

Forum: Special Political and Decolonisation Committee (GA4)

Issue: Examining the political status and self-determination claims of Kurdish populations in the Middle East

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TOPIC INTRODUCTION

The Kurdish Question represents one of the most complex geopolitical situations in modern global politics. The Kurdish people inhabit a mountainous region known as Kurdistan, which includes parts of eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran, as well as parts of northern Syria.¹ They are frequently referred to as the largest stateless ethnic group, and even though there isn't an exact estimate due to the fact that some population surveys don't ask about ethnicity, or classify Kurds under broader national groups,² their population is estimated to be about 25-45 million individuals.³ Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1920s, and the establishment of modern state borders, the Kurds were primarily divided among Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and since then they have pursued recognition, political rights, autonomy and independence.⁴

Since the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the political objectives of Kurdish populations have evolved differently across these nations.⁵ Those objectives range from demands for greater cultural and political rights to autonomy and full independence. The host governments have approached those demands through the perspective of national security, domestic stability, and the preservation of already established borders, resulting in a history of legal restrictions and political negotiations.⁶

¹ Britannica. "Kurdistan | History, Religion, & Facts." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/place/Kurdistan.

² "The Ongoing Problem of Kurdish Demographics Across the Middle East." *Americankurdishcom*, 27 Jan. 2025, <https://www.americankurdishcommittee.org/post/the-ongoing-problem-of-kurdish-demographics-across-the-middle-east>.

³ Kent, Lauren. "Who Are the Kurds?" *CNN*, 5 Mar. 2026, edition.cnn.com/2026/03/05/middleeast/kurds-iran-kurdistan-explainer-intl.

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "The Time of the Kurds." *Cfr.org*, Council on Foreign Relations, 17 Nov. 2022, www.cfr.org/articles/time-kurds.

⁵ Ismael, Yousif. "Remembering the Treaty of Lausanne." *Washington Kurdish Institute*, 6 Aug. 2019, dckurd.org/2019/08/06/remembering-the-treaty-of-lausanne/.

⁶ "The Kurdish Question in the Middle East: A Comparative Perspective - AMEC." *AMEC*, 23 Feb. 2026, amecrd.com/the-kurdish-question-in-the-middle-east-a-comparative-perspective/.

This situation is particularly complex, as it highlights a tension between 2 core principles of International Law, as outlined in the United Nations (UN) Charter,⁷ namely the principles of territorial integrity, and the right of peoples to self-determination.⁸ On one hand international law acknowledges the right of distinct populations to determine their own political future, but on the other hand it protects existing states from having their borders changed from the threat or use of force.⁹



Figure 1: Map showing the transnational distribution of Kurdish populations in the Middle East.¹⁰

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Self-Determination

“Self-determination is the process by which a group of people, usually possessing a certain degree of national consciousness, form their own state and choose their own

⁷ United Nations. “United Nations Charter.” *United Nations*, 1945, www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text.

⁸ “The Kurdish Question in the Middle East: A Comparative Perspective - AMEC.” *AMEC*, 23 Feb. 2026, amecrd.com/the-kurdish-question-in-the-middle-east-a-comparative-perspective/.

⁹ “Self-Determination and Territorial Integrity.” *Www.un.op.org*, un.op.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/4.-Self-determination-and-territorial-integrity_EN.pdf.

¹⁰ Britannica. “Kurd | History, Culture, & Language.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Kurd.

government.”¹¹ In international law, self-determination can also mean autonomy, federalism, cultural rights, or political participation within an existing state, not only forming a new state.

Self-Governance

“Self-governance is the right and ability of a group to run its own affairs without outside control.”¹²

Regional Autonomy

“The authority of an autonomous region to govern and administer the interests of the local people according to its own initiatives based on the people's aspirations in accordance with the prevailing laws and regulations.”¹³

Territorial Integrity

“Territorial Integrity is the principle under international law that nation-states should not violate the borders of other states. It serves as a fundamental tenet of global diplomacy, ensuring that the sovereignty of a nation is respected by others.”¹⁴

Independent State

“An independent state, also known as a sovereign state, is a political entity with a defined territory, a permanent population, and an effective government. It possesses the exclusive right to govern itself without external interference and has the capacity to engage in international relations with other states.”¹⁵

Secession

“The secession of a region or group from the country or larger group to which it belongs is the action of formally becoming separate.”¹⁶

¹¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Self-Determination | Definition, History, & Facts.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/self-determination.

¹² “Self-Governance.” *Thinkfiveable*, Fiveable, 3 July 2026, <https://fiveable.me/intro-to-poli-sci/key-terms/self-governance>.

¹³ “What Is Regional Autonomy? | Down to Earth.” *Www.Downtoearth-Indonesia.Org*, <https://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/story/what-regional-autonomy>.

¹⁴ “Territorial Integrity.” *TRT World Research Centre*, 26 Apr. 2026, researchcentre.trtworld.com/dictionary/territorial-integrity/.

¹⁵ LSD.Law. “Independent State.” *LSD.Law*, 23 Mar. 2023, <https://definitions.lsd.law/independent-state>.

¹⁶ Collins Dictionary. “Definition of Secession.” *Collinsdictionary.com*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 19 May 2026, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/secession.

Separatism

“Separatism is a political concept where a group—often defined by shared ethnic, racial, linguistic, geographical, or religious characteristics—seeks to gain independence from a larger governing body.”¹⁷

Assimilation

“Assimilation refers to the gradual absorption of a minority group into the dominant culture, often resulting in the loss or adaptation of their original cultural identity.”¹⁸

Civil Rights

“Civil rights are guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law, regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics.”¹⁹

Centralisation

“Centralisation refers to the concentration of power, authority, and decision-making within a single, central entity or a small group of individuals.”²⁰

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historical Background

Pre-Modern Era and the Ottoman Empire

After the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the majority of the Kurdish population lived within the borders of the Ottoman empire, therefore establishing a long-standing historical presence in that region.²¹ The Kurds had signed an agreement with the Ottoman empire, which obligated the Ottoman empire to protect the freedom and independence of Kurdish princedoms, and to defend

¹⁷ “Separatism | EBSCO.” *EBSCO Information Services, Inc.* | www.ebsco.com, 2023, www.ebsco.com/research-starters/political-science/separatism.

¹⁸ “Assimilation - Definition and Explanation.” *The Oxford Review - OR Briefings*, 2 May 2024, <https://oxford-review.com/the-oxford-review-dei-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dictionary/assimilation-definition-and-explanation/>.

¹⁹ Hamlin, Rebecca. “Civil Rights.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 Sept. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-rights>.

²⁰ FRSA, Oliver J. Freeman. “The Difference Between Centralisation and Decentralisation.” *Coinmonks*, 20 Mar. 2023, <https://medium.com/coinmonks/the-difference-between-centralisation-and-decentralisation-9981457b8e33>.

²¹ Radpey, Loqman. “Kurdistan on the Sèvres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World’s Largest Stateless Nation.” *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 50, no. 6, Sept. 2021, pp. 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.32>.

them against foreign assault.²² Under this system, Kurdish Tribal leaders could enjoy a degree of autonomy. Before the 20th century, the traditional Kurdish homeland was split between the Ottoman empire and the Safavid empire, which was a Persian dynasty, as decided by the treaty of Zuhab in 1639.²³ This division already established a pattern of political division that shaped Kurdish governance for years.²⁴ During the 19th century, both the Ottoman empire and Persian states aimed to modernise and centralise their control, weakening the authority of Kurdish principalities.²⁵ These early developments contributed to the development of the modern Kurdish Question and demands for political recognition and self governance.

Post World War I and the treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne

Following World War I, on August 10th, 1920, the allied powers and representatives of the Ottoman Empire signed the treaty of Sèvres, which severely limited the Ottoman empire.²⁶ Under this, Kurds would gain independence from Turkey, if a majority of Kurdish people in Kurdish areas voted in favour of it, and if the League of Nations approved it.²⁷ However, the treaty of Sèvres was never ratified.²⁸ The treaty of Sèvres is significant, as it was the first international recognition of the Kurdish people's right to self-determination, even though it was never implemented.²⁹

The Turkish independence war (1919-1923), led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, leader of the Turkish nationalist movement, challenged the treaty of Sèvres and resulted in negotiations for a new settlement, ultimately leading to the treaty of Lausanne, which replaced the treaty of Sèvres.³⁰ The treaty of Lausanne, signed on the 24th of July, 1923, was the peace settlement between Turkey and the Allied Powers, and it recognised the borders of the modern state of Turkey.³¹ Although during discussions in Lausanne the Turks continued to view the Kurds as a separate

²² Radpey, Loqman. "Kurdistan on the Sèvres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 50, no. 6, Sept. 2021, pp. 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.32>.

²³ Sabir, Sherko. "The Treaty of Zuhab (1639): The Treaty That Made Kurdistan's Partition Permanent." *Kurdish History*, 24 May 2026, www.kurdish-history.com/post/treaty-of-zuhab-1639.

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ Atmaca, Metin. "Resistance to Centralisation in the Ottoman Periphery: The Kurdish Baban and Bohtan Emirates." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4, Informa UK Limited, Feb. 2019, pp. 519–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1542595>.

²⁶ Britannica. "Treaty of Sèvres | Allies-Turkey [1920]." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 3 Aug. 2018, www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Sevres.

²⁷ Özoğlu, Hakan, and Hille Hanso. "A Hundred Years of Attempts to Create an Independent Kurdistan." *ICDS*, 19 Dec. 2017, <https://icds.ee/en/a-hundred-years-of-attempts-to-create-an-independent-kurdistan/>.

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ Sarkis, Dala. "The Treaty of Sèvres (1920): The Promise of Kurdistan That Was Never Kept." *Kurdish History*, 24 May 2026, <https://www.kurdish-history.com/post/treaty-of-sevres-1920>.

³⁰ "Outline of Turks and Turkish States: The National War of Independence (1919-1923): Turkish Republic - Turkey." *Transanatolie.Com*, 2026, https://www.transanatolie.com/english/turkey/turks/turkish_republic-turkey.htm.

³¹ Britannica. "Treaty of Lausanne | Allies-Turkey [1923] | Britannica." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Lausanne-1923.

ethnic group, they completely reversed this position, portraying the Kurds as part of the Turkish nation.³² Under this, all demands for autonomy of Turkish Kurdistan were dropped, and all the traditional Kurdish homeland was split between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Armenia.³³

The Emergence of Modern Kurdish Nationalism and Political Mobilisation

The roots of modern Kurdish nationalism developed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and were formed throughout the Ottoman empire, where Kurdish organisations started promoting Kurdish cultural identity, language, and civil rights.³⁴ Following the treaty of Lausanne, Kurdish populations were mostly divided among Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Each of these governments implemented policies which aimed at strengthening national unity and central government control, and as a result, these states often promoted assimilation or denied separate Kurdish political identity.³⁵ Because of this, many Kurdish communities faced restrictions on cultural expression, language use, and political participation.

In response, numerous Kurdish political movements emerged, which advocated for the recognition of Kurdish identity and political rights.³⁶ Some groups advocated for cultural and political rights within the existing states, while others advocated for the autonomy and independence of a Kurdish state. However, Kurdish political movements were not unified, and different groups were pursuing various objectives, including cultural, political, and civil rights. Over time, these movements have developed from localised rebellions, to organised movements, making the Kurdish question a major issue in Middle Eastern Politics.³⁷

Kurdish Political Objectives

Cultural and Civil Rights Recognition

One of the most common objectives of Kurdish communities has been the recognition of their cultural and civil rights. The protection of cultural identity is connected with the recognition of their status as a distinct ethnic group, and their ability to participate equally in society. These

³² Radpey, Loqman. "Kurdistan on the Sèvres Centenary: How a Distinct People Became the World's Largest Stateless Nation." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 50, no. 6, Sept. 2021, pp. 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.32>.

³³ Britannica. "Treaty of Lausanne | Allies-Turkey [1923] | Britannica." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Lausanne-1923.

³⁴ Bajalan, Djene Rhys. "Between Accommodationism and Separatism: Kurds, Ottomans and the Politics of Nationality (1839-1914)." *University of Oxford*, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:19df6c44-b55c-4807-8d8b-bf202184bcd4/files/mcd8bc3fae89bd8a4cd6671697a9105c12>.

³⁵ Mafakheri, Ramin. "What Drives the Securitization of the Kurdish–Kurdistan Question, and How Does It Shape the Middle Eastern Security Subcomplex?" *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, vol. 12, no. 3, June 2025, pp. 303–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989251346576>.

³⁶ Britannica. "Kurd | History, Culture, & Language." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Kurd.

³⁷ Fawcett, Louise. "After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?" *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27, OUP, 2001, pp. 109–18, library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/13213145.pdf.

demands focus on ensuring that Kurdish identity, cultural practices, and language are legally recognised and protected within the states Kurds live.

The right to use the Kurdish language in education and in public life is a central aspect of this, as language plays a fundamental role in defining minority identity.³⁸ Moreover, international frameworks like Article 27 the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) emphasise the importance of protecting linguistic diversity.³⁹ Additionally, a significant part of this is the preservation of Kurdish cultural traditions.⁴⁰ This includes the preservation of Kurdish cultural practices, historical identity, and forms of expression. Kurdish groups argue that this is necessary to prevent the marginalisation of Kurds within the countries they live in.⁴¹

Furthermore, Kurds have aimed to achieve participation in political processes without discrimination. This includes the ability to participate in decision making processes, and expressing political views, without discrimination.⁴² This is viewed as something crucial since it ensures that Kurdish interests and concerns are represented within national governments.

Regional Autonomy and Self-Governance⁴³

Many Kurdish movements have advocated for regional autonomy and self-governance within existing states.⁴⁴ Firstly, they mostly advocate for the establishment of legislative and administrative bodies in areas where Kurds are the majority. An example where this has happened is the establishment of an Autonomous Region in Iraq in the 1970s.⁴⁵ More specifically, the Iraq's 1970 autonomy agreement included a twelve member executive council with legislative and executive powers, and a fifty member legislative assembly, administering districts and governorates with a population of which the majority were Kurds.⁴⁶

³⁸ Beishenkulova, Meerim. "The Kurdish Minority: Linguistic Rights and Education in Turkey and Syria." *EURAC Research*, 2025, www.eurac.edu/en/blogs/eureka/the-kurdish-minority-linguistic-rights-and-education-in-turkey-and-syria.

³⁹ United Nations. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." *Ohchr*, United Nations, 16 Dec. 1966, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

⁴⁰ BBC. "Who Are the Kurds?" *BBC News*, 15 Oct. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440.

⁴¹ Raj V, Dr Kiran. "Kurdish Identity in a Fragmented Iran: Politics of Belonging and Exclusion." *The Government - Annual Research Journal of Political Science*, vol. 14, 2025, pp. 26–49, <https://sujo.usindh.edu.pk/index.php/the-government/article/view/7917>.

⁴² İnsan Hakları Derneği. "The Kurdish Question in the Context of Human Rights in Turkey." *IHD*, 20 Feb. 2025, https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/country-document/2025-02/UPRINFO_IHD_STATEMENT.pdf.

⁴³ Gunes, Cengiz. "Approaches to Kurdish Autonomy in the Middle East." *ResearchGate*, Oct. 2019, www.researchgate.net/publication/336759331_Approaches_to_Kurdish_Autonomy_in_the_Middle_East.

⁴⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "The Time of the Kurds." *Cfr.org*, Council on Foreign Relations, 17 Nov. 2022, www.cfr.org/articles/time-kurds.

⁴⁵ "Iraq - Kurdish Autonomy." *Countrystudies.us*, 2026, <https://countrystudies.us/iraq/76.htm>.

⁴⁶ *ibid*

Moreover, another demand of Kurds is greater decision making authority. Particularly, Kurds have been advocating for their own regional bodies, namely councils, assemblies, and municipalities, instead of Ankara determining policy.⁴⁷ Since the 2000s, Kurdish movements have advocated for a “democratic autonomy”, meaning that Kurdish local councils and supreme bodies should be able to make important decisions in services, security and generally policies instead of the centralised state.⁴⁸ Additionally, another request is the constitutional recognition of autonomous Kurdish regions.

Full independence

Some Kurdish Movements advocate for the establishment of an independent Kurdish State, which supports that Kurdish people make up a distinct nation with shared history, culture, language, and territory, and therefore possess the right to self-determination. This would involve the creation of a sovereign state in the middle east.⁴⁹ This is controversial, because it would require changes of existing international borders, and it is opposed by the countries that currently Kurdish populated regions are in.

The Kurdish Situation in each Country

Turkey

The largest population of Kurds in the Middle East live in Turkey. They make up the largest ethnic and linguistic minority, with about 15 million people making up about 18-20% of Turkey's total population.⁵⁰ After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the country implemented many policies which aimed at a unified Turkish State, thus many times suppressing expressions of Kurdish identity, which many times led to tensions between the Turkish State and Kurds.⁵¹

In response to these policies, a lot of Kurdish movements rose. In 1978, the Kurdistan's Workers' Party (PKK) was established by Abdullah Öcalan, which from the start advocated for an independent Kurdish State.⁵² It is important to note however that PKK is only one Kurdish political

⁴⁷Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan. <https://files.libcom.org/files/DemAut.pdf>.

⁴⁸ibid

⁴⁹ Council on Foreign Relations . “The Time of the Kurds.” *Cfr.org*, Council on Foreign Relations, 17 Nov. 2022, www.cfr.org/articles/time-kurds.

⁵⁰ “Country Policy and Information Note: Kurds, Turkey, October 2023 (Accessible).” GOV.UK, 2023, www.gov.uk/government/publications/turkey-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-kurds-turkey-october-2023-accessible.

⁵¹ Mohammed, Suren Jamal, and David Romano. “The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: The Central Role of Identity Recognition (or Lack Thereof).” *Ethnopolitics*, Taylor & Francis, Nov. 2023, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2275229>.

⁵² Parliament of Australia. “Appendix E – Statement of Reasons – Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).” *Www.apf.gov.au*, www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed_Inquiries/pjcis/five_terrorist/repor/output/appendixe.

actor and it does not represent all Kurdish communities and political organisations. Since 1984, the PKK engaged in armed insurgency against the Turkish government.⁵³ Even though their initial aim was to establish an independent Kurdish State, since 2005 they have shifted their focus to achieve greater political and cultural rights within Turkey.⁵⁴ Turkey, the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU), and the United Kingdom (UK) along with other countries, view the PKK as a terrorist organisation.⁵⁵

In more recent years, there have been some reforms in Turkey.⁵⁶ There have also been more opportunities for Kurdish language broadcasting and education. However, disputes still remain which are about political representation, cultural rights, civil rights, and tensions still continue to exist.⁵⁷ In 2009, Turkey launched a policy initiative called the “Kurdish Opening”, or “Democratic Opening” which aimed to resolve the Kurdish issue.⁵⁸ Its aim was to improve cultural and linguistic rights and generally address grievances however it ultimately collapsed due to nationalist backlash.⁵⁹

Moreover, recent developments have further shaped the issue. More specifically, in 2025, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan called for the organisation to be disarmed and dissolved.⁶⁰ Then, in May 2025, the PKK announced that it would dissolve and end its armed struggle.⁶¹

⁵³ Council on Foreign Relations. “Conflict between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups.” *Global Conflict Tracker*, Council on Foreign Relations, 3 Aug. 2022, www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups.

⁵⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. “Conflict between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups.” *Global Conflict Tracker*, Council on Foreign Relations, 3 Aug. 2022, www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups.

⁵⁵ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “From Rep. Of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, www.mfa.gov.tr/pkk.en.mfa.

⁵⁶ International Crisis Group. “Türkiye’s PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer | International Crisis Group.” *Crisisgroup.org*, 18 July 2022, www.crisisgroup.org/visual-explainers/turkiyes-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer.

⁵⁷ BBC. “Who Are the Kurds?” *BBC News*, 15 Oct. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440.

⁵⁸ CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE. “The Kurdish Opening in Turkey: Origins and Future?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/events/2009/11/the-kurdish-opening-in-turkey-origins-and-future>.

⁵⁹ “The PKK and the Closure of Turkey’s Kurdish Opening - MERIP.” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 5 Aug. 2010, <https://www.merip.org/2010/08/the-pkk-and-the-closure-of-turkeys-kurdish-opening/>.

⁶⁰ Tol, Gönül. “Will the PKK Really Disarm? - Middle East Institute.” *Middle East Institute*, 12 May 2026, <https://mei.edu/podcast/will-the-pkk-really-disarm/>.

⁶¹ “The Dissolution of the PKK: Strengthening Turkey Internally and Externally | Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.” *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, 2025, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/policy-briefs/dissolution-pkk-strengthening-turkey-internally-and-externally>.

Syria

There are about 2.5 millions Kurds in Syria⁶² For much of the 20th century, Kurds in Syria faced restrictions on civil, political, and cultural rights, some were denied Syrian citizenship, limiting their access to political participation and accessing of public services.⁶³

The Syrian civil war which started in 2011 significantly changed the situation as well. The Syrian government lost control of parts of their territory, and therefore Kurdish groups were able to establish autonomous administrations in some regions with large Kurdish populations. They managed to establish de facto autonomy for over 10 years, but under pressure from the new government this was unable to persist.⁶⁴ The de facto autonomous region was referred to as Rojava, or the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and it is administered primarily by Kurdish populations.⁶⁵

Generally, AANES has advocated for a decentralised government within the unified Syrian state, but with constitutional recognition, with its political status remaining unresolved.⁶⁶ While negotiations continue, there is still a lot of debate regarding the extent of Kurdish self governance, the distribution of political authority, and the status of Kurdish- administered regions within the country.⁶⁷

Iraq

Iraq is home to a large amount of a Kurdish population, making up about 15-20% of its population.⁶⁸ During the 20th century, the relations between Kurds and the Iraqi government have been marked by periods of negotiations and of conflict. After the overthrow of the Iraqi government in 2003, Kurdish autonomy was officially recognised under the 2005 Iraqi constitution.⁶⁹

⁶² "Kurds in Syria." *Minorityrights.org*, Oct. 2023, minorityrights.org/communities/kurds-5/.

⁶³ *SpeCial RepoRt*. 2009, www.usip.org/sites/default/files/kurdsinsyria.pdf.

⁶⁴ Dmytro, Kyrychok. "The Rise and Fall of Kurdish Autonomy in Syria." *Resurgamhub.org*, 2026, resurgamhub.org/analytics/middle-east/the-rise-and-fall-of-kurdish-autonomy-in-syria.

⁶⁵ Rojava Information Centre. "Key Facts – Rojava Information Center." *Rojavainformationcenter.org*, rojavainformationcenter.org/background/key-facts/.

⁶⁶ "Sources Indicate Damascus Hosts AANES Delegation for Integration Negotiations." *Levant24*, 13 Aug. 2025, <https://levant24.com/en/article/sources-indicate-damascus-hosts-aanes-delegation-for-integration-negotiations>.

⁶⁷ Shafaq News. "Syrian Government, Kurdish AANES Reopen Talks on Constitutional Revisions - Shafaq News | Latest Breaking News in Iraq and the World." *Shafaq News | Latest Breaking News in Iraq and the World*, 14 May 2025, <https://shafaq.com/en/middle-east/syrian-government-kurdish-aanes-reopen-talks-on-constitutional-revisions>.

⁶⁸ Minority Rights Group. "Kurds in Iraq." *Minorityrights.org*, Oct. 2023, minorityrights.org/communities/kurds-3/.

⁶⁹ Washington Kurdish Institute. "From Constitution to Collapse: The Kurdish Struggle in Post-2003 Iraq." *Washington Kurdish Institute*, 9 July 2025, dkurd.org/2025/07/09/injustice-abroken-promises/.

Today, the Kurdish region is administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which has its own parliament and has an authority over regional affairs. Evidently, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is one of the most developed examples of Kurdish self-governance in the Middle East.⁷⁰ However, there are many disputes between the KRG and the central Iraqi government, regarding the distribution of revenues from oil and gas,⁷¹ control of disputed territories such as Kirkuk,⁷² and generally the extent of regional authority.

Also, in September 2017, the Kurdistan Region held an independence referendum, in which a large majority of voters voted in favour of independence, but it was rejected by the Iraqi government.⁷³ More specifically, the government of Iraq rejected the referendum, Iraqi federal forces retook disputed areas like Kirkuk, and therefore the referendum did not lead to independence.⁷⁴

Iran

A significant number of Kurds also reside in Iran, making up about 10% of the Iranian population.⁷⁵ Many groups have advocated for civil, political, and cultural rights, while others for full independence.⁷⁶ Unlike Iraq, Iran hasn't recognised an autonomous Kurdish region.⁷⁷ The government of Iran has viewed the Kurdish Question as a matter of national security and territorial integrity, and Kurdish political parties and activists have faced restrictions.⁷⁸ Today, many Kurdish movements focus on greater civil rights, political representation, and cultural rights.

⁷⁰ KRG. "Region | Facts & Figures." *Kurdistan Regional Government*, <https://gov.krd/boi-en/why-kurdistan/region/facts-figures/>.

⁷¹ "Obstacles and Options in Baghdad-Erbil Negotiations | the Washington Institute." *www.washingtoninstitute.org*, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/obstacles-and-options-baghdad-erbil-negotiations.

⁷² "Outsourced Politics in Kirkuk Complicates Power-Sharing Deal." *Amwaj.media*, amwaj.media, 2024, <https://amwaj.media/en/article/the-al-rasheed-agreement-ends-the-era-of-rebwar-taha-and-opens-the-doors-of-power>.

⁷³ Sentiment, How Street Interviews Spread Anti-Syrian Refugee. "What Caused the KRG Miscalculation on the Independence Referendum?" *The Washington Institute*, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-caused-krq-miscalculation-independence-referendum.

⁷⁴ BBC. "Iraq Supreme Court Rules Kurdish Referendum Unconstitutional." *BBC News*, 20 Nov. 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42053283>.

⁷⁵ "Kurds in Iran." *Minorityrights.org*, Oct. 2023, minorityrights.org/communities/kurds-4/.

⁷⁶ "Kurds in Iran." *Minorityrights.org*, Oct. 2023, minorityrights.org/communities/kurds-4/.

⁷⁷ Calamur, Krishnadev. "Why Doesn't the U.S. Support Kurdish Independence?" *The Atlantic*, 20 Oct. 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/us-kurdish-independence/543540/>.

⁷⁸ "Country Policy and Information Note: Kurds and Kurdish Political Groups, Iran, October 2025 (Accessible)." *GOV.UK*, 2025, www.gov.uk/government/publications/iran-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-kurds-and-kurdish-political-groups-iran-october-2025-accessible.

There are several Kurdish political actors in Iran. Firstly, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) is an organisation established in 1945 and it is based in Mahabad.⁷⁹ Its objective is the right to Kurdish self-determination for Kurdish people within Iran, and its main political goal is autonomy for Iranian Kurdistan within a democratic Iran.⁸⁰ Another significant organisation is Komala, which calls itself Marxist-Lenist and advocates for self-determination of Kurdish people and a “revolutionary democratic republic”,⁸¹ as they advocate for a government where political power is held by the people and all groups have equal political rights. Also, it is more uncompromising than KDPI towards the central authorities.⁸² Moreover, another organisation is the Party for a Free life in Kurdistan (PJAK) which advocates for greater Kurdish self-governance and political rights. Also since its creation in 2004 PJAK has carried out an armed insurgency against Iran through its armed wing.⁸³ These organisations generally differ in their ideologies and methods, but they all reflect the broader Kurdish demand for greater political representation, greater rights, and self-governance within Iraq.

In Iran, unlike Iraq, Kurdish autonomy isn’t constitutionally recognised and and Kurdish movements in Iraq haven’t achieved formal recognition or regional autonomy. Instead their demands have focused on better political representation, cultural and civil rights, and for some organisations autonomy within Iran.

Self-determination versus Territorial Integrity

The core of the Kurdish question lies in the debate between Self-Determination and Territorial Integrity, which are 2 core principles of international law. The principle of Self-Determination, recognised in article 1 of the UN Charter,⁸⁴ and reaffirmed in both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)⁸⁵, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)⁸⁶, says that all peoples have the right to determine their own political future. In contrast, the principle of territorial integrity, as recognised in Article 2(4) of the

⁷⁹ Bruinessen, Martin Van. ‘Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran - MERIP’. *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 20 July 1986, <https://www.merip.org/1986/07/major-kurdish-organizations-in-iran/>.

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ ‘Kurdistan Free Life Party | Mapping Militants Project’. *Mappingmilitants.Org*, 2025, <https://mappingmilitants.org/mmp-group/kurdistan-free-life-party>.

⁸⁴ United Nations. “United Nations Charter.” *United Nations*, 1945, www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text.

⁸⁵ United Nations. “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” *Ohchr*, United Nations, 16 Dec. 1966, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

⁸⁶ United Nations. “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.” *Ohchr*, United Nations, 16 Dec. 1966, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.

UN charter, protects sovereignty and existing borders and prohibits the threat or use of force against them, without automatically prohibiting every peaceful change of borders.⁸⁷

The Kurdish question represents a conflict between these 2 principles. Kurdish groups call upon the right to self-determination in order to advocate for greater political representation, regional autonomy, or independence. At the same time, the countries in which Kurds live, invoke the principle of territorial integrity, and say that any changes that Kurdish independence or autonomy would bring to their territorial organisation, violates this principle. Therefore these governments oppose secession or the establishment of an independent Kurdish state.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria

Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria are the countries in which the majority of Kurdish people live.⁸⁸ Because Kurds are spread across these countries, rather than being concentrated, Kurdish politics have been developed in a transnational context. As it has also been examined in the background information, across these four countries, Kurdish communities have faced various combinations of repression, limited reform, autonomy, and political exclusion. At the same time, the issue has taken different forms in each state, ranging from armed conflict and restrictive policies to partial self-governance and decentralised policies.

Israel

Israel has expressed political sympathy towards Kurds, particularly in Iraq and Syria, due to their role in fighting extremist groups such as ISIS.⁸⁹ Israel was the only state in the region to recognise the 2017 independence referendum, and Iraqi Kurds are considered as important regional allies.⁹⁰ This is because Israel recognises Kurdish actors as some of the most effective actors against ISIS.⁹¹ Moreover, it has raised concerns regarding Turkish military operations that affect Kurdish-controlled areas⁹². Israel has condemned Turkish invasions into Kurdish-led regions of northeast Syria, and is concerned about possible ethnic cleansing or mass

⁸⁷ United Nations. "United Nations Charter." *United Nations*, 1945, www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text.

⁸⁸ Britannica. "Kurdistan | History, Religion, & Facts." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/place/Kurdistan.

⁸⁹ Sirwan Kajjo. "Israel Urges Action to Protect Syria's Kurds." *Voice of America*, Voice of America (VOA News), 11 Dec. 2024, www.voanews.com/a/israel-urges-action-to-protect-syria-s-kurds-/7897681.html.

⁹⁰ "Israel and the Kurdish Question." *Pism.PI*, 2024, https://pism.pl/publications/Israel_and_the_Kurdish_Question.

⁹¹ "After Declaring Autonomy, Syrian Kurds 'Open to Ties with Israel.'" *Timesofisrael*, 18 Mar. 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-declaring-autonomy-will-israel-embrace-syrias-kurds/>.

⁹² Zaki, Uri. *Israel-Kurd Relations in the Middle East Post-October 7th*. Jan. 2026, mitvim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Kurds-and-Israel-ENG_Final.pdf.

displacement of Kurdish civilians, and has given humanitarian assistance.⁹³ Furthermore, Israel has called for greater international recognition of Kurdish efforts against ISIS.

United States of America (USA)

USA It supports Kurdish forces as a part of counterterrorism forces in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁹⁴ More specifically since 2014 it provides military cooperation to Kurdish-led groups in Syria and Iraq for anti-ISIS operations.⁹⁵ This cooperation includes providing weapons, training, and other military assistance.⁹⁶ This cooperation is framed as a security partnership in order to defeat ISIS rather than as the endorsement of broader Kurdish political perspectives. At the same time, USA policies support Kurdish autonomy within existing states, but doesn't endorse Kurdish independence, reaffirming the importance of Iraq's unity and the preservation of current international borders.⁹⁷

Russian Federation

The Russian Federation prioritises state sovereignty and territorial integrity of existing middle eastern countries, and it opposes changes to international borders, including Kurdish independence.⁹⁸ When Iraqi Kurds have moved towards independence, Russia has supported the unity of Iraq, even while Russia maintains economic ties with the Kurdistan region and they say that any Kurdish rights should be addressed within existing states, in line with international law, rather than through secession.⁹⁹ At the same time Russia tries to keep open communication with many sides in the Syrian conflict, including the Syrian government, various opposition groups, and Kurdish led forces. This allows Russia to position themselves as a mediator and helps stay

⁹³ Reuters. "Israel Aiding Syria's Kurds, Advocating for Them with U.S.: Official." *Reuters*, 6 Nov. 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/israel-aiding-syrias-kurds-advocating-for-them-with-us-official-idUSKBN1XG2AO/>.

⁹⁴ "DOD, Kurdish Peshmerga Continue Partnership to Fight ISIS." *U.S. Department of War*, 2025, www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3171097/dod-kurdish-peshmerga-continue-partnership-to-fight-isis/.

⁹⁵ "DOD, Kurdish Peshmerga Continue Partnership to Fight ISIS." *U.S. Department of War*, 2025, www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3171097/dod-kurdish-peshmerga-continue-partnership-to-fight-isis/.

⁹⁶ News, PBS. "U.S. Starts Arming Syrian Kurds Closing in on ISIS Stronghold." *PBS News*, 30 May 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-starts-arming-syrian-kurds-closing-isis-stronghold>.

⁹⁷ Keele University. "U.S. Perspectives on Kurdish Independence from Iraq, 1972-2011." *Worktribe.Com*, 2025, <https://keele-repository.worktribe.com/output/423919/us-perspectives-on-kurdish-independence-from-iraq-1972-2011>.

⁹⁸ "Request Rejected." *Www.mid.ru*, 2026, www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1553854/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab200024483ee3ece6d8f0a2a7573e5c5313743870e2055f877b9c55de9f2c1e56004f0899a6240c1430002b9edaddc6a4b263c00d719be1bc7212cfcf222dc8469c720770091d7c27f8187f2592b9411490fe43b0b5543ce5649.

⁹⁹ Dmitry Zhdannikov. "Russia Becomes Iraq Kurds' Top Funder, Quiet About Independence Vote." *Reuters*, 20 Sept. 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/russia-becomes-iraq-kurds-top-funder-quiet-about-independence-vote-idUSKCN1BV1IW/>.

informed about developments in Kurdish controlled areas while formally supporting the state of Syria.¹⁰⁰ Also, Russia has provided practical support to Kurdish actors, for example through energy investments, using economic and political engagement with Kurdish regions,¹⁰¹ as a way to influence its own influence in the region.

European Union (EU)

The EU constantly supports the protection of minority rights, cultural rights, and civil participation for Kurdish populations, in Syria, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq.¹⁰² This includes pressure on states to improve Kurdish linguistic rights, non-discrimination, and more.¹⁰³ Also they have called for the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question, through dialogue and not violence, while maintaining respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore it monitors the treatment of Kurdish communities especially in Turkey through progress reports, human rights dialogues, and resolutions that criticise abuses such as restriction on Kurdish media.¹⁰⁵ In addition, the EU has provided humanitarian aid for Kurds and other civilians affected by the conflict in Iraq and Syria, including support for displaced persons, health services, and more.

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)

Even though NATO doesn't maintain a formal terrorist list, its member states, including Turkey, recognise the PKK as a terrorist organisation.¹⁰⁶ NATO has been affected by

¹⁰⁰ Kozhanov, Nikolay. *Russian Policy Across the Middle East Motivations and Methods*. 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-02-21-russian-policy-middle-east-kozhanov.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ "Draw Media | Analyzing Russia's Involvement in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region's Energy Sector." 2023, <https://drawmedia.net/news/kurdistan/14349-analyzing-russias-involvement-in-iraq-and-the-kurdistan-regions-energy-sector>.

¹⁰² "EU's Renew Europe Sets Conditions for Engaging Syria's New Leadership, Stresses Kurdish Rights." *EU's Renew Europe Sets Conditions for Engaging Syria's New Leadership, Stresses Kurdish Rights*, 16 Jan. 2026, www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/887705/eus-renew-europe-sets-conditions-for-engaging-syrias-new-leadership-stresses-kurdish-rights.

¹⁰³ Library of the European Parliament . "Progress on the Situation of Kurds in Turkey?" *Europarl.Europa.Eu*, 31 Jan. 2013, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130448/LDM_BRI\(2013\)130448_RE_V1_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130448/LDM_BRI(2013)130448_RE_V1_EN.pdf).

¹⁰⁴ *DIRECTORATE-GENERAL for EXTERNAL POLICIES POLICY DEPARTMENT QUICK POLICY INSIGHT a Call for Peace in Turkey*. www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2013/491486/EXPO-AFET_SP%282013%29491486_EN.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Library of the European Parliament . "Progress on the Situation of Kurds in Turkey?" *Europarl.Europa.Eu*, 31 Jan. 2013, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130448/LDM_BRI\(2013\)130448_RE_V1_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130448/LDM_BRI(2013)130448_RE_V1_EN.pdf).

¹⁰⁶ "NATO Will Not Get Involved in Turkish Operations against PKK in Kurdistan: Secretary-General." *NATO Will Not Get Involved in Turkish Operations against PKK in Kurdistan: Secretary-General*, 6 June 2018, www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/376158.

disagreements among its member states regarding Kurdish groups operating in Syria, as Turkey has condemned the support some allies give to Kurdish forces, while the USA and several European members view these states as partners against ISIS.¹⁰⁷ NATO aims to balance support for Turkey's security concerns with broader regional stability objectives in Syria and the Middle East.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
23 August 1514	The Battle of Chaldiran took place ¹⁰⁸
17 May 1639	The treaty of Zuhab was signed ¹⁰⁹
10 August 1920	The treaty of Sèvres was signed ¹¹⁰
24 July 1923	The treaty of Lausanne was signed ¹¹¹
16 December 1966	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) was adopted ¹¹²
11 March 1970	The Iraqi-Kurdish autonomy agreement was signed ¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Asharq Al-Awsat. "Türkiye Criticizes Some NATO Countries' Support for Kurdish Units in Syria." *Aawsat.Com*, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5034375-türkiye-criticizes-some-nato-countries'-support-kurdish-units-syria>.

¹⁰⁸ Bunting, Tony. *Battle of Chaldiran | Summary*. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Chaldiran>.

¹⁰⁹ Sabir, Sherko. "The Treaty of Zuhab (1639): The Treaty That Made Kurdistan's Partition Permanent." *Kurdish History*, 24 May 2026, www.kurdish-history.com/post/treaty-of-zuhab-1639.

¹¹⁰ "Treaty of Sevres | JMCC." *Jmcc.Org*, 2025, <https://www.jmcc.org/en/Article/274/Treaty-of-Sevres>.

¹¹¹ "The Treaty of Lausanne 100 Years on – DW ." *Dw.Com*, <https://www.dw.com/en/greece-and-turkey-the-treaty-of-lausanne-100-years-on/a-66307830>.

¹¹² United Nations. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." *Ohchr*, United Nations, 16 Dec. 1966, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

¹¹³ "The 11 March Autonomy Agreement – the Kurdistan Memory Programme." *Kurdistanmemoryprogramme.Com*, <https://kurdistanmemoryprogramme.com/the-11-march-autonomy-agreement/>.

1978	Establishment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) ¹¹⁴
15 August 1984	The outbreak of armed insurgency from the PKK occurred ¹¹⁵
5 April 1991	The UN Security Council resolution 688 was adopted ¹¹⁶
March 2003	The Iraqi government was overthrown ¹¹⁷
15 October 2005	The new Iraqi constitution was ratified ¹¹⁸
10 August 2007	The UN Security Council resolution 1770 was adopted ¹¹⁹
2009	The "Kurdish Opening" initiative started in Turkey ¹²⁰
March 2011	Outbreak of the Syrian Civil war which eventually led to the establishment of Rojava ¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups." *Global Conflict Tracker*, Council on Foreign Relations, 3 Aug. 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups>.

¹¹⁵ "Five Key Dates in the Turkey-PKK Conflict." *Institutkurde.Org*, 2025, <https://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/latest/five-key-dates-in-the-turkey-pkk-conflict-13839/>.

¹¹⁶ UN. "Official Document System - UN." *Un.Org*, 2026, [https://documents.un.org/symbol-explorer?s=S/RES/688\(1991\)&i=S/RES/688\(1991\)_0975580](https://documents.un.org/symbol-explorer?s=S/RES/688(1991)&i=S/RES/688(1991)_0975580).

¹¹⁷ EBSCO. "2003 Postwar Occupation of Iraq | Military History and Science | Research Starters | EBSCO Research." *Ebsco*, 2022, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/military-history-and-science/2003-postwar-occupation-iraq>.

¹¹⁸ UNHCR. "Constitution of the Republic of Iraq." *Unhcr.Com*, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2005/36563>.

¹¹⁹ UN. "Resolution 1770 (2007) /: Adopted by the Security Council at Its 5729Th Meeting, on 10 August 2007." *United Nations Digital Library System*, UN, 10 Aug. 2007, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/604941?v=pdf>.

¹²⁰ "Turkey's 'Kurdish Opening' Faces New Challenges." *Turkeyanalyst.Org*, 2019, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/185-turkeys-kurdish-opening-faces-new-challenges.html>.

¹²¹ Britannica. *Syrian Civil War | Facts & Timeline. Encyclopædia Britannica*, Britannica, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War>.

2013-2015	The Turkey-PKK peace process took place ¹²²
25 September 2017	The 2017 independence referendum was held ¹²³
12 May 2025	The PKK announced that it would dissolve and that it would end its armed struggle against Turkey ¹²⁴

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

UN Security Council Resolution 688 (S/RES/688) (1991)

This resolution condemned the repression of Iraqi civilians including Kurds. Moreover, it called for humanitarian access and protection of populations including Kurds, and it called on Iraq to allow access to humanitarian organisations and called for the protection assistance of refugees and displaced persons, with particular attention to Kurds.¹²⁵ Furthermore, it contributed to the establishment of no-fly-zones over Iraq. A no-fly-zone is an area above a country's airspace where aircrafts from other countries are not allowed to fly above.¹²⁶ Even though it didn't create no-fly-zones itself, France, the USA and the UK relied on Resolution 688 as the legal and political basis for creating no-fly-zones over northern Iraq to protect humanitarian organisations and Kurdish civilians.¹²⁷ Overall this resolution significantly improved the protection of Kurds in Iraq, it didn't address the broader issue of Kurdish self-determination or provide a lasting political solution for the issue.

¹²² Cudi Zerey. *Turkey's Peace Process in the Context of the Kurdish–Turkish Conflict and Implications for European Union Policy*. 18 Mar. 2026, <https://manaramagazine.org/2026/03/turkeys-peace-process-kurdish-turkish/>.

¹²³ European Parliament. "Iraqi Kurdistan's Independence Referendum | Think Tank | European Parliament." *Europa.Eu*, 2017, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)608752](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2017)608752).

¹²⁴ "The Dissolution of the PKK: Strengthening Turkey Internally and Externally | Al Jazeera Centre for Studies." *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, 2025, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/policy-briefs/dissolution-pkk-strengthening-turkey-internally-and-externally>.

¹²⁵ ICRC. "UN, Security Council Resolution 688 on Northern Iraq | How Does Law Protect in War? - Online Casebook." *Casebook.Icrg.Org*, <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/un-security-council-resolution-688-northern-iraq>.

¹²⁶ Cambridge Dictionary. "No-Fly Zone." *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/no-fly-zone>.

¹²⁷ UK Parliament. "House of Commons - Defence - Thirteenth Report." *Publications.Parliament.Uk*, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmdfence/453/45306.htm>.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

Article 1 of the ICCPR recognises the right to peoples of self-determination, and it protects freedom of expression and political participation. It also guarantees minority groups the right to enjoy their culture, religion and language. In the Kurdish context, ICCPR is cited to argue that Kurds constitute a group of people, with a collective right to self-determination, supporting claims for autonomy and participation in governing the regions in which they are a majority. However, even though the ICCPR strengthens claims for meaningful regional autonomy and political participation, it doesn't create by itself an enforceable right to secession under current international law.

UN Security Council Resolution 1770 (2007)

The UN Security Council Resolution 1770 extended the role of the UN Assistant Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) for 12 months and authorised an expanded role. It assigned UNAMI with advising, supporting, and assisting Iraq in advancing political dialogue and the coordination of humanitarian efforts.¹²⁸ Basically, this broader mandate has included support for inclusive political processes and the facilitation of dialogue between Baghdad and regional actors, such as the Kurdistan Region, aiming to resolve issues with dialogue rather than by force. Overall, this resolution strengthened support for peaceful dialogue between Baghdad and Kurdish actors, but it focused on reconciliation rather than directly addressing Kurdish self-determination claims.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

The 2005 Iraqi Constitution¹²⁹

The 2005 Iraqi constitution officially recognises the Kurdistan region, with its existing authorities, as a federal region within Iraq. It guarantees Kurdistan Regions administrative legislative and judicial power in areas not reserved to the government, allowing Kurdish actors to participate in the political process concerning internal affairs and security issues. Moreover, a significant aspect of this constitution is that It recognised Kurdish as an official language of Iraq, besides Arabic, and protects the right to education and public use of Kurdish. The language recognition is extremely important, as it practically elevates Kurdish identity to constitutionally protected status, and it also created a basis for Kurdish language education and administration across Iraq. Generally the 2005 constitution established a framework in which there is Kurdish self-governance, but Iraqi territorial integrity is still preserved. Even though it is a framework which represents a step towards recognising Kurdish identity and advancing, there are still disputes

¹²⁸ United Nations. "SECURITY COUNCIL EXPANDS UNITED NATIONS ROLE IN IRAQ AS PART OF EFFORTS TO END STRIFE, WIN REGIONAL SUPPORT, TACKLE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." *Un.Org*, 10 Aug. 2007, <https://press.un.org/en/2007/sc9095.doc.htm>.

¹²⁹ "Iraq 2005 Constitution - Constitute." *Www.constituteproject.org*, 2005, www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.

regarding the distribution of powers and resources between the government and the Kurdistan region which present challenges.

The 2017 Independence Referendum

The KRG held an independence referendum on 25 September 2017 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and some disputed territories, asking whether the region should be independent from Iraq.¹³⁰ Results showed that over 93% voted in favour.¹³¹ However the Iraqi government rejected the referendum as unconstitutional and a threat to the unity of Iraq and thus refused to recognise its outcome, affirming the belief that the borders of Iraq should remain unchanged. Therefore, the referendum wasn't effective, because it did not lead to independence. After the vote, the Iraqi government imposed sanctions on the region and it retook control over disputed areas, and thus the referendum can be characterised as a symbolic expression of Kurdish self-determination rather than something that lead to a significant change in territorial status.

The 2013-2015 Turkey-PKK peace process

The 2013-2015 Turkey-PKK peace process was one of the most comprehensive attempts by the Turkish government and PKK to end their armed conflict through negotiations, ceasefires, and political reforms.¹³² It began in 2013 with confirmation that talks were taking place with the leader of PKK leading to a PKK ceasefire announcement and a withdrawal of PKK fighters from Kurdish territory. During this period, they explored a political plan that included expanding linguistic and cultural rights, and generally finding ways to address the Kurdish Question within Turkey's existing framework.¹³³ Expectations for a political settlement were high at that time, however they fell apart in the middle of 2015 due to shifting domestic politics and the escalating regional instability arising from the Syrian conflict.¹³⁴ Many of the political achievements of the previous two years were undone, and armed conflict between the PKK and Turkey continued.¹³⁵ Moreover, it has been argued that even though this peace process was indeed important, the

¹³⁰ European Parliament. "Iraqi Kurdistan's Independence Referendum | Think Tank | European Parliament." *Europa.Eu*, 2017, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)608752](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2017)608752).

¹³¹ Degli Esposti, Nicola. "The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 10, July 2021, pp. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1949978>.

¹³² Cudi Zerey. *Turkey's Peace Process in the Context of the Kurdish–Turkish Conflict and Implications for European Union Policy*. 18 Mar. 2026, <https://manaramagazine.org/2026/03/turkeys-peace-process-kurdish-turkish/>.

¹³³ Yeğen, Mesut. *The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects*. 2015, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191379/gte_wp_11.pdf.

¹³⁴ Cudi Zerey. *Turkey's Peace Process in the Context of the Kurdish–Turkish Conflict and Implications for European Union Policy*. 18 Mar. 2026, <https://manaramagazine.org/2026/03/turkeys-peace-process-kurdish-turkish/>.

¹³⁵ *ibid*

process failed to make lasting arrangements on Kurdish autonomy, which illustrates the fragility, uncertainty and potential of negotiation based approaches to the Kurdish Question.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Enhanced regional autonomy

One possible solution would be to encourage states with significant Kurdish populations to extend regional self-governance. This would include the formal recognition of Kurdish majority regions within formal constitutions, so that autonomy would be a structured part of the state. States could establish regional councils managed by Kurds with authority on local governance which would allow Kurds to manage everyday affairs, participate in policymaking, and feel represented. Moreover, this solution could possibly include granting local authorities greater control over education, language, culture and civil rights. More specifically, in education, national curricula could include the Kurdish language and history, run some schools and universities in Kurdish. A very important part of this solution would be that it would explicitly not suggest any kind of reforming of borders, or creating a new independent Kurdish state, in order to maintain the principle of territorial integrity. Therefore, this solution would practically call for greater Kurdish autonomy within existing states. However, the practical limitation of this solution is the fact that it would depend entirely on the political willingness of the central governments, which most likely would be negative towards it, as they would fear that something like this could lead to future Kurdish separatism .

Establishing UN facilitated dialogue mechanisms

Another possible solution would be to establish formal forums where representatives of the central governments of the states and Kurdish political or administrative bodies would meet and engage in discussion, under the supervision of the UN. These platforms would be designed in order to ensure that Kurdish actors are recognised as legitimate political actors, not just as security problems of the countries. Within these forums, the UN could help parties explore different models of autonomy and self governance, in order to find arrangements that would benefit both parties, and be considered legal under international law, namely that they don't violate any international law norms. Such UN facilitated forums could provide a structured place for peaceful dialogue, helping Kurdish actors explore autonomy arrangements without resorting to violence. However, their effectiveness could be limited by the willingness of governments and Kurdish actors to participate, as well as by the lack of the UN's enforcement powers in case any of the parties refuse to comply with the agreed outcomes.

Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Initiatives

Another solution would be the implementation of peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives aimed at reducing violence and managing disputes peacefully. Firstly, ceasefire support would involve encouraging and monitoring agreements between states and Kurdish armed groups. This could include local monitoring teams, clear rules about what each side may and may

not do, and agreed steps to follow if there are violations. A second part of this solution would focus on disarmament and reintegration programmes aiming to reduce the role of armed actors by collecting weapons, demobilising them, and supporting their social and economic reintegration back to life. Benefits of this would include a direct reduction in violence and a gradual reduction of violence and a weakening of armed actors as political tools, creating more space for everyday peaceful negotiations. However, again, a practical limitation of this solution is the fact that it would mostly rely on strong political will from both sides, and if this isn't present, ceasefires and disarmament efforts are likely to collapse.

Protection of cultural and linguistic rights

Lastly, one alternative solution would be the protection of cultural and linguistic rights of Kurdish populations. Firstly, a part of this would be to include the Kurdish language in schools and universities. This could include teaching Kurdish as a subject, including Kurdish history in curricula, or even conducting classes entirely in Kurdish. In the media sector, the states could permit and promote the Kurdish language on television, radio, online platforms, so Kurdish people have access to news, entertainment, and cultural content in their own language. Another element would be the legal and administrative protection for the use of the Kurdish language in public life. Finally, this approach would include measures to preserve and promote Kurdish cultural heritage. States and local authorities could document and protect Kurdish historical sites, archives and traditions, fund museums and cultural centres, and many more. These policies would aim to avoid the eradication of Kurdish culture over time, so it can be passed to future generations within existing states. Benefits of this solution would include the strengthening of Kurdish identity and the reduction of cultural marginalisation, while it offers a relatively low risk way for states to address grievances through education, media, and heritage policies. However, there are still some practical limitations, including the fact that this would not tackle deeper political and security issues, and it may be applied only partially or symbolically, again due to possible low willingness of states.

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