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The Kurdish Nation

The Kurdish people are one of the world’s largest ethnic groups without an official country. Their fight for independence and autonomy, which continues to this day, has lasted for more than a century. Also known as Kurds, they are an unprotected minority of Indo-European descent, and hail as indigenous people of the plains and highlands of former Mesopotamia, a region that is today marked by Southeastern Turkey, Northeastern Syria, Northern Iraq, Northwestern Iran, and Southwestern Armenia. According to a 2017 estimate by the Kurdish Institute of Paris there are 36.4 to 45.6 million Kurds in the world, with an estimated 30 million of them residing in the Middle East, making them the 4th largest ethnic community in the entire Middle East region (Sawe 2018). Despite their vast population, Kurds have never had their own country; instead, they are governed by the respective governments that have mandate over the land that they live in. While the establishment of a Kurdish country is a contentious political debate, there is no doubt that the Kurdish people are a diverse, populous, and culturally rich group that have their own unique place in the Middle East.

Kurds have their own language, traditions, and culture. In the early 20th century, Kurds began to consider the creation of a “Kurdistan” during the era of the Ottoman empire. After WWI, and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the victorious Western allies had originally promised the Kurds their own country in the Treaty of Sevres, but this was never materialized (Who Are The Kurds). When the borders of modern Turkey and its neighbours were drawn in the Treaty of Lausanne, there was no more talk of an independent Kurdistan in global politics. Since then, Kurds have been a minority in every country they live in , and any attempts to set up an independent state has been met with strong opposition (Sawe 2018), if not downright aggression. For example, the Iraqi administrators forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurds in the late 1970s in what was called the “Arabisation” policy. Additionally, Saddam Hussein’s government, which continued this initiative in the 1980s, destroyed at least 400 villages, and killed at least 50,000 Kurdish civilians (Naidu 2020).

In recent years, the situation for Kurds has changed significantly. Since 2005, Kurds secured constitutional recognition in Iraq and today function as a semi autonomous entity, known as the Kurdistan Region; they have their own parliament, borders, foreign policy and armed forces known as the Peshmerga, which translates to: *those who stand before death*. 40% of the Kurdish military are women, comprising one of the world’s larger female fighting forces (Al Jazeera, 2017). In the context of Middle East conflicts, the Peshmerga were at the forefront in the fight against ISIS. In 2017, 93% of Kurds voted for Iraqi Kurdistan’s independence in a referendum, which caused increased tension with the Iraqi government. External support was non-existent due to fear of increased pressure for Kurds’ independence in Turkey, Iran and Syria, which would result in rearranging the borders, loss of territory and loss of oil revenue in these countries. Therefore, the status of Kurds in recent history has shown that they have a significant position in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Beyond modern history, the Kurdish people also have a rich cultural background; traditions and history go as far back to the beginning of recorded civilization, with the Erbil Citadel in the Kurdistan region of Iraq being continuously inhabited for over 6000 years (Kurdish People Fast Facts). The holiday Newroz, has its roots in Zoroastrianism and is a celebration of the arrival of spring, usually marked today as March 21st. There is an ancient Kurdish myth that explains the origin: there was once an Assyrian king by the name of Zuhak, who had serpents growing from his shoulders and acted like a tyrant. Among other atrocities, he demanded a sacrifice of two children every day. A blacksmith by the name of Kawa decided to end his rule, and beheaded the king and his serpents. To signal his victory, a bonfire was lit, which led to a chain of fires being lit on mountain tops across Kurdistan to spread the message. As a result, the Kurds often light large bonfires to this day to continue the myth and tradition for Newroz (Who Are The Kurds).

Given the long, rich, and detailed history of the Kurds, it is clear that they have a special place in the Middle East. Although they do not have their own country, they have the history, the culture, and the population for one. The story of the Kurdish people has left its own distinctive mark and shows that sometimes the most interesting things can be apparent in plain sight.

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