

WHO ARE THE KURDS ?

History and Geography

Homeland for the Kurdish people is the Zagros and Taurus mountain ranges of the Middle East known as Kurdistan ("place of the Kurds"). The area overlaps with Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and parts of the former Soviet Union. Kurds refer to the area of Kurdistan located in Turkey as "Northern Kurdistan;" in the area of Iran as "Eastern Kurdistan;" in Iraq as "Southern Kurdistan;" and in Syria as "Western Kurdistan." They derive their collective culture and personality from life on these 10,000 foot massifs and make claim to this region long before the Arabs entered Mesopotamia and 3,000 years before the Turks arrived in Anatolia. Like the Persians, Kurds are of Indo-European origin and linked ethnically and historically with much of Persian history.

Kurds today have no official country, though they are said to be one of the largest and oldest ethnic groups in the world ... and the largest group of ethnic people without a country. Kurds trace their heritage back thousands of years and are linked historically with the Medes ("Darius the Mede") of the ancient Medo-Persian Empire. Many Biblical stories are rooted in this history, including the Old Testament stories of Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah, and others. The Medes are also known historically for overthrowing the Assyrian Empire (in the region that is now Iraq) in 612 BCE. Some historians believe that the Arabs gave the name "Kurds" to these rugged people in the 7th century CE.

During the Ottoman Empire (1534–1921), the Kurds came under the rule of two sovereigns: the Sultan in Istanbul and the Shah in Teheran. These separate ethnic and linguistic groups --- Turks, Persians, and Kurds --- have long influenced both cultural assimilation and animosities between these three groups. After World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Rule, the British and French carved up the new "Middle East," and the Kurds were divided among six countries: Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and the former Soviet countries of Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Though the Kurds had been promised autonomy under the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, the treaty was never honored. Since then, the Kurds have formed several political parties, which are often at odds with each other but who continue to seek autonomy and the right to rule their own legitimate region.

Most estimates say there are about 32,000,000 Kurds currently living in the Kurdistan regions of the Middle East, with the largest of these (almost half) in the Anatolia region of Turkey. In addition, since 1979 thousands of Kurds have had to flee the revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran; annihilation attempts by Saddam Hussein in Iraq; the current civil war in Syria; and political persecutions in Turkey. Today, Kurdish communities are found in several other regions of the Middle East, as well as throughout Western Europe and North America. The largest community in the United States live in Nashville, TN.

Culture and Language

Kurds are Indo-European and tend to define themselves in linguistic and cultural terms. The Kurdish language is an Indo-European tongue with some similarities to Persian (or Farsi). This language traces back to the times of the early Medo-Persian Empire and is similar to the language used in the Zoroastrian (Avestan) scriptures. Because of the separation of Kurds by different governing authorities for so many years, the language has taken on different dialects, which sometimes makes it hard for Kurds from different regions to communicate with one another. Further, the Kurdish language was banned in most of the Kurdistan region until very recent years, so many ethnic Kurds are unfamiliar with their own language. The three main dialects of the Kurdish language are Kirmanji (spoken in Turkey, Syria and Northern parts of Iran and Iraq); Kermanshahi (spoken in the Kermanshah province of Iran); and Surani (spoken in western Iran and most of Iraq). Because of their long and close ethnic and cultural relationships with the Persians, many Kurds use the Persian dialect of Kurdish as their literary language.

The Kurds are traditionally a tribal society with somewhat nomadic lifestyles, though most have settled in villages and small towns, as well as some of the larger cities. The Kurdish economy still serves a rural people; most are farmers, tailors, cobblers, weavers, and cultural artisans. However, education in recent years is rapidly elevating the status and progress of many Kurdish communities producing intellectuals and professionals in a modern society.

The majority of Kurds are Muslims who follow the "Sunni" branch of Islam known as "Shafiism." This branch is generally more traditional, keeping with values and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life. Other Kurds adhere to the "Shi'a" branch of Islam which is embraced by the majority of Persians. Still others follow the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, which dates from the Medo-Persian Empire. Many Kurdish people consider themselves to be more secular and enjoy the lifestyles of a modern society.

The traditional Kurdish garment ("kaffiyeh") is distinct in the Middle East. Men wear loose fitting shirts and baggie pants and do not shave off their mustaches. Women wear very colorful clothing, often with sequins and sparkling decorations. Kurdish women do not veil but sometimes wear colorful scarves or headdress.

Traditional Kurdish performers include story-tellers, minstrels, and bards who draw from rich Kurdish legends and epic traditions. One of the great legendary Kurdish heroes is Saladin, who led Muslims to capture the Holy City of Jerusalem in the 12th century CE. Kurdish performers are known worldwide for their artistry in many forms. One of the best known performers is actor and singer Ibrahim Tatlis. Though Kurdish, his songs are mostly in Turkish or Arabic since the Kurdish language has been banned in Turkey for most of the last century. Most Kurdish songs are distinguished by their simple melodies with patterns of ten syllable lines and a range of only three or four notes.

Kurds are "collectivist" people who enjoy strong family bonds and Kurdish traditions. They are also fierce defenders of Kurdistan. Alexander the Great once admitted that the Kurds gave him "... more trouble than the entire Persian Army!"

Kurds in Turkey

About half of Kurdistan's population lives in Turkey, where they make up one-fifth of the population. Though the Kurds refer to their region as "Northern Kurdistan," they must refer to it officially as "Eastern Anatolia." They are frequently referred to by the Turks in a condescending manner as "those mountain Turks," a designation given to them by Turkey's first leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

When the Ottoman Empire was carved up following World War I, the Kurds were promised their own sovereignty and government by the "Treaty of Sevres." This treaty was rejected by the new Turkish leader, Kemal Atatürk and has never been honored by successive governments in any area of Kurdistan. By the time of Atatürk's death in 1938, people in Turkey were forbidden to speak the Kurdish language, a situation that has only slightly improved today. In many parts of Turkey, Kurdish children are not allowed to enroll in school unless they shed their Kurdish identity and adopt a Turkish name.

There is a critical shortage of schools in Turkey's Kurdish territories. More than 70% of people living there are functionally illiterate. Teaching in the Kurdish language has been banned since 1925. There is a strong urgency among Kurds to reclaim their ethnic heritage, including the right to speak their own language and practice their cultural traditions. Several major uprisings by the Kurds have resulted in fierce battles resulting in even harsher treatment and conditions by Turkish forces.

Abdullah Ocalan, who was born into a poor Kurdish family in 1948, is the best known leader of a political movement known as the "Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan" (PKK) or "Kurdish Workers' Party." Through education and association with socialist and other revolutionary groups, Ocalan formed strong resistance groups among the Kurds and launched his first attack on Turkish security forces on 15 August 1984.

Ocalan was arrested but fled to Damascus, Syria where he continued to plan and launch several subsequent attacks. He was instrumental in encouraging the Iraqi Kurds to conduct a rebellion against Saddam Hussein following the 1991 Gulf War. This resulted in a Turkish supported "safe haven" for Kurds in Northern Iraq that was protected by United States Allies based in Turkey who monitored a "no-fly zone" over Kurdish Iraqi territories.

Ocalan was forced to leave Syria after conducting bloody attacks against Turkish Forces in 1993 and sought asylum in several countries around the world. However, no country would accept him. He was found and finally brought to stand trial in Turkey in 1999. His sentence was "death by hanging." While waiting to appeal his sentence, however, Turkey amended its Constitution in 2002 abolishing the death sentence. Ocalan is currently serving a life sentence on an isolated Turkish island.

In 2007, the AKP political party in Turkey heavily courted the Kurdish vote by promising: "The Kurdish problem is my problem." In January 2009, the first Kurdish-language TV channel began broadcasting, albeit only a few hours a week. In 2013, the Kurdish leader Ocalan negotiated with Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, agreeing to call off fighting in exchange for improvement for the Kurds in Northern Kurdistan.

Kurds in Iraq

Kurds make up about one fifth of the population in Iraq. Kurdish Iraq is in the northern and lush mountainous regions, which Kurds refer to as "Southern Kurdistan." Many in this area continue to suffer from the devastating attacks on both people and lands imposed on them during the brutal rule of Saddam Hussein. However, since the overthrow of Saddam by United States forces in 2003, the Kurds in Iraq have made phenomenal progress, greatly transforming the area into a region of safety and economic success.

Massoud Barzani heads the autonomous "Kurdish Regional Government" in Iraq, as well as the leading political party which is the "Kurdistan Democratic Party" (KDP). Unfortunately, there have been deep divisions among Kurdish political parties for many years. The main rival party of Iraq's KDP is the "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan" (PUK), formerly headed by Jalal Talabani. Since 2002, however, the two parties have been working together toward their collective vision of a united and self-governing "Kurdistan" within Iraq. Talabani now serves as Iraq's President following the elections in 2004, though he currently remains hospitalized in a German hospital following a stroke in 2012.

During the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, the Iraqi Kurds aligned themselves with their Persian Kurdish kinsmen in Iran. Because of this, Saddam launched poisonous gas and chemical attacks on hundreds of Kurdish villages, killing thousands of mostly women and children. Saddam made it his stated intent to annihilate the population of Kurds in Iraq. These events still haunt the Kurdish people of the region today.

Following the Gulf War in the early 1990's, Iraqi Kurds believed that the United States and other Western allies would provide assistance to them if they would lead in an effort to overthrow the Saddam regime. The Kurds launched several attempts, but the hoped for Allied support did not come. As a result, thousands more Kurds were imprisoned, tortured, and killed by Saddam's regime. Many of the Kurdish refugees in the United States fled Iraq as a result of these circumstances. Others fled to neighboring countries, as well as to Europe and elsewhere.

Iraqi Kurdistan welcomed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Well-trained and armed Kurdish militia groups known as "peshmerga" ("those who face death") were among the largest and most effective fighting forces in support of the United States invasion and occupation. This, along with an elected Kurdish President in Baghdad's central government, has given the Iraqi Kurds new hope in their ultimate goals of sovereignty and an autonomous region all their own.

Under the "Kurdistan Regional Government," Iraq's Kurds currently enjoy the greatest freedoms and prosperity of any other Kurds in the region. They have reclaimed use of their Kurdish language for education and boast of seven new universities. They are drawing global businesses to their region, mostly focused on the rich oil deposits with the potential of bringing great new wealth to the region. Their success brings concerns to the Baghdad government as well as to bordering Kurdistan regions. The KRG has welcomed thousands of Syrian Kurdish refugees to their area but say they have no interest in extending their governing authority beyond Iraqi Kurdistan.

Kurds in Iran

Iranian Kurds are mostly settled in the Kermanshah and Hamadan areas of Western Iran where they have lived for centuries. This is the historical Biblical site of Susa, the summer palaces for kings of the ancient Persian Empire. The burial site of the Jewish Queen Esther and her Uncle Mordecai is in this region and continues to draw pilgrims from around the world. About seven million Kurds live in this area of "Eastern Kurdistan."

The greatest purity and richness of the Kurdish language is found in Iran. The richest collection of Kurdish literature is also housed here. Kurdish people are proud of their identity with the ancient Medes, and continue to keep alive their rich stories through both oral and written traditions. Kurdish language radio broadcasts radiate out of this Kermanshah area. At times, broadcasting in the Kurdish language has resulted in arrests, torture, imprisonment and death of journalists, though the broadcasting and journalism continues.

Politically, Kurds in Iran have been at odds with both the former Pahlavi Shah monarchies (overthrown in 1979) and with leaders of the 34-year old Islamic Republic of Iran. More than 10,000 Kurds have been killed since the establishment of the Islamic regime; thousands more have been imprisoned or exiled. Kurds are persecuted because of their claims to the Kurdistan region, as well as for practicing their religious and cultural traditions. Many Kurds are "Sunni" Muslims, while the governing agents of the Ayatollah regimes are "Shi'a." While often kept in secret, many Iranian Kurds also still practice the traditions of their original Zoroastrian ancestry (as do many Kurds in other regions of Kurdistan).

The dominant Kurdish political party of Iran is the "Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan" (PDKI) who participated in the uprising against the Shah Pahlavi monarchy. Another political group which crosses the Iran-Iraq borders is the "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan" (PUK). This political group has often been at odds with both the Iran's central government as well as Iraq's main political "Kurdish Democratic Party." However, with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003, the leaders of the Iraqi KDP and the PUK have called a truce to their disagreements and agreed to work together for a unified Kurdistan. Jalal Talabani, who was the leader of Iraq's PUK was elected President of Iraq in 2004 and serves with the central government of Iraq in Baghdad.

Communication between the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria has been severely hampered by the lack of a common language except their own Kurdish language, which has largely been banned. Only a few Kurds are literate in the Kurdish language. The languages and alphabets used in Turkey, Iran, and the Iraq and Syrian areas are vastly different. In Turkey, the national language is Turkish which uses the Roman alphabet and goes from left to right. Arabic is spoken in Iraq and Syria where the Arabic script goes from right to left. Farsi is spoken in Iran and the Persian script is written from right to left; however, the alphabet and language are different from the Arabic script! Reclaiming the original Kurdish language and returning to a consistent written and literary form seems at times formidable ... but the Kurds in Iran work diligently toward this end.

Kurds in Syria

About three million Kurds live in the northern area of Syria, which Kurds refer to as "Western Kurdistan." Though less than ten per cent of Syria's population, they constitute the largest ethnic minority group in Syria. In 1962, twenty per cent of the Kurds were stripped of citizenship in Syria with a claim that they had "slipped in" illegally. This claim was denounced by several amnesty groups but prevailed, thus forcing a large portion of the Kurdish population to live as second-class citizens.

Human rights groups have long considered the treatment of Kurds in Syria to be deplorable. Not only have Kurds been denied their rights to speak their own language, but have also not been able to register in schools unless they assumed an Arabic name and identity. This area of "Western Kurdistan" has further been neglected in the provision of social and economic development and opportunities. As in other areas of Kurdistan, the Kurdish flag has been banned in all its forms.

Initially, Syrian Kurds were among the minority groups allied with the government of President Bashar Assad. As dire as their circumstances were, many believed that government by a Sunni Arab majority in Syria could be even worse. However, President Assad withdrew from fighting in the Kurdish area in 2012 and Syrian Kurds have been left to fare on their own ever since. Rebel groups, most of which are radical Islamists, have now entered the region and are involved in heavy fighting with these Syrian Kurds.

The main political party of the Syrian Kurds is the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) which is headed by Selah Muslim. The PYD has traditionally been aligned with the PKK Kurdish party in Turkey whose leader is the imprisoned Abdullah Ocalan. This alignment came about because of the former close relationship between the ruling AKP Turkish government of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan and that of President Bashar Assad, both of whom designated the PKK and the PYD as "terrorist" groups. However, that relationship has now frayed, as the Turkish government has called for the overthrow of Bashar Assad. At the same time, the Turkish Prime Minister has been meeting with the imprisoned PKK leader Ocalan to try and come to some peace terms between the Turks and the Kurds.

The current civil war in Syria raises many hopes as well as dire concerns among Syria's Kurdish community. Rebel fighting is killing many Kurdish people and destroying homes and land. Recently, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq began to send out messages to the Syrian Kurds to seek safety in Iraqi Kurdistan. Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees have responded to the invitation. In one camp which was built to house 22,000 refugees, there are now more than 50,000. KRG leader Massoud Barzani recently visited the camp telling the crowds: "We are brothers to you ... and you are now in your home and in your country." He further asked for, and has received, large donations from the Iraqi Kurds to improve the conditions of these newly arrived Kurds. A sort of "refugee economy" has sprung up with a community of vendors, money changers, and "donkey taxis" to assist the newcomers in their "new home" ... all of which leads to predictions that the Kurds of Kurdistan may be the first card to fall in a new re-carving of countries in the Middle East.

Kurds in the United States and Worldwide

In addition to the estimated 32,000,000 Kurds now living in Kurdistan, there are significant numbers of Kurdish people living in the former Soviet Union regions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and other countries of Central Asia and the Middle East. Kurds have been leaving the Kurdistan region since the end of World War I. While being promised their own homeland in the Treaty of Sevres, the agreement was never complied with, leaving millions of Kurds in limbo as to their survival and the futures of their children.

During the centuries of rule by the Ottoman Empire, Kurds had been divided between the rule of the Sultans of the empire and the Shah of Iran. (Iran was never a part of the Ottoman Empire). These conditions help to explain some of the political divisions among Kurds today, particularly with the closer identity Kurds in Iran have with the long histories of Medo-Persian (Kurdish-Iranian) empires.

The largest number of Kurdish people living outside Kurdistan is in Sweden, where many have been placed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The second largest number is in Germany. A significant number of Kurdish refugees have also been placed in Canada and the United States. Since 1979, the Kurdish refugee population has grown significantly, with the Iranian Kurds fleeing the rule of the Ayatollahs and the Iraqi Kurds fleeing persecution by Saddam Hussein who became president of Iraq that same year. Generally, Kurds have been prohibited in trying to cross from one Kurdistan region to another because of strict immigration laws in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

While significant numbers of Kurdish families have settled in Canada and the United States, the largest North American community of Kurds is in Nashville, TN. Kurds say that the beautiful mountainous scenery reminds them of their mountainous homeland. A popular Kurdish saying is: "We have no friends but the mountains." Many now refer to Nashville as their "Little Kurdistan." Kurds also speak of the sounds of country music in the area reminding them of the soulful ballads of their homeland. Other main areas of Kurdish settlement are in Dallas and San Diego. About 7,000 Kurds currently live in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

Kurds everywhere tend to refer to themselves as "we Kurdish People." There remains a strong sense of "be-longing" to their Kurdish homeland even after generations of living in other countries. They continue to practice their cultural traditions wherever they are, though often in some secrecy. The traditional celebration of "Now Ruz" and other Zoroastrian traditions are an integral part of Kurdish culture and traditions everywhere.

Kurds everywhere also speak of their hope for return to a united and autonomous homeland of "Kurdistan" ... "place of the Kurds." They want to speak their own language, form their own government, and be in control of their own cultures, economies and destiny. Opponents fear that this might actually happen, particularly since the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the establishment of an autonomous government and region in Iraqi Kurdistan. Events of the "Arab Spring," as well as the possible new mappings of Syria and Iraq serve to deepen the hopes and dreams of "those Kurdish People."

Johnnie Hicks -03/24/14