



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 strongly repress its minority ethnic and religious groups. For a brief period in 1946, Kurds in Iran established a Kurdish state, the [Republic of Mahabad](#) with the support of the Soviet Union, 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. 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. Iran [has shelled](#) the KRG to hit the KDPI and other groups. Iranian Kurds [have backed](#) Kurdish independence in other nations.

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, Sulaimani and Halabja, and some other areas. Iraqi Kurds have had de facto autonomy since 1991, when a U.S.-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.

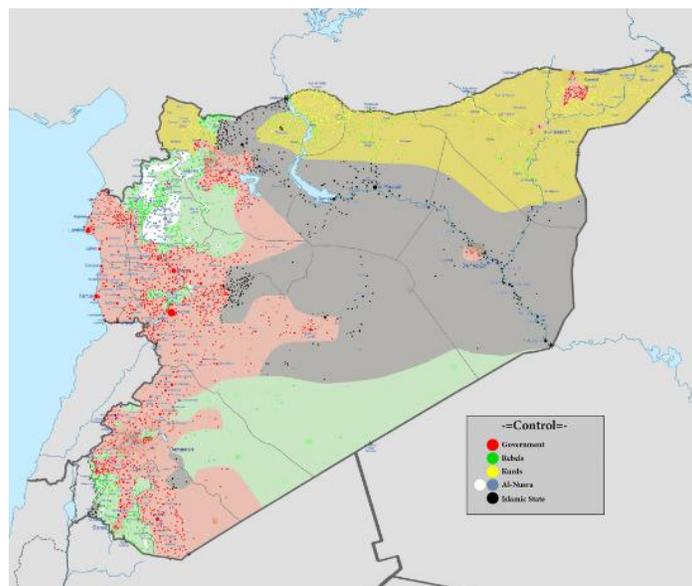
Talabani served as the President of Iraq from 2005 to 2014, and Barzani only recently stepped down as President of the KRG, which he had been since 2005. The KRG is [facing](#) an economic crisis. Today, the two main parties [maintain joint control](#) over the KRG along with a newer major Kurdish party – 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, traditionalist, 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, and both are riven by [infighting](#) between the parties and within the parties. The KRG parliament has been paralyzed by this infighting. Both the PUK and the KDP still maintain their own Peshmerga forces, which sometimes [do not cooperate](#) with each other. The Kurds have laid claims to and for some time controlled areas outside their recognized borders, including the oil-rich Kirkuk region. [Kirkuk was originally Arabized during the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein](#). The Kurdish areas in the north are considering secession from Iraq, and [held a non-binding September 2017 referendum](#) that won 93% of the vote. The Iraq [central government](#), led by the Shia Arab majority, as well as [Iran and Turkey](#), all vociferously opposed KRG independence, and threatened [economic pressure, troop movements](#). The Iraqi army [engaged with the Kurds over Kirkuk](#), with Iran and the PMF's [supportive](#) of Iraqi forces. The PUK [allied](#) with Iraq and Iran against the KDP. The Kurds [retreated](#) and are now [only in](#) the official KRG areas. [Public officials](#) in the U.S. have also opposed independence and threatened aid. 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 and other areas in 2014. The KRG, especially the KDP, has an excellent relationship with the U.S., and originally [with Turkey](#), to whom it sells oil. Turkey turned hostile only after the KRG [held the referendum](#) on independence. The KDP is a [rival](#) of the PKK, which has moved up to 5000 of its own troops into Sinjar, and the YPG. Partly because of this rivalry, and partly because the KDP itself is influenced by Turkey, they have embargoed supplies sent to the YPG. The PUK [is](#) an ally of the PKK and the YPG. It [is also](#) an ally of Iran. Iran [has shelled](#) the KRG to attack Iranian Kurdish groups, including the Iranian KDP. There [are](#) almost two million Iraqi refugees in the KRG, many of which are in those areas the Kurds liberated, including Sunni Arabs, the Yazidis, & Christians. The U.S. has been hesitant to arm the KRG directly; instead supplies go 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 the north, with its large oil deposits, as well as much of its agriculture. Since 2012, the Syrian Kurds have had their own leftist and non-religious 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; how close is a matter for debate. Many Turkish Kurds from the PKK have crossed the border to fight with the YPG. Since 2012, Syrian President Assad withdrew most of his combat troops from the area. **The well-trained YPG has been one of the most successful opponents of ISIS, largely driving out ISIS forces from much of Syria.** Like the Peshmerga, the YPG [also has](#) women fighters, the YPJ, who are [even more prominently featured](#). In Oct. of 2015, the YPG helped [organize](#) a coalition of Kurdish and Arab factions from northeastern Syria into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which emerged as the centerpiece of the U.S.-led military effort against ISIS, in Syria. The SDF political wing, the [Syrian Democratic Council](#), [announced](#) their plans for the “Democratic Federal System for Rojava - Northern Syria.” A constitution was [finalized](#) by August 2016. [Abdul Karim Saroukhan](#) is the head of the administration. Elections [have been held](#). This federation is not meant to serve as a Kurdish state; the SDC is in favor of a federal system in Syria. However, the Assad government has [announced](#) that it is open to negotiations with Kurds over autonomy. 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 there are [exceptions](#). The YPG has a good relationship with the U.S. They also have an excellent relationship with the Yazidi Kurds in neighboring Iraq, many of whom have sought protection in Syria. The U.S. has [provided arms and supplies](#) to the YPG and its allies, although Turkey has objected. When Turkey invaded northern Syria, the Turks [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 Muslim. The KDP from the KRG is not very friendly with the YPG, and has at times enforced a blockade against Rojava and has also [sponsored](#) its own rival Syrian Kurdish party, the Kurdish National Council (KNC), and an associate militia, the Rojava Peshmerga, who [number](#) about 3000 troops. This militia, from the KRG, has engaged in clashes with the YPG. The PYD is [reaching](#) out to Saudi Arabia.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_civil_war.png

Turkey (North Kurdistan, Bakur)

In Turkey, there are about 15-18 million Kurds, roughly 20% of the 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 Turks. The Kurds in Turkey have a much [greater](#) demographic growth 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 [moderate, leftist and non-religious](#) movement – has fought a decades-long war against 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 U.S. to do so. In 1999, the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan was arrested and jailed for treason by Turkey. 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. 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, and in Iraq in Singal. The PKK has a [rivalry](#) with the KDP in the KRG, although it generally gets along with the PUK.

The Yazidis

The 700,000 Yazidi religious minority in Iraq and Syria [is also](#) ethnically Kurdish. The Yazidi are mostly [grouped](#) in Iraq – population of around 600,000 – of which 400,000 lived in Sinjar (Shingal). Their religion has elements from Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism. 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. 6,417 Yazidis [were abducted](#) by the jihadists from 2014, and up until December 1, 2017, only 3,207 of them have been rescued or managed to flee their captors. The PKK from Turkey and the YPG from Syria stepped in to defend the Yazidi Kurd population when ISIS went after them, and as a result, many Yazidis [support](#) the PKK and YPG troops in Iraq. There [are](#) three Yazidi militias: 1) the Sinjar Defense Units (HPS), led by Haider Shesho, which has [1000 - 5000](#) fighters, including about 400 women, and is affiliated with the PUK; 2) the Qasim Shesho Peshmerga, which is led by Qasim Shesho, has [2000](#) fighters, and is allied with the KDP; and 3) the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), an offshoot of the PKK, which has [more than 1000 - 3000](#) men and women fighters. There is also [Lalesh](#), a Yazidi affiliate of the PMF's in Iraq.

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