure was the exceptional census conducted in Al-Hasakah Governorate in 1962, which arbitrarily stripped approximately 120,000 Kurds (around 20% of the Syrian Kurdish population at the time) of their Syrian citizenship, rendering them stateless (*ajanib*, or foreigners).[32] Their descendants, numbering around 300,000 by 2011, were also denied citizenship and basic rights, including the right to own property, access state employment, vote, or legally marry.[33] Another category, the *maktumin* (unregistered), had no official records at all.[33]
- **Linguistic and Cultural Suppression:** The Kurdish language was banned in official use and education. Kurdish cultural expressions, names, and place names were suppressed, and Kurdish political activism was treated as a security threat.[4]
- **Land Policies:** The government implemented policies aimed at altering the demographic makeup of Kurdish regions, including the "Arab Belt" plan in the 1970s, which sought to settle Arabs in Kurdish areas along the Turkish border, though it was only partially implemented.[33] Decree 49 in 2008 aimed to evict inhabitants from border areas, disproportionately affecting Kurds who were already restricted from property ownership.[33]
- **Political Repression:** Kurdish political parties were banned, and activists faced arrest, imprisonment, and torture. Public celebrations like Nowruz were often met with violent crackdowns.[33] The Qamishli riots in 2004, sparked by clashes at a football match, saw security forces kill dozens of Kurdish protesters, leading to widespread unrest.[33] The assassination of Kurdish cleric Sheikh Mohammed Mashouq al-Khaznawi in 2005, attributed to security forces, further inflamed tensions.[33]

The Syrian Civil War and the Rise of Kurdish Autonomy:

The outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, and the subsequent descent into civil war, created a power vacuum in Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria. As the Assad regime withdrew its forces from these regions to focus on fighting rebels elsewhere, Kurdish groups, primarily the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), seized the opportunity to establish control.4

In April 2011, in an attempt to placate the Kurdish population and prevent them from fully joining the broader uprising, Bashar al-Assad issued Decree No. 49, granting citizenship to

many of the ajanib Kurds in Al-Hasakah.33 However, this move was met with skepticism by many Kurds, as it often involved security interviews and potential military conscription, and it did not address the status of the maktumin.33

The PYD, ideologically aligned with Abdullah Öcalan's democratic confederalism, declared de facto autonomy in several "cantons" (Jazira, Kobanî, and Afrin) starting in 2012-2014, an entity that came to be known as Rojava (Western Kurdistan).33 This administration later evolved into the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES or DAANES), which expanded to include Arab-majority areas captured from ISIS.4

The YPG, and later the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which it leads, became a crucial partner for the US-led international coalition in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS).31 Their military successes against ISIS, particularly in battles like Kobanî, earned them international recognition but also drew the ire of Turkey, which views the YPG/PYD as an extension of the PKK and a threat to its national security.31 Turkey launched several military incursions into northern Syria (e.g., Afrin in 2018, Operation Peace Spring in 2019) to push Kurdish forces from its border and establish a "safe zone," leading to significant displacement of Kurdish populations and accusations of demographic change.31

The Syrian Civil War thus fundamentally altered the status of Syrian Kurds, transforming them from a repressed minority into a significant political and military actor controlling roughly a third of Syrian territory, including most of the country's oil and agricultural resources.[89] This newfound autonomy, however, remained unrecognized by the Assad regime and was under constant threat from Turkey and other regional actors.

B. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES/Rojava): Governance and Ideology

The de facto autonomous region established by Kurdish groups and their allies in northern and northeastern Syria, known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also referred to as Rojava (Western Kurdistan), represents a unique experiment in governance in the war-torn country. Its development and ideological underpinnings are heavily influenced by the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK.

Governance Model and Ideology:

The AANES operates on the principles of "democratic confederalism," an ideology that rejects the traditional nation-state model in favor of a decentralized system of grassroots democracy, gender equality, ecological sustainability, and ethnic and religious pluralism.4 This framework aims to achieve self-rule and cultural rights within the existing borders of Syria, rather than seeking outright secession to form an independent Kurdish state.42

The governance structure of AANES is based on a multi-layered system of communes, councils, and assemblies, with an emphasis on direct citizen participation and co-presidency (one male, one female) at various levels of leadership to ensure gender equality.105 The administration has made significant efforts to include the diverse ethnic and religious communities within the territories it controls, including Arabs, Syriac-Assyrian Christians, Turkmen, Armenians, and Yazidis.33 This is reflected in its official use of multiple languages;

Kurdish (Kurmanji dialect), Arabic, and Syriac (Aramaic) have been adopted as official languages in the regions under its administration.33
Education has been a key area of reform, with the AANES introducing curricula that allow for mother-tongue instruction in Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac, a stark contrast to the previous Baathist regime's policy of exclusive Arabic-language education and suppression of minority languages.24 As of early 2025, over 700,000 students were reportedly learning in their mother tongue in AANES schools.24 The AANES has also established its own universities.24
The military arm of AANES is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of militias led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), but also including significant Arab, Assyrian/Syriac, and other ethnic components.107 The SDF has been the primary ground partner for the US-led coalition against ISIS in Syria.45
Challenges and Criticisms:
Despite its progressive ideals, the AANES has faced numerous challenges and criticisms. These include accusations of authoritarian tendencies by the dominant PYD, restrictions on political opposition, forced conscription, and difficulties in providing services and managing resources in a war-ravaged environment with limited international recognition and ongoing external threats.33 The administration has also had to manage vast detention camps like Al-Hol and Roj, holding tens of thousands of ISIS suspects and their families, a significant humanitarian and security burden.113 Turkey's persistent hostility and military interventions have posed an existential threat, leading to displacement and instability.106 Furthermore, integrating diverse ethnic communities, particularly in Arab-majority areas captured from ISIS, into its governance model has been an ongoing process with its own set of complexities and local resistances.25
The AANES represents a significant attempt by Syrian Kurds and their allies to implement an alternative model of self-governance based on principles of decentralization, inclusivity, and democratic participation. Its survival and evolution have profound implications for the future of Syria and for Kurdish aspirations across the region.

C. Post-Assad Syria (December 2024 onwards): Negotiations and Agreements with the Interim Government

The unexpected collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 and the subsequent establishment of an interim government in Damascus, led by figures associated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other opposition factions, created a new and uncertain political landscape for Syria, including for the AANES.[34] This shift prompted urgent negotiations between the SDF/AANES leadership and the new authorities in Damascus regarding the future status of northeastern Syria and the integration of its institutions.
The March 10, 2025 Agreement:
A landmark development occurred on March 10, 2025, when SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi and Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, signed an agreement outlining the basis for integrating the AANES's civilian and military apparatus into the Syrian state.39 This agreement, reportedly facilitated with American and French involvement 122, was seen as a crucial step towards national unity and preventing further conflict. Key provisions and

principles of the eight-point agreement included 108:

- **Integration of Institutions:** Commitment to integrating all civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria (including border crossings, airports, and oil and gas fields) into the administration of the Syrian state by the end of 2025.[108]
- **Recognition of Kurdish Rights:** Recognition of the Kurdish community as an integral part of the Syrian state, ensuring their citizenship and all constitutional rights.[108]
- **National Unity and Rejection of Division:** Affirmation of Syria's unity and rejection of calls for partition, sectarian violence, or hate speech.[108]
- **Return of Displaced Persons:** Facilitating the return of all Syrians displaced during the war to their places of origin under Syrian state protection.[108]
- **Nationwide Ceasefire:** A call for a ceasefire throughout Syrian territory.[108]
- **SDF Integration:** The SDF forces were to be integrated into the Syrian army, potentially as distinct corps or divisions, rather than individual dissolution.[108]

Challenges and Diverging Interpretations:

Despite the agreement, significant challenges and diverging opinions on its implementation quickly emerged.108

- **Pace and Form of Integration:** The AANES/SDF advocated for a gradual, step-by-step integration process that would preserve a significant degree of their autonomy and existing institutions, envisioning a decentralized or federal system for Syria.[34] They sought constitutional guarantees for Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights, including Kurdish-language education, and recognition of AANES as a legitimate governance structure.[34]
- **Damascus's Stance:** The interim government in Damascus, while acknowledging past injustices against Kurds [111], emphasized national unity under a more centralized state and cautioned against federalization or partition.[108] Just three days after the March 10 agreement, on March 13, 2025, interim President al-Sharaa enacted a temporary constitution ("Constitutional Declaration") that reaffirmed Syria's identity as the "Syrian Arab Republic," established Arabic as the sole official language, and designated Islamic jurisprudence as a primary source of legislation.[106] This move was strongly criticized by the AANES and SDF's political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), as undermining the spirit of the agreement and signaling a return to exclusionary Arab nationalist and centralizing policies.[106]
- **Control of Resources:** The control over oil and gas fields in northeastern Syria, currently under SDF/AANES administration, remained a contentious issue, with Damascus aiming to restore central state authority over these vital resources.[108]
- **Ongoing Negotiations:** Specialized subcommittees were formed to oversee the implementation of the March 10 agreement, with follow-up meetings occurring.[117] Discussions in late May and early June 2025 focused on practical mechanisms for integration, education issues, and the return of IDPs, with both sides describing the talks as "positive and constructive" but acknowledging the complexity of the issues.[117] The SDF continued military training and recruitment, signaling an insistence on

maintaining its structure and a cautious approach to full integration.[126]

International Reactions:

The United States and France (representing the EU position) welcomed the March 10 agreement as a positive step towards a unified Syria and the inclusion of Kurds in the political process, noting their role in facilitating the dialogue.121 Russia's position has been more focused on preserving its own strategic interests in Syria, including its military bases, while navigating relations with the new interim government and other regional actors.116 The lifting of most US and EU economic sanctions on Syria in May 2025 was intended to support the political transition and economic recovery, contingent on credible, non-sectarian governance and respect for minority rights.132

The future political status of Syrian Kurds and the AANES remains fluid. While the March 2025 agreement provided a framework for integration, the deep-seated differences in vision for Syria's future governance—centralized versus decentralized/federal—and the pressures from regional powers, particularly Turkey's staunch opposition to any form of PKK-linked Kurdish autonomy on its border [32], continue to shape the negotiations. The Kurds' control over significant territory and resources, their battle-hardened SDF, and their international partnerships (especially with the US) provide them with leverage, but the path to a stable and rights-respecting political settlement in the new Syria is fraught with challenges.

D. Human Rights Situation and Socio-Economic Conditions in AANES Areas

The areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have experienced a unique human rights and socio-economic trajectory amidst the broader Syrian conflict and its aftermath. While the AANES has implemented progressive policies in some areas, it has also faced significant challenges and criticisms.

Human Rights:

- **Positive Developments:** The AANES has made notable strides in promoting cultural and linguistic rights for minorities, including Kurds, Syriac-Assyrians, and Arabs, by allowing mother-tongue education and recognizing multiple official languages.[24] It has also emphasized gender equality, with women playing prominent roles in governance and military structures (e.g., the YPJ).[105]
- **Violations by Autonomous Authorities:** Despite these advances, human rights organizations have documented violations by AANES authorities. Amnesty International reported in 2024 that over 56,000 people, including an estimated 30,000 children, remained in their custody in at least 27 detention facilities and two large camps (Al-Hol and Roj) due to perceived affiliation with the Islamic State (ISIS).[114] Many have been detained since 2019 under dire conditions, constituting large-scale rights violations.[114] The UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) noted in September 2024 that the SDF continued to detain political activists.[113] Child recruitment by the SDF and affiliated groups has also been a concern, despite commitments to end the practice.[113]
- **Violations by Other Actors in the Region:**
    - **Turkish Forces and Allied Syrian National Army (SNA):** Turkish military

operations and SNA factions in areas of northern Syria occupied by Turkey (such as Afrin and areas seized during Operation Peace Spring) have been responsible for serious human rights abuses, including indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, summary killings, abductions, unlawful detentions, torture, sexual violence, and violations of housing, land, and property rights, often targeting Kurdish civilians.[31] Amnesty International documented the summary killing of Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf by Ahrar al-Sharqiya (part of SNA) in 2019.[65] These actions have led to significant displacement of Kurds and accusations of demographic change.[31]

- **Former Syrian

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