

## [What Kurds Want](#)

Kurds dream of an independent nation called Kurdistan as claimed by the *Khoybun* delegation to the United Nations in 1945, ([See map](#)). Given that Greater Kurdistan is currently divided between four nation states, and that there is a lack of international support for an independent Kurdistan within or across current nation-state borders, Kurdish leaders seek independence, autonomy or democratic federalism from or within Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. (See [Why Kurds Deserve Self-rule](#)),

**In Iraq**, the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was recognised in the federal constitution of Iraq (2005). The KRI has its own 111-member parliament, including five seats reserved for Assyrians and five seats reserved for Turkmen, although anybody can run as a candidate in any of the political parties, and they do. The constitution gave the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) many powers, such as the right to maintain its own security forces, including the Peshmerga or 'those who face death', and a police force. Nevertheless, the region remains under the fiscal and administrative control of the Government of Iraq (GoI) and its powerful ministries. This has caused ongoing disputes between the KRG and GoI, the most outstanding being the need to settle the status of the disputed territories, and whether the KRG has the right to explore and export oil independently of the GoI.

After the breakdown in KRG-GoI relations in January 2014, and ISIS taking control of Mosul and parts of Kirkuk in June 2014, Peshmerga were left to defend a 1,000 kilometre front line from Nineveh in the west to Diyala in the east. This meant the territory under KRG control was greatly expanded. In 2017, President Masoud Barzani called for a referendum on independence for the KRI and disputed territories. Despite international pressure by all countries, except for Israel, Jordan and Russia, to cancel the referendum, and some KRI political and civil organisations calling for the referendum to be delayed, on September 25, 2017, a referendum on independence was held in the four governorates of Kurdistan (Dohuk, Erbil, Halabja and Sulaimani) and most of the disputed territories. These disputed territories are the province of Kirkuk; six districts and three subdistricts in Nineveh (Akra, Shekhan, Shingal/Sinjar, Tal Afar, Tel Keif and Qaradash districts and the subdistricts of Zumar, Bashida and Aski Kalal); two districts in Diyala (Khanakin and Mandali); one district and a subdistrict in Wasit (Badra and Jassan) and one district in Salahaddin (Tooz).

In the referendum on independence, 92.73 percent of people voted in favour of independence. A few weeks later, on October 16, 2017, Iranian and Iraqi forces militarily took control of the disputed territories and demanded the KRI and its borders come under federal authority. For further details see [Why International Support is Required to solve disputes between the GoI and KRG.](#)

Whilst the KRG finances public schools in the mother tongue of different ethnic groups, and allows freedom of religion and different religious groups to determine their own personal status law related to marriage and divorce, outstanding issues in the KRI are:

- A lack of transparency in government decisions, income and expenditure;
- Nepotism;
- A weak judicial system;
- A Peshmerga force split between the two dominant political parties (KDP and PUK) and those that answer to the Ministry of Peshmerga;
- A draft constitution that needs refining and enacting; and
- Ethno-religious rights, particularly regarding land and political representation in the disputed territories, with some Yezidi, Assyrians and Turkmen demanding autonomy or an independent homeland. Hence, ethno-religious rights will need to be negotiated, whether or not Kurdistan becomes an independent nation state.

The alternative to an independent Kurdistan inside Iraq is an independent Kurdistan across one or more of the current borders, or for the KRI to remain part of a loose con/federation of Iraq, in which regions have full political, economic, military and cultural autonomy. However, the Shia dominated government in Baghdad, and the Shia militias established to fight ISIS in 2014, which have become a powerful political force, and neighbouring countries will resist further decentralisation.

**In Turkey**, in the 1990s, the stated aim of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) changed from creating an independent Kurdistan to establishing democratic federalism throughout Turkey. After the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government introduced major reforms, such as allowing Kurdish media and the Kurdish language to be taught in private schools, in 2013, the first bilateral ceasefire was established between PKK and the Turkish state. The AKP government promised a peace process to address Kurdish issues, but claimed a pre-condition for

negotiations was that the PKK disarm. The government refused the PKK's demand for independent monitors to oversee the process. In December 2015, the Democratic Society Congress (which encompasses a number of Kurdish groups in Turkey) announced a 14-point framework for discussion, which was rejected by the AKP government. The 14 points were:

1. Formation of autonomous regions consisting of neighbouring provinces in consideration of cultural, economic and geographic affinities.
2. Self-governance of these autonomous regions by elected bodies ... with representation of autonomous regions at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey ...
3. End of ... tutelage by the centralized administration ... and the ... elimination of its authority to discharge elected officials.
4. The establishment of people's assemblies for each town, neighbourhood and village, and for youth, women and each faith within an autonomous region ...
5. The expansion of democracy and equal representation of women in assemblies and all decision-making mechanisms ...
6. Support for the participation of youths in decision-making and self-rule mechanisms.
7. Self-administration of education; Provision of education in all mother tongues ...; Amendment of the curriculum in line with a new democratic constitution, universal values, human rights, local history, cultural and social distinctions; Recognition of official languages other than Turkish.
8. Provision of opportunities for work and studies in the fields of language, history and culture; Places of worship to be organised as autonomous institutions.
9. Provision of healthcare and medical services by autonomous administrations.
10. Re-arrangement of the judicial system and legal services in accordance with the Autonomous Region Model.
11. Autonomous regional administrations to supervise and operate land, water and energy sources, and production sharing; ... in all areas such as agriculture, husbandry, industry and trade in accordance with the democratic constitution ...Provision and supervision of land, air and sea transport by autonomous administrations.
12. Arrangement of traffic services by local authorities in accordance with the relevant central institutions. Assignment of local budget to autonomous regional administrations for the provision of cited services; woman-oriented budgeting;

collection of some taxes by self-governing units in accordance with the agreements and principles of equity decided with the central government and other local administrations; the central government to grant local administrations a share of the total tax revenue; Realization of necessary precautions by the central administration to eliminate the differences in the level of development between regions.

13. Establishment of official local security units under the governance of the autonomous regional administrations, [in co-ordination] with local and central units.

The ceasefire and any hope of negotiations ended in July 2015, after a pro-Kurdish political party, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) won 80 seats in the 550-seat parliament in the June 7 elections. This achievement blocked the AKP from gaining a parliamentary majority. Armed conflict between the Turkish state and PKK has continued ever since. With the introduction of an executive presidency, the re-election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as president, and the election of an AKP-ultranationalist MHP government in June 2018, most commentators consider it is unlikely there will be a peaceful resolution of Kurdish issues inside Turkey for the foreseeable future. Yet, given the new executive powers of President Erdogan, by issuing a few decrees, he could allow provincial governors to be elected, autonomy at the provincial level, and school education in a minority's mother tongue.

**In Syria**, Kurdish leaders and their allies advocate for the Assad regime be replaced by a federal system of government based on a new constitution that provides autonomy to different regions. In December 2016, a Constituent Assembly representing administrations in northern Syria issued a draft social contract for a Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, in view of providing a model for the rest of Syria. The contract proposed different regions be given full autonomy to manage their own security forces, judicial system and foreign relations, with above and below ground resources being fairly distributed throughout Syria. Twenty ministries dealing with the economy, agriculture, natural resources, security, foreign affairs etc. would answer to local multi-ethnic people's assemblies that administer the districts (cantons) of Afrin, Kobani, Tel Abyad (Gire Spi), and Cizere, as well as other towns liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Top priorities in the contract included the protection and political representation of women, youth and all minorities, and the protection of the environment. Since the draft contract, elections

have been held at the community and canton (district) level but not for the Syrian Democratic Council, which oversees the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

Challenges for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria include:

- Accommodating political plurality. The major disagreement between Kurdish political parties in Syria is whether Rojava (western Kurdistan/northern Syria) should become an autonomous region like the KRI, as advocated by those affiliated with former KRI President Masoud Barzani, or whether a federal structure should be based on territory, emphasise the local ethnic mix, and adopt a hierarchal committee system of governance as advocated by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDF), led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD);
- The adoption of PKK's political ideology of democratic federalism and sympathy for the Kurds' fight for self-determination in Turkey. Consequently, the PYD and its Peoples' Protection Units are accused of having operational links with the PKK in Turkey, despite the PYD and its allies advocating peace with Turkey, and denying any operational links with the PKK in Turkey.
- Traditional Arabs resenting gender equality, a quota for female representation in all committees and organisations, and not accepting bans on polygamy and child marriage, or conscription to establish local security forces. These resentments may be exacerbated if Saudi and UAE Sunni Arab forces are deployed to the area.
- Threats from ISIS sleeper cells and sympathisers;
- Military attacks and threats to attack from the Turkish state and the Syrian government, and these authorities encouraging resentment and otherwise undermining stability in territory secured by the SDF;
- The US-led coalition's unclear level of political and military support for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria;
- Federation representatives being blocked by Turkey from taking part in political negotiations on the future of Syria; and
- A lack of funding for Post-ISIS reconstruction.

**In Iran**, Kurdish parties ask for autonomy within a federated Iran, and cultural and political rights for all ethnicities and religions. The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), established in 2004, advocates for democratic federalism (as promoted by PKK, HDP, the Democratic Federal System in Northern Syria and the Democratic Society

Congress). After Ayatollah Khomeini's devastating Holy War on Iranian Kurds, declared in August 1979 in response to Kurds rebelling against the new Islamic Regime of Iran excluding them from power, and lasting until 1983, Kurdish organisations called a ceasefire and attempted to negotiate with a succession of Iranian political leaders. In 1989 – 1990, and again in 1996 and 2004, different Kurdish parties engaged in armed conflict, but otherwise attempted to negotiate and lobby from the diaspora. Since mid-2016, two parties, PJAK and the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) resumed a low intensity armed struggle to achieve self-determination.

**Regarding Kurds' cross-border relations**, Kurds empathise with the plight of their fellow Kurds (some of whom are relatives); political and civil organisations and leaders hold meetings; some cross-border organisations are affiliated; and different combinations of organisations have succeeded in forming umbrella groups. In the war against ISIS, even non-affiliated Kurdish militaries have co-ordinated, for instance, in defeating ISIS in Kobani in Syria and in Sinjar and Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Kurdish political leaders have advocated on behalf of their fellow Kurds with the government of another country, and have given refuge to Kurdish militants from another country. Otherwise, Kurdish organisations and administrations (as opposed to individuals) have followed a policy of non-interference when their fellow Kurds are engaged in military conflict with the armed forces of another country.

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