



Kurdish Fact Sheet

The Kurds

The Kurds are one of the indigenous peoples of the Middle East and the region's fourth-largest ethnic group, with an estimated 30-40 million people. They live in large numbers in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey and about 30,000 in Armenia. There are also about 2 million who live in Europe. They primarily speak Kurdish, an Indo-European language, and are predominantly Sunni Muslims.



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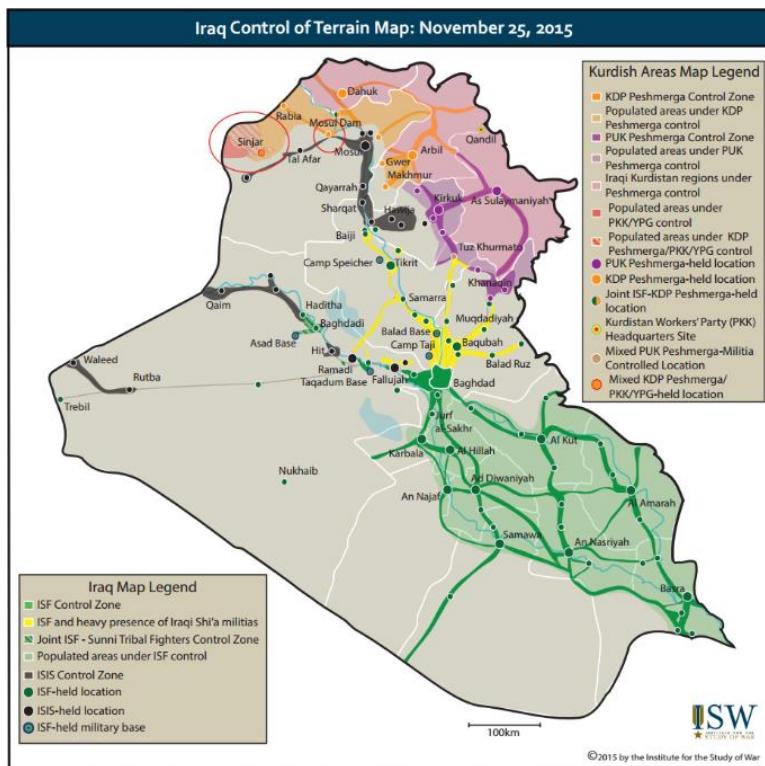
Iran (East Kurdistan, Rojhelat)

In Iran, there are 8 million Kurds, mostly settled along the borders with Iraq and Turkey. Although most Kurds are Sunni Muslim, in Iran there is a sizable percentage – which may be as high as 50% – that are Shia Muslims. Iran's parliament has a strong Shia majority among its 43 Kurdish members. The Iranian regime continues to this day to strongly repress its minority ethnic and religious groups, including the Kurds. For a brief period in 1946, Kurds in Iran established a Kurdish state, the Republic of Mahabad led by Qazi Mohammad with the support of the Soviet Union in the city of Mahabad, which quickly collapsed after the Soviets pulled out of Iran. In 1979, revolts by the left-leaning Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Marxist group Komala were suppressed by the Iranians. In the 90's, these Kurdish parties moved into exile in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq, where they are not supposed to conduct guerilla warfare against Iran. In 2015, the KDPI began to move back into Iran and clashes with its 2000 peshmerga fighters were reported. There is also the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which has sprung up based in the border areas between Iran, Iraq and Turkey. In 2011, the PJAK decided to call a cease-fire with Iran after clashes between its fighters and the Iranian forces left hundreds dead, but recently violence flared up again. PJAK may have up to 7000 fighters. Iranian Kurds have traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight for other Kurdish militias.

Iraq (South Kurdistan, Basur)

In Iraq, there are 5.5 million Kurds who reside primarily in the four northern provinces that make up the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Duhok, Erbil (Hewler in Kurdish), Sulaimani and Halabja. Iraqi Kurds have had de facto autonomy since 1991, when a US-led coalition established a no-fly zone over Kurdish areas to protect them from Saddam Hussein's attacks. **The KRG's army of an estimated 160,000-190,000 is known as the Peshmerga, whose name translates as "those who face death."** The KRG was originally founded by two separate Kurdish political parties – Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – which fought a civil war in the mid to

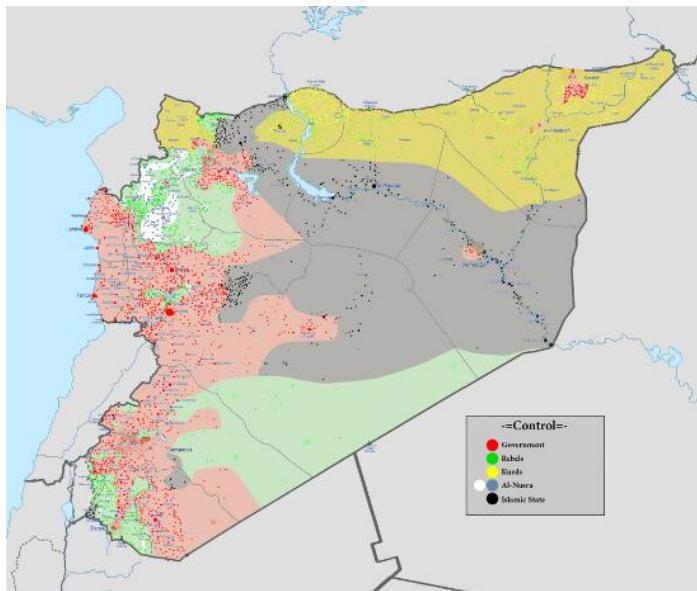
late 90's before uniting. It was during this time that the Peshmerga first began to use female fighters. Talabani served as the President of Iraq from 2005 to 2014, and Barzani has been the President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region since 2005, even though his term was supposed to end in 2013. The KRG is [facing](#) an economic crisis. Today, the two main parties [maintain joint control](#) over the KRG along with a newer major Kurdish party – the Change Movement, or Gorran – which was organized to fight corruption in the Kurdish government. The KDP [controls](#) Erbil and Dohuk provinces, but the PUK and Gorran control, Sulaimani and Halabja. The KDP is the more capitalist, pro-American, and currently the largest of the three parties; the PUK and Gorran are both left-wing. However, both the KDP and the PUK are [essentially](#) autocratic family run organizations. Both the PUK and the KDP still maintain their own Peshmerga forces, which sometimes [do not cooperate](#) with each other. Gorran does not have any Peshmerga forces of its own. There is also a lot of [political infighting](#). Some Iraqi Kurds live outside of the KRG, however, and the Kurds have laid claims to areas outside their recognized borders, including the oil-rich Kirkuk region. [Kirkuk was originally Arabized during the Baathist control of Iraq by Saddam Hussein](#). Although the KRG [overall](#) has a better record of respecting the rights of its own people and minorities in its region, [including refugees](#), both Iraqi Christians and Yazidis were angered when many Peshmerga forces [fled](#) when ISIS conquered Sinjar (Shingal in Kurdish) and other areas in 2014. The KRG has an excellent relationship with the US, and [with Turkey](#), to whom it sells oil. The KDP is a [rival](#) of the PKK from Turkey which has moved up to 5000 of its own troops into Sinjar. The PUK [is](#) an ally of the PKK and the YPG. It [is also](#) an ally of Iran. There [are](#) almost two million Iraqi refugees in the KRG, including Sunni Arabs, the Yazidis, & Christians. The US government has been hesitant to arm the KRG directly, instead [sending](#) supplies through the Iraqi government, which has led to problems as the Iraqi government has not forwarded all of these arms and supplies to the KRG.



Syria (West Kurdistan, Rojava)

In Syria, there are [close to 2 million Kurds](#) who inhabit regions in the north, which also have large oil deposits near the border with Turkey and Iraq. Since 2012, the Syrian Kurds have had their own leftist and non-religious political party, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), led by [Salih Muslim](#), with a militia called the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). There are [roughly](#) 70,000 YPG fighters. The PYD is connected to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey, a leftist guerrilla movement that has fought a

decades-long war against the Turkish state. Many Turkish Kurds from the PKK have crossed the border to fight with the YPG. Since 2012, Syrian President Assad has largely left the Syria Kurds to their own rule, and even withdrew most of his combat troops from the area on the grounds that they were needed more urgently in the Syrian heartland. **The well-trained YPG has been one of the most successful opponents of ISIS, largely driving out ISIS forces from much of northern Syria.** Like the Peshmerga, the YPG also has women fighters, the YPJ. In Oct. of 2015, the YPG helped organize a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighting factions from northeastern Syria into the Syria Democratic Forces, which has emerged as the centerpiece of the recent US-led military effort against ISIS, in Syria. Unfortunately, Turkey, led by Islamist President Erdogan, has been a firm opponent of the YPG, because of its affiliation with the PKK, and has often attacked YPG fighters in Syria. The YPG generally has a good record of respecting the rights of minorities in the region, although they have admitted some incidents of forcing Arabs out of their homes. The YPG and its allies announced their plans for an autonomous federation of Rojava in Northern Syria: a constitution was finalized by August 2016. The YPG has a good relationship with the US. The US has provided arms and supplies to the YPG and its allies, although Turkey has objected. Recently, Turkey invaded northern Syria. The Turks have claimed to be focused on fighting ISIS; many observers believe they are more interested in combating the YPG. They have already issued a warrant for PYD leader Salih Muslim over an Ankara bombing. The United States and the international coalition continues to coordinate with the YPG in the fight against ISIS.



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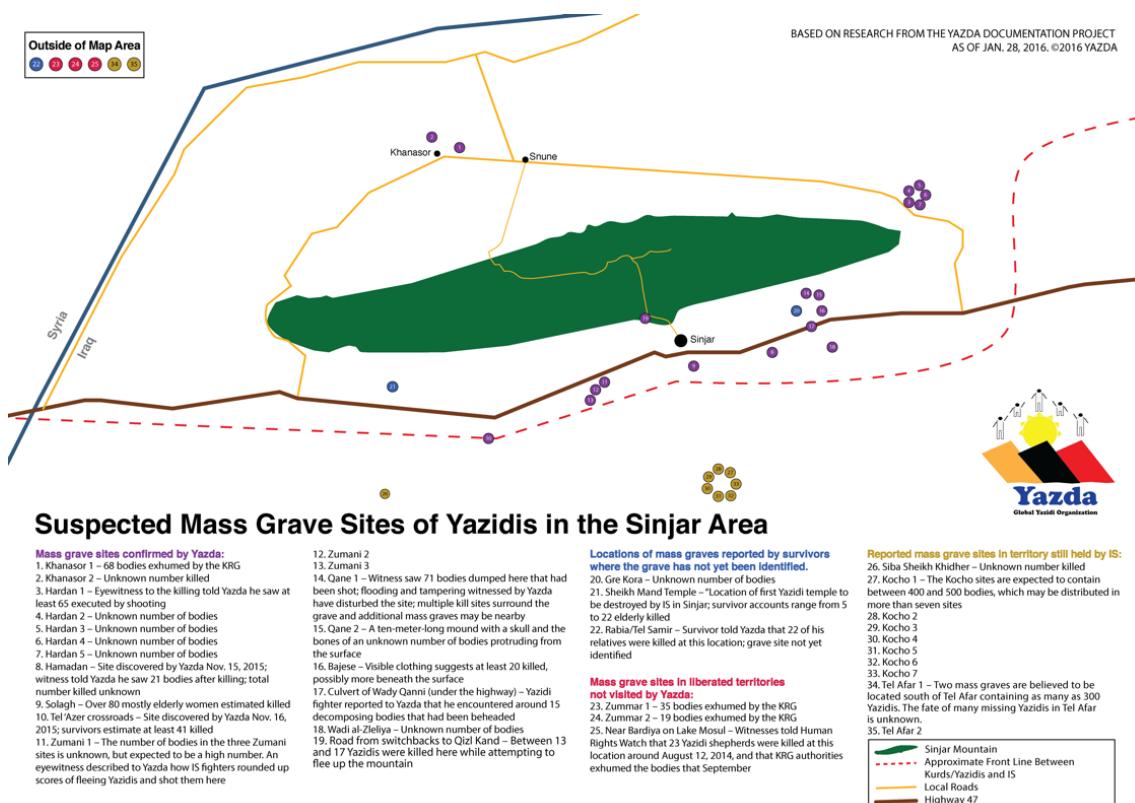
Turkey (North Kurdistan, Bakur)

In Turkey, there are about 15-18 million Kurds, roughly 20% of the Turkish population who live in – and are a majority in – the southern and eastern mountainous areas. The Kurdish population has long been discriminated against by the Turkish government. The Kurds in Turkey have a much greater demographic growth rate than the Turks, which has prompted paranoia in Islamist President Erdogan and other Turkish officials. Since 1984, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey, originally a Marxist movement – but now a more moderate, leftist and non-religious movement – has fought a decades-long war against the Turkey which has resulted in the deaths of more than 40,000 people. The PKK has been listed as a terrorist organization by the State Department since 1997, largely because the then-non-Islamist Turkish government pressured the US to do so. In 1999, the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan (Apo, in Kurdish), was arrested and jailed for treason by Turkey, he is currently held in Imrali island, an isolated prison with little contact from the outside world. Turkey's Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) largely is supported by Turkish Kurds. Since the attempted coup in Turkey, President Erdogan has cracked down on that party, and on women's rights, which

the HDP (and the PKK) [have always strongly promoted](#). Erdogan signed a ceasefire with the PKK in 2013, but in the midst of his Nov. 2015 election campaign, [he eventually abrogated it](#). Many PKK fighters are fighting in Syria with the YPG. The PKK has a [rivalry](#) with the KDP in the KRG. The [jailed Kurdish leader](#) recently called for a new round of peace talks in a new message urging an end to the fighting.

The Yazdis

The 700,000 member Yazidi religious minority in Iraq and Syria [is also](#) ethnically Kurdish. The Yazidi are mostly [grouped](#) in Iraq – current population of around 600,000 – of which 400,000 lived in Sinjar (Shingal). Their religion has elements from Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism. They honor a supreme being known as Yasdan, and the 7 great spirits that emanate from him, of which the greatest is the Peacock Angel. When ISIS attacked their land in 2014, [over](#) 200,000 fled to the KRG. ISIS has murdered more than 3,000 Yazidi men, raped thousands of Yazidi women and children, and sold at least 5000 Yazidis, mostly women and children, as sexual slaves. 3500 [women continue](#) to live in slavery, although others have been ransomed back. There [are](#) three Yazidi militias: 1) the Sinjar Defense Units (HPS), led by Haider Shesho, which has 5,000 fighters, including about 400 women, and is affiliated with the PUK; 2) the Qasim Shesho Peshmerga, which is led by Qasim Shesho, has 3000 fighters, and is allied with the KDP; and 3) the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), an offshoot of the PKK, which has almost 2,000 men and women fighters.



Link for larger image <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/report-on-mass-graves-of-yazidis-in-sinjar/>

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