The Enduring Nexus: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Kurd-Arab Relations in Kurdistan

Introduction

Kurdistan, a term evoking a rich tapestry of history, culture, and resilient people, refers to a broadly defined geo-cultural region traditionally inhabited by the Kurds. It is not a politically unified sovereign state but rather an extensive plateau and mountainous area sprawling across significant portions of what are now eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran, and smaller parts of northern Syria and Armenia.[1] The geographical heartland of the Kurds is characterized by formidable mountain systems, primarily the Zagros and the eastern extension of the Taurus ranges, a terrain that has profoundly shaped their traditional nomadic pastoralist lifestyle.[1] The very name "Kurdistan," meaning "Land of the Kurds," first appears in historical records in 11th-century Seljuk chronicles, underscoring a long historical association of this people with the territory.[2]

While the concept of Kurdistan as a cultural and ethnic homeland is ancient, its political recognition is fragmented and relatively recent. Only Iran, with its northwestern Kordestān province, and Iraq, with its constitutionally recognized autonomous Kurdistan Region, officially acknowledge internal entities by this name.[1] This discrepancy between the expansive traditional homeland and limited official recognition highlights a central theme in Kurdish history: the persistent quest for self-determination. The geographical delineation of Kurdistan itself remains a subject of contention and varying interpretations, with some cartographic representations extending its boundaries considerably, reflecting ongoing political aspirations and the unresolved nature of the Kurdish national question.[2] This inherent fluidity in the definition of "Kurdistan" is not merely a cartographic debate but a direct consequence of the Kurds' historical statelessness and their continuous struggle for recognition and self-governance within a system of nation-states that largely excluded them. The term thus signifies both a tangible ancestral homeland and an enduring political project, its perceived borders shifting with the tides of political fortune and collective ambition.

The relationship between the Kurdish people and their Arab neighbors is as ancient and complex as the history of the Middle East itself. It is a narrative that defies simple categorization, having evolved through centuries of conquest, cohabitation, strategic alliances, and periods of intense conflict. The initial Arab conquests in the 7th century brought Islam to the Kurdish mountains, a religion overwhelmingly adopted by the Kurds.[1] However, a crucial aspect of this early interaction was the widespread Kurdish retention of their distinct linguistic and cultural identity; Islamization did not equate to Arabization.[1] This dichotomy of a shared Abrahamic religious framework juxtaposed with a resilient ethnic particularism has laid

the foundation for a multifaceted relationship. Throughout history, Kurdish emirates and powerful dynasties, most notably the Ayyubids founded by Salah al-Din (Saladin), rose to prominence, at times ruling over vast Arab-majority populations and playing significant roles within the broader Islamic civilization.[11] The Ottoman era introduced new dynamics, with Kurdish emirates enjoying varying degrees of autonomy in exchange for loyalty and military service, particularly along the empire's volatile eastern frontier.[13] The 20th century marked a traumatic turning point. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent redrawing of regional maps by colonial powers led to the division of Kurdistan among newly formed nation-states, often rendering Kurds a minority within Arab-majority polities like Iraq and Syria.[15] This new political reality ushered in an era of intensified ethno-national struggles, state-led assimilation policies, and numerous Kurdish uprisings.

This report posits that the relationship between Kurds and Arabs in Kurdistan has been a dynamic interplay of political expediency, shared cultural and religious frameworks, and competing ethno-national aspirations. This intricate nexus has been profoundly shaped by the interventions of regional and international powers and the persistent Kurdish quest for self-determination against the backdrop of evolving state structures in the Middle East. Understanding this complex history is essential to comprehending the contemporary political landscape of the region and the ongoing challenges and opportunities for Kurd-Arab relations.

I. Historical Foundations: Pre-20th Century Interactions

A. Early Encounters and the Rise of Islam

The historical interactions between Kurds and Arabs commenced with the expansion of the early Islamic caliphates into the mountainous regions inhabited by Kurdish tribes. These encounters laid the groundwork for a relationship that would be characterized by both integration into a shared religious civilization and the preservation of distinct ethno-linguistic identities.

Kurdish Tribes and Arab Conquests: Initial Contacts and Conversion

The Arab conquest of territories traditionally inhabited by Kurds began in the 7th century CE, notably during the caliphate of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, around 638 AD.[1] Historical accounts suggest that Kurdish tribes offered "fierce resistance" to these Arab-Muslim invasions, with this resistance enduring for approximately a century.[9] This opposition was not always rooted in purely religious objections; rather, it often stemmed from social and political factors, as Kurdish tribes sought to maintain their autonomy and societal structures in the face of external incursions.[9]

Despite this initial period of resistance, the majority of Kurds eventually converted to Islam. A significant characteristic of this conversion was that it did not lead to a wholesale Arabization of the Kurdish people. They largely retained their distinct languages (variants of Kurdish, an

Indo-Iranian language) and their unique cultural traditions.[1] This pattern of Islamization without Arabization distinguishes the Kurdish experience from that of some other groups in the region and underscores a theme of cultural resilience alongside strategic adaptation. Various methods, including matrimonial strategies at elite levels, were reportedly employed to encourage conversion and foster ties. For instance, historical sources indicate that the mother of the last Umayyad Caliph, Marwan II (Marwan ibn Muhammad, also known as Marwan al-Himar), was of Kurdish origin, suggesting a degree of intermarriage and political integration between Kurdish and Arab elites even in this early period.[9]

During the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750 AD), historical narratives suggest that the Kurds, having largely embraced Islam, did not pose major systemic problems for the Islamic state. Many Kurds, particularly those in the Anatolian frontier regions, served as fighters (ghazis) under the banner of the Islamic state, acting as a human buffer against external threats, notably from the Byzantine Empire.[8] This early role highlights a pragmatic coexistence and integration into the military and political fabric of the early Islamic world.

Kurdish Emirates within the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258): Governance, Autonomy, and Arab Relations

The establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 AD marked a new phase. As the central authority of the Abbasids began to wane, particularly from the mid-9th century onwards due to internal strife and the rise of regional powers like the Buyids (who dominated Baghdad from 932 to 1055), opportunities arose for local Kurdish leaders to assert greater political autonomy.[9] This period witnessed the emergence of various Kurdish emirates – local governments established by tribal chiefs within the nominal realm of the Abbasid Caliphate.[18] Among the prominent Kurdish emirates that flourished during this era were the Hasanwayhids (959–1015) in the Zagros region, the Shaddadids (951–1174) in parts of Armenia and Arran, the Rawadids (955–1221) centered around Tabriz, the Annazids (990–1116) in western Jibal, and the Marwanids (990–1096) of Diyarbekir and Jazira.[2] These principalities relied heavily on the military strength of Kurdish tribesmen, often providing their own mounted troops without the need for Turkic slave soldiers (ghilman) that other regional powers depended upon.[11]

The internal structure of these emirates was typically rooted in tribal affiliations, with power concentrated in the hands of the emir and his ruling family. Formal institutions to check the emir's authority were often lacking, and tribal traditions, loyalties, and rivalries heavily influenced political life.[18] Such internal fragmentation, characterized by disputes within and between ruling families and tribes, often proved to be a persistent challenge, hindering the development of larger, more unified Kurdish political entities and making them vulnerable to external powers.[18] For example, the Hasanwayhid emirate, despite initial successes, eventually succumbed to internal rivalries and conflicts with other Kurdish groups like the Annazids.[18] Nevertheless, some emirs, such as Nasser al-Dawla of the Marwanids, are noted for fostering urban development, constructing public works like baths, mosques, and libraries, and patronizing scholars, indicating periods of stability and cultural flourishing within these autonomous entities.[18]

Their relationship with the Abbasid Caliphate was often one of nominal allegiance. Kurdish

emirs generally accepted the spiritual legitimacy of the Caliph in Baghdad, which helped to maintain a degree of stability and avoid direct, overwhelming confrontation with the central Islamic authorities or the powers (like the Buyids) that controlled them.[18] However, this did not preclude conflict; the Hasanwayhids, for instance, are recorded as having clashed with and even defeated Buyid armies sent to subdue them.[18]

In the early centuries of Islamic rule, Kurdish groups were often described in historical sources as playing a somewhat marginal political role, frequently appearing as mercenaries or rebels.[11] The first significant Kurdish uprising noted in some accounts occurred in Mosul during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Abu Jaafar al-Mansur (circa 764 AD), followed by further revolts, such as one during the time of Caliph al-Mu'tasim (circa 839 AD) and another in Mosul in 866 AD.[8] These instances suggest a pattern of both integration and active resistance to perceived injustices or overreach by central authorities. Arab historians of the period, such as al-Mas'udi in the 10th century, provided accounts of the Kurds. However, early Arab and Persian writers sometimes exhibited confusion regarding the term "Kurd," occasionally using it to refer broadly to nomadic groups in the Zagros Mountains, indicating that direct contact and nuanced understanding were not always prevalent.[20] Despite this, by the 12th century, historical sources suggest that the Kurds were increasingly recognized as a more unified ethnic group, albeit one divided among various tribes.[11] Furthermore, Kurdish scholars and intellectuals made their presence felt in major Islamic intellectual centers like Baghdad, contributing to the rich tapestry of Abbasid-era civilization [[1] (result 3.1, 3.2)].

The Ayyubid Dynasty (1171-1250): Kurdish Leadership in an Arab-Dominated Islamic World

The 12th century witnessed a significant zenith in Kurdish power and influence with the rise of the Ayyubid dynasty, founded by Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, known to the West as Saladin [[1] (result 1.1), [11]]. Saladin, who hailed from a Kurdish family belonging to the Rawadiya branch of the Hadabani tribe and was born in Tikrit, initially served the Zengid dynasty.[12] Through his military prowess and political acumen, he rose to prominence, eventually displacing the Shi'a Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt in 1171 and establishing his own Sunni dynasty.[12]

Under Saladin's leadership, the Ayyubids forged a powerful state that, at its height, encompassed Egypt, Syria, most of Palestine, Upper Mesopotamia (including Kurdish regions), and Yemen.[12] Saladin is most renowned in both Islamic and Western history for uniting Muslim forces against the Christian Crusaders and recapturing Jerusalem in 1187 after nearly nine decades of Frankish rule.[12] This period represents a unique juncture where Kurdish leadership was not only accepted but was instrumental in shaping the political and military landscape of the Arab-majority Islamic world. The Ayyubid success complicates any simplistic narrative of Kurd-Arab relations as being solely defined by Arab dominance or perpetual conflict; it demonstrates a clear instance of Kurdish ascendancy and effective governance over diverse populations, united under the banner of Islam against a common external threat.

The Ayyubid military initially included significant Kurdish contingents, reflecting Saladin's origins and power base.[11] However, later Ayyubid rulers, including Saladin's successor Al-Adil

and his nephew Al-Kamil, increasingly relied on Turkish Mamluk slave soldiers, a trend that would eventually lead to the Mamluks supplanting the Ayyubids in Egypt in 1250.[12] Internal dynamics within the Ayyubid state sometimes involved tensions and power struggles between Kurdish and Turkish military and administrative factions.[13]

Culturally, the Ayyubids were patrons of Sunni Islamic learning, establishing numerous madrasahs (religious academies) in the lands they ruled, including Egypt and Jerusalem.[12] They were also notable military engineers, responsible for significant fortifications such as the Citadel of Cairo and the defenses of Aleppo.[12] The Ayyubid era also saw an increased presence of Kurds in major urban centers across the Middle East. Kurdish quarters, mosques, and madrasahs were established in cities like Aleppo, Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Gaza, and Jerusalem, indicating a significant Kurdish diaspora and influence within the heartlands of Arab Islamic civilization.[11] This diaspora was fueled by the influx of Kurdish tribal forces and scholars drawn by the opportunities presented by Ayyubid rule and the broader political currents of the time. The dynasty itself, though ruling over predominantly Arab populations and operating within an Arabo-Islamic cultural milieu, retained its Kurdish identity, which was acknowledged by contemporary chroniclers. The eventual decline of the Ayyubids was due to internal familial factionalism and the rising power of their Mamluk military corps.[12]

The historical pattern of Kurdish conversion to Islam without complete assimilation into Arab identity demonstrates a notable cultural resilience. This strategic adaptation allowed Kurds to navigate the new political realities imposed by Arab conquests while preserving their distinct linguistic and social structures. This was not a passive acceptance but often involved periods of resistance driven by social and political factors rather than purely religious ones.[9] Even as they became part of the Dar al-Islam, their unique identity persisted.

Furthermore, a recurring theme in Kurdish history, evident even during periods of increased political strength like the era of the emirates, is internal fragmentation. Tribal disputes and rivalries consistently hampered the development of unified and lasting Kurdish political structures.[18] This disunity often rendered Kurdish entities vulnerable to larger, more centralized external powers, a challenge that would echo through subsequent centuries. The reliance on tribal loyalties often superseded broader ethnic or proto-national cohesion, representing a structural weakness that external forces could, and often did, exploit.

The Ayyubid dynasty stands as a particularly compelling period. Here, Kurdish military and political leadership extended over vast Arab-majority territories. Saladin and his successors, while operating within an Islamic and largely Arab cultural context, were of known Kurdish origin.[11] This era complicates any narrative that casts Kurd-Arab relations solely in terms of subordination or conflict, showcasing instead instances of Kurdish leadership and shared governance, particularly in the face of common external adversaries like the Crusaders. The Ayyubid success underscores that Kurdish identity was not an insurmountable obstacle to achieving paramount leadership within the medieval Islamic world, even if the dynasty itself eventually gave way to new power dynamics.

B. Under Seljuk and Ottoman Rule

The arrival of Turkic peoples, first the Seljuks and later the Ottomans, introduced new layers of

complexity to the political and social landscape of Kurdistan and its relationship with Arab populations. These eras were marked by shifting alliances, varying degrees of Kurdish autonomy, and the gradual integration of Kurdish territories into larger imperial structures.

Kurdish Principalities and the Seljuk Sultanate: Cooperation and Conflict

The Seljuk Turks, a nomadic group originating from Central Asia, began their westward expansion in the 11th century. They conquered Persia, asserted their authority over the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad, and subsequently extended their dominion over various Kurdish principalities.[9] The initial encounters between Seljuk forces and established Kurdish emirates, such as the Marwanids of Diyarbekir, occurred around 1042, with the Seljuks demanding allegiance.[21]

Despite the initial subjugation of some Kurdish entities, the Seljuks soon recognized the strategic importance of Kurdish territories and the military capabilities of Kurdish warriors. This led to periods of cooperation, most notably in the Seljuk campaigns against the Byzantine Empire.[21] A significant instance of this collaboration was the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, where an estimated 10,000 Kurdish horsemen fought alongside Sultan Alp Arslan's Seljuk army, contributing decisively to the Byzantine defeat.[13] This victory opened Anatolia to Turkic settlement and marked a turning point in regional history.

In recognition of the distinct character of the Kurdish-inhabited lands, the Seljuk Sultan Ahmad Sanjar, around 1150, formally created a province named "Kurdistan." Its capital was near Hamadan, and it encompassed areas like Sinjar, Shahrazur, Dinawar, and Kermanshah.[2] This was the first recorded official use of "Kurdistan" as an administrative designation, although it only covered a southern portion of the broader ethnic Kurdish homeland. Prior to this, Arab geographers often referred to these mountainous regions as "al-Jibal" (The Mountains).[9]

However, the relationship between the Seljuks and the Kurds was not consistently harmonious. Shared military endeavors did not always translate into enduring political partnerships. The Seljuks, driven by their own expansionist aims, pursued alliances opportunistically and, at times, displaced or undermined their former Kurdish allies.[21] For example, the Marwanid state, which had earlier provided refuge to the Abbasid Caliph's family, did not militarily intervene to restore the Caliph when he was overthrown by a rival. This inaction allowed the Seljuks to sweep into Arab lands, defeat the usurper, and position themselves as the new protectors of the Abbasid Caliphate, thereby diminishing both Arab and Kurdish influence in Baghdad.[21] This complex interplay of loyalties and power politics illustrates the shifting dynamics involving Kurds, Arabs, and the newly dominant Seljuk Turks.

Kurdish Autonomy and Integration within the Ottoman Empire: From Semi-Independence to Centralization Efforts

The Ottoman Empire's rise to preeminence in the Middle East brought about another significant phase in Kurd-Arab relations, largely framed by the Kurds' interaction with the Ottoman state. The Ottomans first made substantial contact with the Kurds during their eastward expansion and conflict with the Safavid Empire of Persia in the early 16th century.[14]

A pivotal moment was the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. Influential Kurdish emirs and tribal leaders, advised and organized by the Kurdish scholar Idris Bitlisi, chose to ally with the Sunni Ottoman Sultan Selim I against the Shi'a Safavids.[8] Kurdish forces played a crucial role in the Ottoman victory and the subsequent annexation of Eastern Anatolia and parts of northern Mesopotamia (areas of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan) into the Ottoman Empire.[10] This alliance was strategically vital for the Ottomans, providing them with a loyal buffer against Safavid Persia.

In recognition of this critical support, Sultan Selim I granted the Kurdish emirates a considerable degree of autonomy. This special status included hereditary rule for the Kurdish tribal leaders over their territories, exemptions from certain taxes, and military obligations primarily focused on defending the eastern frontier.[8] This system of semi-independent Kurdish emirates, such as Soran, Baban, Bohtan, and Ardalan, persisted for centuries, from 1514 until the mid-1800s.[11] This arrangement served the mutual interests of both parties: the Ottomans secured their volatile eastern border, allowing them to concentrate their military resources on other fronts (e.g., in Europe and the Mediterranean), while the Kurds enjoyed substantial self-governance in their internal affairs.[8] This period of strategic symbiosis, however, was contingent on the Ottoman state's perceived need for Kurdish military support and its capacity to project power.

The relationship began to fray in the mid-19th century, particularly from the 1830s onwards, as the Ottoman Empire embarked on a series of modernizing and centralizing reforms known as the Tanzimat.[13] Successive Sultans, notably Mahmud II, sought to dismantle the autonomous structures of the Kurdish emirates and integrate Kurdish territories more directly into the central administration. These policies interfered with the traditional Kurdish tribal system and curtailed the powers of the emirs, leading to resentment and a series of Kurdish revolts aimed at restoring their lost autonomy.[14] Notable uprisings, such as that of Bedir Khan Beg in 1847, were primarily resistance against centralization rather than secessionist nationalist movements at this stage.[13] These revolts were ultimately suppressed by the modernized Ottoman military. For a brief period, an administrative unit known as the Kurdistan Eyalet (Province of Kurdistan) was established (1846-1867) following the defeat of Bedir Khan Beg, but this did not halt the trend towards greater central control.[14]

A temporary improvement in Kurd-Ottoman relations occurred under Sultan Abdul Hamid II (reigned 1876–1909). Adopting a Pan-Islamist ideology, he sought to unify the Muslim subjects of the empire, including Kurds and Arabs, against external threats and rising ethnic nationalisms among Christian minorities.[13] As part of this policy, he created the Hamidiye Cavalry in the 1890s, primarily composed of Kurdish tribesmen. These units were tasked with defending the empire's eastern frontiers (against Russia) and also controversially used to suppress Armenian nationalist activities [[1] (result 1.2), [14]]. This period saw some Kurdish tribal leaders and religious sheikhs gain prominence and favor from the Sultan. However, Pan-Islamism proved to be a temporary unifier. The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the subsequent rise of an assertive Turkish nationalism (İttihadism) within the Ottoman government led to policies that further alienated many Kurds.[13] The emphasis on Turkish ethnic identity began to overshadow the religious solidarity that Abdul Hamid II had fostered.

This shift contributed to the emergence of early Kurdish nationalist sentiments and some small, often uncoordinated, revolts. The Ottoman state also initiated deportations of Kurds in 1916, aiming to disrupt their tribal structures and national cohesion as the empire faced its final crisis during World War I.[14]

Socio-Cultural and Political Relations between Kurds and Arabs in Ottoman Kurdistan

Within the vast Ottoman Empire, Kurds and Arabs often inhabited the same or adjacent provinces, particularly in regions like the Mosul Vilayet (which included large parts of modern Iraqi Kurdistan), the Baghdad Vilayet, and the Aleppo Vilayet.[1] Their interactions were shaped by the overarching Ottoman administrative system, shared religious frameworks, local economic necessities, and tribal dynamics.

A shared Sunni Islamic faith provided a common religious and cultural ground for many Kurds and Arabs, facilitating a degree of social cohesion and intermingling.[23] The Ottoman millet system, while primarily designed for non-Muslim minorities, also recognized the internal communal organization of its Muslim subjects. The Pan-Islamist policies of Sultan Abdul Hamid II further aimed to reinforce this unity among Muslim groups.[13]

Tribal organization remained a potent force for both Kurdish and many Arab communities in the region. Ottoman administration often relied on co-opting or managing tribal leaders (Aghas and Sheikhs) from both groups to maintain order and collect taxes.[1] Locally, interactions between Kurdish and Arab tribes would have been diverse, encompassing periods of peaceful coexistence, economic exchange, competition for resources such as pastureland and water, inter-tribal alliances, and feuds. These local dynamics were often influenced by the interventions or policies of Ottoman provincial governors.

Economic interactions were a constant feature of life. The traditional Kurdish nomadic pastoralism, involving seasonal migrations with livestock, naturally brought them into contact with settled agricultural Arab communities in the plains.[1] Trade in livestock, dairy products, wool, and agricultural goods flowed between Kurdish highlands and Arab-majority towns and agricultural areas.[25]

The Ottoman state, particularly in its later stages, sometimes pursued policies or employed propaganda that could create or exacerbate divisions between its subject peoples. For instance, during World War I, Turkish nationalist elements within the government used Pan-Islamist rhetoric to rally Kurdish support for the Ottoman war effort, sometimes by contrasting Kurds favorably with Arabs, who were concurrently engaged in the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule.[13] Conversely, some historical narratives suggest that Ottoman Turkish elites, despite strategic alliances, sometimes harbored attitudes of superiority towards non-Turkish Muslim groups, including both Arabs and Kurds.[8]

The decline of Ottoman authority in the face of internal nationalist movements (including the Arab Revolt) and external pressures during World War I ultimately led to the empire's dissolution.[14] This collapse set the stage for a radical reordering of the Middle East, where the aspirations of both Arab and Kurdish nationalisms would collide with the interests of colonial powers and the formation of new nation-states. The primary political axis for Kurdish entities

throughout much of the Ottoman era was their relationship with the imperial center in Istanbul. While local Kurd-Arab interactions were a part of daily life, large-scale, distinct "Kurd-Arab" political alliances or conflicts, separate from their shared status as Ottoman subjects or their individual dealings with the Porte, are less clearly defined in the historical sources for this period until the rise of overt ethno-nationalisms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The following table provides an overview of key Kurdish political entities prior to the 20th century, illustrating their historical presence and interactions with larger empires.

Table 1: Key Kurdish Emirates and Principalities (Pre-20th Century)

Emirate/Principality	Approximate Period	Key Geographic Area(s)	Notable Rulers/Events	Relationship with Contemporary Empires	Citations
Marwanids	990–1096 AD	Diyarbekir, Jazira	Abu Ali Hassan Ibn Marwan (founder), Nasser al-Dawla (cultural development)	Nominal Abbasid vassalage; interacted with Buyids; later annexed by Seljuks. Protected Abbasid Caliph's family at one point. Maintained relations with Byzantine Empire.	[2]
Hasanwayhids	959–1015 AD	Zagros region (Dinawar, Hamadan, Nahavand)	Hasanwayh ibn Husayn al-Kurdi, Badr ibn Hasanwayh	Emerged during Abbasid weakness; clashed with and made peace with Buyids.	[2]
Shaddadids	951–1174 AD	Parts of Armenia and Arran (East Transcaucasia)	Muhammad ibn Shaddad (founder)	Interacted with regional powers including Byzantines and Seljuks.	[2]

Rawadids	c. 955–1071/1116 AD	Azerbaijan (Tabriz, Maragheh)		Controlled Azerbaijan; eventually absorbed by Seljuks.	[2]
Annazids (Banu Annaz)	990–1117 AD	Western Jibal (Hulwan)	Abu'l Fath Muhammad ibn Annaz	Interacted with Buyids and Seljuks; internal tribal conflicts.	[9]
Ayyubid Dynasty	1171–1250 AD	Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Palestine, Upper Mesopotamia	Salah al-Din (Saladin), al-Adil, al-Kamil	Independent dynasty founded by Kurds; displaced Fatimids; led fight against Crusaders; ruled over Arab-majority regions.	[11]
Ardalan	14th–19th C.	Sharazour, Sinne (Sanandaj), Khanaqin, Kirkuk, Kifri, Hawraman	Vassals of various Persian-centered federations (Kara Koyunlu, Ak Koyunlu), later Ottomans and Qajars.	Maintained significant autonomy for centuries; rule ended by Qajar monarch Nasser-al-Din Shah in 1867.	[11]
Soran	16th–19th C.	Soran district, Rawandiz	Mir Muhammad (Mir Kor)	Ottoman vassal emirate; notable for Mir Kor's attempts at modernization and expansion, eventually suppressed by Ottomans (1830s).	[11]
Baban	16th–19th C.	Sulaymaniyah region		Ottoman vassal emirate; played	[11]

				a role in regional politics and conflicts between Ottomans and Persians.	
Bohtan (Botan)	14th–19th C.	Jazirat Ibn Umar (Cizre)	Bedir Khan Beg (19th century leader of major revolt)	Ottoman vassal emirate; Bedir Khan Beg's revolt (1847) aimed to restore autonomy against Ottoman centralization.	[11]

This table underscores the long history of Kurdish political entities and their complex interactions with dominant regional empires. It illustrates that before the 20th century's nation-state paradigm, Kurdish self-governance, albeit often in a vassal or semi-autonomous form, was a recurring feature of the Middle Eastern political landscape. This historical precedent is crucial for understanding the enduring Kurdish aspirations for self-rule in the modern era.

II. The 20th Century: Nation-States, Nationalism, and Shifting Tides

The 20th century heralded a period of profound transformation in the Middle East, characterized by the collapse of multinational empires and the turbulent emergence of modern nation-states. For the Kurds, this era was particularly consequential, as their ancestral lands were partitioned, and their aspirations for self-determination were largely unfulfilled, leading to new forms of political mobilization and protracted conflicts with the newly established states, including those with Arab majorities.

A. The Post-Ottoman Partition and its Impact

The defeat and subsequent dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (1914-1918) created a power vacuum and an opportunity for the reordering of the political map of the Middle East. Kurdish leaders and intellectuals actively sought to capitalize on this moment to achieve national self-determination.

The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and the Treaty of Lausanne (1923): Kurdish Aspirations and the Division of Kurdistan

In the immediate aftermath of World War I, the victorious Allied Powers, influenced by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination for nationalities, initially appeared to support Kurdish aspirations. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed on August 10, 1920, between the Allies and the defeated Ottoman government, included provisions (Articles 62, 63, and 64) for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in eastern Anatolia, with the possibility of future independence should the Kurdish population desire it and the League of Nations approve.[2] Article 64 specifically mentioned that Kurds in the Mosul Vilayet (then under British occupation and disputed with Turkey) could voluntarily join this potential Kurdish state.[29] This treaty marked the first significant international acknowledgment of the Kurds as a distinct ethno-political entity with a potential right to statehood.[27] Kurdish delegations, notably one led by Sherif Pasha, actively lobbied at the Paris Peace Conference, sometimes coordinating with Armenian representatives, to advocate for Kurdish independence or autonomy under the protection of a major power, often favoring a British mandate.[29] The British, for a time, saw a potential Kurdish entity as a useful buffer state and a means to secure their own strategic and oil interests in the region.[29]

However, the promise of Sèvres was short-lived. The treaty was vehemently rejected by the Turkish National Movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which launched a successful war of independence to resist the dismemberment of Anatolia and establish a new Turkish republic.[2] The Allies, facing a resurgent Turkey and driven by their own shifting geopolitical priorities and rivalries, proved unwilling or unable to enforce the terms of Sèvres militarily.[27] Factors contributing to the treaty's failure included the military victories of the Turkish nationalists, Allied disunity, a desire to secure Turkish cooperation against the perceived threat of Bolshevism from Soviet Russia, and a re-evaluation of colonial interests.[27]

The Treaty of Lausanne, signed on July 24, 1923, formally superseded Sèvres and established the borders of modern Turkey.[2] Crucially for the Kurds, Lausanne made no mention of Kurdish autonomy or an independent Kurdish state. Instead, the Kurdish-inhabited territories of the former Ottoman Empire were definitively divided among Turkey, the newly established British Mandate of Iraq, the French Mandate of Syria, and Persia (Iran, which had its own historical Kurdish population).[14] This outcome was a profound disappointment and a historic turning point for the Kurdish people, effectively institutionalizing their statelessness and transforming them into the largest ethnic group in the Middle East without a state of their own.[15] The shift from the promise of Sèvres to the realities of Lausanne became a foundational grievance in modern Kurdish political consciousness, often referred to as a "betrayal" by the Allied powers, who were perceived as prioritizing their relationships with the new Turkish Republic and their own imperial designs over the principle of Kurdish self-determination.

Kurds as Minorities in Emerging Arab States (Iraq, Syria)

The drawing of new international borders by the colonial powers had immediate and lasting consequences for the Kurds, who now found themselves as ethnic minorities within newly created or reconfigured states, including Arab-majority Iraq and Syria. These artificial borders often cut across traditional Kurdish tribal territories, separated communities, and disrupted long-standing nomadic migration routes and economic patterns.[1]

In **Iraq**, which was established as a British Mandate, the status of the Mosul Vilayet became a major point of contention. This region, rich in oil and with a substantial Kurdish population alongside Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians, was ultimately attached to Iraq despite Turkish claims and the aspirations of many Kurds for either autonomy or inclusion in a potential Kurdish state.[17] Britain's decision to support the establishment of an Arab-led government in Baghdad, largely drawn from Sunni Arab officers and urban elites who had served the Ottomans, set the stage for persistent conflict between the central Iraqi state and its Kurdish population.[17] Early Kurdish resistance to this new order was evident in uprisings led by figures like Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, who proclaimed a short-lived Kingdom of Kurdistan (1921–1924) in an attempt to assert Kurdish self-rule.[2] These early revolts, though ultimately suppressed by British and Iraqi forces, signaled the Kurds' unwillingness to be passively incorporated into a state structure that did not recognize their distinct identity or aspirations.

In **Syria**, placed under a French Mandate, Kurdish-inhabited areas in the north and northeast were incorporated into the new Syrian state. While the French Mandate period initially allowed for some degree of Kurdish nationalist political and cultural activity [17], the overarching colonial project was the construction of a Syrian state that, upon independence, would be predominantly defined by an Arab national identity. This, too, laid the groundwork for future tensions as Kurdish identity and political demands clashed with the centralizing tendencies of the post-independence Syrian state. The division of the Kurdish homeland by these new state boundaries not only thwarted immediate aspirations for a unified Kurdistan but also created distinct Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria (as well as Turkey and Iran), whose subsequent political trajectories and relationships with Arab majorities would evolve along different, albeit often parallel, paths of struggle and negotiation.

B. The Rise of Arab Nationalism and State Policies

The 20th century was marked by the ascendancy of Arab nationalism as a powerful political and ideological force across the Middle East, particularly in the newly independent states of Iraq and Syria.[34] This ideology, while a vehicle for anti-colonial liberation and Arab unity for its proponents, often posed significant challenges for non-Arab minorities, including the Kurds, living within the borders of these emerging Arab nation-states.[17] The emphasis on a unified Arab identity and centralized state control frequently clashed with Kurdish aspirations for cultural preservation, political autonomy, and self-determination, leading to policies of assimilation and suppression, which in turn fueled Kurdish resistance.

Arabization, Assimilation, and Suppression of Kurdish Identity in Iraq and Syria

The core tenets of Arab nationalism, emphasizing a shared Arab language, culture, and destiny, often translated into state policies that sought to create homogeneous national identities. For the Kurds, this frequently meant pressure to assimilate and the denial or marginalization of their distinct ethno-linguistic and cultural heritage.

In **Iraq**, successive governments, and most systematically the Ba'athist regime that seized power in 1968, implemented comprehensive Arabization policies in Kurdish-inhabited regions.[15] These policies were particularly intense in areas deemed strategically or

economically vital, most notably the oil-rich Kirkuk governorate and other disputed territories along the administrative boundary of the Kurdish region. The methods of Arabization included:

- **Forced Displacement and Demographic Change:** Kurdish families and other non-Arab groups like Turkmen and Assyrians were forcibly evicted from their homes and lands, which were then often given to Arab settlers brought in from other parts of Iraq, particularly the south. This was a deliberate attempt to alter the demographic composition of these regions in favor of Arabs.[15]
- **Suppression of Kurdish Identity:** The Kurdish language was restricted in official use and education, Kurdish cultural expressions were suppressed, and at times, Kurdish identity itself was denied, with Kurds sometimes pejoratively referred to as "Mountain Arabs" or other derogatory terms aimed at negating their distinct ethnicity.[15]
- **Political and Economic Marginalization:** Kurds faced discrimination in state employment, were excluded from influential government positions, and their regions often suffered from economic neglect and underdevelopment, except where resource extraction (like oil) served the central state's interests.[42]

The presence of significant oil reserves in Kurdish-inhabited areas, especially Kirkuk, became a major exacerbating factor in these conflicts. Arab-nationalist central governments in Baghdad viewed control over these resources as essential for national development and state power. Consequently, Arabization campaigns and efforts to assert central authority were often most fiercely pursued in these oil-rich regions, which Kurds considered an integral part of their historical homeland and crucial for their own economic future.[15] This "resource curse" intertwined ethnic identity politics with fierce competition for economic wealth, adding a potent and often violent dimension to Kurd-Arab relations in Iraq.

In **Syria**, similar patterns of state policy emerged under the influence of Arab nationalism, particularly after the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1963.[39] The Syrian government also sought to assimilate or tightly control its Kurdish population:

- **Denial of Citizenship:** A notorious census conducted in the Jazira (al-Hasakah) governorate in 1962 arbitrarily stripped approximately 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenship, rendering them stateless (ajanib) or unregistered (maktoumeen).[15] This deprived them of basic civil rights, including the right to vote, own property, access state employment, and travel freely.
- **The "Arab Belt" Project:** In the 1970s, the Syrian government initiated a plan to create an "Arab Belt" along the border with Turkey in Kurdish-majority areas. This involved the confiscation of Kurdish lands, the displacement of Kurdish villagers, and the settlement of Arab families, with the explicit aim of altering the region's demography and severing ties between Syrian Kurds and Kurds in Turkey.[15]
- **Cultural and Linguistic Suppression:** The public use of the Kurdish language was restricted, Kurdish cultural activities were curtailed, and Kurdish names were often not allowed for newborns. Education was exclusively in Arabic, and expressions of Kurdish identity were suppressed.[15]

The rise of Arab nationalism, therefore, presented a formidable challenge to Kurdish identity

and aspirations. While it served as an anti-colonial and unifying force for Arab populations, its application within the multi-ethnic new states often led to the marginalization and suppression of non-Arab groups like the Kurds. This inherent ideological conflict between state-building projects based on Arab identity and the Kurds' desire for self-preservation and self-determination became a primary driver of conflict and instability throughout the 20th century.

Kurdish Resistance: Uprisings and Political Mobilization

In response to these policies of suppression, denial of rights, and attempts at forced assimilation, Kurdish communities in both Iraq and Syria engaged in various forms of resistance, ranging from cultural preservation efforts and political organization to armed uprisings.[16]

In **Iraq**, the Kurdish struggle was particularly intense and sustained:

- The **Ahmed Barzani revolt** in 1931 was an early tribal-led resistance against central Iraqi control.[32]
- **Mustafa Barzani**, Ahmed's younger brother, became the most iconic figure of the Iraqi Kurdish national movement, leading a series of major revolts and wars against successive Iraqi governments. These included the uprising of 1943-1945, the **First Iraqi-Kurdish War (1961–1970)**, and the **Second Iraqi-Kurdish War (1974–1975)**.[32] These conflicts, largely spearheaded by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) founded in 1946, aimed to achieve meaningful autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan and resist Arabization policies.
- A significant development was the **March 1970 Autonomy Agreement** between the Iraqi government and Kurdish leaders, which promised the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region. However, this agreement ultimately collapsed due to disagreements over its implementation, particularly concerning the status of oil-rich Kirkuk and the extent of autonomous powers.[32]
- The collapse of the 1970 agreement and the defeat in the 1975 war (following the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran, which cut off Iranian support for Barzani's forces) led to a period of intensified repression. However, it also spurred the formation of new Kurdish political organizations, most notably the **Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)** in 1975, led by Jalal Talabani, which continued the insurgency, often with a more leftist orientation.[32]
- The **1991 Kurdish uprising** in northern Iraq, following Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, was a watershed moment. Spontaneous mass protests and Peshmerga (Kurdish fighters) advances, coupled with international intervention (Operation Provide Comfort and the establishment of no-fly zones), led to the withdrawal of Iraqi government forces from large parts of northern Iraq. This resulted in the creation of a de facto autonomous Kurdistan Region, with its own government (the Kurdistan Regional Government - KRG) and parliament.[2]

In **Syria**, while Kurdish political activism and cultural consciousness were present, large-scale armed revolts comparable to those in Iraq were less frequent until the outbreak of the Syrian

Civil War in 2011.[46]

- Syrian Kurds faced consistent political repression, but there were also periods where Kurdish political figures participated in Syrian national politics, sometimes by downplaying their Kurdish identity or aligning with broader Syrian political currents.[46]
- The **Qamishli events of 2004**, which began with clashes at a football match and escalated into widespread Kurdish protests against the Ba'athist regime, marked a significant expression of Kurdish grievances and aspirations for rights. The protests were met with a harsh crackdown by Syrian security forces.[40]

The 20th century in Iraqi Kurdistan, and to a degree in Syria, was thus characterized by a cyclical pattern: Kurdish demands for rights and autonomy were met with state repression, leading to Kurdish revolts. These uprisings were often brutally suppressed, sometimes followed by temporary agreements or lulls in fighting, only for the underlying tensions to resurface and lead to renewed conflict. This recurring cycle underscored the consistent failure of successive Arab-nationalist governments to find a sustainable political accommodation for Kurdish aspirations, and, conversely, the unwavering refusal of many Kurds to relinquish their distinct identity and their demands for self-governance. Each wave of repression and each failed revolt often sowed the seeds for future confrontations, hardening positions on both sides and deepening the chasm of mistrust.

Interactions between Kurdish Political Parties and Arab Opposition Groups

The relationship between Kurdish political movements and Arab opposition groups in both Iraq and Syria has been complex, often characterized by tactical alliances and underlying tensions.

In **Iraq**, Kurdish parties, particularly the KDP, at various times formed alliances with other Iraqi opposition factions, including communists and even some pan-Arab groups before the Ba'ath Party consolidated its power.[50] These alliances were typically formed in opposition to the ruling monarchy or specific authoritarian regimes. The KDP's long-standing slogan, "Autonomy for Kurdistan, democracy for Iraq," reflected this dual strategy of pursuing Kurdish self-rule while also engaging with broader Iraqi democratic movements.[50] However, these alliances were often pragmatic and tactical, frequently undermined by fundamental disagreements over the extent of Kurdish autonomy versus the Arab nationalist vision of a centralized, unified Iraq.

In **Syria**, the dynamic has been similarly intricate, especially since the 2011 uprising that evolved into the Syrian Civil War. While some instances of cooperation between Kurdish groups and elements of the Arab opposition against the Assad regime did occur, the relationship has been largely defined by deep divisions.[26] Key points of contention included the scope of Kurdish autonomy, the proposed federalization of Syria (advocated by many Kurds but resisted by much of the Arab opposition), the role and legitimacy of Kurdish armed forces like the YPG (People's Protection Units) and the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), and accusations of Kurdish collaboration with external powers or, at times, the Assad regime itself. The mainstream Syrian opposition, often imbued with Arab nationalist sentiments, has generally been wary of, if not overtly hostile to, Kurdish federalist aspirations, fearing the

potential fragmentation of Syria.

C. The Al-Anfal Campaign (1988): Genocide and its Lasting Impact on Kurd-Arab Relations in Iraq

The Al-Anfal campaign, orchestrated by Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime against the Kurdish population of northern Iraq between February and September 1988, stands as one of the most brutal episodes in modern Kurdish history and a defining moment in Kurd-Arab relations within Iraq.[15] This campaign, officially codenamed "Anfal" (Arabic for "spoils of war," taken from the eighth sura of the Quran), constituted a systematic and genocidal assault on Kurdish civilians.

Aims of the Anfal Campaign:

The stated aim of Anfal was to eliminate Kurdish Peshmerga insurgents who had allied with Iran during the latter stages of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).32 However, the campaign's scope and methods reveal broader and more sinister objectives. It was an integral part of the Ba'athist regime's long-standing "Arabization" policy, designed to ethnically cleanse Kurds from strategic and oil-rich areas of northern Iraq, particularly Kirkuk and its surroundings, and to permanently crush any Kurdish aspirations for autonomy or independence.37 The regime sought to resolve the "Kurdish problem" once and for all through overwhelming force and demographic engineering.

Methods Employed During Anfal:

The Anfal campaign was executed with systematic brutality across eight stages, targeting rural Kurdish areas designated as "prohibited zones":

- **Systematic Destruction of Villages:** An estimated 2,000 to 4,500 Kurdish villages, along with over 20 small towns and cities, were systematically razed to the ground. Homes, schools, mosques, and infrastructure were destroyed by shelling, bulldozing, and burning, effectively erasing the physical presence of Kurdish life in vast areas.[15]
- **Mass Killings and Summary Executions:** Tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians were rounded up. Men and boys of "battle age" (typically 15 to 70) were systematically separated from women, children, and the elderly, and then subjected to mass summary executions. Their bodies were often dumped in pre-dug mass graves in remote desert regions of southern and western Iraq.[37] Estimates of the number of Kurds killed or "disappeared" during Anfal range from at least 50,000 to as high as 182,000.[15]
- **Use of Chemical Weapons:** The Iraqi regime repeatedly used chemical weapons, including mustard gas and nerve agents like sarin and tabun, against Kurdish civilian populations. The most infamous chemical attack occurred in the town of Halabja in March 1988 (though technically a separate operation, it happened within the same anti-Kurdish onslaught), killing an estimated 5,000 civilians and injuring thousands more.[15] Chemical weapons were also used in numerous other villages during the Anfal stages.
- **Forced Displacement and Deportation:** Hundreds of thousands of surviving Kurds were forcibly displaced from their homes. Many were transported to desolate "victory" camps or resettlement complexes, often in desert areas, where they faced harsh

conditions, starvation, and disease. Others were deported to different parts of Iraq.[15]

- **Role of "Jash" Forces:** The Ba'athist regime utilized Kurdish collaborators, known derogatorily as *Jash* (literally "donkey's foal"), to assist in identifying Kurdish villages, locating Peshmerga hideouts, and sometimes luring out civilians with false promises of amnesty.[38] This use of Kurds against Kurds added another tragic dimension to the campaign.

Lasting Impact on Kurd-Arab Relations in Iraq:
The Anfal campaign inflicted a profound and lasting trauma on the Kurdish people and irrevocably damaged relations between the Kurdish community and the central Arab-dominated Iraqi state:

- **Deep-Seated Trauma and Mistrust:** Anfal created an indelible scar on the collective Kurdish psyche, fostering deep-seated hatred and an abiding mistrust towards any central government in Baghdad, particularly one perceived as Arab chauvinist.[37] The campaign solidified a narrative of Kurdish victimhood and martyrdom at the hands of a brutal Arab regime.
- **Complication of Inter-Communal Relations:** While Anfal was orchestrated and executed by the Ba'athist state, its Arabization component – the policy of settling Arab families in depopulated Kurdish areas – inevitably poisoned inter-ethnic relations at a local level. From a Kurdish perspective, these Arab settlers were often seen as benefiting from their dispossession, regardless of whether they were coerced or economically incentivized by the regime. The perceived indifference or lack of widespread condemnation from the broader Arab population in Iraq at the time further entrenched feelings of isolation among Kurds.
- **Reinforcement of Kurdish Nationalism and Autonomy Demands:** The horrors of Anfal powerfully reinforced Kurdish demands for self-protection, security guarantees, and meaningful self-governance. The campaign demonstrated, in the starkest possible terms, the vulnerability of the Kurds under a hostile central authority and catalyzed international sympathy (albeit often belatedly) for their plight. This experience was a significant factor contributing to the conditions that allowed for the establishment and consolidation of the de facto autonomous Kurdistan Region after 1991.[37]
- **Enduring Political Significance:** The memory of Anfal continues to be a potent force in Kurdish political consciousness and discourse. It shapes the KRG's policies, its skepticism towards Baghdad's intentions, and its insistence on maintaining its own security forces (Peshmerga). The demand for justice for Anfal victims and recognition of the campaign as genocide remains a key element in Kurdish political agendas.

The Anfal campaign was not merely an episode of severe repression; it was a calculated, systematic attempt at genocide that aimed to destroy the fabric of Kurdish society in northern Iraq. Its legacy continues to cast a long shadow over Kurd-Arab relations in the country, serving as a stark reminder of the extreme consequences of unchecked state power and ethno-nationalist conflict. This historical trauma significantly informs the Kurdish desire for security and self-determination, making any future integration with a dominant Arab state deeply problematic without robust, internationally backed guarantees for their rights and

safety.

The following table provides a summary of major Kurdish uprisings in Iraq and Syria during the 20th century, highlighting the persistent struggle for Kurdish rights and the responses of Arab-led governments.

Table 2: Major Kurdish Uprisings in Iraq and Syria (20th Century)

Uprising/Leader	Dates	Location	Primary Aims	Key Events/Outcome	Nature of Arab Government Response	Citations
Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji Revolts	1919–1924	Iraq	Independence; Kingdom of Kurdistan	Proclaimed Kingdom of Kurdistan; revolts against British Mandate and Iraqi monarchy. Ultimately suppressed.	Military suppression by British and nascent Iraqi forces.	[2]
Ahmed Barzani Revolt	1931–1932	Iraq	Tribal resistance to central control; greater autonomy	Unified several Kurdish tribes; revolt suppressed by Iraqi Army with British support. Leaders went underground or into exile.	Military suppression, exile of leaders.	[32]
Mustafa Barzani Revolt	1943–1945	Iraq	Nationalist insurrection; autonomy	Revolt suppressed by Iraqi military; Barzani exiled to Iran, participated in Republic	Military suppression, exile of leaders.	[32]

				of Mahabad.		
First Iraqi-Kurdish War (M. Barzani)	1961–1970	Iraq	Autonomy; resistance to Arabization	Protracted guerrilla warfare; ended with March 1970 Autonomy Agreement (promised autonomy but largely unimplemented). High casualties.	Military campaigns, negotiations, eventual autonomy agreement (later reneged).	[32]
Second Iraqi-Kurdish War (M. Barzani)	1974–1975	Iraq	Implementation of autonomy; resistance to Ba'athist policies	Collapse of 1970 agreement; large-scale conventional fighting; Kurdish forces defeated after Iran withdrew support (Algiers Accord).	Major military offensive, suppression of revolt, increased Arabization.	[32]
PUK Insurgency (Jalal Talabani)	1976–1979	Iraq	Continued resistance; autonomy	Guerrilla warfare following KDP defeat; limited success due to lack of foreign support.	Counter-insurgency operations, Arabization campaigns.	[32]
Kurdish Rebellion (Iran-Iraq War)	1980s	Iraq	Autonomy; opposition to Saddam Hussein	KDP and PUK collaborated against Baghdad,	Extreme repression, chemical attacks, Al-Anfal	[32]

				received support from Iran; led to Anfal campaign.	genocide.	
1991 Iraqi Uprisings (Kurdish Front)	March 1991	Iraq	Overthrow Saddam; autonomy	Mass uprising after Gulf War; initial successes followed by brutal crackdown; led to establishment of No-Fly Zones and de facto KRG autonomy.	Massive military retaliation, then withdrawal from Kurdish areas under international pressure.	[2]
Qamishli Uprising	March 2004	Syria	Cultural and political rights; protest against Ba'athist regime	Sparked by football match incident; widespread protests in Kurdish areas; dozens killed.	Violent crackdown by Syrian security forces, arrests.	[40]

This table illustrates the consistent pattern of Kurdish demands for recognition and self-rule throughout the 20th century within the newly formed Arab states, and the often violent responses these demands elicited from central governments. This history of conflict and repression is fundamental to understanding the deep-seated desire for autonomy and the complexities of contemporary Kurd-Arab political relations.

III. Contemporary Kurd-Arab Relations in Kurdistan (Post-2003 Iraq & Post-2011 Syria)

The early 21st century ushered in new geopolitical realities in the Middle East, significantly altering the landscape for Kurd-Arab relations. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War beginning in 2011 created power vacuums and opportunities for Kurdish entities to assert greater autonomy, leading to new forms of interaction, cooperation, and

conflict with Arab populations and governing authorities.

A. Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Regional Government - KRG)

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 paved the way for the formal constitutional recognition of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. However, this new era has been characterized by persistent disputes with the central government in Baghdad over sovereignty, resources, and territory, alongside complex relationships with Arab communities residing within or displaced to the Kurdistan Region.

1. KRG-Baghdad Dynamics: Disputes over Sovereignty, Oil, Budget, and Disputed Territories (Kirkuk, Sinjar)

The 2005 Iraqi Constitution formally recognized the KRG as a federal region within Iraq, granting it its own executive, legislative, and judicial powers, as well as a commitment to an equitable share of national revenues.[2] Despite this constitutional framework, the relationship between Erbil (the KRG capital) and Baghdad has been fraught with tension and unresolved issues, primarily revolving around:

- **Budget Allocations and Salary Payments:** A chronic point of contention has been the transfer of the KRG's share of the federal budget from Baghdad and the payment of salaries for KRG civil servants and Peshmerga forces. Baghdad has frequently delayed or withheld these funds, accusing the KRG of not meeting its obligations regarding oil revenue transfers. The KRG, in turn, has accused Baghdad of weaponizing public finances to undermine its constitutional autonomy and destabilize the region.[60] This has led to recurrent salary crises in the KRI, impacting public sector employees. For instance, in May 2025, Baghdad halted funding, citing KRG's alleged overspending and failure to transfer revenues, a claim disputed by the KRG which argues its share should be based on collected federal revenues, not actual expenditures.[62] Such disputes have led Kurdish political parties to threaten withdrawal from the federal government, potentially destabilizing Iraq's fragile political coalitions.[61]
- **Oil and Gas Resources:** The control and management of oil and gas resources located within the Kurdistan Region and disputed territories are central to the Erbil-Baghdad conflict. The KRG has independently developed its oil sector, signing contracts with international oil companies and exporting oil via a pipeline through Turkey, arguing this is within its constitutional rights.[59] Baghdad, however, maintains that all oil revenues should be managed federally and has deemed the KRG's independent oil deals unconstitutional, launching legal challenges.[61] Iraq's Federal Supreme Court has issued rulings requiring the KRG to transfer all oil and non-oil revenues to Baghdad.[61] The suspension of oil exports through the Iraq-Turkey pipeline since March 2023, following an international arbitration ruling, has further exacerbated economic pressures on the KRG.[62] This fundamental disagreement over resource control reflects the KRG's aspiration for economic self-sufficiency as a cornerstone of its autonomy, versus Baghdad's insistence on federal sovereignty over national wealth.
- **Sovereignty and Autonomy:** Underlying these specific disputes is a broader struggle

over the nature and extent of Kurdish autonomy within the Iraqi federal system. The KRG consistently seeks to preserve and expand its self-governing powers, while various factions in Baghdad often push for greater centralization. The KRG's pursuit of an independence referendum in September 2017, though non-binding and ultimately leading to a political and territorial backlash from Baghdad, starkly illustrated this tension.[2]

- **Disputed Territories (Article 140):** The status of territories claimed by both the KRG and the federal government, often referred to as "disputed territories," remains one of the most intractable issues. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution outlines a three-stage process (normalization, census, and referendum) to determine the final administrative status of these areas, which were subjected to Arabization policies under Ba'athist rule.[25] These territories, including parts of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din governorates, are ethnically diverse, with significant Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Assyrian, and Yazidi populations. The failure to fully implement Article 140 has left these areas in a state of political and security limbo, becoming flashpoints for Erbil-Baghdad tensions.
    - **Kirkuk:** The oil-rich and multi-ethnic city and governorate of Kirkuk is often described as the "Jerusalem of the Kurds" and is central to Kurdish national identity, but also claimed by Arab and Turkmen communities.[41] Kurdish Peshmerga forces took control of Kirkuk in June 2014 when the Iraqi army collapsed in the face of an ISIS offensive. However, in October 2017, following the KRG's independence referendum, Iraqi federal forces, alongside Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), retook Kirkuk and other disputed areas from the Peshmerga.[41] The governance of Kirkuk remains highly contested, with ongoing political maneuvering by Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen parties for control of the governorship and local administration.[68] Historical Arabization policies and subsequent attempts at "Kurdification" have left a legacy of demographic disputes and competing land claims, with recent reports suggesting renewed efforts at Arab resettlement, further heightening inter-ethnic tensions.[41]
    - **Sinjar (Shingal):** This district, predominantly inhabited by the Yazidi minority (many of whom identify as ethnically Kurdish), suffered horrific atrocities under ISIS, including genocide.[64] Its status as a disputed territory has led to a complex and fragmented security and governance landscape. Following the defeat of ISIS, various armed actors, including the KDP-affiliated Peshmerga, Iraqi federal forces, PMF factions (some with Iranian backing), and PKK-affiliated groups like the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), have vied for influence.[67] The 2020 Sinjar Agreement between Baghdad and Erbil, aimed at normalizing security and administration to facilitate the return of displaced Yazidis, has seen limited implementation due to the multiplicity of armed groups and their competing agendas, as well as ongoing mistrust between the KDP and PKK-linked factions.[67] Relations between Yazidis, local Arab tribes (some of whom were accused of collaborating with ISIS), and various Kurdish factions remain deeply scarred by recent events and historical grievances.[73]

    - Other disputed areas, such as **Makhmur** in Erbil Governorate and **Khanaqin** in Diyala Governorate, also continue to experience similar challenges related to security, governance, and inter-communal relations.[64]
- **Security Cooperation and the Peshmerga:** The constitutional status of the KRG's Peshmerga forces, their funding, and their role within the Iraqi national defense system remain subjects of debate. Security coordination between Peshmerga and Iraqi federal forces in the disputed territories is often inconsistent and hampered by political mistrust, creating security vacuums that can be exploited by groups like ISIS.[59]

The persistent constitutional ambiguities, particularly regarding resource management and the status of disputed territories, serve as continuous conflict drivers. These areas are not merely lines on a map but are deeply interwoven with historical grievances, competing national narratives (Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen), fierce competition for resources like oil, and complex security dilemmas. The dynamics within Kirkuk and Sinjar, for instance, act as microcosms of the broader challenges facing Iraq in terms of power-sharing, minority rights, transitional justice, and forging a cohesive national identity in a post-Ba'athist, federal era.

2. Arab Communities in the KRG

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq hosts diverse Arab communities, including long-term residents, those who migrated for economic reasons, and a significant population of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who sought refuge from conflicts elsewhere in Iraq, particularly the violence perpetrated by ISIS.

- Internally Displaced Arabs (IDPs): Conditions, Challenges, and Integration/Return Prospects

  The KRG became a major haven for IDPs following the ISIS onslaught in 2014, hosting hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals, a substantial portion of whom were Arabs from Nineveh, Anbar, Salahuddin, and Diyala provinces.74 As of late 2024 and early 2025, over 100,000 IDPs, including Arabs, remained in 21 camps across the KRI, with many more residing in non-camp settings.74

  Living conditions for IDPs have varied. The KRG, in collaboration with UN agencies and international NGOs, has provided essential services such as shelter, food aid, healthcare, and education, including Arabic-language schooling in camps.[75] However, these efforts have been strained by the sheer scale of displacement, funding shortfalls, and the KRG's own economic challenges. Reports indicate that many IDPs in camps live below the poverty line and face precarious food security and limited access to adequate services.[75]

  The KRG's official policy supports the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of IDPs to their areas of origin.[75] However, numerous barriers impede large-scale returns. These include ongoing insecurity in areas of origin (such as the continued presence of militias and political instability in Sinjar and parts of Nineveh), destroyed infrastructure and housing, lack of livelihood opportunities, and insufficient compensation for losses incurred during displacement.[67] The Iraqi federal government's plans to close all IDP camps, including those in the KRI, have faced postponements due to these unresolved

issues, necessitating a comprehensive approach that addresses security, reconstruction, and judicial hurdles to ensure durable solutions.[74] Durable solutions, as advocated by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations, encompass voluntary return, local integration within the KRI, or relocation to other parts of Iraq, with the emphasis on IDPs making free and informed choices.[74] Access to civil documentation (national IDs, birth certificates) is a critical prerequisite for IDPs to access public services and rebuild their lives, an area where UNHCR and partners have provided significant support.[74]

The treatment of Arab IDPs by KRG authorities has, at times, been a subject of concern and controversy. Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued reports in 2015 and 2016 alleging discriminatory practices by KRG security forces (Peshmerga and Asayish) against Arab IDPs and communities in areas retaken from ISIS, particularly in disputed territories.[83] These allegations included preventing Arab IDPs from returning to their homes while allowing Kurds to do so, the cordoning off of Arab villages, arbitrary detentions of Arab men without charge, and the demolition of Arab homes and property.[83] KRG officials generally denied these accusations, citing security necessities, the ongoing threat from ISIS, or claiming that destruction was a result of combat operations.[83] Amnesty International, in a 2016 report, also documented instances where KRG Peshmerga forces and Kurdish militias allegedly destroyed thousands of homes in Arab villages, potentially as a punitive measure against communities perceived to have sympathized with ISIS, or to consolidate territorial gains in disputed areas.[86] These reports were contested by the KRG and some Arab tribal leaders who stated that the destruction was primarily due to fighting and that Peshmerga forces had protected Arab-populated areas.[85] This duality highlights the complex reality for Arab IDPs: the KRI offered refuge from extreme violence, yet the experience for some was marred by hardship, insecurity, and allegations of discriminatory practices, particularly in the contested interface zones between KRG and federal Iraqi control.

- Established Arab Residents (non-IDP): Socio-Economic Life, Political Participation, and Cultural Interactions in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk

  Beyond the IDP population, Arab communities have a historical presence in parts of what is now the KRI, and their numbers have been augmented by individuals and families migrating from other parts of Iraq, especially since 2003, seeking greater security and economic opportunities.35 Within the KRI's three core governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk, these established Arab residents constitute a minority.89

  Socio-economically, many Arab residents are integrated into the KRI's economy, participating in various sectors including commerce, real estate, tourism, and professional services.[87] The influx of Arab capital and labor has, by some accounts, contributed positively to the region's economic dynamism, particularly in urban centers like Erbil.[88] The KRG officially promotes policies aimed at attracting investment and fostering economic growth, which theoretically benefit all residents.[94] Culturally, there is evidence of daily interaction and social mixing between Kurds and Arabs in these cities,

with Arabic commonly heard in public spaces and markets.[35] The KRG publicly states its commitment to embracing ethnic and religious diversity and promoting peaceful coexistence.[76] Experiences of refugees, including Arabs from Syria, suggest that linguistic and social integration is possible over time, with children often becoming fluent in Kurdish dialects.[95] However, underlying cultural anxieties can also surface, such as concerns voiced by some Kurds about the perceived "Arabization" of youth or public spaces.[93]

Political participation and formal representation for established Arab residents within KRG institutions appear more circumscribed. The KRG Parliament has historically allocated quota seats for ethnic and religious minorities such as Christians (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs), Turkmen, and Armenians, but not specifically for Arabs as a distinct ethnic minority group residing within the KRI's core provinces [[61] (result 2.2), [87] (result 1.2)]. The rationale often provided is that Arabs constitute a majority in Iraq as a whole, and their political rights are primarily exercised through the federal Iraqi system. While a KRG law passed in 2015 aimed to guarantee minority rights more broadly in political and educational spheres [96], its specific application and impact on the Arab resident community (distinct from IDPs or Arabs in disputed territories) are not clearly detailed in the available information. Moreover, minority representation in the KRG parliament has itself been a contentious issue, subject to political maneuvering between the major Kurdish parties (KDP and PUK), with accusations that these larger parties often influence or co-opt candidates for the reserved minority seats [[61] (result 2.2), [87] (result 1.2)]. Recent rulings by Iraq's Federal Supreme Court have further complicated this by altering the minority quota system in the KRG parliament, reducing the number of reserved seats [[61] (result 2.2), [87] (result 1.2)]. Specific mechanisms for established Arab community leaders to formally engage with KRG institutions, outside of general civic participation or informal channels, are not well-documented in the provided sources.[97] The KRG's official policies emphasize welcoming diverse communities and upholding their rights.[76] However, a 2016 UNHCR interview noted that access to the rule of law in the KRI could sometimes be influenced by ethnic affiliation and personal connections, and reported a general mistrust among IDPs (including Arabs) towards KRG security forces, even if systematic mistreatment by police or courts based on ethnic status was not found.[102] The same source indicated that both Arabs and Kurds faced risks of arbitrary detention by Asayish (KRG security/intelligence) forces.[102]

A critical distinction must be made between the experiences of Arabs in the disputed territories like Kirkuk and Sinjar, and those residing within the KRG's three constitutionally recognized governorates. In the disputed areas, Arabs are a significant demographic component in a direct and often tense struggle for political control, resources, and security between Erbil and Baghdad. Their relationship with Kurdish authorities there is heavily influenced by these overarching conflicts. In contrast, Arabs living within the KRI proper are more akin to a settled minority or immigrant community, whose interactions with the KRG are less about territorial contestation and more focused on issues of civil rights, economic opportunity, service provision, and social

integration. This distinction is crucial for a nuanced understanding of Kurd-Arab relations within Iraqi Kurdistan, as KRG policies and local dynamics manifest differently across these contexts.

B. Syrian Kurdistan (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria - AANES)

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, provided an opening for Syrian Kurdish groups, primarily the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), to establish de facto autonomy in northern and eastern Syria. This entity, now known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also referred to as Rojava, has developed its own governance structures and military forces (the Syrian Democratic Forces - SDF), and controls significant territory with diverse ethnic populations, including large Arab communities.[2]

1. AANES Governance: The Social Contract (Dec 2023), Multi-Ethnic Participation, and Arab Representation

The AANES operates on an ideology of democratic confederalism, which emphasizes grassroots democracy, decentralization, gender equality, ecological sustainability, and the co-existence of all ethnic and religious communities.[49] Its foundational constitutional document is the Social Contract.

- **The Social Contract (December 2023):** A new, revised Social Contract was adopted in December 2023. This document renamed the entity the "Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES)" and restructured its administrative divisions into a single region encompassing seven provinces or cantons.[104] This latest version aims to further solidify the principles of multi-ethnic governance and decentralized power.
- **Multi-Ethnic Governance and Arab Representation:** A core principle of the AANES, reiterated in the 2023 Social Contract, is the equal participation and representation of all ethnic and religious components, including Kurds, Arabs, Syriac-Assyrians, Turkmen, and Armenians.[103] As the AANES expanded its control into predominantly Arab-majority areas such as Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Manbij, particularly after successful campaigns against ISIS [104], the need to genuinely incorporate Arab communities into governance structures became paramount. The Social Contract reflects this by designating Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac as official languages with equal rights in all spheres of life, including education and administration.[104] The concept of a "democratic nation," transcending narrow ethnic nationalism, is promoted.[110] Local councils are designed with mixed representation, often stipulating a 60% share for directly elected members and 40% for representatives of organized social and ethnic groups, including Arab tribes.[104] Furthermore, Arab fighters constitute a significant, even majority, component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the official military of the AANES [[87] (result 4.2)].
- **Local Administration Structures:** Governance in AANES is organized hierarchically,

starting from grassroots communes at the neighborhood level, up through people's councils in towns, cities, and cantons, culminating in the Peoples' Democratic Council at the AANES-wide level.[104] The Social Contract stipulates that decisions directly affecting specific ethnic or religious components should be made based on consensus.[112]

- **Resource Management:** The AANES economy relies on revenues from public properties (including significant oil and gas fields in Jazira and Deir ez-Zor, and grain silos), local taxation, customs duties from border crossings (like Semalka with Iraqi Kurdistan), and service delivery.[104] The administration aims to foster an economic model that blends co-operative enterprises with private initiative, under the principle of "ownership by use," and oriented towards the common good rather than pure profit-seeking.[104] However, the control and equitable distribution of resources, particularly oil revenues from Arab-majority areas, remain a sensitive and contentious issue.[118]
- **Relationship with the Syrian Government:** The AANES has never been officially recognized by the Syrian government in Damascus, which historically advocated for a centralized state.[103] The AANES, conversely, has consistently sought a federal or decentralized model for Syria.[103] The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 dramatically altered this dynamic. In March 2025, a landmark agreement was reportedly signed between SDF General Commander Mazloum Abdi and Syria's Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa. This agreement outlined provisions for a nationwide ceasefire, the integration of SDF forces into a new Syrian national army, constitutional recognition of the Kurdish community and their rights, and the return of control over oil and gas fields and border crossings to the state.[103] Negotiations regarding the implementation of this agreement and the future shape of Syria, particularly the extent of decentralization, are ongoing and represent a critical juncture for Kurd-Arab relations at the state level in Syria.[103]

The evolution of the Social Contract, especially the 2023 version, reflects a pragmatic adaptation by the AANES to the demographic reality of the territories under its control, many of which are Arab-majority. The increased emphasis on Arabic as an official language, formal mechanisms for power-sharing in councils, and the broader "democratic nation" concept (as opposed to an explicitly Kurdish nationalist project) indicate an effort to build legitimacy and ensure stability across diverse regions.[104] However, the degree to which these formal provisions translate into genuine, perceived power-sharing and address the grievances of Arab communities remains a crucial and ongoing challenge, as evidenced by events like the Deir ez-Zor clashes.[104]

The March 2025 agreement with the new Syrian government in Damascus presents a fragile but potentially transformative opportunity for Kurd-Arab relations at a national level in Syria.[103] Its success will depend on navigating profound historical mistrust, the specific terms of SDF integration into a national army, the actual degree of decentralization the new Syrian state is willing to concede, and the powerful influence of external actors, particularly Turkey, which remains vehemently opposed to any form of robust Kurdish autonomy in Syria.[120] The path

forward is laden with complexities, requiring delicate negotiations and a willingness from all sides to compromise for the sake of a more stable and inclusive post-conflict Syria.

2. Kurd-Arab Coexistence and Tensions: Local Grievances, Resource Sharing, and Security Challenges (e.g., Deir ez-Zor clashes)

While the AANES officially promotes a model of multi-ethnic democratic society and shared governance [104], the reality on the ground in North and East Syria involves a complex tapestry of coexistence, cooperation, tension, and at times, open conflict between Kurdish and Arab communities.

- **Coexistence and Shared Governance Efforts:** There are numerous instances of daily interaction and cooperation. Arab tribes and community representatives participate in local councils established by the AANES, and Arabs form a significant, if not majority, contingent within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [[87] (result 4.2), [109]]. The Social Contract explicitly aims to protect the cultural and linguistic rights of all constituent communities, including Arabs.[103] In many areas, particularly those with mixed populations or those liberated from ISIS, there are reports of shared community life, cooperation in agriculture, local commerce, and civil society initiatives.[122] The joint struggle against ISIS, a common enemy, forged bonds between Kurdish and Arab fighters and communities.[26]
- **Local Grievances and Tensions:** Despite these efforts, significant tensions persist, particularly in Arab-majority areas under AANES/SDF control.
    - **The Deir ez-Zor Clashes (August-September 2023):** This was the most significant outbreak of violence, erupting after the SDF arrested Ahmad al-Khabil (Abu Khawla), the Arab commander of the SDF-affiliated Deir ez-Zor Military Council, on charges of corruption and misconduct.[109] The clashes involved Arab tribal fighters, including elements of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, against SDF forces.
        - *Underlying Causes:* The uprising was fueled by a range of local Arab grievances, including accusations of corruption and mismanagement by AANES officials, inequitable distribution of oil revenues from fields in Deir ez-Zor (with many locals feeling the wealth was diverted to Kurdish-majority areas or did not benefit them adequately), forced conscription into the SDF, lack of sufficient service provision, and a perception of Kurdish dominance within the AANES/SDF structures in Arab-majority regions.[109] Some tribal figures also objected to certain social policies of the AANES, such as those promoting gender equality, viewing them as contrary to local traditions.[109]
        - *External Influence:* The clashes were exacerbated, and possibly instigated, by external actors. Reports indicated involvement or encouragement from the Syrian regime and Iran-backed militias seeking to destabilize SDF control and expand their own influence in eastern Syria.[109] Turkey also voiced support for the Arab tribal fighters, aligning with its broader policy of opposing the PYD/YPG.[109]

        - *Outcome:* The SDF, with crucial support from the US-led coalition (which urged calm and de-escalation), eventually suppressed the main uprising. However, the events forced the AANES leadership to acknowledge the legitimacy of some local grievances. SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi pledged reforms, including restructuring civil councils to ensure better Arab representation and addressing local demands more effectively.[109] Sporadic clashes continued, highlighting the fragility of the situation.
    - **Resource Sharing:** The control and distribution of oil wealth from fields in Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah remain a primary source of tension. Arab communities in these oil-rich areas often feel marginalized and that they do not receive a fair share of the revenues, which are critical for the AANES's budget.[109] This economic grievance is a powerful mobilizing factor.
    - **Security and Governance Deficits:** In many Arab-majority areas, particularly those more recently brought under AANES control or those distant from core Kurdish areas, there are complaints about inadequate service provision (electricity, water, healthcare, reconstruction), a lack of transparency in governance, and a perception that security and administrative structures are dominated by Kurdish cadres, even if local Arabs hold nominal positions.[104] Focus group discussions in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa have indicated that local populations sometimes place more trust in traditional tribal reconciliation mechanisms than in AANES-led judicial or administrative processes, particularly concerning issues like the reintegration of former ISIS affiliates.[126]
    - **Human Rights Concerns:** While the AANES projects an image of respecting human rights, international organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have raised concerns regarding arbitrary detentions, conditions in detention facilities (especially those holding thousands of ISIS suspects and their families, many of whom are Syrian Arabs), and due process violations in AANES-controlled areas.[45] These issues can impact local Arab populations and perceptions of AANES justice.

The paradox of liberation and governance in Arab-majority areas is evident: while the SDF, with significant Arab participation, played a key role in liberating these regions from the tyranny of ISIS, the subsequent AANES administration has struggled to translate military success into universally accepted and effective governance. Winning the peace and fostering genuine partnership with all segments of the Arab population requires more than just shared opposition to extremist groups; it demands addressing deep-seated economic grievances, ensuring tangible local benefits from resource wealth, and creating genuinely inclusive and responsive governance structures that are perceived as legitimate by local Arab communities, including their influential tribal leadership.

External actors, including the Syrian regime (both pre- and post-Assad's fall), Iran, and Turkey, consistently seek to exploit these internal vulnerabilities and Arab grievances to undermine AANES control and advance their own geopolitical interests.[109] This external meddling creates a persistent cycle of instability, making the task of building durable Kurd-Arab coexistence

even more challenging. Arab tribal structures themselves are a double-edged sword for the AANES. While efforts have been made to integrate tribal leaders into governance and security arrangements [125], these same influential structures can be mobilized against the AANES if local grievances are unaddressed or if external actors offer more compelling incentives or exploit existing rivalries. Thus, navigating tribal dynamics requires a delicate and continuous balancing act from the AANES leadership.

3. Socio-Economic Conditions in Arab-Majority Areas under AANES (Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah)

The socio-economic conditions in Arab-majority areas under AANES control are shaped by a confluence of factors, including the legacy of war and ISIS occupation, the AANES's governance and resource management policies, and the broader economic crisis afflicting Syria.

- **Post-ISIS Reconstruction and Service Provision:** Cities like Raqqa, the former de facto capital of ISIS, suffered catastrophic destruction during the military campaigns to liberate them.[132] Reconstruction efforts have been slow and hampered by a lack of resources, international sanctions on Syria (which indirectly affect AANES areas), and the ongoing security challenges. Basic infrastructure – including housing, water, electricity, and healthcare facilities – remains severely damaged or inadequate in many areas.[129] Humanitarian needs across North and East Syria, including these Arab-majority regions, remain staggering in 2024-2025, with millions dependent on aid for survival.[129]
- **Economic Base and Resource Management:** The primary economic activities in these regions are agriculture (particularly wheat and cotton along the Euphrates River valley), livestock rearing, and, crucially, oil and gas extraction.[104] The AANES controls some of Syria's most significant oil fields, located predominantly in Deir ez-Zor and parts of Hasakah. Revenue from these resources is vital for funding the AANES administration, its security forces, and public services.[104] However, as noted, the management and distribution of this oil wealth are major sources of grievance among local Arab populations, who often feel that they do not receive a fair share of the benefits and that revenues are disproportionately directed towards other areas or administrative overheads.[109] The AANES has stated that it aims for an economy that blends co-operative and private enterprise, with an emphasis on local self-sufficiency and "ownership by use".[104] While average salaries in AANES areas have been reported as higher than in regime-controlled Syria [104], widespread poverty, unemployment, and inflation remain serious challenges, exacerbated by the collapse of the Syrian pound and broader economic pressures.[144]
- **Service Delivery Challenges and Arab Civilian Perspectives:** The provision of consistent and adequate public services is a major challenge for the AANES. Access to clean water, electricity, healthcare, and education is often limited and unreliable, particularly in rural areas and regions heavily damaged by conflict.[129] Arab civilian perspectives on AANES governance and service provision are mixed and vary by locality and individual experience. While some may appreciate the relative security and stability

compared to previous ISIS rule or ongoing conflict in other parts of Syria, many express frustration over economic hardship, perceived corruption or inefficiency in local administrations, lack of job opportunities, and the slow pace of reconstruction.[109] The new Social Contract of December 2023 and the ongoing political negotiations with the new central government in Damascus aim to address some of these governance, representation, and resource issues, but their tangible impact on the daily lives and perceptions of Arab communities in these regions is a developing situation.[103] Humanitarian reports from 2024-2025 continue to highlight significant needs for assistance, ongoing displacement, and difficulties in accessing basic services across these Arab-majority governorates.[129] The "resource paradox" is particularly acute here: despite controlling significant oil wealth, the AANES struggles to translate these resources into widespread prosperity and contentment for many local Arab communities, leading to a disconnect between resource control and perceived local benefit. This, in turn, fuels instability and creates openings for those seeking to undermine AANES authority.

The critical nexus between security and development is starkly evident. The AANES operates in a highly volatile security environment, continuously battling ISIS remnants and facing external threats, primarily from Turkey.[120] This necessitates a significant allocation of resources and attention to security matters, often at the expense of long-term development initiatives and robust service provision in heavily damaged areas like Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. The lack of substantial international investment in reconstruction (beyond immediate stabilization aid) and the broader economic isolation of the region further exacerbate these socio-economic challenges, making it difficult for the AANES to meet the expectations of the local Arab populations and thereby address a key source of underlying tension.

4. External Influences: Impact of Turkey, Syrian Regime, and ISIS Resurgence on Kurd-Arab Dynamics

The complex web of Kurd-Arab relations within AANES-controlled territories is significantly influenced by the actions and agendas of external actors, each pursuing distinct geopolitical objectives.

- Turkey:
  Ankara views the YPG/SDF, the dominant military force within AANES, as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it designates as a terrorist organization and considers a primary threat to its national security.120 Consequently, Turkey has launched multiple large-scale military incursions into northern Syria since 2016 (e.g., "Euphrates Shield," "Olive Branch," "Peace Spring," "Spring Shield"). These operations have resulted in the Turkish occupation of significant Kurdish-majority areas such as Afrin, Tel Abyad, and Ras al-Ayn.15 These interventions have led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurds and other local populations, and reports from human rights organizations and local sources indicate significant demographic changes in these occupied zones, with Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions facilitating the settlement of Arab and Turkmen groups, some of whom are IDPs from

other parts of Syria.15 These actions directly and negatively impact Kurd-Arab relations, creating new layers of displacement, resentment, and competition for resources in the affected areas. The SNA factions supported by Turkey have also been accused of widespread human rights abuses against Kurdish civilians and other residents in the areas under their control, including arbitrary detentions, property confiscation, and extortion.136 Turkey's overarching goal is to prevent the consolidation of a contiguous and powerful Kurdish autonomous region along its southern border and to dismantle the AANES's self-governance structures.120 Turkish policies, including its support for certain Arab tribal elements or opposition groups hostile to the AANES, often exacerbate existing Kurd-Arab tensions or create new ones by altering local power balances and fueling mistrust.

- Syrian Regime (Pre- and Post-Assad Fall):
  Historically, the Assad regime maintained a complex and often contradictory relationship with Syrian Kurds. While generally suppressing Kurdish political aspirations and cultural rights 15, the regime also engaged in tactical cooperation with Kurdish groups when it served its interests, such as countering Turkish influence or certain Syrian opposition factions.103 During the Syrian Civil War, there were periods of tacit non-aggression between regime forces and the YPG/SDF, particularly as both fought against ISIS and Turkish-backed opposition groups. However, the regime never recognized AANES autonomy and consistently called for the restoration of central state authority over all Syrian territory.103 The regime and its allies, notably Iran, have been accused of actively working to undermine AANES by fomenting unrest among Arab tribes in areas like Deir ez-Zor, exploiting local grievances to challenge SDF control.109 The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the emergence of a new interim government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa has introduced a new dynamic. The March 2025 agreement between the SDF and this new government, which reportedly includes provisions for SDF integration into a national army and recognition of Kurdish rights, could potentially reshape Kurd-Arab relations at a national level [87 (result 4.1), 103]. However, the successful implementation of such an agreement faces immense challenges, including the new government's own centralizing tendencies, the deep-seated mistrust between various factions, and the continued strong influence of Turkey, which is likely to oppose any arrangement that grants significant autonomy to Syrian Kurds.
- ISIS Resurgence:
  Although territorially defeated in 2019, the Islamic State (ISIS) continues to operate as a potent insurgency in Syria, particularly in the vast desert regions and in Arab-majority areas of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Hasakah, which are nominally under AANES/SDF control.129 ISIS conducts regular attacks, including assassinations, IED bombings, and assaults on SDF personnel, local officials perceived as collaborating with the AANES, and tribal figures who oppose them.146 The group actively exploits existing socio-economic grievances, governance gaps, and inter-communal tensions (including those between some Arab tribes and the Kurdish-led administration) to recruit members and destabilize the region.147 The ongoing ISIS threat necessitates a heavy

security focus by the SDF, diverting resources from development and service provision. If SDF counter-terrorism operations are perceived by local Arab populations as heavy-handed, discriminatory, or resulting in civilian casualties, this can further exacerbate mistrust and create an environment more conducive to ISIS exploitation. The fight against ISIS was the primary rationale for the US-SDF partnership, a factor that significantly empowered the SDF and shaped regional Kurd-Arab dynamics by positioning the SDF as the key local force against the extremist group. A resurgence of ISIS could therefore reinforce this security-focused dynamic, but also strain AANES resources and test its ability to maintain stability and local support in Arab-majority areas.

C. Arab Communities in Kurdish-Majority Regions of Turkey and Iran (Brief Overview)

While the primary focus of contemporary Kurd-Arab relations is often on Iraq and Syria due to the existence of autonomous Kurdish political entities and active conflicts, Arab communities also exist within the Kurdish-majority regions of Turkey and Iran. Their situations are shaped by the distinct state policies and ethno-national dynamics of these countries.

- **Turkey (Southeast):** Southeastern Turkey, considered Northern Kurdistan by Kurds, is predominantly Kurdish but also home to other ethnic groups, including Arabs.[150] Arab communities are concentrated in provinces along the Syrian border, such as Şanlıurfa, Mardin, and Hatay (which has a significant Arab population and was annexed from Syria in 1939).[152] Smaller Arab populations also exist in other southeastern provinces like Siirt and Batman.[153] Historically, under the Ottoman Empire, ethnic and social differences among Muslim communities were recognized, with distinctions made between Turkmen and Kurdish nomadic tribes [[3]

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