

SEPARATIST ISSUES: CASE STUDY – THE KURDS

Introduction

In February 1999, 33-year-old Akwar Serhan Aziz set himself on fire.

'You don't see a man burning in front of you every day. Maybe that was the reason I shot every movement of the human flame which unexpectedly appeared in front of my eyes.

Aziz sacrificed himself – a man without a native land – a man with ideals.'

Yannis Kontos, a photographer living in Athens submitted these lines and a series of photographs to a

Key Word Box

Separatist pressures

Separatist pressure is the effort made by a group of people within one or more countries to gain greater autonomy, and ideally independence, from a central government from which they feel alienated. Such people often have a different language, culture, or religion from the rest of the nation, and are geographically isolated within that area.

Examples include the Basques (in France and Spain), the Catalans (in Spain), the Quebecois (Canada), the Chechens (Russia), and the Kurds (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Armenia).

Autonomy

This is the right of self-government and self determination. For centuries the Kurds had a physical and cultural homeland and a society involving strong tribal organisation.

Today, without a national state and government, tribes serve as the highest native source of authority in which the Kurdish people place their allegiance. They are seeking autonomy from their respective national governments.

Nation

The political unit to which people show their allegiance. They see the nation as a large number of people of mainly common descent, language, history and usually territory bounded by defined limits in which there is a society with one government. The nation is the primary focus of political allegiance – not the individual and not the world.

Sovereignty

This refers to the supreme power held by the government of a nation

website which provides an opportunity to build a collective memory for people who have no national archive. The images and recollections serve as testimony to the long and suppressed history of the Kurds.

Aziz poured petrol over himself and set himself alight when police tried to clear members of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in Athens who had gathered to demonstrate about the capture of their leader at the Greek Embassy in Kenya and his extradition to Turkey for trial. They were demanding that Greece offer political asylum to Abdullah Ocalan, a man who had led an armed struggle against the Turkish military in an attempt to gain 'national unity and self-determination and freedom from alien slavery':

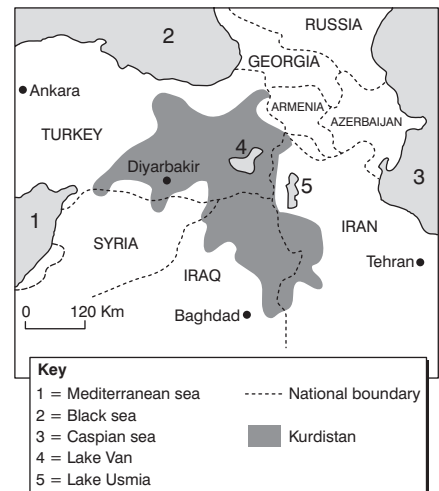
<http://www.akakurdistan.com/kurds/stories/index.html>.

Aim

This Geofile unit will define separatism, say who the Kurds are and will locate Kurdistan. It will examine a range of reasons for Kurdish separatism, consider the evidence for separatist feelings, look at the consequences of separatist pressures, and regard the attitudes of the different groups of people involved.

The map on the Kurdish stories website, already quoted, was presented at a San Francisco Conference in 1945. The borders shown remain in dispute amongst

Figure 1: Kurdistan



the peoples of the region. The website 'uses the map as a reference to the region in that Kurdistan is not shown on any contemporary map'.

The Kurds

The Kurds are the largest ethnic group without a country of their own. They live across the borders of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey and parts of the former Soviet Union – Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

The Kurdish Human Rights Project estimates their number at about 40 million, including the diaspora (those who have moved to other parts of the world). They are unlike the Arabs, Turks, or Persians, who form the majority populations in the countries in which they live. They have a separate language, culture, and history, but currently live,

Figure 2: Kurdish population as stated by Guardian Online, drawn from 1999 data

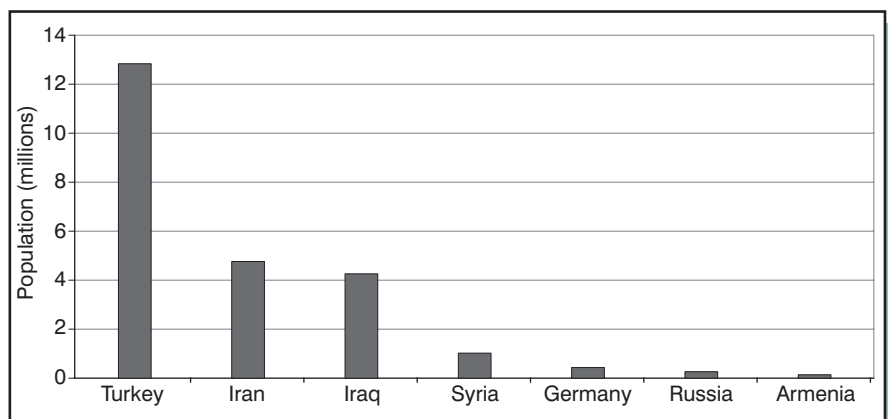
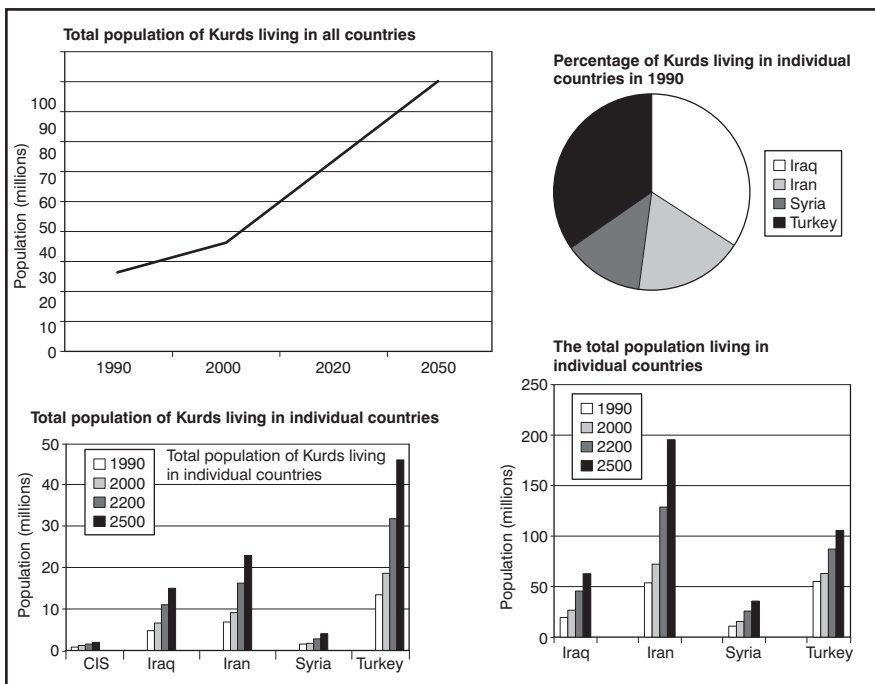


Figure 3: Population trends among Kurdish populations



Source: <http://www.xs4all.nl/~tank/kurdish/htdocs/facts/demographic.html>

Figure 4: Information to help locate Kurdistan

Information to help locate Kurdistan : Highest Points			
Area	Mountain	Country	Height
Southern Kurdistan	Mt Alvand	Iran	3,580 metres
Central Kurdistan	Mt Halgurd	Iraq	3,733 metres
Western Kurdistan	Mt Munzur	Turkey	3,840 metres
Northern Kurdistan	Mt Ararat	Turkey	5,165 metres
Information to help locate Kurdistan: Area			
Area	Equivalent areas		
595,700 km ²	Germany and Britain	France	Texas
Climate Information			
Rainfall	1524–2032 mm per year in the Central Regions 508–1016 mm per year on lower land Most precipitation is in the form snow, which can fall for six months of the year		
Temperature	The mean average temperature is 13–18°C, decreasing with height		

sometimes without recognition, in these countries.

Their culture and identity have been oppressed by the regimes of the nations within which they live. Religion, language, culture and perhaps, most importantly, a common history of persecution, tie together the more than 20 million Kurds worldwide.

Kurdistan

Kurdistan is basically made up of the mountainous areas of the central and northern Zagros, the eastern third of the Taurus and the Pontus, and the northern half of the Amanus

ranges. The relationship between the Kurds and their mountains is very strong – the Kurds’ home ends where the mountains end.

There are also two Kurdish enclaves in central and north central Anatolia in Turkey and in the province of Khurasan in north-east Iran.

Language and Religion

The Kurdish language is part of the north-western subdivision of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages, which is like Persian, and by extension, related to the European languages. Modern Kurdish divides into Kurmanji and

Dimili-Gurani, supplemented by scores of sub-dialects. A modified version of the Perso- Arabic alphabet is used in Iraq and Iran. Elsewhere, the written language is based on the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets.

Nearly three-fifths of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims; there are Shiite and Sufi Muslims too. There are several indigenous Kurdish faiths of great age. Communities of Jews, Christians and Baha’is are found in various corners of Kurdistan.

Brief History

Kurdish history can be even more subjective than most history – there are Kurds, nationalist governments and global powers like Britain, France and the United States of America telling the story. Here is some information to provide a historical background.

There has never been a recognised Kurdistan nation like there is a Turkish or Iraqi state. There were only small kingdoms and tribes that were alternately united or at war over hundreds of years. The Middle East has always seen movements of people. In the 12th and 13th centuries Turkish nomads dominated the area, and most independent Kurdish states succumbed. Kurdish principalities survived and were autonomous until the 17th century. In the course of the 16th to 18th centuries, vast portions of Kurdistan were systematically devastated by the Safavids and Ottomans. Large numbers of Kurds were deported to far corners of their empires. The scale of this death and destruction was the basis for a unification of feeling against foreign vandals. There was a call for a united Kurdish state; and the fostering of culture and language. These feelings were expressed in the literature of the time. By 1867 the last autonomous principalities had been eradicated by the Ottoman and Persian governments that ruled Kurdistan. The Kurdish provinces were under the control of governors.

The break-up of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War made matters worse. The Treaty of Sevres in 1921 imagined an independent Kurdish state covering large portions of Ottoman Kurdistan – guaranteeing self-determination to the Kurds. However, Britain and France had

Figure 5: Examples of states protecting their boundaries and threatening Kurdish unity

Country	Recent History
Soviet Azerbaijan	A Kurdish Autonomous Province was established here in the 1920s but was disbanded in 1929. In 1992–94 the fledgling Armenian Republic forcibly displaced the entire Kurdish community.
Iran	A Kurdish republic was established in the Soviet-occupied zone in 1945. It lasted one year, until it was reoccupied by the Iranian Army
Iraq	From the 1970s the Iraqi Kurds enjoyed an official autonomous status in a portion of that nation's Kurdistan. However, on March 16, 1988 Saddam Hussein carried out a poison gas attack on Halapja, Kurdistan; an estimated 5,000 Kurds were killed. The 'Kurdistan Regional Government' – or 'Iraqi Kurdistan' – split from Ba'athist Iraq in an uprising in 1991 and enjoyed the protection of the Allied 'no-fly zone' The Kurds were granted a 'safe haven' after the first Gulf War. From 1995 there was fighting between different Kurdish factions.
Turkey	Since 1987 Kurds in Turkey have waged a war of national liberation against Ankara's 70 years of suppression of Kurdish identity. A burgeoning and youthful population is demanding either equality with the Turkish component of the country, or full independence.

colonial ambitions for the area, which was strategically important, being the gateway between Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. In addition, the area contained important resources, especially oil and natural gas. There were British statements along the lines of 'You can't trust these tribal people to look after themselves'. So, unimpressed by the Kurds' many bloody uprisings for independence, France and Britain divided up Ottoman Kurdistan between Turkey, Syria and Iraq in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). The Kurds of Persia (later Iran) were kept where they were by Teheran. This division of Kurdistan and the defence of these boundaries by the newly created states kept Kurdish society fragmented (see Figure 5).

Independent in their language, culture and traditions, the Kurds were expected to conform to the ways of the majority. They were expected use the official language of the new states (Turkish, Arabic or Farsi) and to identify with their nationality.

Oppression by nationalist governments is not the only obstacle to Kurdish independence; they themselves are split in their political objectives. Some political aims are based on ancient tribal structures, some are Islamic, and some are left-wing.

Some Kurds do not necessarily want a separate nation. Mainstream Kurds are no longer pressing for

independence, even the relatively extreme political group in Turkey, the PKK, has clear and official statements that no longer claim independence. Most Kurdish groups want equal rights and autonomy, but not necessarily sovereignty.

From the end of the First World War through the two Gulf Wars and up to the present day, global powers like the USA, France and Britain have played a dominant role in the history of the area. The Kurds are the only ethnic group in the world with indigenous representatives in three geopolitical blocs:

- 1 The Arab World (in Iraq and Syria)
- 2 NATO (in Turkey)
- 3 The South Asian-Central Asian group (in Iran)
- 4 And until recently the Soviet bloc (in Armenia and Azerbaijan)

This interest reflects the areas strategic position and its resources.

Helena Smith, a journalist based in Athens, reported in the *Guardian* on June 2, 2004 that Turkish forces had rounded up suspected Kurdish rebels

'allegedly intent on attacking Istanbul, days after militants vowed to fight on for autonomy in the south-east and warned tourists to stay away. The crackdown came on what Kurdish guerrillas called the end of a five-year truce. Police detained two alleged rebels and four alleged sympathisers in one of Istanbul's impoverished suburbs, the Anatolia news agency reported yesterday. The men allegedly were found with large amounts of explosives.

The agency said the pair, who moved to Istanbul after training in Iraq and Iran 18 months ago, were awaiting orders for the attack.

Meanwhile, militants in Kongragel, successor to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) said at the weekend, they were ending their ceasefire. "Tourists should not choose Turkey", the group said on a website. "We appeal to people wanting to invest in Turkey not to come and invest in a conflict zone."

Figure 6: Protests in London, May 2002, against Turkey joining the European Union.



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Figure 7: Extract from a newspaper published in June 2004 by the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan

Vast waves of protests in Kamyaran

The cruelty of the Iranian Islamic regime is no longer a mystery for the Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan. To suppress the Kurds, the vicious regime of Iran has constantly resorted to different terrible methods such as persecution imprisonment and killing. What happened in Kamyaran, situated between Kermanshah and Sanandaj Provinces, in recent days is just the continuation of those inhumane methods and suppressive policies of regime in the region.

Rashid Haidari

Iraqi Postscript

Although many Kurds support the Americans over the removal of the Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussein, they are suspicious that political convenience and the US presidential elections will result in hasty decisions on Iraq’s future which could mean the country is handed over to Shia clerics who claim to represent the majority of Shia Arabs in the south. The unity of Iraq could be at stake if the country’s permanent constitution fails to preserve Kurdish demands for a federal state.

With the recent regime change the Kurds are emerging from their isolation and starting to reintegrate themselves into Iraq. But will communication with the Shia Arabs in the south be in Arabic or in English?

Acknowledgements

Rebecca Ullman

The Kurdish Human Rights Project

<http://www.pdk-iran.org/>
The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan

<http://www.kurdishmedia.com/>
The Kurdish Media

<http://www.kurdistanobserver.com/>
The Kurdistan Observer

Kurdistanica
The First Encyclopaedia of Kurdistan

Figure 8: Extract from a poem (to read the poem in its entirety, go to <http://www.kurdistanobserver.com/>)

‘I want a state called Kurdistan’
[To the UN]
Poem by Dr Kamal Mirawdeli

I want a state called Kurdistan
My homeland since the first day of the creation
I want my own nation
I want Kurdish nan
From every great tradition of Kurdistan
To be sold in all supermarkets in the world
So that I can say
Actually the barley and the wheat
That produce bread
That makes the world fed
Were first cultivated
In the land of Karda
Where cows and sheep
Were also nurtured
And agrarian revolution
I want Kurdish music of Zirak and Zozan
To be promoted by my state
Played on every radio
Heard by every audio
Want my Kurdistan flag to shake
With every diplomatic handshake
I want my Kurdish embassies in the world
With sections for culture, tourism and commerce
Bringing together Kurdish talents, skills and knowledge
And promoting Kurdish culture and language

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Find all the place names mentioned in this article, in your atlas.
2. Study the graphs in Figure 3. Draw graphs to show the percentage of Kurds living in the individual countries in 2000; and the estimated percentages for 2020 and 2050. Comment on your findings. What assumptions have been made in estimating the population? Why have different organisations estimated different totals?
3. What is the evidence for separatist feeling?
4. What are the geographical, historical, economic, social and cultural reasons for Kurdish separatism?
5. What are the consequences of Kurdish separatist pressures?
6. What are the attitudes of the different groups of people involved?