



November 22, 2017

# The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran

The Kurds of the Middle East are an ethnonational group distinct from other peoples of the region. They share strong historical, cultural, and interactive bonds across countries, and are one of the largest groups without control of a state. Despite shared ties, Kurds differ from one another along linguistic, political, and religious lines. Although most are Sunni Muslim, some belong to different Muslim sects (i.e., Shiite, Alevi, Alawite) or different religions entirely (i.e., Christianity, Yezidism).

Since the early twentieth century, Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran have periodically faced repression and economic disadvantages, and have at times engaged in conflict with their respective governments. Kurdish nationalists in these states have received support for their insurgencies or political struggles from (1) other Kurds in the region, (2) the Kurdish diaspora in Europe (numbering more than one million, mostly from Turkey), (3) neighboring governments, and (4) various international (including U.S.) sources.

mount some of the most effective military opposition in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State organization.

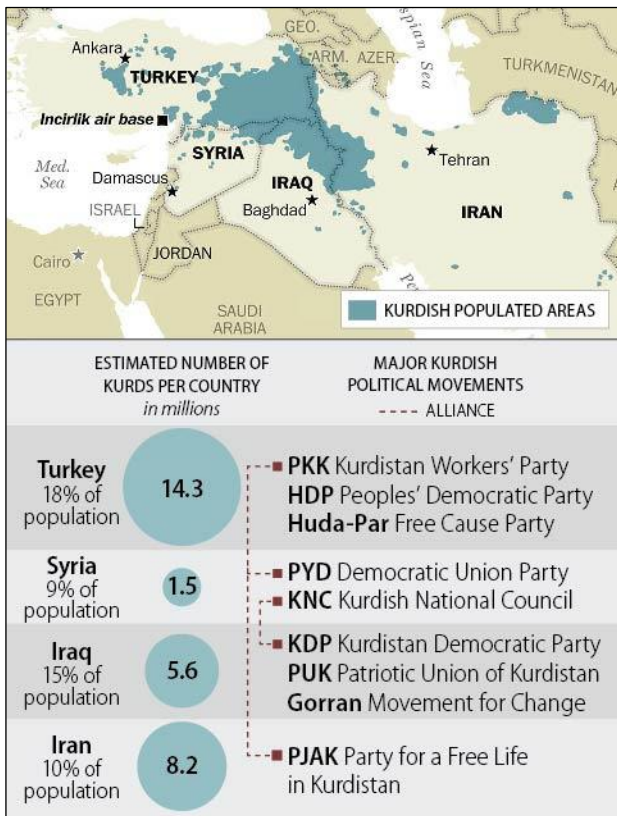
The two most prominent sources of Kurdish leadership come from the PKK (see inset graphic for acronym explanations), which originated in Turkey, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The two entities are rivals but also make periodic common cause. The PKK and KRG have traditionally employed different approaches to vying for transnational influence. The PKK uses its longstanding tradition of armed resistance to attract Kurdish followers and sympathizers across borders, while the KRG’s functional autonomy in northern Iraq (since shortly after the 1991 Gulf War) has served as a model for other Kurdish movements seeking greater self-governance.

The PKK’s cross-border reach comes largely through (1) its “democratic confederalism” with major Kurdish groups in Syria (PYD) and Iran (PJAK) seeking greater autonomy or functional independence, (2) financial and media support from the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, and (3) its military safe haven in the Qandil mountains (within the KRG’s territorial boundaries near the Iranian border).

The KRG has boosted its regional and international profile in recent years by expanding international political, trade, and investment relationships. However, after a September 2017 KRG-sponsored advisory referendum on independence, the Iraqi government regained control of a number of disputed territories that Kurdish forces administered after government forces fled from Islamic State fighters in 2014. Without oil-rich Kirkuk governorate and an uncontested export pipeline, independence would be less viable for Iraqi Kurds.

**Iraq.** Since 2003, Iraqi Kurds have had more control over their own affairs than at any time in Iraq’s history, while also significantly influencing the country’s future. Kurdish self-governance came in large part from U.S. military operations that prevented Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi forces from reasserting control in certain predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War. (Hussein’s forces killed thousands of Iraqi Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and displaced thousands immediately after the Gulf War.) An earlier U.S.-Iran effort to aid Kurdish rebels had ended after a 1975 Iran-Iraq diplomatic agreement.

Within the KRG, the two main political groups are the KDP, with its traditional sphere of control in northern KRG territories; and the PUK, with its traditional sphere of control in southern areas. *Peshmerga* militias are affiliated with each group and with the KRG. The PUK split from the KDP in 1975, and the two groups have subsequently alternated between cooperation and conflict—being divided



Sources: Gene Thorp/Washington Post, citing the Central Intelligence Agency; Council on Foreign Relations; adapted by CRS.

Relative cohesiveness among some Kurdish groups (in comparison with non-Kurds) appears to have helped them

along lines of political philosophy, personal ambition, economic interests, geography, and dialect. The Kurdish parliament also includes members from smaller parties (including Gorran, a PUK offshoot) and various ethnic minorities. A number of non-Kurds (Turkmen, Arabs, Assyrians, and Armenians) live in KRG-controlled areas.

Difficulties in reaching political consensus within the KRG have persisted since its inception, contributing to KDP-PUK armed conflict in the 1990s. More recent intra-Kurdish disagreements have occurred over (1) how the central Iraqi government shares oil revenue with the KRG, (2) the administration of territories outside the KRG's formal territorial boundaries, (3) KRG leadership, and (4) whether and how to move toward possible independence. At times, however, the KDP and PUK have made common cause on some of these matters.

Governance is further complicated by the presence of the PKK in some areas of northern Iraq. KRG leaders deal with Turkish cross-border airstrikes on PKK positions in northern Iraq, along with PKK aspirations for greater local control. Yet, KRG leaders remain sensitive to transnational Kurdish pleas for ethnic solidarity. As mentioned above, the KRG lost territory to Iraq's government in late 2017. This development, along with the November 2017 resignation of KDP head Masoud Barzani as KRG president and the October 2017 death of PUK leader Jalal Talabani, complicates questions regarding Iraqi Kurds' leadership and relations with key regional actors, including Iran.

**Turkey.** Historically, the Turkish government and military have sought to limit Kurdish influence and identity in Turkey, due in part to concerns about Turkish territorial integrity and political stability. The PKK emerged in the late 1970s as a Marxist-Leninist separatist movement that also sought to challenge traditional Turkish Kurdish tribal hierarchies. For more than 30 years, the PKK (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and foreign narcotics trafficker) has engaged in on-and-off conflict with the government and with fellow Kurds in Turkey while fostering links with other Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Europe. Until 1998, the PKK's top leadership was based in Syria. (PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan was forced to leave after Turkey threatened war with Syria for harboring him. Since 1999, Ocalan has been imprisoned in Turkey.)

Despite the PKK's institutional preeminence among Kurds in Turkey, support for it has fluctuated among conservative (particularly avowedly religious) Kurds. Over the years, some Kurds have supported Islamic-leaning parties and movements in Turkey, including the ruling AKP and the more Kurdish-specific Huda-Par (a political arm of a militant group known as Kurdish Hezbollah). In recent years Turkey's government has nurtured ties with the KRG in Iraq, perhaps in part to counter the PKK's transnational influence; nevertheless Turkey's maintains its longstanding official opposition to outright Iraqi Kurdish independence.

Since 1991, various pro-Kurdish political parties widely viewed as having some connection with the PKK have gained representation in Turkey's parliament, generally via independent candidacies. In 2015, the HDP became the first

pro-Kurdish party to surmount Turkey's 10% electoral threshold. The HDP publicly maintains that it is independent from the PKK and generally advocates obtaining greater Kurdish rights by peaceful means. Hostilities between the PKK and the Turkish government resumed in 2015 and the government has broadened efforts to centralize control over Kurdish-populated areas of southeast Turkey in the wake of the July 2016 attempted coup. The government generally conflates the HDP with the PKK and has jailed or ousted several HDP members of parliament and local officials.

**Syria.** When Syria's civil war started in 2011, Kurds were largely concentrated in three non-contiguous areas (Afrin, Kobane, Jazirah) near the Turkish border. Having endured repression under the rule of the Asad family and Syria's earlier leaders, Kurds gained greater autonomy in 2011-2012 in what they call "Rojava" (Western Kurdistan) as the government redeployed military forces to other areas of the country. The PYD, reportedly established in 2003 in affiliation with the PKK, has emerged as the dominant Syrian Kurdish group, though a number of smaller political factions still exist. Non-Kurdish groups in PYD-controlled areas include Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians, and Armenians.

Following a failed effort to administer Syrian Kurdish areas in cooperation with the KNC, a group aligned with Iraq's KDP, the PYD established a governing confederation in early 2014 for the three Syrian Kurdish areas (now dubbed "cantons"). The PYD-controlled People's Protection Units (YPG) militia is reportedly bolstered by PKK personnel and includes some KNC fighters as well. The YPG is the leading force in the coalition of militias known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that are partnering with the United States against the Islamic State. U.S. officials do not consider the PYD or the YPG to be a terrorist group. The PYD claims that the governing bodies it has helped form to administer territories, including in predominantly Arab-populated areas, remain subject to Syrian sovereignty but are models for a future decentralized system.

Turkey strongly objects to the U.S. approach to the PYD/YPG. YPG territorial gains have been a contributing factor to increased Turkey-PKK tensions and to a direct Turkish military intervention in Syria that began in August 2016. The YPG has apparently coordinated to some extent with the Asad government and Russia to safeguard its interests in Syria despite Turkish opposition, though the YPG has also clashed at times with Syria's government.

**Iran.** Many Iranian Kurds aspire to greater communal privileges, but receive less international attention than Kurds in other countries. This may be due to internal disunity, government repression and/or limited media coverage. The PJAK, which uses the PKK's northern Iraqi safe haven and was designated by the Treasury Department in 2009 as a PKK-controlled terrorist organization, has engaged in occasional conflict with government forces.

---

**Jim Zanotti**, [jzanotti@crs.loc.gov](mailto:jzanotti@crs.loc.gov), 7-1441

**Clayton Thomas**, [cbthomas@crs.loc.gov](mailto:cbthomas@crs.loc.gov), 7-2719

IF10350