Navigating the Mosaic: Kurdish Relations with Minority Groups in Kurdistan

I. Introduction: Defining Kurdistan and Its Minorities

The relationship between Kurds and the diverse minority groups inhabiting the lands often referred to as Kurdistan is a complex tapestry woven from centuries of shared history, political upheaval, and shifting socio-cultural landscapes. This report endeavors to analyze these multifaceted interactions, examining both past and present dynamics across the regions spanning Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, where significant Kurdish populations reside alongside numerous other ethnic and religious communities.

A. The Contested Geography of Kurdistan

Kurdistan, as a concept, represents a broadly defined geographic region traditionally inhabited primarily by Kurds. It is not a sovereign state but an extensive plateau and mountainous area that stretches across large parts of what are now eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran, and smaller portions of northern Syria and Armenia.[1] The designation "Kurdistan" – literally "Land of the Kurds" – refers to this area of Kurdish settlement, roughly encompassing the Zagros and the eastern extension of the Taurus mountain systems.[1] Official recognition of any entity named "Kurdistan" is limited. Iran has a northwestern province named Kordestān, and Iraq has a constitutionally recognized autonomous Kurdistan Region.[1] The United Nations Terminology database further distinguishes between the "Kurdistan Region" as the autonomous entity within federal Iraq and "Kurdistan" as the broader geographical area.[2] This distinction underscores the contested and varied meanings attached to the term. The traditional Kurdish way of life, historically nomadic and centered around sheep and goat herding, was profoundly altered by the enforcement of national boundaries after World War I. These new borders impeded seasonal migrations, compelling most Kurds to transition to village life and settled agriculture.[1]

The very ambiguity of "Kurdistan" as a political and cultural space is fundamental to understanding Kurd-minority relations. While it signifies a historical homeland for the Kurdish people, its geographical boundaries remain fluid and contested, overlapping with the sovereign territories of four modern nation-states. This lack of a unified, internationally recognized Kurdish state means that the dynamics between Kurds and other resident groups are not shaped in a vacuum. Instead, they are profoundly influenced by the overarching policies and political agendas of the central governments in Ankara, Baghdad, Tehran, and Damascus. Consequently, any examination of these relationships must be regionally specific, taking into account the distinct state contexts that frame these interactions and often create a multi-layered interplay of power, allegiance, and identity.

B. Overview of Major Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Kurdish Regions

The regions inhabited by Kurds are also home to a rich diversity of other ethnic and religious groups. These minorities, each with their own distinct histories, cultures, languages, and

religious practices, have coexisted with Kurds for centuries, their interactions ranging from cooperation and mutual influence to periods of tension and conflict. Among the most significant of these groups are Assyrians (including Chaldeans and Syriacs), Yazidis, Turkmen, Shabak, Kaka'i (also known as Yarsan or Ahl-e Haqq), Armenians, Arabs, and smaller communities of Jews, Mandaeans, and Alevis. Obtaining precise demographic data for these groups is often challenging due to political sensitivities, the absence of recent or reliable census data in some areas, and the ongoing conflicts and displacements that have characterized the region.[3]

The position of these groups is often characterized by a "minority within a minority" dynamic. In many parts of historical Kurdistan, Kurds themselves constitute an ethnic or political minority within the larger nation-state. The other ethnic and religious communities living alongside them in these areas can therefore be seen as navigating a complex identity landscape, positioned between the dominant Kurdish group in their specific locale and the overarching authority and policies of the central state. This layered reality significantly influences their political allegiances, strategies for cultural and physical survival, and their relationships with both Kurdish authorities or movements and the respective state governments. Understanding this triangular dynamic is crucial for a nuanced appreciation of their experiences.

To provide a clearer overview of this demographic complexity, Table 1 outlines the major minority groups across the different parts of Kurdistan.

Table 1: Major Minority Groups in Kurdistan by Region

Region	Minority Group	Estimated Population/Significance (if available)	Primary Religion(s)	Key Sources
Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)	Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs	~150,000+ Christians (including IDPs) in KRI/Nineveh [4]; Chaldeans 80% of Iraqi Christians [6]	Christianity (various denominations)	[3]
	Yazidis	~500,000 in Iraq (pre-ISIS 700,000) [8]; KRG considers them Kurds [9]	Yazidism	[3]
	Turkmen	Significant in Kirkuk, Tal Afar; ~60% Sunni, rest Shi'a [11]	Islam (Sunni, Shi'a)	[3]
	Shabak	~250,000; ~70%	Islam (Shi'a,	[3]

		Shi'a, rest Sunni [12]	Sunni), syncretic practices	
	Kaka'i (Yarsan)	110,000-200,000 in Iraq [14]	Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq)	[3]
	Armenians	Present; one reserved seat historically in KRG parliament [15]	Christianity (Armenian Apostolic)	[3]
	Mandaeans	~70,000 historically, now far fewer in Iraq, some in Erbil [17]	Mandaeism	[17]
	Jews	100-250 in IKR (unofficial KRG MERA estimate) [5]	Judaism	[5]
Syrian Kurdistan (AANES/Rojava)	Arabs	Majority in some AANES regions (e.g., Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa) [20]	Islam (mostly Sunni)	[20]
	Assyrians/Syriacs	Significant in Jazira region, Khabur Valley [20]	Christianity (various denominations)	[20]
	Yazidis	~50,000 in Syria (2014 est.), mostly Afrin, Aleppo countryside [23]	Yazidism	[21]
	Armenians	Present, included in AANES Social Contract [22]	Christianity (Armenian Apostolic)	[20]
	Turkmen	Present, included in AANES Social Contract [22]	Islam (mostly Sunni)	[20]
	Chechens	Present, included in AANES Social Contract [22]	Islam (Sunni)	[20]
Turkish Kurdistan	Armenians	Historically significant, vastly reduced post-Genocide [25]	Christianity (Armenian Apostolic)	[25]
	Assyrians/Syriacs	~25,000 in Turkey, mostly Istanbul;	Christianity (various	[27]

		~3,000 in SE [27]	denominations)	
	Alevis (Kurdish)	Estimates vary (1/5 to 1/3 of total Alevis, or majority); Zaza & Kurmanji speakers [28]	Alevism	[25]
	Yazidis	Historically present, significantly reduced [25]	Yazidism	[25]
	Zazas	Distinct linguistic group, many are Alevi [25]	Islam (Sunni), Alevism	[25]
Iranian Kurdistan	Azeris	Significant in West Azerbaijan, compete for influence with Kurds [31]	Islam (mostly Shi'a)	[31]
	Yarsan (Kaka'i)	Mostly Kurds (Guran, Sanjabi, Kalhor etc.), also Laks, Lurs [33]	Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq)	[33]
	Lurs	Sizable group, some Yarsani; near Kurdish areas [31]	Islam (Shi'a), Yarsanism	[31]
	Jews	Historically present, most emigrated; small communities may remain [19]	Judaism	[19]
	Armenians	Present, esp. West Azerbaijan; face religious discrimination [32]	Christianity (Armenian Apostolic)	[32]

C. Scope and Approach of the Report

This report will systematically analyze the historical and contemporary relationships between Kurdish populations and the aforementioned minority groups across the four primary regions of Kurdistan. The examination will cover political dynamics, including issues of representation, autonomy, conflict, and cooperation. It will also delve into social interactions, encompassing

patterns of coexistence, discrimination, and integration. Furthermore, the report will assess cultural rights, focusing on language, religion, and education, alongside relevant economic factors that influence inter-group relations. The analysis will be grounded in the available evidence, aiming to provide an objective, multi-faceted, and academically rigorous perspective on these intricate and often sensitive relationships.

II. Kurds and Minorities in Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Region of Iraq - KRI)

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), an autonomous region established under Iraq's 2005 constitution [1], presents a distinct context for Kurd-minority relations. Its history, marked by conflict with the central Iraqi government and the pursuit of Kurdish self-governance, has significantly shaped the experiences of the diverse ethnic and religious minorities residing within its de facto and de jure boundaries.

A. Historical Context: From Ottoman Era to KRG Autonomy

The territories now constituting the KRI were part of the Ottoman Empire until its dissolution after World War I, subsequently falling under the British Mandate of Mesopotamia. Throughout much of the 20th century, Kurdish aspirations for autonomy or independence led to recurrent conflicts with successive Iraqi governments. The Ba'athist regime under Saddam Hussein, in particular, was characterized by brutal repression against the Kurds, including the genocidal Anfal campaign in 1988.[3] This period also saw systematic "Arabization" policies in northern Iraq, which involved the forcible displacement of non-Arab populations, including Kurds, Yazidis, Assyrians, Shabaks, and Turkmen, and their replacement with Arab settlers, particularly in oil-rich areas like Kirkuk.[3]

Following the 1991 Gulf War and the establishment of a no-fly zone, Kurds were able to establish a de facto autonomous region. This autonomy was formally recognized in Iraq's 2005 constitution, leading to the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with its own constitution and parliament, largely dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).[1] This autonomy, however, brought new challenges and dynamics for the minority groups living within or adjacent to the KRI's jurisdiction.

B. Key Minority Groups:

1. Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs (Christians):

These Christian communities are indigenous to Iraq, tracing their ancestry to ancient Mesopotamia. Chaldeans constitute the largest segment, accounting for approximately 80% of Iraqi Christians.6 They speak modern Aramaic dialects and belong to various ancient Eastern Christian churches.6 Historically, official Iraqi statistics often miscategorized them as Arabs, a point of significant contention for communities asserting a distinct ethno-national identity.7

Like the Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs were victims of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign and Arabization policies.[7] The national censuses of 1987 and 1997 infamously forced individuals to identify as either Arab or Kurdish, effectively erasing Assyrian identity from

official records for those who insisted on it.[7] The post-2003 period brought further suffering, as Christians were doubly targeted in the ensuing sectarian violence and by extremist groups, leading to substantial internal and external displacement.[7] The advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 across the Nineveh Plains, a historical Christian heartland, triggered another wave of mass displacement, with many seeking refuge in the KRI.[7]

Politically, within the KRG, Christians have had reserved representation. Historically, five of the 11 minority quota seats in the 111-seat KRG parliament were allocated to Christian representatives (often referred to as Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian seats).[7] However, a February 2024 ruling by Iraq's Supreme Federal Court altered the KRG's election law, reducing the total number of parliamentary seats to 100 and cutting the minority quota seats from 11 to just 5 for the upcoming elections, which will inevitably impact Christian representation.[36] Some Assyrian political movements, such as the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), have a history of participation in the Kurdish armed struggle, formally joining in 1982.[7]

Despite this formal representation and historical alliances, relations with Kurdish authorities have been fraught with tension. Numerous reports from Assyrian groups and international observers highlight persistent issues of land encroachment by Kurds, illegal construction on Assyrian-owned lands, and pressure to support the political aims of the dominant KDP and PUK.[3] Accusations of "Kurdification" and demographic engineering in historically Christian areas are recurrent.[3] Recent protests in Ankawa, a predominantly Christian suburb of Erbil, against land confiscations and what residents perceive as cultural erosion (e.g., proliferation of nightclubs) underscore these ongoing grievances.[40] While the KRG announced reforms in Ankawa, including land compensation, critics argue that these measures are superficial and fail to address the core issues of systematic demographic changes and land appropriations by politically connected individuals.[40]

The aftermath of ISIS has presented further challenges. ISIS systematically destroyed significant parts of Assyrian cultural and religious heritage.[7] In some areas retaken from ISIS, such as Bartella, Shabak-Shi'a militias have reportedly undermined local Syriac self-governance and attempted demographic alterations.[6] Consequently, many Assyrians, distrustful of both Baghdad and Erbil, advocate for a semi-autonomous "safe zone" in the Nineveh Plains under international protection.[7]

Conversely, KRG officials, including Christian ministers like Ano Abdoka (currently KRG Minister of Transport and Communications), publicly emphasize the KRG's commitment to minority representation, religious freedom, and fostering a culture of tolerance, often portraying the Kurdistan Region as a beacon of peace and stability for minorities.[4] This highlights a paradox: the KRG offers a degree of physical security and religious freedom, especially when contrasted with active persecution in other parts of Iraq. However, this protection often appears to come at the cost of genuine political autonomy for minorities and the security of their ancestral lands, leading to concerns about long-term cultural and demographic survival within a Kurdish-dominated political framework. The KRG's need for international legitimacy, where the protection of Christians is viewed favorably, may at times conflict with internal Kurdish nationalist ambitions regarding territory and political control.

2. Yazidis:

The Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking endogamous religious group indigenous to the Kurdistan region.9 A significant point of debate, both academically and within the community itself, is whether Yazidis constitute a distinct ethnoreligious group or a religious subgroup of the Kurds.9 While some Yazidis strongly assert a separate identity, the KRG officially considers them ethnic Kurds, with some Kurdish narratives even referring to them as the "original Kurds".9

Yazidi history is replete with persecution, dating back to at least 637 CE, at the hands of various Muslim state entities, as well as neighboring Arab and Kurdish tribes.[10] Following the Islamization of some Kurdish tribes in the 10th century, these groups often participated in the persecution of Yazidis, sometimes attempting forcible conversion.[10] The 19th century witnessed devastating massacres by Muslim Kurdish chieftains like Bedir Khan Beg and Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz, which nearly annihilated the Yazidi population.[10] Ottoman forces under General Omar Wahbi Pasha also committed massacres in Shaikhan and Sinjar in 1890 or 1892 when Yazidis refused to convert to Islam.[10]

The relationship with Kurdish authorities in the modern KRI is deeply scarred by the events of August 2014. The withdrawal of KRG Peshmerga forces from the Sinjar region as ISIS advanced left the Yazidi population defenseless, directly leading to a genocide characterized by mass killings, abductions, sexual slavery, and forced conversions.[10] This perceived abandonment is a profound point of contention and has severely damaged trust. Prior to this, in the post-Saddam era, there were allegations that Kurdish authorities settled Sunni Kurds in historically Yazidi areas like Sheikhan to strengthen KRG's territorial claims.[10] Human Rights Watch has also documented instances where KRG authorities reportedly used heavy-handed tactics, including torture, against Yazidi activists critical of their policies, sometimes pressuring them to identify as Kurds.[10]

Currently, many Yazidis remain displaced, and the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar is devastated.[8] The Iraqi Parliament passed the Yazidi Female Survivors Law (YSL) in 2021, aiming to provide reparations and support to survivors of ISIS atrocities (including Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, and Shabak). However, its implementation, managed by a directorate that includes KRG representation, has faced significant challenges, including bureaucratic hurdles, lack of transparency, and gaps in the provision of essential services like employment and rehabilitation.[42] Distrust of both Arab and Kurdish neighbors persists among many Yazidis in the Nineveh Plains.[3] UNAMI has been involved in supporting government efforts to protect minority rights, including those of Yazidis.[43] The 2020 Sinjar Agreement, brokered between Baghdad and the KRG to stabilize the district and facilitate Yazidi return, has seen very limited implementation and was criticized for its lack of meaningful Yazidi participation in the negotiation process.[44]

The ISIS genocide can be seen as a fundamental rupture in Yazidi-Kurdish relations. While historical persecution by some Kurdish groups was a known grievance, the scale of the 2014 catastrophe and the KRG Peshmerga's role (or lack thereof) created a profound crisis of confidence. This has fueled Yazidi demands for independent security mechanisms, international protection, and a re-evaluation of their relationship with Kurdish political entities.

It has also intensified internal Yazidi debates about their distinct identity vis-à-vis Kurds.

3. Turkmen:

Iraqi Turkmen, who speak a Turkish dialect, are believed to be descendants of Turkic garrisons stationed in the region during the Ottoman era, or possibly earlier Seljuq migrations. Approximately 60% are Sunni Muslim, with the remainder being Shi'a.11 Their historical role as protectors of Ottoman frontiers, sometimes against Kurdish tribal raids, contributed to historically strained relations with Kurds.11

A central and enduring point of contention is the status of Kirkuk, a multi-ethnic, oil-rich city and province that Turkmen consider historically theirs.[11] This claim directly clashes with Kurdish nationalist aspirations to incorporate Kirkuk into the KRI. Under Saddam Hussein's regime, Turkmen, like Kurds, were denied cultural and political rights, and many were displaced from Kirkuk and surrounding areas as part of Arabization campaigns.[11] The post-2003 era saw escalating tensions between Kurds and Turkmen, particularly concerning Kirkuk's future. A 1959 riot in Kirk, where Kurds and communists reportedly killed Turkmen, left a legacy of deep skepticism among Turkmen regarding Kurdish political intentions.[11]

The Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF), often with political and material support from Turkey, was formed to resist Kurdish control over Kirkuk.[11] UN reports in 2006 indicated that KRG security forces were illegally policing Kirkuk and other disputed areas.[11] Following the ISIS offensive in 2014, KRG Peshmerga forces seized control of Kirkuk. Subsequently, there were reports of Kurdish forces expelling Turkmen IDPs from the area and demolishing their temporary shelters.[11] The status of Tal Afar, another Turkmen-majority district west of Mosul, also remains unsettled and has been a site of sectarian violence.[11] Turkmen have faced targeted assassinations and kidnappings in these contested zones.[11]

In the KRG parliament, Turkmen were historically allocated five reserved seats [46], but this number, like that for Christians, has been affected by the recent Iraqi Supreme Court ruling reducing overall minority quotas.[38] Specific recent (2022-2025) KRG reports on Turkmen socio-economic conditions are not prominent in the provided materials, with the focus remaining on political and territorial disputes. The ongoing instability in disputed territories, coupled with the unresolved status of Kirkuk and the KRG-Baghdad oil revenue disputes [47], undoubtedly impacts the socio-economic well-being of the Turkmen community. Kirkuk remains the unresolvable nexus of Turkmen-Kurdish conflict, a deeply symbolic and resource-rich prize that fuels competing nationalisms and draws in regional powers, particularly Turkey, which views itself as a protector of Turkmen interests. Any KRG policy or action in Kirkuk is met with profound suspicion by the Turkmen community, rendering genuine cooperation exceptionally challenging.

4. Shabak:

The Shabak are an ethnic and linguistic minority concentrated in a number of villages in the Nineveh Plains, east of Mosul, with a smaller presence in Mosul city itself.12 Most Shabak consider themselves a distinct ethnic group, neither Arab nor Kurdish, although this identity has been contested. Their language, Shabaki, is a unique amalgam drawing from Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, and Arabic.12 Approximately 70% of the Shabak community identifies as Shi'a Muslim, with the remainder being Sunni; their religious practices often blend elements of

formal Islam with local, syncretic beliefs.12

Historically, the Shabak have faced pressures of assimilation from larger groups. During the Saddam era, the Ba'athist regime attempted to "Arabize" them as part of efforts to consolidate control over the oil-rich north.[12] Following the 2003 US-led invasion, some Kurdish activists and parties claimed the Shabak were ethnically Kurdish, an assertion often linked to Kurdish territorial ambitions in the Nineveh Governorate.[12]

The Shabak, particularly the Shi'a majority, were heavily targeted by Sunni extremist militants after 2003, with an estimated 1,300 Shabak killed between 2003 and 2014.[12] The ISIS offensive in 2014 had a devastating impact. ISIS militants marked Shabak properties in Mosul with the letter 'R' (for '*Rafida*,' a derogatory term for Shi'a Muslims) and systematically targeted the community with massacres, kidnappings, and displacement.[12]

Politically, the Shabak community is divided, with some supporting alignment with the KRG and others favoring the central Iraqi government in Baghdad.[12] Their villages are predominantly located in the disputed territories of the Nineveh Plains, making them central to the KRG-Baghdad tug-of-war. In the aftermath of ISIS, some Shabak men joined the KRG's Peshmerga forces, while others formed or joined Shi'a militias within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), such as the 30th Brigade (Liwa al-Shabak), which is often aligned with Baghdad and has Iranian backing.[6]

Neither the Iraqi Constitution nor the KRG Constitution explicitly mentions the Shabak as a distinct ethnic group, although Iraq's electoral law reserves one parliamentary seat for the Shabak minority.[12] A significant grievance is that the KRG does not recognize the Shabak as a distinct ethnicity, and consequently, the Shabaki language is not taught in schools in KRG-controlled areas, placing it at risk of extinction.[12] Shabak in KRG-administered areas have reported pressure to support Kurdish political aims.[12]

Socio-economically, even before the ISIS onslaught, Shabak in the Nineveh Plains reported difficulties accessing basic services.[12] Many remain internally displaced.[12] While the Yazidi Survivors Law includes Shabak survivors in its remit for reparations [42], the general human rights situation for minorities in the KRI shows both progress and persistent challenges.[50]

Complicating inter-minority relations, recent U.S. State Department reports have cited allegations that Shabak PMF militias (specifically the 30th Brigade) have been involved in facilitating land sales aimed at reducing Christian demographic presence in the Nineveh Plain and have seized Christian properties.[49] This positions the Shabak in a precarious role, sometimes as victims of larger conflicts and sometimes, through their armed factions, as alleged perpetrators against other vulnerable minorities in the contested Ninewa Plains. Their internal divisions and location in disputed territories make them a "swing" minority, susceptible to co-optation and pressure from both Erbil and Baghdad.

5. Kaka'i (Yarsan):

The Kaka'i, also known as Yarsan or Ahl-e Haqq, are followers of a syncretic religion with roots in 14th-century western Iran, incorporating elements of Zoroastrianism and Shi'a Islam.14 In Iraq, their population is estimated by community members to be between 110,000 and 200,000, residing mainly southeast of Kirkuk and in the Nineveh Plains, with communities also

in Diyala, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah.14 Ethnically, Kaka'is in Iraq are generally considered to be Kurdish and predominantly speak the Macho (a Gorani dialect) or other Kurdish dialects, though some Arabic-speaking communities exist.14 Due to their distinct and often misunderstood faith, they have historically faced persecution and tend to be secretive about their religious practices.14 Kaka'i men are often distinguishable by their characteristic prominent moustaches, which can make them more vulnerable to harassment.14

The KRG's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) officially recognized the Kaka'i religion in 2015, a significant step that has also led to the Kaka'i community having a reserved seat on the Halabja provincial council.[14] This recognition by the KRG is notable, especially as the Iraqi federal constitution does not mention the Kaka'i, and members of the community often have "Muslim" listed on their national ID cards – a situation some Kaka'i reportedly prefer as it offers a degree of protection from discrimination.[14]

Despite KRG recognition, Kaka'is continue to face discrimination, threats, kidnappings, and assassinations due to their religious identity.[14] They were targeted by ISIS, leading to the formation of their own armed forces, some of which were incorporated into the Peshmerga.[14] At the federal level, Kaka'i community members have reported that the Shia Endowment seized Kaka'i worship sites in Diyala and Baghdad, subsequently converting them into Shi'a mosques.[49]

Historically, Kaka'is were displaced under the Ba'ath regime's Arabization policies.[14] Internal divisions within the community regarding whether they constitute a sect of Islam or an entirely independent religious group have, at times, hindered their ability to present a unified political front.[14] While KRG recognition is a positive development, the persistence of discrimination and violence raises questions about the depth of this protection. It remains a critical issue whether this formal recognition translates into genuine security and the ability to practice their faith openly without fear, or if it is a more symbolic gesture within a KRI that primarily advances a Kurdish national identity.

6. Armenians, Mandaeans, Jews:

These represent some of the smaller, ancient minority communities in Iraqi Kurdistan.

- **Armenians:** Are present in the KRI, and KRG Minister Ano Abdoka recently acknowledged them as one of the minority groups facing challenges in the region.[15] The KRG parliament historically reserved one seat for an Armenian representative [16], though this is subject to the recent changes in minority seat allocations.
- **Mandaeans (Sabian Mandaeans):** Adherents of an ancient Gnostic creed, known for their pacifist beliefs and reverence for John the Baptist.[17] Historically concentrated in the marshlands of southern Iraq, many migrated to larger cities like Baghdad and Kirkuk, and significantly, to Erbil in the KRI, especially after the 2003 invasion and subsequent instability.[17] Their population in Iraq has drastically dwindled from an estimated 70,000 due to persecution, displacement, and emigration, with some estimates suggesting up to 90% have left the country.[17] Despite this, Mandaean religious festivals, such as Parwanaya (Feast of Creation), are reportedly celebrated in Erbil.[18]
- **Jews:** Jewish communities have a long history in Kurdistan. However, the vast majority

of Kurdish Jews were evacuated to Israel in the early 1950s.[19] There are reports that Kurds mourned the departure of their Jewish neighbors and, in some cases, maintained their synagogues.[19] In 2015, the KRG appointed a Jewish representative to the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, though this individual was later dismissed.[19] Unofficial KRG MERA estimates suggest a very small number of Jews, perhaps 100 to 250 individuals, may still reside in the IKR, though most do not openly acknowledge their religion due to fears of persecution.[5]

The dwindling presence of these ancient communities, particularly Mandaeans and Jews, reflects a broader trend across the Middle East where conflict, persecution, and socio-political instability have led to the near disappearance of once-vibrant non-Muslim groups. While the KRG may offer a relatively more tolerant environment compared to other parts of Iraq for the remaining members, their numbers are critically low. Their relationship with the Kurdish majority today is less about active political contention and more centered on the KRG's capacity and willingness to preserve the remnants of this historical diversity and protect their cultural heritage. Their near-disappearance signifies a profound loss of the region's traditional pluralism.

C. KRG Policies: Minority Rights, Representation, IDP Management, Ministry of Endowments

The KRG has established a framework for minority rights and representation, projecting an image of an inclusive and democratic region. The KRG Constitution and various laws provide for the protection of minority rights. Historically, 11 out of the 111 seats in the KRG parliament were reserved for minority representatives: five for Christians (Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian), five for Turkmen, and one for Armenians.[3] This system of quotas was intended to ensure minority voices in the legislature. However, a February 2024 ruling by Iraq's Supreme Federal Court has significantly altered this arrangement, reducing the total number of KRG parliamentary seats to 100 and slashing the minority quota seats from 11 to 5 for the upcoming regional elections.[36] This decision has caused considerable concern among minority communities, particularly Christians and Turkmen, who will see their dedicated representation substantially diminished.

Table 2: Minority Political Representation in KRG

Minority Group	Historical Quota Seats (pre-2024 ruling)	Current Quota Seats (post-2024 ruling, for 100-seat parliament)	Key Issues/Observations
Christians (Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac)	5	Part of the 5 total minority seats (specific allocation unclear from snippets, likely reduced)	Concerns about KDP/PUK influence over MPs; effectiveness of representation questioned; impact of seat reduction.
Turkmen	5	Part of the 5 total	Similar concerns about

		minority seats (specific allocation unclear from snippets, likely reduced)	Kurdish party influence; historical tensions over Kirkuk; impact of seat reduction.
Armenians	1	Part of the 5 total minority seats (specific allocation unclear from snippets, likely reduced)	Smaller community, representation likely impacted by overall reduction.
Yazidis	No specific reserved seats (considered Kurds by KRG) [9]	No specific reserved seats	Lack of distinct ethnic quota remains a point of contention for some Yazidis advocating for separate recognition.
Shabak	No specific reserved seats in KRG (one in Iraqi Parliament) [12]	No specific reserved seats	Not recognized as a distinct ethnicity by KRG; divided political loyalties.
Kaka'i (Yarsan)	No specific reserved seats in KRG Parliament (one on Halabja provincial council) [14]	No specific reserved seats	Recognized as a religion by KRG MERA, but parliamentary representation not through a dedicated ethnic/religious quota at the KRG parliamentary level.

Despite the formal mechanisms of representation, minority leaders and observers have frequently voiced concerns that the major Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK, unduly influence the selection and actions of minority MPs holding quota seats, thereby undermining genuine minority self-representation and ensuring alignment with Kurdish political agendas.[5] KRG Minister Ano Abdoka, himself a Christian, recently met with U.S. officials to discuss the KRG's commitment to ensuring "appropriate representation" for ethnic and religious minorities in government formation, acknowledging the challenges faced by these communities.[15]

In the aftermath of the ISIS onslaught, the KRG hosted hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs), a significant proportion of whom belonged to minority groups such as Yazidis, Christians, and Shabaks.[5] The KRG authorities provided land and security for Christian-led humanitarian efforts for their displaced communities.[4] However, significant challenges persist for IDPs in accessing their full rights, essential services, and pathways to durable solutions, whether return, resettlement, or local integration.[45] The implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law, which the KRG supports, aims to provide reparations but has encountered bureaucratic and logistical hurdles.[42]

The KRG's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) plays a role in managing religious affairs and engaging with minority communities. MERA officially recognized the Kaka'i religion in 2015 [14] and provides unofficial statistics on the small Jewish presence in the IKR.[5] KRG officials consistently make public statements affirming their commitment to religious freedom, tolerance, and coexistence.[15]

Human rights reports indicate that the KRG's 2021-2025 human rights action plan claims a 75% implementation rate for recommendations concerning minority rights, anti-discrimination measures, and the prevention of hate speech.[50] Nevertheless, other reports from human rights organizations highlight ongoing issues, such as the harassment and detention of journalists and activists who are critical of the authorities, which can indirectly affect the ability of minorities to voice grievances.[51]

This situation suggests a dual approach by the KRG towards minorities: on one hand, there is formal inclusion through constitutional guarantees, parliamentary quotas, and a dedicated ministry. This framework projects an image of an inclusive, democratic region, which is crucial for the KRG's international legitimacy and relations. On the other hand, persistent complaints from various minority groups regarding land disputes, alleged demographic changes, the pervasive influence of the KDP and PUK over minority political representatives, and pressure to conform to Kurdish political objectives suggest a reality of political control where Kurdish national interests are often prioritized.[3] This duality reflects an inherent tension within the KRG's project of constructing a Kurdish-led autonomous region while governing a diverse population, some of whom harbor competing historical claims or grievances. The recent federal court decision to reduce minority parliamentary seats further complicates this dynamic, potentially diminishing even the formal avenues for minority political expression and influence within the KRI.

D. Inter-Communal Relations in Ninewa Plains and Disputed Territories Post-ISIS

The ISIS occupation from 2014 to 2017 had a catastrophic impact on the Ninewa Plains and other disputed territories, areas characterized by their rich ethnic and religious diversity. ISIS specifically targeted these communities – including Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs, Yazidis, Shabak, Kaka'i, and Turkmen – with genocidal violence, aiming to eradicate their presence and erase the region's long-standing pluralism.[57] The aftermath requires substantial reconstruction not only of infrastructure but also of shattered social fabrics and inter-communal trust.[57]

The attacks by ISIS led to a profound crisis of faith in the Iraqi state's ability to protect its citizens and exacerbated existing fractures in relations between different communities. Some minority groups accused segments of the local Sunni Arab population of complacency or even complicity with ISIS, deepening mistrust.[3] In response to the security vacuum and direct threats, several minority communities formed their own self-defense forces, such as the Assyrian Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), various Shabak brigades (some later integrated into the PMF), and Kaka'i armed units.[12] The NPU, for instance, aligned itself with the Baghdad government but had to navigate the complexities of the KRG's 2017 independence referendum, which included parts of the Nineveh Plains.[58]

Socio-economically, the ISIS occupation devastated livelihoods, particularly agriculture, which

is a mainstay for many communities in Nineveh.[57] Minorities in these disputed areas continue to face official neglect and significant barriers in accessing education, employment, housing, healthcare, and other essential services.[53]

The governance of these "disputed territories" remains a central point of contention between the federal government in Baghdad and the KRG in Erbil, both of which lay claim to these areas.[3] After the retreat of ISIS, many of these territories came under the de facto control of KRG Peshmerga forces.[3] However, various PMF units, including those with specific ethnic or sectarian affiliations (such as the Shabak 30th Brigade or Iran-aligned militias), also established a strong presence, often challenging KRG influence and, in some instances, being accused of abuses against other minority groups, such as Christians.[6]

This complex and fragmented security landscape has fueled calls from many minority leaders for special administrative arrangements that can guarantee their security and right to self-governance. Proposals include the establishment of a protected safe zone or the creation of new provinces in northern Iraq specifically for minorities, such as in the Nineveh Plains, Sinjar, and Tal Afar, with direct budgetary allocations from the central government.[3]

UNAMI and the OHCHR are actively involved in the region. UNAMI facilitates minority working groups that include representatives from the KRG and federal authorities, aiming to address minority rights issues and support the implementation of international recommendations.[43] The OHCHR is also preparing for a country visit to Iraq to assess the situation of minorities.[59]

The disputed territories, particularly the Nineveh Plains, serve as a microcosm of Iraq's broader fragmentation and the acute vulnerability of its minority populations. These communities are caught in a perilous web of competing influences: the KRG, the federal Iraqi government, powerful PMF factions (some with external backing from Iran), and lingering local resentments or suspicions, particularly from segments of the Sunni Arab community. The failure to effectively implement security and governance agreements like the Sinjar Agreement [44], and the proliferation of various armed groups, underscore the persistent security vacuum and the deep-seated distrust among communities and towards state institutions. For Kurdish authorities, these areas are often viewed as historically or strategically integral to Kurdistan. For the minorities themselves, these are ancestral homelands where they seek security, justice, and a degree of autonomy, often expressing a desire to be independent of both Erbil's and Baghdad's direct control. This intricate interplay of local aspirations and larger power struggles makes inter-communal relations exceptionally fraught and highly dependent on the agendas of often unaccountable external and internal power brokers.

III. Kurds and Minorities in Syrian Kurdistan (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria - AANES/Rojava)

The emergence of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava, during the Syrian Civil War has created a new and complex environment for Kurdish relations with minority groups. This entity, while not internationally recognized as a

state, exercises de facto governance over significant territories.

A. Historical Context: From Ottoman Era to Syrian Civil War and AANES Establishment

Northern Syria, like other parts of Kurdistan, has a history of ethnic and religious diversity. The early 20th century witnessed profound demographic shifts, partly due to the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides, during which some Kurdish and Chechen tribes reportedly cooperated with Ottoman authorities, while some local Arab militias also attacked fleeing Christian civilians.[20] Concurrently, waves of Kurds fled persecution in Turkey and settled in Syria, where French Mandate authorities granted many of them citizenship.[20]

Following Syrian independence, and particularly under Ba'athist rule from 1963 onwards, the state pursued systematic Arabization policies in northern Syria. These policies involved discrimination against Kurds, including denial of citizenship to a significant portion of the Kurdish population (the *maktumin*), suppression of the Kurdish language and culture, and the settlement of Arabs in historically Kurdish areas as part of projects like the "Arab Belt".[60]

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, created a power vacuum in northern Syria that allowed the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), to establish de facto autonomy. The AANES was formally declared in January 2014, initially in three cantons, and later expanded to include other regions as the YPG, as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), gained territory from ISIS and other groups.[20]

B. Key Minority Groups:

1. Arabs:

Arabs constitute a significant portion of the population within AANES-controlled territories, forming a majority in some regions such as Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.20 The AANES's foundational document, the Charter of the Social Contract, explicitly includes Arabs as one of the constituent peoples of the administration.22 Arabs participate in the SDF and in the governance structures of the AANES at various levels. For instance, AANES delegations negotiating with the Syrian government in Damascus have included Arab representatives.64 The AANES's co-governance model, which often pairs officials, aims to reflect ethnic diversity.65

Inter-communal relations between Kurds and Arabs within AANES are complex and varied. Some Arab communities appreciate the relative stability and security provided by the AANES, particularly in contrast to ISIS rule or ongoing conflict in other parts of Syria.[66] However, significant tensions exist, especially in Arab-majority areas like Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa. Protests against AANES governance erupted in Deir ez-Zor in 2019, with grievances including perceived Kurdish domination in local administrations, lack of adequate public services, forced conscription into the SDF, and concerns over resource distribution, particularly oil revenues.[20] Some Arab tribal leaders and community figures in Deir ez-Zor have expressed negative views of AANES governance, citing marginalization and corruption, and have indicated a preference for a return to centralized Syrian government control.[66] There are also sentiments that Arab representatives within AANES structures are often affiliated with the PYD/SDF and do not genuinely represent the diverse interests or grievances of the broader Arab civilian population.[67] In post-ISIS reconciliation processes, particularly concerning former ISIS affiliates, Arab tribal leaders in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa have often favored tribally-led

mechanisms over AANES-led accountability processes.[68]

The "Arab question" serves as a critical litmus test for the AANES's proclaimed model of inclusive, decentralized, multi-ethnic federalism. While Kurds are the leading political and military force, the large Arab population, especially in key regions like Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, means that their willing participation and integration are essential for the long-term viability and legitimacy of the AANES project. Reported Arab grievances concerning political representation, equitable resource distribution, security practices of the SDF, and fears of Kurdish political dominance indicate significant practical challenges to the AANES's ideals.[20] Successfully addressing these concerns is not only vital for internal stability but also crucial for the AANES's negotiating position with the Syrian central government.[64] Failure to genuinely integrate Arab populations could lead to further instability, create openings for external spoilers, and undermine the AANES's broader claims of representing all communities in northeastern Syria.

2. Assyrians and Syriacs (Christians):

Assyrians and Syriacs are indigenous Christian communities with a deep historical presence in northern Syria, particularly in the Jazira region and along the Khabur River. Many are descendants of those who fled the Assyrian Genocide (Sayfo) in Ottoman Turkey in 1915.20 The AANES Social Contract explicitly affirms minority rights and includes Syriacs, Arameans, Armenians, and Chechens as constituent peoples.22 Syriac has been recognized as an official language in AANES-administered areas, used in education and administration to some extent.61 The AANES has also promoted the Dawronoye ideology among some Assyrian groups, a secular nationalist movement.39 Christians, notably through parties like the Syriac Union Party (SUP), participate in AANES governance structures; for example, Sanharib Barsom of the SUP has been part of AANES delegations to Damascus.64 The AANES has generally supported pluralistic initiatives and has been seen by some international observers as providing a more conducive environment for religious freedom compared to other parts of Syria.24

However, the relationship is also marked by significant challenges and serious allegations of rights violations by AANES and its dominant PYD/YPG forces against segments of the Assyrian/Syriac community. A major point of contention has been education policy. In 2019, AANES authorities were accused of forcibly closing at least 14 private Assyrian schools that refused to adopt the AANES-mandated curriculum.[39] Assyrian community leaders and educators have expressed concerns that their children are caught between two undesirable options: the former Syrian government curriculum, which includes Sharia law and is banned by AANES, and the AANES curriculum, which they criticize for promoting historical revisionism, Kurdish nationalist ideology, and lacking proper accreditation.[70] While the AANES has an independent education system that teaches local languages including Syriac [72], some Assyrians report that their own community-developed curricula are banned and their teachers have faced harassment.[71] Recent negotiations between AANES and the new Syrian transitional government have focused on education, with an aim to allow students in AANES territories to take Syrian national exams, potentially alleviating some of these concerns.[73]

Regarding political representation and security, there are accusations that AANES silences

Assyrian critics and uses Assyrian proxy forces (like those affiliated with the SUP) to intimidate dissenting voices within the community.[39] The kidnapping and assassination of David Jendo and Elias Nasser, leaders of the independent Assyrian Khabur Guards militia, in April 2015, after Jendo had publicly criticized YPG looting of Assyrian homes, remains a deeply divisive issue.[39] A joint statement by sixteen Assyrian and Armenian civic and church organizations in November 2015 accused the PYD of expropriation of private property, human rights violations, illegal military conscription, and interference in church school curricula.[39] More recently, Assyrian groups like the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), alongside the SUP, have called for genuine political representation in any post-Assad Syria, the restitution of confiscated lands, protection of Assyrian villages (especially in the Khabur Valley) from demographic changes, and the constitutional recognition of Syriac as a national language.[76] Some Assyrian activists report ongoing land grabs (affecting approximately 15% of Assyrian lands in AANES areas), SDF seizure of homes belonging to absentees with unfulfilled promises of return, protracted and biased court proceedings in land disputes, and a policy by AANES of positioning itself as the sole representative of "Christians" to Western governments, thereby bypassing direct engagement with distinct Assyrian indigenous identity and concerns.[71] Furthermore, there are allegations of SDF forces desecrating Assyrian cemeteries and churches by digging trenches and using these sacred sites for military purposes, which in turn provokes Turkish retaliatory strikes that damage Assyrian heritage sites.[71]

This situation presents an "inclusion paradox" for Assyrians and Syriacs under AANES. On one hand, the AANES framework formally recognizes their existence, language, and provides platforms for political participation through allied parties like the Syriac Union Party. This is a marked improvement over the assimilationist policies of the Syrian Ba'athist state. On the other hand, this formal inclusion is accompanied by serious allegations from other Assyrian organizations and activists concerning coercive cultural policies (especially in education), the suppression of independent Assyrian schooling, land confiscation, political intimidation, and even violence against those critical of PYD/YPG dominance. This suggests that inclusion may be conditional upon alignment with the AANES's overarching political project. Some Assyrians perceive this as a form of Kurdification or an attempt to control their community by favoring compliant factions while marginalizing or suppressing dissenting voices and independent institutions like the ADO or the Khabur Guards. The AANES faces the challenge of balancing its legitimate security concerns and ideological objectives with the imperative to ensure genuine cultural, religious, and political autonomy for distinct non-Kurdish indigenous groups.

3. Yazidis:

Yazidis in Syria have historically faced denial of their rights to perform religious rituals, learn and transmit their teachings, and build or renovate places of worship under successive Syrian governments.61 The AANES-controlled areas are generally perceived by Yazidis and some international observers as offering a more promising environment for religious freedom and inter-religious cooperation.24 The AANES Executive Council includes Yazidi members, indicating a degree of formal representation.24

The primary demand of Syrian Yazidis, particularly in the context of Syria's political transition, is the official and constitutional recognition of their faith as a distinct religion, ensuring

inclusion and justice.[23] They emphasize that merely mentioning their religion in a constitution is insufficient; they seek practical, on-the-ground guarantees embedded in legal charters and daily life.[23] This call for recognition was prominently featured at the Kurdish Unity Conference in Qamishli in April 2025, which called for state neutrality towards all religions and the right for all to perform religious rites.[23] Yazidis stress that Yazidism is a distinct religion, not simply a belief system to be subsumed under another faith, and they believe a written constitution is essential to permanently safeguard their rights and protect all faiths.[23] This demand is particularly poignant given the 2021 decree by the (former) Syrian Ministry of Justice that forced Yazidis to subject personal status matters (like marriage) to general personal status law, unlike other recognized minorities such as Christians, Jews, and Druze, which sparked considerable anger within the Yazidi community.[23]

The conflict in Syria has severely impacted the Yazidi community. Turkish military operations and the actions of Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions have specifically targeted Yazidis, leading to displacement, killings, abductions, sexual violence, confiscation of property, and the desecration of their religious sites and cemeteries.[24] A Yazidi woman fleeing SNA attacks in December 2024 reported experiencing verbal abuse at checkpoints simply for being Kurdish, highlighting the intersection of ethnic and religious vulnerability.[78] On a more protective note, the AANES (specifically YPG/SDF forces) played a crucial role in rescuing Yazidis fleeing the ISIS genocide in Sinjar, Iraq, in 2014, providing a humanitarian corridor and refuge.[41]

The Yazidi quest for recognition within the AANES framework and in a future Syria navigates the complex interplay between their distinct religious identity and the Kurdish-led political environment. While the AANES offers a significantly improved space for religious freedom and physical security compared to areas controlled by Turkish-backed factions or the historical Ba'ath regime, the overarching political framework is still strongly influenced by Kurdish national aspirations. The core challenge for Yazidis is to secure their specific religious rights and distinct identity within a political entity where Kurdish identity is foundational, ensuring that their uniqueness is not assimilated or instrumentalized for broader political goals. Their negative experience with the former Syrian government's attempt to classify them as a sect of Islam underscores their profound desire for unambiguous legal, social, and constitutional recognition as a distinct faith community.

4. Armenians, Turkmen, Chechens:

These smaller minority groups are explicitly named in the Preamble of the AANES Social Contract as part of the confederation of peoples constituting the administration, signaling an official policy of inclusion.22 The AANES Executive Council and its Bureau of Religions and Beliefs are reported to maintain diverse leadership that includes Turkmen and Armenians, among others.24

However, like other communities in northern Syria, they have been affected by the ongoing conflict and external interventions. Turkish military operations and the actions of allied SNA factions have also impacted Turkmen areas and communities.[24] Historically, during the Ottoman era, some Chechen tribes, alongside certain Kurdish groups, were implicated in the Armenian and Assyrian genocides.[20]

The formal acknowledgment of these smaller minorities in AANES foundational documents and some administrative bodies indicates an intent towards broad inclusivity. However, the available information provides limited specific details on their substantive rights, actual levels of political participation, or unique challenges within the AANES beyond general statements of inclusion or being affected by Turkish military operations. This relative lack of detailed information might suggest either a generally less contentious integration due to their smaller numbers or perhaps a lack of focused attention on their specific situations compared to larger and more politically assertive groups like Arabs or Assyrians. Their inclusion could be, at this stage, more nominal than substantive, and the actual extent of their influence and ability to advocate for specific community needs within the AANES power structures warrants further investigation.

C. AANES Governance Model: Social Contract, Minority Rights, Participation, Policies

The AANES operates on a governance model rooted in its "Charter of the Social Contract," first adopted in January 2014 and revised in 2023. This document explicitly affirms minority rights, gender equality, and the principles of democratic confederalism.[22] The Preamble lists Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens as the constituent peoples of the AANES.[22] It aims to establish a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism, and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs, while recognizing Syria's territorial integrity.[22] Article 21 of the Social Contract notably references the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).[22] An earlier iteration of a constitutional document for the region (Article 53D) guaranteed administrative, cultural, and political rights for Turkmen, ChaldoAssyrians, and all other citizens, a spirit likely maintained in current frameworks.[58]

Table 3: Overview of AANES Social Contract Provisions for Minority Rights

Right Category	Specific Provision in Social Contract (or related AANES law/policy)	Source Snippet(s)	Notes/Examples of Implementation or Challenges
Ethnic & Cultural Recognition	Preamble names Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, Chechens as constituent peoples. Aims for mutual coexistence and understanding. Syria is multi-ethnic/cultural.	[22]	Implemented through multi-ethnic councils. Challenges: accusations of Kurdification by some Assyrians/Arabs.[20]
Language Rights	All languages in Northern Syria are equal in all areas	[20]	Tri-lingual education (Kurdish, Arabic, Syriac) implemented.[72]

	(social, educational, cultural, administrative). Peoples can manage affairs in mother tongue. Syriac official.		Challenges: AANES curriculum lacks wider recognition; Assyrian schools dispute AANES curriculum, leading to closures.[70]
Religious Freedom	Society free from intervention of religious authority in public affairs (secular). Freedom of worship for all (including Yazidis). State neutrality to religions.	[20]	Generally more conducive to religious freedom than other Syrian regions.[24] Yazidis feel freer.[23] Concerns: some Christian objections to educational reforms (ban on niqabs, AANES curriculum imposition).[69]
Political Participation	Democratic participation, all may express themselves freely. Co-governance (male/female, often multi-ethnic). Councils from commune to regional level.	[20]	Arabs, Syriacs, Armenians, Turkmen included in governance structures.[24] Challenges: some Arabs/Assyrians feel representation is tokenistic or controlled by PYD.[39] Lack of elections for some councils criticized.[66]
Gender Equality	Explicit affirmation of gender equality. Co-governance policy mandates female co-chair of equal authority. Women's military units (YPJ). Women's committees.	[22]	High female participation in administration and military. Efforts to combat patriarchal traditions (polygamy, underage marriage).[81]
Human Rights	Protects fundamental human rights and liberties. Refers to UDHR, ICCPR, ICESCR.	[22]	AANES generally viewed more positively on human rights than other Syrian actors.[20] Concerns: arbitrary detentions, forced

			conscription, suppression of dissent reported by some groups/HRWs.[20]
Decentralization	Promotes decentralization and democratic confederalism. Rejects centralism.	[20]	Core demand in negotiations with Damascus.[64] Opposed by Damascus. Some local Arab communities also wary of decentralization under SDF control.[66]

The AANES political system aspires to direct democracy through communes and councils, with a co-governance policy mandating male and female co-chairs, often from different ethnic or religious backgrounds, for leadership positions.[20] The Legislative Council includes regional representatives and technocrats, and the Executive Council comprises diverse commissions and offices, including one for Religions and Beliefs.[63] AANES delegations negotiating with Damascus have included Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac members, reflecting this diversity.[64]

Language and education policies aim for equality, with all languages in Northern Syria declared equal for all official and social purposes, and peoples entitled to manage their affairs in their mother tongue.[20] AANES has introduced education in local languages (Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac).[61] The model typically involves mother-tongue education for the first three years, followed by the introduction of an additional local language, and then foreign languages.[72] However, this system faces challenges: the AANES curriculum lacks broader recognition, leading some families to pursue both AANES and Syrian government curricula for their children.[72] Significant controversies have arisen, particularly with Assyrian schools, over the imposition of the AANES curriculum and the closure of schools that resisted it.[39]

Religiously, the AANES is avowedly secular, with the Social Contract aiming for freedom from religious intervention in public affairs.[20] Generally, AANES-controlled areas are considered more conducive to religious freedom than government-held or rebel-controlled regions of Syria.[24] Yazidis, for example, report feeling freer and having representation within AANES structures.[23] However, there have been concerns from some Christian groups regarding educational reforms, such as the ban on niqabs in schools and the mandatory AANES curriculum for religious schools.[69]

Socio-economically, the AANES provides essential services like education, electricity, water, and security to millions.[65] In 2021, it reportedly had the highest average salaries in Syria, though challenges in distribution, food security, and healthcare persist.[20] Revenue is generated from public properties (including oil, gas, and grain silos in Jazira), local taxation, customs fees, service delivery, remittances, and donations.[20] The economic model blends co-operative and private enterprise, with an emphasis on "ownership by use" and the

establishment of communes and co-operatives in agriculture and other sectors.[20] However, the region faces a severe humanitarian crisis due to ongoing conflict, particularly displacement caused by Turkish military operations and advances by HTS/SNA forces, which strain resources and create dire conditions for IDPs (Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, and others).[78]
For inter-communal dispute resolution, the AANES model, based on democratic confederalism, promotes grassroots democracy and pluralism, emphasizing dialogue and negotiation.[66] However, in some Arab-majority areas like Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, tribal reconciliation processes are sometimes preferred over AANES-led mechanisms, particularly for dealing with issues related to former ISIS affiliates.[68] Ongoing negotiations between AANES and Damascus involve joint committees to implement agreements and resolve contentious issues.[64] Organizations like the Life & Peace Institute also work in the region to support inclusive peacebuilding, which is relevant to fostering harmonious inter-communal relations.[85]
The AANES project, ideologically rooted in Abdullah Öcalan's democratic confederalism, represents a commitment to decentralization, secularism, gender equality, and multi-ethnic/religious pluralism, as enshrined in its Social Contract.[22] This is a radical departure from Syria's authoritarian Ba'athist past and other regional governance models. However, this ambitious experiment faces immense pressures. Militarily, it is threatened by Turkey, its allied SNA factions, and ISIS remnants.[87] Economically, it grapples with devastated infrastructure and resource constraints, exacerbated by displacement crises.[20] Internally, it navigates tensions with some non-Kurdish communities, particularly segments of the Arab and Assyrian populations, over issues of perceived Kurdish dominance, resource allocation, and cultural policies.[20] Externally, it faces a complex and often hostile relationship with the Syrian central government (both the former Assad regime and the current transitional authority) and other regional powers.[64] The AANES's capacity to uphold its inclusive ideals is continuously tested by these pragmatic realities, leading to compromises, criticisms, and sometimes stark contradictions between its foundational principles and its practices on the ground. The long-term success of its minority rights model and its very survival depend critically on its ability to navigate these multifaceted internal and external challenges.

D. Impact of External Factors: Turkish Military Operations, ISIS Threat, Relations with Syrian Transitional Government

The AANES and the minority communities within its territories exist within an exceptionally volatile geopolitical environment, where their security and rights are profoundly affected by external actors.

- **Turkish Military Operations:** Since 2016, Turkey has launched a series of military incursions into northern Syria, including operations in Afrin (2018), and the Tel Abyad-Ras al-Ain corridor (2019).[89] These operations are explicitly aimed at weakening the Kurdish presence along its border, which Ankara views as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The consequences for civilian populations, including Kurds and other minorities like Yazidis and Christians, have been devastating. These incursions have led to massive displacement, widespread human rights abuses perpetrated by Turkish forces and their allied SNA factions (including looting, unlawful

property seizures, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence), and deliberate demographic changes through the resettlement of predominantly Arab families in areas formerly inhabited by Kurds and others.[69] Turkish drone strikes have also targeted and killed Kurdish journalists and SDF personnel.[82] These ongoing military actions pose an existential threat to the stability of AANES and the safety of all communities residing in AANES-controlled or Turkish-targeted areas.[24]

- **ISIS Threat:** Although ISIS has been territorially defeated in Syria, the group remains an active threat, continuing to conduct insurgent attacks and maintain an ideological influence.[90] The AANES, through the SDF, plays a crucial role in ongoing counter-ISIS operations and bears the significant security and humanitarian burden of managing large detention camps, such as Al-Hol and Roj, which house tens of thousands of ISIS affiliates and their families from various countries.[64] This responsibility diverts substantial resources and attention from AANES's governance and development efforts. Recently, the Syrian transitional government and AANES reached an agreement to begin evacuating Syrian citizens from these camps.[90]
- **Relations with Syrian Transitional Government:** Following the ousting of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the AANES/SDF entered into negotiations with the new Syrian transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa. A landmark agreement was signed in March 2025, outlining a path for the integration of northeastern Syrian institutions into the Syrian state structure, including security forces.[64] However, these negotiations are fraught with complexity. The AANES insists on maintaining a decentralized governance model and securing constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and the rights of other components, while the Damascus government has historically favored centralization.[64] The outcomes of these negotiations are critical for the future of AANES and the status of minority rights within its framework. The United States has also engaged with the transitional government, presenting demands that include the protection of minority rights (Kurds, Christians, Druze, Alawites) as a condition for future normalization and international support.[93]

The AANES and its diverse population are thus engaged in a precarious geopolitical tightrope walk. Their survival and the protection of minority rights are inextricably linked to the shifting dynamics between major regional and international powers, the policies of the new Syrian government, and the persistent threats from hostile state and non-state actors. Any significant change in the balance of power – be it a shift in U.S. policy, renewed Turkish aggression, or the stance of the Damascus government – can have immediate and severe repercussions for these vulnerable communities.

IV. Kurds and Minorities in Turkish Kurdistan

The Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey have a long and often turbulent history of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, deeply shaped by the legacies of the Ottoman Empire and the policies of the modern Turkish Republic.

A. Historical Context: Ottoman Legacy, Armenian Genocide, Turkish Republic,

Assimilation Policies

During the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish emirates and tribal confederations often enjoyed significant autonomy in exchange for loyalty to the Sultan, particularly in the eastern frontier regions.[94] However, this dynamic began to shift in the 19th century with Ottoman centralization efforts. A critical turning point was the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), who established the Hamidiye Light Cavalry regiments, largely composed of Kurdish tribesmen. These units were ostensibly created for border defense but were notoriously used to suppress Armenian aspirations and commit abuses against Armenian and other Christian populations, as well as rival Kurdish tribes.[26]

The Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916, a systematic extermination of the Ottoman Armenian population, was meticulously carried out by the Young Turk government with the participation of some Kurdish tribes, particularly those affiliated with the Hamidiye Cavalry, and even inmates released from prison for this purpose.[25] It is crucial to note, however, that not all Kurds participated; some Kurdish individuals and tribes opposed the genocide and provided shelter or adopted Armenian refugees.[95] Turkish historiography has sometimes been accused of overstating the Kurdish role in an attempt to deflect blame from the Ottoman state.[95] The Genocide resulted in the near-total elimination of the Armenian presence from their historic homeland in Eastern Anatolia and laid the groundwork for a more ethnically homogeneous Turkish nation-state.[98]

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 ushered in an era of intensified Turkification and assimilation policies targeting all non-Turkish identities. The Kurdish language was banned in public life and education, Kurdish geographical names were changed to Turkish ones, and Kurdish populations faced deportations and violent suppression throughout the 1920s and 1930s.[25] Officially, Kurds were often referred to as "Mountain Turks," their distinct ethnic identity denied.[30] Major Kurdish rebellions, such as Koçgiri (1921), Sheikh Said (1925), Ararat (1927-1930), and Dersim (1937-1938), were brutally crushed by the Turkish military, often with devastating consequences for the civilian population, including Alevi Kurds in Dersim.[25]

B. Key Minority Groups:

1. Armenians:

Historically, Armenians lived intermixed with Kurds in Eastern Anatolia. Relations were complex, sometimes characterized by a traditional system of kirvelik (a godparent-like bond creating fictive kinship between Armenian and Kurdish families), but also by the exploitation of Armenian peasants by Kurdish feudal beys.26 The Hamidiye regiments, composed of Kurdish tribesmen, played a significant role in the anti-Armenian massacres of 1894-1896 and the subsequent Genocide of 1915.26 However, instances of protection also occurred, with some Kurdish groups, notably Yazidis and Alevis from the Dersim region, sheltering Armenians at great risk to themselves.96

In contemporary Turkey, the Armenian Genocide remains an officially denied event by the state. However, within Kurdish political and intellectual circles, there has been a growing acknowledgment of the Genocide and the role some Kurds played in it.[95] Descendants of Kurds who participated in the atrocities have expressed regret and remorse, and many

contemporary Kurds reportedly feel "amputated" by the historical "departure" of Armenians from their shared homeland.[96] While the Armenian question remains largely taboo in mainstream Turkish society, this taboo has been significantly challenged within Kurdish civil society and political movements.[99] Some Kurdish politicians, such as the former mayor of Diyarbakır, Osman Baydemir, have initiated projects for the reconstruction of Armenian historical sites and the rehabilitation of Armenian memory in the region.[97] Academic research continues to explore Turkish-Armenian relations and the Kurdish collective memory of the Genocide.[100]

The Armenian Genocide casts an enduring shadow over Kurdish identity and politics in Turkey. For many Kurds, particularly those involved in progressive and rights-based political movements like the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and its predecessors, acknowledging the Genocide and the complicity of some ancestral Kurdish groups has become a crucial step. This acknowledgment serves multiple purposes: it differentiates them from the Turkish state's persistent denialism, it offers a basis for building solidarity with Armenians, and it helps articulate a more inclusive and critical understanding of their own history and society. However, this process of reckoning is complex and sensitive, as it also brings to the fore difficult issues such as the appropriation of Armenian lands and properties by some Kurds following the Genocide [96] and the varied local memories of these events. This internal confrontation with a painful past is vital for any genuine and lasting Armenian-Kurdish rapprochement.

2. Assyrians/Syriacs:

The historical homeland of Assyrians/Syriacs in Turkey is concentrated in the southeastern provinces of Mardin and Hakkari. However, due to centuries of persecution and displacement, an estimated 95% of the Assyrian population from this region has left Turkey.27 Like the Armenians, Assyrians were victims of the 1915 Genocide (known to Assyrians as Sayfo or 'the Sword'), with some Kurdish tribal elements participating in the massacres.27 Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Assyrian villages were assigned Turkish names, and the community was caught in the crossfire of the protracted conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK from 1984 onwards, suffering forced evictions, mass displacement, and the destruction of their villages.27 A 1994 report documented the destruction of 200 Assyrian villages over the preceding three decades and the assassination of 24 Assyrians since 1990.27

A major ongoing grievance for Assyrians in Turkey is their exclusion from the minority rights protections guaranteed under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which the Turkish state has restricted to only Armenians, Jews, and Greeks.[27] This exclusion has meant that Assyrians do not have the legal right to mother-tongue education or to establish their own community schools, rights which are fundamental for the preservation of their distinct language and cultural heritage.[27] Land and property rights also remain significant and contentious issues. Many historical Assyrian properties, including ancient monasteries and churches, were confiscated by the state or illegally occupied. While some properties, like the historic Mor Gabriel Monastery, were eventually returned after lengthy legal battles and international pressure, the overall situation remains precarious.[27]

The Assyrian community often finds itself caught between the demands of Kurdish nationalist

movements and the policies of the Turkish state. Their survival as a distinct community in Turkey is under severe pressure due to their dwindling numbers and these complex political dynamics.[27] Within the Assyrian diaspora, particularly in Western countries, there are strong feelings regarding historical injustices, sometimes manifesting as hostility towards Kurds and Kurdish political entities like the KRG, stemming from perceptions of past betrayals and contemporary issues like alleged land grabs in northern Iraq.[101] However, there are also acknowledgments of historical coexistence and shared experiences of state repression alongside Kurds.[101] The Assyrian experience in Turkey is one of a dwindling indigenous minority facing cultural erasure due to state policies of assimilation and denial of fundamental minority rights. Their plight is often overshadowed by the larger Kurdish question, but their struggle for recognition and survival is a critical component of the broader human rights landscape in the region.

3. Alevis (Kurdish Alevism):

Kurdish Alevism represents a distinct syncretic religious tradition among Alevi Kurds, differing in some practices and theological emphases from Turkish Alevism. Kurdish Alevis often exhibit beliefs more rooted in nature veneration, place a strong emphasis on the figure of Pir Sultan Abdal (as opposed to Haji Bektash Veli, who is more central for Turkish Alevis), and maintain hereditary sacred lineages (ocax) and specific sacred sites (jiare), such as the Munzur River and the Duzgin Bawo mountain in the Dersim (Tunceli) region.28 Some Kurdish Alevi beliefs are also seen as having connections to other regional faiths like Yarsanism and Yazidism.28 The traditional socio-religious structure involves ocax members (spiritual leaders like sayyid, raywer, pîr, murşîd) and their followers (taliw). This structure was significantly disrupted by 20th-century state violence and socio-economic changes but is currently undergoing a revival, with Tunceli (Dersim) serving as a vital socio-cultural and sacred heartland.28

Kurdish Alevis have a long history of facing both religious and ethnic discrimination, oppression, and forced assimilation policies from the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.[28] This persecution fueled significant rebellions, most notably the Koçgiri rebellion in 1921 and the Dersim rebellion in 1937-1938. Both uprisings, which aimed for Kurdish autonomy and resisted centralist state policies, were brutally suppressed by Turkish military forces, resulting in massacres of thousands of Alevi Kurds and the devastation of the Dersim region.[28] The Dersim massacre, in particular, remains a deep collective trauma for Kurdish Alevis. They were also the primary victims of the anti-Alevi Maraş massacre in 1978, perpetrated by right-wing Turkish nationalists.[28] During the Ottoman era, there were also state-sponsored attempts to "Bektashify" (align with the more institutionalized Bektashi order) or even Sunnify Kurdish Alevi communities.[28]

The dual identity of being both Kurdish (often Zaza-speaking in areas like Dersim, alongside Kurmanji-speakers elsewhere) and Alevi has shaped their political alignments. Historically, they voted for a range of parties, but the rise of politicized Sunni Islam in Turkish politics often pushed them towards secular and leftist parties like the Republican People's Party (CHP) and later the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP).[28] Crucially, Kurdish Alevis played a very significant role in the formation and leadership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Figures like Mazlum Doğan and Sakine Cansız were prominent Alevi Kurds in the PKK.[28] The PKK, in

turn, often positioned itself as a defender of Alevi Kurds against state oppression and Turkish nationalist violence. In more recent times, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and its successor parties have become the main political representatives for a large majority of Alevi Kurds.[28]

Kurdish Alevism is thus an identity forged in resistance. Their unique syncretic faith, distinct from both Sunni Islam and mainstream Turkish Alevism, combined with their Kurdish ethnicity, has made them targets of compounded discrimination by a state historically committed to Turkish ethnic and Sunni Islamic homogeneity. This shared experience of persecution has fostered a resilient and often radicalized religio-political consciousness, aligning them closely with Kurdish nationalist and leftist movements. The preservation of their distinct cultural and religious practices, centered around sacred landscapes like Dersim, is a core concern in their ongoing struggle for recognition and rights.

4. Yazidis:

Yazidis have a historical presence in the Kurdish-inhabited regions of Turkey.25 Like other non-Sunni minorities, they were subject to persecution by Ottoman authorities. At times, this persecution involved the participation of Kurdish groups who had been recruited or co-opted by the Ottoman state.25 The provided information offers less detail on the contemporary situation of Yazidis specifically within Turkish Kurdistan compared to their communities in Iraq or Syria. This relative silence might suggest a significantly smaller, more assimilated, or perhaps more overshadowed community in Turkey today. Any remaining Yazidi presence would undoubtedly be shaped by this historical legacy of persecution, influencing their relations with both the Turkish state and local Kurdish populations. Their situation warrants further dedicated research to understand their current status, rights, and inter-communal dynamics within Turkey.

5. Zazas:

The Zazas are a distinct linguistic minority in eastern Turkey, speaking Zazaki, a Northwestern Iranian language that is related to, but distinct from, Kurdish dialects like Kurmanji and Sorani.25 A significant portion of the Zaza-speaking population, particularly in the Dersim (Tunceli) region and surrounding areas, adheres to Alevism.28 While many Zazas, especially Zaza Alevis, are politically and culturally aligned with the broader Kurdish movement and often identify as Kurds, some Zaza intellectuals and activists advocate for a distinct Zaza ethnic identity separate from Kurdishness. The Turkish state's assimilationist policies have historically targeted all non-Turkish languages, including Zazaki. Within the Kurdish socio-political sphere, the relationship between Zazaki speakers and speakers of other Kurdish dialects can be complex, involving debates about linguistic rights, cultural representation, and the nature of Kurdish identity itself. This linguistic and potential ethnic distinction adds another layer of complexity to the minority landscape in Turkish Kurdistan, influencing demands for cultural rights and shaping internal Kurdish political and social dynamics.

C. State Policies and Human Rights: Discrimination, Language Rights, PKK Conflict, Contemporary Issues

The Turkish state has a long and well-documented history of discriminatory and assimilationist policies towards its Kurdish population and other minorities residing in the southeast. For decades, the Kurdish language was banned or severely restricted in public life, education, and

media. Laws even prohibited the use of Kurdish names containing the letters 'q', 'w', and 'x', which are common in Kurdish but not in Turkish.[25] The official state ideology often denied a distinct Kurdish identity, classifying Kurds as "Mountain Turks".[30]

The armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which began in earnest in 1984 and continues intermittently, has had a devastating impact on the civilian population of southeastern Turkey. This conflict has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands, the forced displacement of an estimated one to three million people (predominantly Kurds), the systematic destruction of over 3,000 villages by state forces by the mid-1990s, and widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings.[25] The state also created and armed a "village guard" militia, composed of local Kurds loyal to the state, numbering around 58,000 members. This policy sometimes led to intra-Kurdish feuding and further complicated local dynamics.[30]

Contemporary human rights reports from organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (covering the period 2020-2025) indicate that serious human rights violations persist in Turkey, with a particular impact on Kurdish individuals and communities, as well as other dissenting voices. These reports highlight:

- Ongoing baseless investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of human rights defenders, journalists, opposition politicians (including many Kurdish figures), and lawyers on vaguely defined terrorism-related charges.[102]
- Significant executive interference in the judiciary, with Turkish courts often failing to implement rulings from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) or Turkey's own Constitutional Court.[102]
- The sentencing of numerous Kurdish politicians in the "Kobani trial" in May 2024, related to their calls for protests in 2014 against the ISIS siege of Kobani in Syria.[102]
- The continued practice of dismissing democratically elected mayors from pro-Kurdish parties (such as the HDP and its successors) in Kurdish-majority municipalities and replacing them with state-appointed trustees.[102]
- Blanket bans on protests and public assemblies, such as those imposed in Van and Bitlis following controversial election decisions, and ongoing restrictions on peaceful vigils like those held by the Saturday Mothers/People (who protest enforced disappearances).[102]
- A continued crackdown on Kurdish media outlets, cultural expression, and the detention and prosecution of Kurdish journalists.[102]
- Turkish military operations conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan and northern Syria, ostensibly targeting PKK and YPG affiliates, which have reportedly resulted in civilian casualties and the targeting of Kurdish journalists abroad.[102]

The Turkish state's decades-long conflict with the PKK has led to a profound securitization of Kurdish identity and political expression. Any assertion of Kurdish rights, language, or culture is frequently conflated by state authorities with support for terrorism. This overarching security paradigm not only results in widespread human rights violations against Kurds but also creates an environment of intimidation, suspicion, and repression that inevitably affects other smaller minority groups (such as the remaining Armenians, Assyrians, Yazidis, and

Alevis) who reside in the same predominantly Kurdish regions. Their own distinct grievances and demands for rights can be easily overshadowed, dismissed, or even suppressed within this highly polarized and militarized context. Furthermore, state actions such as the replacement of elected Kurdish mayors with government-appointed trustees directly undermine local democratic processes and affect all inhabitants of these municipalities, regardless of their ethnicity or religion.

V. Kurds and Minorities in Iranian Kurdistan

Iranian Kurdistan, encompassing the northwestern provinces of Iran, is a region of significant ethnic and religious diversity, where Kurds themselves are a substantial minority within the broader Iranian state. Their relations with other minority groups are shaped by this complex demographic landscape and the policies of the Islamic Republic.

A. Historical Context: Diverse Ethnic Landscape, State Policies

Iran is a multi-ethnic nation, with Persians constituting the largest group. Other significant ethnic communities include Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Lurs, and Balochis.[31] Iranian Kurds, estimated to number between 8 and 12 million (around 10% of Iran's total population), are predominantly concentrated in the northwestern provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, and parts of Hamadan and Lorestan.[31] The majority of Iranian Kurds are Sunni Muslims, which positions them as a religious minority in a predominantly Shiite Muslim state.[31]

The history of Iranian Kurds is marked by a persistent struggle for cultural and political rights, and a troubled relationship with successive central governments that have often sought to suppress Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. Various Kurdish armed opposition groups, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), Komala, and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), have engaged in intermittent conflict with Iranian authorities over decades.[31]

B. Key Minority Groups:

1. Azeris:

Azeris form a very large ethnic minority in Iran, with a significant presence in West Azerbaijan province, where their population overlaps and intermingles with Kurdish communities.31 Historically, Kurds and Azeris have competed for influence and resources in these ethnically mixed areas.32

Recent events have highlighted the potential for tension. In March 2025, clashes were reported in the city of Urmia (the capital of West Azerbaijan province) between some Shiite Azeris and Sunni Kurds. The trigger was reportedly Kurdish Nowruz (New Year) celebrations occurring during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan and coinciding with the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Ali, a revered figure in Shiite Islam.[32] During ensuing protests, some Azeri demonstrators reportedly chanted nationalist slogans such as "Urmia is Turkic and will remain Turkic" and displayed symbols associated with Turkish nationalism, like the Grey Wolf salute. Clashes with security forces were also reported.[32]

These incidents are often viewed through multiple lenses. While local grievances and historical competition for regional influence undoubtedly play a role, some analysts and observers accuse the Iranian authorities of deliberately exploiting or even engineering such ethnic tensions as a "divide and rule" strategy to prevent the formation of a unified opposition

among Iran's diverse ethnic groups.[32] By fueling inter-ethnic strife, the state can potentially deflect socio-economic discontent and maintain control. Furthermore, some analysts suggest that external actors, such as Turkey, may benefit from or encourage such tensions due to pan-Turkist ideologies.[32] The election of Masoud Pezeshkian, an Iranian of Azeri-Turkish heritage, as Iran's president in 2024 on a platform that included promoting ethnic minority rights, adds another layer to these complex dynamics.[31] The Urmia events underscore the volatile nature of Azeri-Kurdish relations in northwestern Iran, where local sensitivities can be easily ignited, potentially exacerbated by state policies or external influences.

2. Yarsan (Kaka'i / Ahl-e Haqq):

The Yarsan faith (also known as Kaka'i in Iraq or Ahl-e Haqq) is a syncretic religion founded by Sultan Sahak in the late 14th century.33 In Iran, its followers are predominantly ethnic Kurds, particularly from tribes such as the Guran, Sanjabi, Kalhor, Zangana, and Jalalvand, though some Laks and Lurs also adhere to Yarsanism.33 The community has a distinct religious literature written primarily in the Gorani Kurdish dialect.33

Due to the Islamic Republic's emphasis on Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion, Yarsanis face significant pressure and discrimination. Many are forced to hide their religious identity to avoid persecution and are often disparagingly referred to as "Ali Allahi" (worshippers of Ali), a label they reject.[33] As an unrecognized religious minority, Yarsanis suffer discrimination in law and practice, including restricted access to education, employment, political office, and places of worship. They are vulnerable to arbitrary detention, unjust prosecution, and torture simply for professing or practicing their faith.[34] The execution of Reza Rasaei, a Kurdish Yarsani protester, in August 2024, starkly illustrates the severe risks faced by members of this community, particularly those who engage in political dissent.[106] The Yarsan community in Iran thus endures a dual burden: the general suppression of Kurdish ethnic rights and specific religious persecution due to their non-Shi'a, syncretic beliefs. Their distinct religious practices and Gorani-based sacred texts also mark them as a unique cultural subgroup within the broader Iranian Kurdish population.

3. Lurs, Jews, Armenians:

- **Lurs:** The Lurs are another significant ethnic group in western Iran, inhabiting areas often adjacent to Kurdish regions, particularly in Lorestan province.[31] Some Lur tribes are also adherents of the Yarsan faith.[33] Their relationship with Kurds is often intertwined with tribal affiliations and, for some, shared religious practices, potentially leading to different dynamics compared to Kurdish relations with Azeris.
- **Jews:** Jewish communities have a very ancient history in Persia, including in regions of Kurdistan such as Kashan.[19] Most Iranian Jews, including those from Kurdish areas, emigrated, primarily to Israel, in the mid-20th century, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel and later the Islamic Revolution.[19] Small Jewish communities may still exist in some Iranian cities, including potentially Sanandaj in Kurdistan province.[19] As a recognized but heavily monitored religious minority in Iran, Jews face various forms of discrimination and restrictions from the state.[34]
- **Armenians:** Armenians also form an ancient Christian minority in Iran, with communities historically present in various parts of the country, including West Azerbaijan province

(Urmia, for example, was historically known for its mosques, synagogues, and churches existing side-by-side [32]). Like other non-Muslim minorities, Armenians face discrimination in law and practice under the Islamic Republic.[34]

The experience of these smaller minorities in Iranian Kurdistan is differentiated. For Lurs, their proximity and occasional shared tribal or religious (Yarsani) affiliations with Kurds create a distinct set of interactions. For Jews and Armenians, their primary challenges stem from state-sponsored religious discrimination, although historical coexistence with Kurds in certain locales is noted. Their numbers are relatively small, and their political relationship with Kurdish groups in Iran appears less prominent in available information compared to that of Azeris or Yarsanis. The Iranian state's approach to its minorities is not uniform; it is influenced by factors such as the group's size, its religious affiliation (Sunni Kurds versus Christian Armenians or Jewish Iranians or syncretic Yarsanis), geopolitical considerations (e.g., Azeris in relation to Turkey and Azerbaijan), and the history of political activism (particularly strong among Kurdish movements).

C. Linguistic Diversity: Sorani, Kurmanji, Southern Kurdish, Laki, Gorani Tribes and Distribution

Iranian Kurdistan is characterized by significant linguistic diversity within the broader Kurdish population. The main Kurdish dialects spoken include:

- **Kurmanji:** Spoken by tribes such as Amar, Herki, Jalali, Milan, and Shekak, primarily in the northern parts of Iranian Kurdistan, particularly in West Azerbaijan province.[104]
- **Sorani:** Spoken by influential tribes like the Jaff, Mamash, Mangur, and Mukri, concentrated in Kurdistan province and southern parts of West Azerbaijan province.[104]
- **Southern Kurdish (including Kalhuri, Feyli):** Spoken by numerous tribes such as Ali Sherwan, Arkawazi, Feyli, Kalhor, Malekshahi, Sanjabi, Shuhan, and Zangana, predominantly in Kermanshah and Ilam provinces, and parts of Lorestan.[104] Many Feyli Kurds are Shi'a Muslims, distinguishing them from the largely Sunni Kurmanji and Sorani speakers.

Beyond these major dialects, other related Iranic languages are spoken by groups often considered part of the broader Kurdish cultural sphere:

- **Laki:** Spoken by tribes including the Beiranvand, Chahardoli, Dilfan, Falak al-Din, Ghiasvand, Hasanvand, Jalilavand, Kakavand, Kordshuli, Musavand, Torkashvand, and Zola. Laki speakers are found in Lorestan, Ilam, Kermanshah, and Hamadan provinces.[104] The classification of Laki as a distinct language or a Kurdish dialect is a subject of linguistic debate, but Laks often share cultural and political affinities with Kurds.
- **Gorani (Hawrami):** Spoken by the Guran tribe in the Hawraman region, straddling the Iran-Iraq border. Gorani holds particular significance as the primary language of Yarsani religious literature.[33]

Additionally, some tribes in Iranian Kurdistan, historically identified as Kurdish or living in Kurdish areas, have become Turkophone (e.g., Delikan, Donboli) due to historical interactions and assimilation processes.[104] The Chegini dialect is described as a mixture of Laki and Luri.[104] This linguistic mosaic exists within the broader Kurdish identity and is spread across various provinces of western and northwestern Iran. Such diversity presents internal complexities for

Kurdish cultural and political cohesion and also creates varied interfaces for interaction with non-Kurdish minorities. While these linguistic groups are often broadly categorized as "Kurdish," their distinct dialects and languages can influence cultural expression, media consumption, and potentially political organization. For non-Kurdish minorities like Azeris or Arabs interacting with Kurds in Iran, the specific Kurdish dialect or related language spoken in their area of contact would naturally shape local communication and inter-group relations. State policies on language – primarily the promotion of Persian as the sole official language and the suppression of minority languages – uniformly affect all these Kurdish linguistic groups, potentially fostering a shared sense of grievance. However, internal linguistic differences could also, at times, be exploited by the state to hinder pan-Kurdish solidarity or to promote alternative local identities.

D. State Policies and Human Rights: Discrimination (Amnesty/HRW Reports)

Reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch consistently document widespread human rights violations against ethnic minorities in Iran, including Kurds, Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Balochis, and Turkmen. These violations include systemic discrimination in access to education, employment, adequate housing, and political office.[34] Chronic under-investment in regions populated by ethnic minorities exacerbates poverty and marginalization.[34]

Iranian security forces are reported to unlawfully kill and injure unarmed Kurdish cross-border couriers, known as *kulbars*, with impunity. These *kulbars* engage in perilous, often illicit, transport of goods across the mountainous Iran-Iraq border due to a lack of viable economic opportunities in their home regions. Similar abuses are reported against Balochi fuel porters (*soukhtbar*) in Sistan and Baluchestan province.[34]

Religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, Jews, Sunni Muslims (many of whom are Kurds), and Yarsanis, also suffer pervasive discrimination in law and practice. This includes restrictions on access to education, employment, child adoption, political office, and places of worship. Members of these religious minorities are frequently subjected to arbitrary detention, unjust prosecution, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment solely for professing or practicing their faith.[34] Individuals born to parents classified as Muslim by the authorities risk severe penalties, including the death penalty for "apostasy," if they adopt other religions or identify as atheist.[34]

Scores of activists, including many from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, remain imprisoned on vague national security charges following grossly unfair trials.[106] The death penalty is disproportionately applied to members of ethnic minorities, particularly for drug-related offenses or politically motivated charges.[34] Several Kurdish political prisoners have been executed or sentenced to death in recent years, including the Yarsani Kurd Reza Rasaei (executed August 2024) and Pakhshan Azizi (sentenced to death).[106]

This situation highlights an intersectionality of ethnic and religious discrimination in Iran. Ethnic minorities like the Kurds, who are also often religious minorities (e.g., Sunni Kurds in a predominantly Shi'a state, or Yarsani Kurds with their distinct syncretic faith), face compounded layers of discrimination and persecution.[31] The Iranian state's policies appear to target both their ethnic identity (through suppression of language, culture, and political

aspirations) and their religious practices if they deviate from the officially sanctioned Twelver Shi'ism. This makes them particularly vulnerable to a wide range of human rights abuses, from economic marginalization and political repression to severe judicial punishments, including execution, especially if they engage in political activism or are perceived as challenging state authority. The *kulbar* phenomenon is a stark illustration of this combined socio-economic and security marginalization, where dire economic conditions force individuals into dangerous livelihoods, only to face lethal force from state border guards.

VI. Cross-Cutting Themes and Comparative Analysis

Across the diverse regions of Kurdistan, several cross-cutting themes emerge concerning the relationships between Kurds and minority groups. These themes reveal patterns of interaction shaped by historical legacies, contemporary political structures, and the influence of external actors.

A. Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation: Historical and Contemporary Examples

The history of Kurdistan is characterized by both profound conflict and notable instances of cooperation involving Kurds and various minority groups.

- **Conflict:**
  - **Kurdish-State Conflicts:** A dominant feature across all four regions is the long history of Kurdish uprisings against central state authorities and subsequent state suppression. In Turkey, the conflict with the PKK has been ongoing for decades.[25] In Iraq, Kurds faced the Ba'athist regime's brutality, culminating in the Anfal genocide.[3] Iranian Kurds have seen armed struggles by groups like PDKI, Komala, and PJAK met with state repression.[31] In Syria, decades of Ba'athist assimilation policies preceded the current civil war and the rise of AANES.[60] These large-scale conflicts have invariably engulfed local minority populations, leading to displacement, loss, and often forcing them to navigate complex allegiances.
  - **Inter-Minority Conflicts (often involving Kurds):** History is also marked by conflicts where Kurds were involved, sometimes as perpetrators and sometimes as victims alongside other minorities. The Armenian Genocide saw participation from some Kurdish tribes, often co-opted by the Ottoman state.[25] Assyrian-Kurdish relations have been marred by historical violence, such as the massacres by Bedir Khan Beg [10], and continue to be strained by land disputes and political tensions in both the KRI and AANES.[7] Yazidis have historically suffered persecution from some Muslim Kurdish tribes.[10] Turkmen-Kurdish tensions, especially over Kirkuk in Iraq, have deep roots.[11] More recently, localized clashes between Azeris and Kurds have occurred in Urmia, Iran.[32] In post-ISIS Nineveh, allegations have surfaced against some Shabak militias regarding actions affecting Christian communities.[6]
- **Cooperation and Coexistence:**
  - **Kurdish Protection of Minorities:** Despite instances of conflict, there are documented cases of Kurdish groups or individuals providing sanctuary and

protection to minorities. During the Armenian Genocide, some Kurds, notably Yazidis and Alevis from Dersim, sheltered Armenian refugees.[95] The AANES provided a crucial escape route and refuge for Yazidis fleeing the ISIS genocide in Sinjar.[41] The historical institution of *kirvelik* (a form of ritual co-parenthood or sponsorship) forged strong bonds between some Armenian and Kurdish families.[96]

- **Joint Political and Military Efforts:** Minorities have, at various times, allied with Kurdish movements. The Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) joined the Kurdish armed struggle against the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 1982.[7] In Syria, Assyrians, Arabs, and other groups fight alongside Kurds within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[21] Kaka'i armed units have integrated with KRG Peshmerga forces.[14] There is a rich history of Assyrian individuals participating in Kurdish revolutions in Iraq, serving as fighters, commanders, doctors, and engineers (e.g., the Hariri family, George Shello).[110] In a different vein, the PKK and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) held a joint press conference in 1980, signaling a degree of cooperation.[26]
- **Shared Suffering and Advocacy:** Common experiences of state oppression have sometimes fostered solidarity. In Turkey, for example, some Kurdish political and civil society groups have increasingly acknowledged the Armenian Genocide and sought dialogue with Armenians, recognizing shared victimhood under Turkish state policies.[26] Kurdish Alevis and Sunni Kurds, despite religious differences, have often found common cause in broader Kurdish political struggles.

These examples illustrate the fluidity of alliances and enmities in the region. Kurd-minority relations are not static; they are dynamic and shift based on evolving political contexts, the nature of leadership on all sides, and the pressures exerted by external state and non-state actors. Groups that were historically in conflict have found common cause against a shared oppressor, as seen with some Assyrians joining Kurdish resistance movements against Ba'athism or diverse ethnic and religious groups coalescing within the SDF to fight ISIS. Conversely, communities that may have coexisted can be driven into conflict by state manipulation (such as the Ottoman use of Hamidiye cavalry against Armenians) or by competition over scarce resources and political influence, as evidenced by recent Azeri-Kurdish tensions in Iran. This fluidity underscores that historical precedents of conflict do not rigidly determine present-day relations, nor do past periods of cooperation guarantee indefinite harmony. The agency of political leaders, civil society actors, and community elders in shaping narratives, building trust, or exacerbating divisions is of paramount importance in this volatile environment.

B. The Role of Kurdish Self-Governance (KRG/AANES) in Minority Protection and Rights: Successes and Shortcomings

The establishment of de facto Kurdish self-governing entities in Iraq (KRG) and Syria (AANES) has created new frameworks for minority rights and protection, with both notable successes and significant shortcomings.

- **Successes (Formal/Stated):**

    - **KRG:** The KRG Constitution includes provisions for minority rights. The parliament historically had quota seats for Christians, Turkmen, and Armenians (though recently reduced by a federal court ruling).[3] The KRG's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs has officially recognized the Kaka'i religion.[14] The KRI provided crucial refuge for hundreds of thousands of IDPs, including many Christians and Yazidis fleeing ISIS.[4] The KRG has a human rights action plan and publicly espouses values of tolerance and coexistence.[15]
    - **AANES:** The Social Contract of AANES is explicitly pluralistic, enshrining rights for all constituent ethnic and religious groups (Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Armenians, Turkmen, Chechens, Yazidis).[22] It promotes a co-governance model aiming for gender and ethnic diversity in leadership, recognizes Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac as official languages, and maintains a secular approach to governance.[20] AANES forces played a key role in protecting Yazidis from ISIS and providing refuge.[41]
- **Shortcomings (Reported/Alleged):**
    - **KRG:** Despite formal provisions, numerous allegations persist regarding "Kurdification" policies, including encroachment on Assyrian, Yazidi, and Turkmen ancestral lands; political marginalization of minorities where quota MPs are seen as controlled by the KDP or PUK; discrimination in service provision; and pressure on groups like Shabak and some Assyrians to identify as Kurds or align with dominant Kurdish parties.[3] The perceived failure to protect Yazidis in Sinjar in 2014 remains a deep wound.[10]
    - **AANES:** Similarly, AANES faces accusations of "Kurdification," particularly in the education sector with the imposition of its curriculum on Assyrian schools and the closure of those resisting.[39] There are reports of suppression of dissenting Assyrian voices and organizations, land appropriations, forced conscription into the SDF, security abuses by YPG/SDF elements, and the marginalization of some Arab communities who feel underrepresented or unfairly treated.[20]

Both the KRG and AANES are, to varying extents, engaged in Kurdish nation-building projects within the territories they control, often in the face of hostility from central states and neighboring powers. This inherently creates a "nation-building dilemma": a tension between promoting a Kurdish national identity and political agenda, and ensuring genuine equality, autonomy, and cultural preservation for the non-Kurdish minorities who share these lands. While their foundational documents and public discourse frequently emphasize inclusivity and minority rights – partly for internal cohesion and partly to gain international legitimacy and support – the practical application of these principles can be compromised when perceived Kurdish political, security, or demographic interests take precedence. This leads to the observed shortcomings and criticisms. The core challenge for these Kurdish self-governing entities is to reconcile the legitimate aspirations of Kurds for self-determination and security with the equally legitimate rights of coexisting minority communities to preserve their own distinct identities, maintain control over their ancestral lands and resources, and have a meaningful and autonomous stake in governance structures.

C. Impact of External Actors (State and Non-State) on Inter-Communal Relations

The relationships between Kurds and minorities in Kurdistan are profoundly influenced by the policies and actions of external state and non-state actors. These external forces often exacerbate existing tensions, exploit divisions, or create new dynamics that impact all communities.

- **Central States (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria):** The historical and ongoing policies of the central governments in the countries where Kurdistan is located have been primary drivers of conflict, displacement, and inter-communal strife. Assimilationist policies (Arabization, Turkification), the violent suppression of Kurdish rights and political movements, and deliberate "divide and rule" tactics have created an environment of instability and mistrust that affects all groups.[3]
- **Turkey:** Turkey's military interventions in northern Syria (Afrin, Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ain) have had a devastating impact, displacing hundreds of thousands of Kurds and members of minority communities (Yazidis, Christians). These operations have often empowered Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, which have been accused of serious human rights abuses against local populations, including minorities.[87] Turkey also provides political and material support to the Iraqi Turkmen Front, influencing Turkmen-Kurdish relations, particularly concerning Kirkuk.[11]
- **Iran:** Iran wields considerable influence in Iraq, partly through its support for certain Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) factions. Some of these militias, including those with Shabak components, have been accused of abuses against other minority groups (such as Christians) in the Nineveh Plains, contributing to demographic shifts and inter-communal tensions.[6] Iran has also been accused by some analysts of exploiting or exacerbating Azeri-Kurdish tensions within its own borders to maintain control.[32]
- **ISIS:** The genocidal campaigns waged by ISIS against Yazidis, and its brutal targeting of Christians, Shabak, Kaka'i, and other communities who did not conform to its extremist ideology, caused catastrophic loss of life, mass displacement, and deep collective trauma. ISIS systematically sought to destroy the region's religious and ethnic pluralism, and its actions have fundamentally reshaped inter-communal dynamics and trust in areas it once controlled.[3]
- **International Coalition / United States:** The U.S.-led coalition's support for the SDF in the fight against ISIS was instrumental in the territorial defeat of the caliphate and empowered the AANES in northeastern Syria. However, this backing also created geopolitical tensions, particularly with Turkey, and contributed to some local Arab grievances regarding SDF governance.[21] The continued, albeit limited, U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria is viewed by some local minority communities as a crucial factor for maintaining stability and deterring aggression.[24]

The minority groups of Kurdistan are frequently caught in the crosscurrents of these larger geopolitical games, their rights and security often becoming secondary to the strategic interests of more powerful state and non-state actors. Their allegiances can be courted, their grievances exploited, and their communities displaced or targeted as proxies or collateral damage in wider conflicts. This makes their situation exceptionally vulnerable and dependent on regional and international power balances.

VII. Conclusion

The relationship between Kurds and the diverse minority groups inhabiting the vast, trans-national region of Kurdistan is characterized by profound complexity, historical depth, and significant contemporary challenges. There is no single, monolithic "Kurdish-minority" dynamic; rather, interactions vary considerably across the distinct political and social contexts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and differ based on the specific minority group in question. Historically, these relationships have encompassed a wide spectrum of experiences, from periods of relatively peaceful coexistence, economic interdependence, and even mutual protection (as seen in instances of Kurds sheltering Armenians during the Genocide, or Assyrians participating in Kurdish uprisings) to eras of intense conflict, exploitation, and persecution (such as the involvement of some Kurdish tribes in the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides, or historical persecution of Yazidis by certain Kurdish groups). The legacy of Ottoman policies, the impact of colonial border-drawing, and the subsequent nation-state building projects of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have all played crucial roles in shaping these interactions, often by suppressing Kurdish national aspirations and simultaneously marginalizing other non-dominant ethnic and religious groups, or by employing "divide and rule" tactics.

In the contemporary period, the emergence of Kurdish self-governing entities – the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) – has introduced new dimensions to Kurd-minority relations. Both entities have, in their foundational charters and public pronouncements, emphasized principles of inclusivity, pluralism, and the protection of minority rights. They have established formal mechanisms for minority political representation, language rights (to varying degrees), and religious freedom, often presenting themselves as safe havens compared to the more oppressive or chaotic conditions elsewhere in their respective countries. These frameworks have, in some instances, provided tangible benefits and a degree of security for vulnerable communities, particularly those fleeing persecution from groups like ISIS or repressive state regimes.

However, these Kurdish-led administrations also face significant criticisms and challenges regarding their treatment of minorities. Accusations of "Kurdification" in terms of demographic policy, land ownership, education, and political life are recurrent in both the KRI and AANES. Minority groups often report that their political representation is controlled or heavily influenced by dominant Kurdish parties, that their distinct cultural and linguistic needs are not adequately addressed or are subordinated to Kurdish national priorities, and that they face discrimination or pressure to align with Kurdish political agendas. The security and autonomy of minorities are often caught between the aspirations of Kurdish self-determination and the interests of the central states, as well as the interventions of regional powers like Turkey and Iran.

The unresolved status of disputed territories, particularly in Iraq (e.g., Kirkuk, Nineveh Plains), remains a critical flashpoint, where Turkmen, Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, and Kaka'is navigate a precarious existence between the competing claims and influences of Erbil and Baghdad,

and various armed actors. In Syria, the AANES's project of democratic confederalism is severely tested by ongoing military threats from Turkey and its proxies, the persistent ISIS insurgency, internal tensions with segments of the Arab and Assyrian populations, and the complex negotiations with the Syrian transitional government.

Across all regions, minorities express deep concerns about their long-term survival as distinct communities, the preservation of their cultural and religious heritage, security of their ancestral lands, and their ability to achieve genuine self-representation and political agency. The "minority within a minority" dynamic often places these groups in a particularly vulnerable position, their fates tied to the outcomes of larger Kurdish struggles for rights and autonomy, as well as the broader geopolitical currents of the Middle East.

Ultimately, fostering stable, equitable, and respectful relations between Kurds and the myriad minority groups sharing the lands of Kurdistan requires more than formal declarations of rights. It necessitates genuine power-sharing, robust legal protections that are consistently enforced, equitable resource distribution, sincere efforts at reconciliation for past injustices, and the creation of political and social spaces where all communities can preserve their identities, express their grievances, and participate meaningfully in shaping their collective future, free from coercion or marginalization by any dominant group, be it Kurdish or state-led. The path forward is fraught with challenges, but a commitment to these principles is essential for the peace and stability of this historically diverse and contested region.

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