Advisory Panel on the Question of the Kurdish Region (APQKR)

Research Report Booklet

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Distribution of Kurdish population

Forum: Advisory Panel on the Question of the Kurdish Region (APQKR)

Issue: Facilitating the return of displaced Kurdish people and the rehabilitation of Kurdish cultural sites

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Introduction

Kurds are a group of 40-50 million stateless people, predominantly Sunni-Muslim, who have been fighting to become an autonomous, geographically recognized state since the 1920s (even though they have been facing difficulties since back in the 7th century). They used to be populated along mountains as they have always been crucial for Kurdish life as the Kurds regard them as sacred. Nowadays, the highest population of Kurds is found in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and a small portion in Armenia.

The situation of the Kurds is very similar to that of the Palestinians due to the Israel-Palestine crisis which began in the mid-20th century. Both countries were occupied and ruled over by harsh governments that do not represent their culture or belief. Their existence was also denied and rejected. When Turkey was set up after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Ataturk, its new leader, imposed a national identity on his people. His philosophy was based on “One nation! One language! One People!” Till this day, Ataturk’s philosophy applies as the Kurdish population is the largest stateless nation in the world.

Regarding the rehabilitation of Kurdish cultural sites, the UNESCO is crucial to accessing the situation. A World Heritage Site is a place listed by the UNESCO as having special or cultural significance. Whenever a cultural site is destroyed, cultural cleansing takes place, “aiming to destroy the dignity of the people who view this heritage as a reflection of their very identity.” The List of World Heritage in Danger takes notes of these occurrences. Kurdish cultural sites have been suffering greatly from the conflict. Cities in Iraq such as Hatra, the ancient city of Ashur and Samarra, are being affected by deliberate destruction of cultural heritage and conflict.
One of the most pressing issue now is the relationship between Turks and Syria since whatever conflict between these two countries impact the Kurdish people. A cease-fire took place between Turkey and Northern Syria after Turkey requested that Syria removed their forces from a 20-mile-deep “safe zone” between the borders of the cities of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayan. Despite this, heavy fighting still remains. Consequently, more than 200,000 people have been displaced and such people fear an approaching winter and the future of an autonomous Kurdistan. Only around 15,000 of these people have made it into northern Iraq, while others are searching for shelter and clean water in Syria. Read more at: https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/24/a-look-at-the-worsening-refugee-crisis-in-northern-syria.html

In this research report, the opinions of main organisations and countries will be examined and presented, as well as contextual information about the issue at hand. The history of the Kurdish people will also be explored, as it is necessary to know what they have been through to conclude how they should be treated in the future. The panel will also consider solutions which have been proposed in the past (treaties, documents, resolutions) and suggest possible solutions for the future.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Nation** – A community of people who typically share culture, language, territory and descent.

**State** – A territory under control of one government.

**Sovereignty** – A self-governing, autonomous state.

**Human rights** – Basic rights which people in a society deserve.

**Independence** – When a country is no longer rule by another country.

**Self-determination** – Ability to make autonomous decisions and self-rule.

**Refugee** - According to UNHCR, a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

**IDP** – Internally Displaced Person. According to UNHCR, a person who is forced to flee their home but who remains within their country’s borders.

**Cultural Heritage Site** – A piece of land which demonstrates the way in which humanity has lived. The sites authenticity and protection are also important factors.

**Background Information**

**Previous conflicts and acts of violence:**

There have been countless incidences regarding violence against the Kurdish people:

- 1925 – Kurdish uprising against the new Turkish Republic is suppressed. The Kurds were not allowed to express their political views.

- 1961 – The Kurds of Northern Iraq revolt against their current rule is crushed. Fighting between the Kurds and the Iraqi government takes place.

- 1988 – Thousands of Kurdish civilians are slaughtered in Iraq for having supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war.

- 1991 – Iraq quashes rebellions from the Kurds when they stand up against Saddam Hussein.

- 1992 – PKK bases in Iraq are attacked by the Turkish military.
• 1994 – Iraqi Kurdish Civil War in which the KDP and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) broke up.

• 2003 – “Americans invade Iraq and the Kurdish Peshmerga join the fight to overthrow Saddam Hussein.”

• 2007 – Turkey launches air strikes and ground attacks against Kurdish PKK movement in Iraq.

• 2009 – PKK Kurdish rebel position in northern Iraq are bombed by Turkish warplanes.

• 2015 – “Turkey joins the US-led military alliance against Islamic State but insists that air-strikes against IS should go hand-in-hand with operations against Kurdish PKK militants in northern Iraq. Ankara launches a bombing campaign against the PKK in northern Iraq - the first time that it has attacked the Kurds since reaching a ceasefire with them in 2013.”

• 2016 February - Regional government decides to cut the pay of public service employees to tackle a deepening financial crisis. This causes several disagreements and issues within the people.

• 2019 – “Turkey's military launched a cross-border operation against Kurdish-led forces in Syria in early October, after US troops who had been allied to the Kurds withdrew.”

**Agreements in the 1919, 1920s:**

In 1919, when the Kurds finally thought they would be allowed independence as a result of the Treaty of Sevres, Ataturk came to power. He tricked the Kurds by saying that in return for support in his war against the Armenians, he would grant the Kurdish people independence. In 1923, the Kurdish situation was further damaged when the Treaty of Lausanne was signed. Kurdistan was split between Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. The Kurds still live under these States’ rule.

**Major Countries, Organizations, and Territories**

**Erbil Citadel** – The Erbil Citadel is a formerly fortified settlement (dates back to the Ottoman period) currently located on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It is culturally important as it preserves over thirty metres of archeological deposits. The Erbil Citadel Management Plan has been working to return Citadel to its role as the central place for Erbil and its citizens as it “represents a physical and symbolic landmark for Erbil.
Amnesty International – AI seemed to be silent over Turkey’s human rights abuses. The Kurdish people went on strike (23 of them at Amnesty International's London headquarters) but the organization seemed not to be supporting or helping them, instead, called the police to try and forcibly remove the protestors.

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – OCHA believes that “Internally displaced persons must be presented with options beyond life in camp”. They believe education is the base for everything and therefore, education in and outside of camp must be improved. Access to education in places such as Iraq is critical. For this reason, Deputy Special Representative of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) Marta Ruedas reinforces that "The humanitarian community has an obligation to ensure that minimum standards are maintained, and camps with poor infrastructure in remote locations which host a limited number of families are not efficient or effective at serving the needs of IDPs. Thus, camp consolidation and the transfer of IDPs to larger camps with better service provision - including schools - is one of the goals of humanitarian actors in Iraq in 2019”.

Jordan – Jordan is home to around 30,000 Kurdish people. Although they tend not to interfere in the issue, Jordan fully supports an autonomous Kurdistan to be established. Al-Safadi, the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, said that “Jordan stands side by side with Iraq to support the country’s efforts to enhance stability. The Kurdistan Region and the Kingdom of Jordan have already established good bilateral relations.”.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – In 1992 the KRG was established after a discussion between political parties of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front. It works in close coordination with the UNHRC in facilitating the return of displaced Kurdish people. It is the official ruling body of autonomous Kurdistan and is
therefore supported by the majority of the Kurds. “The KRG has legal jurisdiction over three provinces, Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Iraqi Army security in the region and the current occupation by ISIS forces, the KRG gained de facto jurisdiction over an additional three provinces, Diyala, Nineveh and Kirkuk.”

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – Useful resource: https://www.france24.com/en/20160714-turkey-unesco-heritage-sites-damage-kurdish-diyarbakir-sur - UNESCO should have been working towards the rehabilitation of Kurdish cultural sites, however, apparently in cities such as Diyarbakir (in Turkey), has not been. Cultural sites being recognized by UNESCO brings great recognition and typically increases tourism in cultural sites. Diyarbakir was supposed to have been included in such list however it has suffered damages. Instead of being a recognized cultural Turkish-Kurdish site, it has become a site of killings and mass displacements and destruction. UNESCO does however work of revitalizing the Erbil Citadel for example, through programs of conservation.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – Useful resources:
https://www.unhcr.org/4492676b0.pdf
In 2005, The UNHCR’s worked to protect Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Stateless People in Iraq through developing local institutions even further so that they were more prepared to deal with displaced people. The UNHCR supports voluntary action of individuals to ensure their safety and an orderly return. In July 2005 they launched the “Al-Tash reallocation program” which allowed 3000 Iranian Kurdish refugees to transfer to Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, since it was a lot safer and comfortable in regard to accommodation and services the refugees would receive. The UNHCR continues supporting and creating programs to facilitate the return of displaced Kurdish people.
In October 2019 the UNHCR has received hundreds of refugees coming into Iraq from Northeast Syria due to their most recent conflict. Most of these are being transported to the Bardarash refugee camp which has been prepared to “receive the latest arrivals fleeing the fighting in northern Syria.” Most of these are women, elderly and children, and many require psychological support.
Timeline of Events

- 7th century – Arabs conquer the Kurds. Their land begins being occupied by the Seljuk Turks, Mongols and the Safavid dynasty.
- 13th century – Kurdish land is occupied by the Ottoman Empire.
- 1918 – Wilson declares his 14 point which included self-determination and the UN to be set up.
- 1920 – Ottoman Empire collapses. Rejection of the Treaty of Sevres.
- 1923 – The Treaty of Lausanne “divides the Kurdish region among Turkey, Iraq, and Syria”.
- 1946 – Iraqi Kurd Mustafa Barzani founds the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).
- 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – Article 1 – “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”
• 1970 – Iraqi government and the Kurds of Northern Iraq sign a peace agreement granting the Kurds some self-rule.

• 1978 – In Turkey, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) is created under the help of Abdullah Ocalan. They strive to grant Kurdish independence.

• 1991 – The United states encourage Iraqs Kurds against Saddam Hussein but is unsucesfull as Iraq crushes the rebellions and kills thousands. The prohibition of the use of the Kurdish language in unofficial settings is reinforced by the Turks.

• 1993 – Kurdish political parties continue to be banned, however, the Turkish government allows limited autonomy to the Kurds.

• 1994 – KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) begin fighting each other for control of the Kurdish autonomous regions.

• 1995 – PKK bases in Iraq are invaded by around 35,000 Turkish troops.

• 1998 – Peace agreement signed between PUK and KDP.

• 1999 – Abdullah Ocalan is captured and convicted of treason and separatism, but his sentence is soon suspended.

• 2003 – Kurds join US and British forces against Saddam Hussein’s regime.

• 2005 – Erdogan travels to Diyarbakir, the main Kurdish city in Turkey. He delivers a speech saying, “the Kurdish problem is also my problem”.

• 2007 – Iran and Turkey both initiate offensives against Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkey launches air strikes against the Kurdish PKK.

• 2009 – PKK Kurdish rebel position in northern Iraq are bombed by Turkish warplanes.

The Kurdish government begins to export crude oil.

Massoud Barzani is re-elected as president of Kurdistan.

• 2013 – A meeting between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq is held to reduce tensions over a range of economic and political issues.

• 2012 – Syrians begins finding refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2013 they have to shut its borders due to too many refugees. PKK announces a ceasefire – armed fighters withdraw from Turkish territory – this led to a real sense of hope.
2014 – Barzani says independence is a “natural right” and will soon be coming for the Kurds.

2015 – Erdogan increasingly adopts the language and tactics of Turkish nationalism for his own benefit for electoral domestic ends. – peace process comes to an end.

2016 – Barzani says that the period of the Treaty of Lausanne has to end and that the international community needs to redraw borders to include the Kurdish state.

2019 – Turkish President Erdogan launches a cross-border military operation against Kurdish-led forces in Northern Syria.

Relevant Documents, Treaties, and Resolutions

- **Treaty of Sevres** – Proposed in 1920 to deal with Turkeys’ actions at war. The Treaty was a complete failure as the Turks were outraged. As a result, the Treaty of Lausanne was brought up.

- **Treaty of Lausanne** – Turkey’s army, tax systems, finances and budgets were now controlled by the Allies. Constantinople was renamed as Istanbul.

- **UN resolution** about recognition of the Kurds – 1945 - clause 1: “To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;”

- After the **1980s**, Kurdish language was lost; Children were not allowed to be given Kurdish names when they were registered and could be punished for speaking the Kurdish language.

- **Erbil Citadel Management**. See information above.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

As mentioned previously, Under the Treaty of Sevres proposed after WW1, the suggestion of breaking down the Ottoman Empire and its territories arose, in which the Kurds, as well as other minorities, would be allowed autonomous homelands. The Treaty of Sevres was not signed.

2005 onwards: The UNHCR has set up several refugee camps where refugees have household support, benefit from crop production programs, education, food, health and nutrition, and others. The UNHCR has distributed sheep, chicken and goats to families in a vulnerable situation, as well as agricultural machinery. Refugees also receive kerosene rations for cooking and heating. Schools have been installed in existing refugee camps, those whom have received furniture and school supplies, in camps in Iraq.
Possible Solutions

In order for the Kurds to be a fully recognized nation and a respected group of people, states all over the world but specifically those with a high population of Kurdish people, must acknowledge their existence Kurdistan, like Palestine, demonstrate their unity and determination to have a territory of their own. Many people see the Kurds as not actually being an ethnic group or a minority.

Nationalist historians argue that “Kurds are just mountain Turks who have forgotten their roots and whose language has become corrupted by being so close to Iran”. Therefore, acknowledgement of their cultural importance and existence should be one step further to peace with the Kurds.

Although unlikely, due to the strong opposing views of border countries, to give the Kurdish people full autonomy, the sovereignty of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria over the regions of Kurdistan within their own territory would have to be sacrificed and given to the Kurds, so that they could form a new state.

Another solution would be for states to collaborate with organisations such as the UNHCR, UNESCO or Amnesty International, as they have been acting for several years now and are aware of effective methods to settle the conflict, especially when it comes to the rehabilitation of cultural sites.

States could also collaborate with donations to preserve cultural sites as they represent the history of a nation.

Obviously, what the Kurds want is complete autonomy and for their own state to be set up, and this desire should not be fully discarded.

Bibliography

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