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Introduction

Kurdistan is a geo-cultural region in West Asia, where Kurds cover a prominent majority of the population. The region is controlled by several countries, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye, referring to the fact that Kurds do not have a country of their own. The Kurdish population in the world is estimated to be over 30 million with most of them living in the roughly defined Kurdistan region, making them one of the biggest stateless nations.

Throughout history, the culture and traditions of the Kurds have been repressed, their identities neglected, and their voices suppressed, leading to a massive scale of discrimination and suffering. The maltreatment of the Kurds led to their uprisings, with the aspiration of an independent Kurdistan, establishing Kurdish political organizations and military forces. These organizations, often designated as terrorist groups, have been involved in battles with central governments, causing millions of civilians to die, suffer, and get displaced. The issue of Kurdistan remains a major problem in multiple countries since an independent Kurdistan threatens the territorial unity of the countries in control over the region.

Although some efforts have been made to solve the issue, significant progress has yet to be made. Meanwhile, hatred and anger in the region are rising due to the ongoing tensions. Therefore, the issue should be addressed and discussed, and solutions should be created with immediate effect.

Key Terms

Autonomy

The right or condition of self-government.

De facto

Practices that exist, regardless of whether they are officially recognized by laws or other formal norms.

Federated state

A territorial and constitutional community forming part of a federation.

Guerilla operation

An operation carried on by small independent forces, generally in the rear of the enemy, with the objective of harassing, delaying, and disrupting military operations of the enemy.

Human rights

Universally recognized moral principles or norms that establish standards of human behavior and are often protected by both national and international laws.

Referendum

A vote in which all the people in a country or an area are asked to give their opinion about or decide an important political or social question.

Territorial unity

The unity of a defined geographical area that is governed by a specific political authority or entity, such as a country, state, or municipality.

Terrorism

The use of violence against non-combatants to achieve political or ideological aims.

General Overview

Throughout history, Kurds have lived in modern-day Iran, Iraq, Syria, Türkiye, and even Armenia, yet failed to form an independent state. During the Ottoman rule, they sought to gain independence. However, their urge strengthened after the First World War. After the Ottoman Empire lost most of its territories in the Middle East and eventually collapsed, the issue of Kurdistan became more prominent as new nations were formed, leaving Kurds divided among them.

The Treaty of Sèvres was signed on August 10, 1920, which promised Kurds the establishment of an independent Kurdish state while the members of the Triple Entente would pursue their interests in the Middle East. However, this agreement was strongly opposed by the newly forming Turkish Republic, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and therefore was replaced with the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923. The Treaty of Lausanne not only ensured that the Turkish Republic would maintain most of its territories but also abandoned the Kurdish aspirations of an independent Kurdish state. Kurdish independence not only feared the newly formed Türkiye but also Iran, Iraq, and Syria since it would risk territorial unity. As a result of this, Kurds failed to establish their state and have often faced racism and discrimination.

With the fear of being marginalized, Kurds have organized uprisings, with some of the most important being the Simko Shaik Uprising in Iran, the Sheikh Said Revolt in Türkiye, the Ararat Rebellion in Türkiye, and the Dersim Rebellion in Türkiye. All of them were brutally crushed by the central governments, contributing to the anger of the Kurdish people to rise. The primary Kurdish aspiration was independence, being followed by significant autonomy and the recognition of their cultural rights. Subsequently, on January 22, 1946, Qazi Muhammed announced the formation of the Republic of Mahabad with the aim of achieving autonomy within Iran. This attempt was oppressed by the Iranian government, and Kurdish desires were ignored.

In general, Kurdish culture, traditions, and language were banned, and Kurdish identities were undermined. The anger and hatred of the Kurds caused them to establish military and political organizations to make their voice heard. Some of these include the PKK, operating in Türkiye; YPG, operating in Syria; and the Kurdistan Free Life Party, operating in Iran. On August 15, 1984, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) launched a full-scale insurgency against the Turkish government, demanding Kurdish independence and rights. In conflicts between Kurdish militant groups and central governments, millions of civilians died, suffered, and were displaced.

Following this, in 1988, the Iraqi government, under Saddam Hussein, launched the Anfal campaign, which involved mass killings, the destruction of Kurdish villages, and the use of chemical weapons against the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, often considered a massacre. This was criticized massively by international parties, and it was followed by the brutal suppression of Kurdish uprisings against Saddam Hussein in 1991 after the Gulf War. This led the United States to establish a no-fly zone in Northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurds to gain autonomy. Meanwhile, in 1993, peace talks between the PKK and the Turkish government began; however, no significant progress was made.

The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 also marked a shift in the future of Iraqi Kurds as they strengthened their influence and gained significant autonomy, establishing the Kurdistan Regional Government. Following this, in 2005, the new Iraqi constitution recognized Kurdish autonomy and granted the Kurds a federated state.

On the other hand, Syrian Kurds, especially Kurdish military forces, played a key role in the Syrian Civil War and expanded their influence. Military groups like the YPG contributed to defeating ISIS and became a strategic ally of the United States. After unofficially seeking control over the region, on January 9, 2014, Syrian Kurds officially announced their autonomy over Northern Syria, also known as Rojava, where Kurds cover a prominent majority of the population.

Nevertheless, autonomy in some regions did not resolve the issue as tensions continued rising. In 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government held an independence referendum. Despite the support of a massive majority, the Kurdistan Regional Government could not gain independence since the referendum failed to receive any support from international parties. Furthermore, the Iraqi government, as well as the Iranian and Turkish governments, opposed it strongly. Additionally, over the last decades, multiple peace efforts were made between the Turkish government and the PKK, such as the 1993 ceasefire attempt and the 2013-2015 peace process, yet none of these succeeded, and violence is still ongoing in the region.

Major Parties Involved

European Union (EU)

The European Union plays a vital role in the issue of Kurdistan through its diplomatic position. While it does not recognize an independent Kurdish state, the EU supports the cultural and political rights of the Kurdish people. The EU further condemns the Turkish and Iranian governments for human rights violations against the Kurdish population. Additionally, the EU acknowledges the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq as an autonomous entity under the Iraqi constitution. It also upholds Iraq's territorial unity, not supporting the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. Furthermore, the EU designates the PKK as a terrorist organization, advocates for peace, and encourages dialogue between major parties involved while also carrying a significant responsibility in delivering humanitarian aid to populations who suffer from human rights violations.

Iran

With a Kurdish population of approximately 10 million, covering an estimated 10% of its population, Iran is one of the most important players in the issue of Kurdistan. The Iranian government has been battling Kurdish separatist ideologies and forces for decades. While recognizing the PKK as a terrorist organization and a threat to the territorial unity of Türkiye, the Iranian government has also been conducting military operations against the Kurdistan Free Life Party, which is considered an offshoot of the PKK. Iran does not support and, quite frankly, fears Kurdish independence anywhere, strictly going against the establishment of an independent

Kurdistan. Iranian government represses Kurdish activists, violating the freedom of speech and over-neglecting the Kurdish population.

Iraq

Iraq, home to the Kurdistan Regional Government, carries an immense significance in resolving the issue of Kurdistan. The Iraqi government has embraced Kurdish autonomy ever since 2005; however, it struggles to maintain a balanced relationship with it due to tensions over economic concerns, political power, and regional pressures. While granting autonomy to the Kurds, Iraq strongly opposes Kurdish independence and seeks to maintain unity. Furthermore, Iraq has limited control over the PKK's presence in Northern Iraq and Türkiye's military operations against it. Türkiye frequently conducts airstrikes and ground incursions against the PKK in northern Iraq, making the situation more complex for the Iraqi government to address. Iraq has also taken responsibility in providing humanitarian aid to Kurdish refugees from Syria, highlighting its relevance to the issue.

Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK)

Ever since its establishment in the late 1970s under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurdish Workers' Party, also known as the PKK, has been operating in southeastern Türkiye and Northern Iraq. It embraces a Marxist-Leninist and separatist Kurdish ethnonationalism ideology. Being a Kurdish militant group, it is recognized as a terrorist organization by major parties such as the European Union, Iran, NATO, Türkiye, and the United States. For decades, it has been conducting acts of terrorism and guerilla operations on Turkish government officials and Turkish civilians, with the aspiration of an independent Kurdistan or greater Kurdish autonomy. It mostly receives support and sympathy from the Kurdish community in Türkiye, as well as the Kurdish communities in Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

Kurdistan Free Life Party

Founded in 2004, the Kurdistan Free Life Party, also designated as an offshoot of the PKK, is a Kurdish nationalist militant group based in Iran, conducting military operations on the Iranian government with the aspiration of an independent Kurdistan. It is battled by Iran and sometimes Türkiye, which recognize it as a terrorist organization.

Kurdistan Regional Government

Kurdistan Regional Government is an autonomous government in control over the Kurdistan Region in Northern Iraq, which has been governing ever since 2005 when the Iraqi government granted the Kurdish population autonomy. Despite being given significant autonomy, the Kurdistan Regional Government remains economically and politically tied to the Iraqi central government. However, relations between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government have been strained over the years due to disputes concerning oil revenues, territorial disputes (especially in Kirkuk), and Kurdish calls for greater autonomy. On the other hand, major nations such as Iran, Türkiye, and the United States have diplomatically and economically supported the Kurdistan Regional Government, despite refusing Kurdish independence.

People's Protection Units (YPG)

People's Protection Units, also known as the YPG, is a Kurdish militant group based in Syria and the primary military component of the USA-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. The YPG established control over Rojava, Northeastern Syria, in 2012 as a result of the Syrian Civil War. The Turkish government views it as an extension of the PKK and, therefore, has launched multiple military operations in Northern Syria against it to push it back. Its tensions with the Syrian government also remain over the governance of Northern Syria and its political power. On the other hand, the United States views the YPG as a key ally in combatting ISIS, providing it with military training, weapons, and air support.

Russia

While maintaining strong economic relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government, particularly in the oil and gas sector, Russia remains strategic on the issue of Kurdistan. Unlike many major parties, Russia does not designate the PKK as a terrorist organization and occasionally condemns Türkiye's military actions toward the Kurds in Syria. However, it avoids major confrontations with Türkiye and seeks to maintain a decent relationship. Additionally, Russia does not criticize Iran for human rights violations against Kurdish people due to their strong political and military alliance. Instead, Russia stands neutral in Iran and does not support separatist Kurdish movements.

Syria

With its Kurdish population estimated to be between 1.6 million and 2.5 million, Kurds make up between 5% and 10% of Syria's population, making it a major party involved in the issue of Kurdistan. With a significant Kurdish population and Kurdish military forces located in Northern Syria, Syria fights the Kurdish aspiration for autonomy in the north. Turkish influence is also present in Northern Syria, as Türkiye conducts military operations against Kurdish military forces, particularly the YPG. While Syria has previously battled Türkiye and its influence in Northern Syria, Syria essentially does not support Kurdish independence nor Kurdish autonomy.

Türkiye

Around 15-20 million Kurdish people live in Türkiye, making up an estimated 18% of Türkiye's population. This makes Türkiye the country with the largest Kurdish population in the world and, therefore, a very significant party on the issue of Kurdistan. The southeastern and eastern regions of Türkiye are especially densely populated with Kurdish people striving to gain independence. The Turkish government led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recognizes the Kurdistan Workers' Party, also known as the PKK, as a terrorist group and the People's Protection Units, also known as the YPG, as an extension of the PKK. Furthermore, it views Kurdish separatism as an existential threat and has been combatting Kurdish separation desires for decades. It conducts military operations on the PKK and the YPG bases located in several countries, such as Syria and Iraq. While maintaining economic and political ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, Türkiye continues to launch operations on the PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. Additionally, Kurdish people in Türkiye have faced long-lasting social stigma and limited recognition, as well as the marginalization of their identities.

United Nations (UN)

United Nations carries an immense role in addressing human rights violations and resolving the issue. While not recognizing the PKK as a terrorist organization, unlike many other major parties, the UN acknowledges Türkiye's security concerns. Furthermore, the UN criticizes the human rights violations against Kurdish people in Iran, Syria, and Türkiye, particularly the repression of the Kurdish voice in Iran, Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria, and countless other human rights violations, including executions, restrictions on political parties, and the violation of freedom of speech. Additionally, the UN endorses the territorial unity and sovereignty of the nations with the Kurdish populations. For example, like the European Union, the United Nations did not support the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum despite recognizing the Kurdistan Regional Government in

Iraq. The UN also urges peace efforts between major parties and is vital in delivering humanitarian aid to those suffering.

United States (US)

The United States, being a global power, is extremely relevant in the issue of Kurdistan with its diplomatic relations and political stance. Therefore, it carries a massive significance in resolving it. Firstly, the United States has historically supported Kurdish groups and advocates for the well-being of Kurdish populations. However, it does not directly support the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. The US has armed and trained Kurdish forces and collaborated with them in battles against ISIS while discouraging separatist movements, aiming to remain strategic and maintain balanced relations with major nations such as Iraq and Türkiye. With this being said, the US also recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization, supporting Türkiye's right to defend itself from terrorism. The United States has been a key ally of the Kurdistan Regional Government, maintaining strong diplomatic relations and respecting its autonomy. The United States further condemns Iran's human rights abuses against its Kurdish population, utilizing the Kurdistan issue to pressure Iran diplomatically. The US is also known to have unofficial ties with the Iran-based Kurdish militant group Kurdistan Free Life Party, contributing to the USA-Iran tensions and displaying the importance of the Kurdistan region for global powers.

Timeline of Key Events

[Ancient and Medieval Periods]

[Kurds have a long history in the Middle East, inhabiting regions in modern-day Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye.]

[August 10, 1920]

[The Treaty of Sèvres was signed.]

[July 24, 1923]

[The Treaty of Lausanne was signed.]

[1925]

[One of the biggest Kurdish revolts in Türkiye occurred under the leadership of Sheikh Said. It was suppressed by the Turkish government.]

[1937-1938]

[The Dersim Kurdish Rebellion in Türkiye was crushed by the Turkish government, with the Turkish military actions often being recognized as a genocide.]

[January 22, 1946]

[Qazi Muhammed announced the formation of the Republic of Mahabad which aimed to grant Iranian Kurds autonomy within Iran. However, it was suppressed by the Iranian government.]

[August 15, 1984]

[The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) launched a full-scale insurgency against the Turkish government, demanding Kurdish independence and rights.]

[1988]

[The Iraqi government, under Saddam Hussein, launched the Anfal campaign, which involved mass killings, the destruction of Kurdish villages, and the use of chemical weapons against the Kurdish population in northern Iraq.]

[1991]

[After the Gulf War, uprisings of the Kurds against Saddam Hussein in Iraq were brutally clashed, leading to the establishment of a US-protected no-fly zone and Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq.]

[1993]

[The Turkish government and the PKK began peace talks, however, tensions

remained high, and no significant progress was made.]

[2003]

[After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Kurds in Iraq gained significant autonomy and influence, leading to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government.]

[2004]

[The PKK declared a ceasefire, yet clashes continued.]

[2005]

[The new Iraqi constitution recognized Kurdish autonomy, providing Kurds in Iraq with a federated state.]

[2013-2015]

[Peace talks between the Turkish government and the PKK were carried out, however they eventually failed.]

[January 9, 2014]

[Syrian Kurds officially announced their regional autonomy in Rojava.]

[2017]

[Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq held an independence referendum. Despite the overwhelming support for independence, it did not become reality due to major parties opposing it.]

UN Involvement and Other Treaties

- **Sykes-Picot Agreement, May 16, 1916:** This secret agreement between the United Kingdom and France divided the Ottoman Empire's Middle Eastern territories, forming new states and leaving the Kurds divided among them.

- **Treaty of Sèvres, August 10, 1920:** This treaty, signed between the Triple Entente and representatives of the government of Ottoman Turkey, abolished the Ottoman Empire and originally promised an independent Kurdish State. However, it was never fully implemented and did not reach success.
- **Treaty of Lausanne, July 24, 1923:** This treaty, replacing the Treaty of Sèvres, redrew the borders of Türkiye and abandoned provisions for an independent Kurdish state.
- **UN Security Council Resolution 688, 5 April 1991:** This resolution adopted by the UN Security Council in its 2982nd meeting condemned the repression of the Iraqi civilian population in many parts of Iraq, including most recently in Kurdish-populated areas.
- **Iraqi Constitution, 2005:** The Iraqi constitution granted Kurds in Iraq autonomy and established the Kurdistan Regional Government. While it does not recognize an independent Kurdish state, it serves as a legal framework for Kurdish governance.
- **The United Nations Population Fund's Annual "Let's Talk" Conference, 28 November 2022, Erbil, Iraq:** The annual conference, which condemned gender-based violence and discussed gender equality in Iraq, was held in the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Kurdistan Regional Government has marked its determination to prevent gender inequality. This could be considered an important milestone for the future of the region, where gender-based violence and human rights violations against women are widespread.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Post WW1 Treaties

After World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the members of the Triple Entente desired to solve the issue of Kurdistan by proposing the creation of a Kurdish state with the Treaty of Sèvres. This state would be established in parts of modern-day Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye. However, the Turkish opposition to this plan was strong, and it was later abandoned with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne. This treaty determined the modern borders of Türkiye, abolishing the possible establishment of an independent Kurdish state.

Kurdish Autonomy in Iraq

Another significant previous attempt to solve the issue was Iraqi-Kurdish efforts for autonomy. Iraqi Kurds have struggled for autonomy for decades, demanding a form of self-governance. In 1970, the Kurdish Autonomy Agreement between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government led by Mustafa Barzani was signed. Nevertheless, this agreement was not fully implemented, followed by the Iraqi government launching attacks against Kurdish fighters. Subsequently, in 1991, Kurdish regions were granted de facto autonomy after the Gulf War, establishing a no-fly zone enforced by the United States and formalizing the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq. Despite providing the Iraqi Kurds with self-governance, Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq has not solved the issue as it sparked autonomy aspirations in other Kurdish communities, as well as expanding the desire for full Kurdish independence. The relationship between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government has also been strained over the years regarding resources, economic benefits, and political power.

2017 Kurdish Independence Referendum

In 2017, the Kurdish Regional Government held an independence referendum to solve the issue by addressing the aspiration for Kurdish independence. The referendum resulted in overwhelming support for independence; however, the Iraqi government, along with the Turkish and Iranian governments, strictly opposed it, emphasizing territorial unity.

Diplomatic Efforts Between the PKK and the Turkish Government

Throughout history, efforts to reduce tensions between the Turkish government and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) were made. However, none of them were sustained and fully implemented. For example, the 1993 ceasefire attempt and the 2013-2015 peace process failed due to political and military challenges.

Syrian Kurdish Autonomy Efforts

The Syrian Civil War created an opportunity for Syrian Kurds, particularly the People's Defense Units (YPG), to establish a semiautonomous region in Northern Syria, often called Rojava. Kurdish forces, in collaboration with the US-led coalition, played a vital role in defeating ISIS in the region. However, their desires for autonomy were ignored by the Turkish and Syrian governments, once again leading to the failure of an attempt to solve the issue.

Possible Solutions

Financial assistance

Providing financial assistance to those who suffer from human rights violations is essential. UN-led funding programs, as well as the assistance of wealthier states, would help deliver aid to those who suffer. Many people in the Kurdistan region get displaced and face harsh living conditions due to the ongoing conflicts. Financial assistance would ensure that needs such as shelter, food, and water are met, as well as investments in education, infrastructure, and healthcare are made for a more sustainable future in the region.

Education programs and raising awareness

The region is home to multiple ethnicities, and hatred between them is widespread due to prejudices and societal misconceptions. While Kurds carry a strong anger and hatred towards others for suppressing them for years, they also receive hate for the terrorist acts conducted by extremist Kurdish groups. In order to overcome this issue, education programs and raising awareness are crucial. Urging the inclusion of Kurdish history and culture in schools, as well as encouraging education programs that will inform people about the misconceptions, would help ensure the tensions in the region are reduced and prejudices are destroyed.

Inclusion of Kurds to society

Encouraging frameworks and regional efforts to include Kurds in society is not only extremely important but also necessary, as it is important to ensure that Kurds feel included in their societies. This would be done through laws strictly discouraging the disclusion of Kurds in areas such as education, healthcare, and public places. For example, providing

Kurdish education in regions with large Kurdish populations could make the Kurds feel more included. Furthermore, regional efforts to prevent racism against Kurds would be encouraged, leading to the reduction of hatred.

Diplomacy

Diplomatic efforts and peace talks conducted by the parties involved in the issue would help acknowledge all perspectives and reveal the aspirations of the major parties. These talks could reduce tensions between parties and, therefore, create solutions. The UN and neutral parties would moderate the talks, serving as mediators.

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Appendix

- The Kurds’ Long Struggle With Statelessness, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/kurds-long-struggle-statelessness>
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