

## Population

26.7 million Kurds live in the parts of Kurdistan divided among four States: 14M in Kurdistan in Turkey (representing 24% Turkey's population); 7M in Iran (16% of Iran's population); 4.5M in Iraq (27% of Iraq's population); and 1.2M in Syria (9% of Syrians). The Kurdish diaspora is comprised of about 1.3M people. The Kurds, therefore, total some 28 million.

The Kurdish language is Indo-European, a sister of Persian, distinct from the Turkic and Arabic language families. Kurdish has three main dialects, with 65% of Kurds speaking Kurmandji, 30% Soranî, and 5% Zaza or Dumilî. 95% of Kurds are Muslim. Kurdish seasonal feast—Nawruz—is celebrated on 21 March, and has come to symbolize the Kurdish people's struggle against oppression of their national rights.

## Origins

Arising from the ancient Mardoï (Mèdes) and Kyrtoï (Scythes) tribes, Kurds organized politically under independent principalities with various names over time, but never formed a "State" in the modern sense. This is often cited to justify denying self-determination to Kurds, one of the oldest and largest peoples of the Middle East, despite international recognition of self-determination rights for other peoples with similar histories. The recent concept of "State" was applied to form Turkey, Syria and Iraq to consolidate great power interests in the Ottoman Empire's 20<sup>th</sup> Century dismemberment.

## Historical Background

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Kurdistan was divided between Ottoman and Persian empires, usurping the Kurdish principalities' independence, but reinforcing the Kurds' common sense of belonging to a distinct people. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, emerging Kurdish cultural and political institutions and Kurdish-language newspapers reaffirmed Kurdish identity.

Meanwhile, the British and French Empires secretly agreed to share Mesopotamia (modern Iraq, Eastern Syria, Southwestern Turkey and Iran). The primary British interest was to control oil resources, namely by managing the formation of Iraq. As the region of Kurdistan was rich in oil, the British were in favor of establishing an "independent" Kurdistan under their control. Consequently, at the signing of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, a State called Kurdistan was foreseen. Even if that State would have covered only 1/3 of Kurdish national territory, this was the unique time that the Kurds' right to self-determination was recognized, though it was never applied.

Since 1918, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had struggled against the Ottoman Empire's disintegration to give to his new Republic of Turkey (1923) the largest territory possible, while pledging to expand no further. Atatürk promised Kurds their equal rights in the new State. However, the second post-war peace treaty signed in Lausanne (1923) dismissed Kurds' national rights, save the use of their language. The British vowed to abandon any support for Kurdish autonomy as a consolation to Turkey, which had lost the oil-rich province of Mosul to British-created Iraq. Again, the Kurds were caught between the colluding interests of greater powers, from the

time of the old Empire into the era of new republics.

## Continuum of Discrimination

Under foreign domination, the Kurds found have been subject to internal discrimination. The Constitution of Turkey's Article 3 of the Constitution declares that the Turkish State, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity, and that its unique national language is Turkish. Article 14 stipulates that the rights and freedoms embodied in the Constitution shall be denied to those violating the Turkish Republic's territorial and ethnic integrity. It is under this pretext that most rights have been denied to the Kurds as their mere existence represents a threat to the "integrity" of the Turkish State. Most Turkish State leaders since its creator, Atatürk, have embodied this ideological position.

Systematic discrimination against Kurds in Iraq also was designed to ensure the ethnic purity of the state, as well as control over key resources concentrated in Kurdish regions. While nominally granting Kurdish autonomy in the 70s, the Ba`thist regime embarked on a campaign of "urbanization"—demographic manipulation—in the oil-endowed Kurdish regions of Kirkuk and Khanaqin. By the 1980s, the deportation and internal displacement of Kurds was formalized in a series of policies and campaigns justifying land confiscation, home demolition, and other collective punishment against ethnic minorities as "enemies of the State."

Also in Iran as well as Syria, the Kurdish population is also dispossessed and subject to forced evictions and other forms of housing and land rights violations, as well as policies of cultural and linguistic assimilation.

