The Kurds are a Middle Eastern, non-Arab minority who live mainly in a large mountain and plateau region in southwest [Asia](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), including areas of eastern [Turkey](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), northeastern [Iraq](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), northwestern [Iran](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), and parts of [Armenia](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) and northeastern [Syria](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False). This region is generally known as Kurdistan, although only Iran officially recognizes that name. The Kurds number about 20 million people worldwide, which makes them the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of its own.

The vast majority of Kurds are devout Sunni [Muslims](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) and speak Kurdish dialects that have evolved from the northwestern branch of the Iranian languages. Traditionally nomadic herders, the people have been forced to adopt a seminomadic or sedentary lifestyle. The Kurds have historically had to resist incessant attempts to subjugate them to the authority of a particular country. Despite their lack of political cohesion, they have made a significant impact on the history of southwest Asia.

**Kurdish History to 1974**

Little is known about the early history of the Kurds, although it is believed the Kurdish people have inhabited Kurdistan for thousands of years. That region was conquered numerous times by various empires, including the [Safavid Empire](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) in the sixteenth century. The [Ottoman Empire](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) wrested control of Kurdistan from the Safavids in the early 18th century and maintained control of the area until the end of [World War I](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), when the Ottoman Empire was dismantled.

Inspired by one of U.S. President [Woodrow Wilson's](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) [Fourteen Points](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), which called for [self-determination](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) for all non-Turkish nationalities from the disbanded Ottoman Empire, Kurdish nationalists pushed hard for independence from both Iraqi and Turkish influence following the war. After the [League of Nations](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) granted a British [mandate](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) over Iraq, [Great Britain](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) and Turkey signed the Treaty of Sèvres, which would have made the city of Mosul in northwestern Iraq the capital of an independent Kurdistan. However, when [Mustafa Kemal Ataturk](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) rose to power in Turkey in the early 1920s, he extended Turkish control over the Kurdish areas of eastern Turkey. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which ended the [Turko-Greek War](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) of 1921-1922, superseded the Treaty of Sevres and made no mention of an independent Kurdistan. The Kurdish people responded with a series of revolts against Turkish rule. The Turks crushed the revolts by using a combination of heavy bombardment and poison gas. The Kurds in neighboring Iran also revolted in the 1920s without success.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, the British met several Kurdish uprisings with force, and the [British Royal Air Force](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) bombed rebellious Kurdish tribes. Britain eventually melded Iraq's Kurdish areas into an independent Iraq, setting the stage for several decades of hostility, oppression, and warfare. During the 1930s, numerous separatist groups arose among the Kurds in Iraq, and several [rebellions](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) against Iraqi rule erupted and were violently suppressed. As [World War II](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) raged in the early 1940s, the Kurds rebelled against British occupation troops but made little headway in obtaining independence.

Following the end of World War II, the Soviet-backed Republic of Mahabad was established in Iran in January 1946, but the Iranian Army quickly brought an end to the [republic](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) in the spring of 1947. In 1958, Kurdish nationalists in Iraq grew hopeful when the [Baath Party](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) overthrew King [Faisal II](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), but the new government proved no more sympathetic to calls for Kurdish independence. During the 1960s, Kurdish forces led by [Mustafa al-Barzani](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) clashed repeatedly with Iraqi troops. Near the end of the decade, the violence erupted into full-scale war, prompting the Iraqi government in 1970 to agree to establish the [Kurdish Autonomous Region](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), where the Kurds would be allowed local self-rule. However, the Kurds rejected the agreement, as the Iraqi government would still have authority over the region.

**The Kurds from 1974 to 1999**

In 1974, Iraqi leader [Saddam Hussein](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) tried to enforce the Kurdish Autonomous Region, and the [Kurdish Revolt](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) broke out. Backed by support from Iran, al-Barzani's troops fought hard against Iraq's army, but they were overrun after Iran withdrew from the conflict in 1975. The following year, Hussein initiated a policy of "Arabization" in which thousands of Kurds were forcibly relocated to other areas of the country. The Iraqi government destroyed more than 2,000 villages and placed more than 500,000 people in protective camps, and Hussein banned the Kurdish language. In the 1980s, during the [Iran-Iraq War](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False), Hussein killed thousands of Kurds in chemical weapons attacks.

Following the [Persian Gulf War](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) in the early 1990s, U.S. president [George H. W. Bush](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) called on all anti-Hussein Iraqis to revolt. Many Kurds answered his call, but the [United States](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) offered little support, and thousands of Kurds died as Hussein brutally suppressed the uprising. The U.S.-led [coalition](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) then launched Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, which supplied food and shelter for Kurds in northern Iraq and established a no-fly zone over the area to keep Hussein from attacking the region.

Kurdish nationalists in Turkey also strove for independence after World War II, but the Turkish government managed to suppress Kurdish resistance and culture. In 1984, however, the newly established Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) began mounting terrorist attacks against Turkish targets, which led to an eruption of violence in the mid-1980s. Turkey angrily retaliated in 1992 by launching a major offensive against the PKK. Thousands of Kurds died, and about 2 million Kurdish people became [refugees](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False). The remaining PKK forces retreated into northern Iraq until 1995, when Turkish troops attacked their camps there. In 1999, PKK leader [Abdullah Ocalan](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) was captured, which brought the 15-year conflict to an end.

**The Kurds since 1999**

The strict enforcement of the no-fly zone in Iraq by the United States and Britain enabled the Kurds to develop a degree of stability in the Kurdish Autonomous Region in the 21st century. However, infighting has led to repeated clashes among the various Kurdish political parties, and the terrorist group Ansar al Islam has embarked on a campaign of violence against the Kurds that included the February 2003 assassination of popular Kurdish political leader Shawkat Haji Mushir.

More recently, the Kurds in Syria were able to take advantage of the Syrian Civil War, forming a de facto autonomous area in Syrian Kurdistan beginning in 2012. However, with the rise of Islamic State (IS) in both Iraq and Syria in 2013, the Kurds once again found themselves under siege. IS has engaged in wholesale [atrocities](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False)against Kurdish populations in both countries. Nevertheless, Kurdish military forces, including the Peshmerga, began to play a central role in the anti-IS campaign that commenced in 2014. Indeed, the United States and other nations now waging war against IS have allied themselves with various Kurdish [militias](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) in order to degrade and defeat the IS insurgency.

These developments, however, further imperiled Kurds in Turkey and in neighboring Syria. Indeed, the Turkish government has taken a dim view toward the formation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, fearing that such an eventuality might compel Turkish Kurds to seek an autonomous area within Turkey. Thus, by 2016, tensions between the Turkish government and Kurds had spiked considerably, particularly after several terrorist bombings sponsored by Kurdish rebel groups had killed a number of civilians in Turkey. Turkey has bombed Kurdish targets in both Iraq and Syria in retaliation. Because the United States and other [NATO](https://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/515851?terms=Kurd&webSiteCode=SLN_HMOD&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f515851%3fterms%3dKurd&sType=quick&token=602ED904970DCD8B5B76FC5E21264AE0&casError=False) nations have allied with the Kurds in the fight against IS, Turkey's punitive campaign against the Kurds has caused friction within the NATO alliance.

In September 2017, Iraqi Kurds governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) voted in overwhelming numbers for independence. The referendum had been pushed by KRG president Massoud Barzani. When the governments of Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, and the United States rejected the vote, fighting broke out between KRG militias and Iraqi forces in northern Iraq. The referendum crisis seemed to have caught Barzani off guard, and he resigned his post on November 1, 2017. It is not likely that Iraqi Kurds will realize a fully independent homeland in the near term.