



CULTURAL ORIENTATION

KURMANJI



*A Kurdish village, Palangan, Kurdistan
Flickr / Ninara*

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CULTURAL ORIENTATION | KURMANJI



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*Kurds celebrating Newroz in Kazlıçeşme
Flickr / Esin*

Chapter 1 | Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Profile

Introduction

There are roughly 30-40 million Kurds throughout the Middle East, and they are primarily concentrated in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Caucasus. Turkey has the largest population of Kurds; over 15 million Kurds call Turkey home, which accounts for about 20% of Turkey's population.^{1, 2, 3} Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East; they are not Arabs, Turks, or Persians. Sunni Islam is the most observed religion among Kurds. The Kurds are the largest ethnicity in the world without a sovereign state to call a homeland. There have been many pushes for Kurdish autonomous regions within Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria or for the creation of a unified Kurdish state created from the Kurdish regions of these countries.^{4, 5}

Although Kurds share a Kurdish cultural identity, many political, social, and ideological differences exist within the Kurdish population.⁶ Iraqi Kurdistan, which consists of Iraq's three northern provinces, is governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The security forces of Iraqi Kurdistan are the "Peshmerga," meaning "those who face death." Historically, the Peshmerga have been divided by their loyalties to Iraqi Kurdistan's political parties; some units answer to the Kurdistan Democratic Party and others to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has waged a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish government. A province in western Iran is called Kurdistan. In this cultural orientation, the standalone phrase, "the Kurdish region" will refer to all Kurdish-inhabited areas the Middle East; Kurdish spellings of terms and cities will be in parenthesis.^{7, 8, 9}

Kurmanji, which means "The Kurdish Tongue," has three primary dialects: northern Kurdish (Kurmanji); Central Kurdish (Sorani); and Southern Kurdish (Pehlewani). These dialects are also referred to as northern, central, and southern Kurmanji.^{10, 11, 12} Kurdish is an official language of Iraq. Kurmanji, an Indo-European language, is related to the Persian language but not to Turkish or Arabic. Kurmanji is written in the Latin script in Turkey and Syria and the former Soviet Republics. In Iraq and Iran, Kurmanji is written primarily in an Arabic script, modified to accommodate the Kurdish alphabet.^{13, 14}

Government

Because the Kurdish population is spread out across several countries, there is no centralized government or capital of the Kurdish region. The capital of Iraqi Kurdistan is Erbil; this is the only capital that carries out official government actions. The KRG claims land in Iraq outside of the three-province borders, but the Iraqi government disputes these claims.¹⁵ The capital of Turkey's Kurdish region is Diyarbakir (Amed), which was the location of fighting between the Turkish government and the PKK in 2015 and 2016.^{16, 17} The Syrian Kurdish region, located in northern Syria, is referred to as Rojava; the capital of Rojava is Qamishli (Qamişlo).^{18, 19, 20} The capital of the Kurdistan Province of Iran is Sanandaj (Sine), but Kermanshah is the Iranian city with the largest Kurdish population.^{21, 22}



*Pre-referendum, pro-Kurdistan, pro-independence rally,
Erbil, Kurdistan
Wikimedia / Levi Clancy*

In September of 2017, the KRG held an independence referendum. Iraq opposed the referendum due to unresolved political issues; Turkey, Iran, and Syria were against it because it could inflame Kurdish secessionist movements within their borders. The United States promised to support the KRG's negotiations with the Iraqi government, but fell short of supporting the referendum. Although the referendum passed among Iraqi Kurds, it did not lead to independence. The Iraqi government used the referendum as a justification to reassert control over disputed territory, leading to a loss of territory for the KRG. Turkey and Iran offered to support the Iraqi military, and increased military activity along their borders with the KRG.^{23, 24}

Iraqi Kurdistan



*Arbil/Erbil: The capital of Iraqi Kurdistan
Flickr / Alan Farhadi*

After the Gulf War and the establishment of the No-Fly Zone over northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurds established the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The region elected its first parliament in 1992, and the KRG was formally recognized by Iraq's constitution in 2005. This autonomous government governs three of Iraq's northern provinces, but it does not encompass all of Iraq's Kurdish population. Both the Iraqi government and the KRG claim Kirkuk and the surrounding territory, which contains large oil fields.^{25, 26, 27}

Political power is held by the presidency and a unicameral parliament.²⁸ The KRG parliament has 111 seats, and it is overseen by a Speaker and a Deputy Speaker. The population votes for a party, rather than a single candidate; elections are held every four years. For decades, two political parties controlled KRG politics: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Historically, the parties were fairly balanced. From 1994-1997, a civil war broke out between the PUK and KDP Peshmerga forces. Although the KRG controls 16 Peshmerga brigades, the KDP and PUK oversee their own Peshmerga units.^{29, 30, 31} A new opposition party, the Change (Gorran) Movement, emerged and had success in the parliamentary elections of 2009 and 2013. Currently, Gorran holds 24 seats in parliament, second to KDP's 38 seats. Some parliamentary seats are reserved for minority populations that reside within Iraqi Kurdistan.^{32, 33}

The KRG's executive power is shared among the president, the cabinet, and the prime minister. The president of the KRG is popularly elected by the people to a four-year term and can serve a maximum of two terms.³⁴ Massoud Barzani was the KRG's first and only president, serving from 2005 to 2017. Barzani's term was so long because he was re-elected and granted term extensions. He announced his resignation in October 2017 after the Kurdish independence referendum failed, leaving the office vacant.³⁵ ³⁶ The fallout from the referendum also postponed parliamentary elections.³⁷

Iran

In 1946, a Kurdish state known as the Republic of Mahabad was established in northwestern Iran with the support and protection of the Soviet Union. The Soviets withdrew shortly after the republic was established, and Iran regained its lost territory through a military campaign. The Mahabad republic ceased to exist before 1947.^{38, 39, 40}



*Sanandaj: the capital of Kurdistan Province in Iran
Flickr / BockPix*

Syria



*YPG fighters in Rojava,
Democratic Federation of Northern Syria
Flickr / OpenUpEd*

Due to the political and security situation in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), an affiliate of the Turkish PKK, has established Rojava, a semi-autonomous region along Syria's northern border.⁴¹ The goal of the government of Rojava is to be an autonomous and democratic region within Syria.^{42, 43, 44} Turkey has conducted military operations against Kurdish militias in northern Syria. Turkey sees the PYD and its military wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), as a threat to its security.^{45, 46, 47} One of the most notable

Turkish incursions was in and around Afrin, Syria in 2018. Turkey claims the action is a part of its conflict with the PKK. The United States has supported the YPG throughout the Syrian conflict.⁴⁸

Turkey

The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) has waged an insurgency against the Turkish government since 1984; the conflict has killed approximately 40,000 people. The current goal of the insurgency is to gain political and cultural rights from the Turkish government; the PKK was founded on Marxist principles and the original goal was to establish an independent Kurdish state. The Turkish government will not negotiate with the PKK until the group demilitarizes. Turkey has launched airstrikes and ground incursions into northern Iraq over the course of the Turkey-PKK conflict.⁴⁹



HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) supporters celebrating their election result in Istanbul on 8 June 2015
Wikimedia / VOA

The People's Democracy Party (HDP) is a major Kurdish political party in Turkey, representing a wide-range of Kurdish interests. HDP officials, including members of parliament, have been arrested by the Turkish government on charges of having links to the PKK. The HDP won 59 seats, out of 550 seats, in Turkey's 2015 parliamentary elections.^{50, 51, 52}

Geography



Topography of Iraqi Kurdistan
Flickr / Acaid

The Kurdish region extends, north to south, from the Caucasus Mountains to a slice of east-central Iraq. From east to west, the Kurdish region extends from central Turkey to western Iran. This area is what Kurds consider Kurdistan. Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have the largest Kurdish populations, and these countries make up the core of the Kurdish region. There are isolated Kurdish communities throughout western Asia and the Middle East. The Zagros and Taurus mountain ranges create the region's rugged terrain.^{53, 54, 55} The highest point in the region is Mount Ararat, located in eastern Turkey; the peak reaches an elevation of 5,165 meters (16,945 ft).⁵⁶

Bodies of Water



*Tigris river is an important river for agriculture
Flickr / Travel Aficionado*

The two most important rivers in the region are the Tigris and the Euphrates. Both rivers are parallel to each other and flow south from eastern Turkey to southern Iraq. The Euphrates is 2800 km (1,740 mi) long, and the Tigris is 1900 km (1,180 mi) long.^{57, 58} Turkey's system of dams along these rivers has provided southeast Turkey with vital water infrastructure, hydroelectricity, and economic benefits, but the dams have also displaced Kurdish communities.

Most of the dams' workforce isn't Kurdish, and the reservoirs physically divide Turkey's Kurdish region. Kurdish militias have attacked dams in Turkey and kidnapped dam workers. Turkey's dam projects have faced domestic and international criticism for population displacement, the loss of cultural and historic sites, and straining water resources in Iraq and Syria.^{59, 60, 61}

The Ataturk Dam is one of the largest dams in the world. Located on the Euphrates River, it provides hydroelectricity and irrigation to southeastern Turkey.⁶² When the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River is complete, the reservoir will displace the local population, submerge local archeological sites, and may have a negative environmental impact as far away as southern Iraq.^{63, 64}

Lake Van

Lake Van, located in eastern Turkey, is Turkey's largest body of water. Lake Van contains salty water, so it is not used for irrigation or drinking. The lake rarely freezes, and few fish are able to survive. The northeastern inlet is shallower than the main portion of the lake. Lake Van's water levels fluctuate throughout the year. It is at its lowest level in the winter, and it reaches its peak water level in July.⁶⁵



*Lake Van, Akdamar Island and the Holy Cross Cathedral
Wikimedia / gozturk*

Climate



View of Greater Zab River of Iraqi Kurdistan
Wikimedia / Moplayer

The average temperature in southeast Turkey ranges from 32 °F (0 °C) in the winter to 86 °F (30 °C) in the summer. Southeastern Turkey receives between 12-24 in (30-61 cm) of rain per year. Most precipitation occurs in the winter months, and there is little rainfall in the summer.^{66, 67} In Iraqi Kurdistan, the average winter highs are between 7-13 °C (44 to 55 °F), and the winter lows are just above freezing. In the summertime, the temperature can reach up to 50 °C (122 °F). Iraqi Kurdistan receives

between 375-724 mm (15-28 in) of precipitation.⁶⁸ Afrin, in northwestern Syria, has a warm yet mild climate. The summer temperature is about 30 °C (86 °F), and the lows in the winter are approximately 3 °C (37 °F). The annual rainfall is about 20 in (500 mm).⁶⁹

History

In antiquity, the Kurdish region was part of the ancient land of Media and inhabited by the Medes. The Hurrian people, who inhabited eastern Turkey, were recorded as far back as the third century BCE. The Hurrians interacted with the ancient Hittites as far south as Syria, but by the second millennium BCE, the Hurrians became a lost empire. Alexander the Great conquered Media in 330 CE, and over time, the Medes lost their culture to regional powers.^{70, 71, 72}



Delal Bridge in Zakho, Iraqi Kurdistan
Wikimedia / Moplayer

The name “Kurd” was attached to various nomadic tribes who inhabited northern Mesopotamia. The Kurdish people started to convert to Islam in the seventh century CE after Arabs gained control of the region. Kurdish principalities were established in the Middle Ages, but these kingdoms dissolved by the mid-19th century.^{73, 74}

In the aftermath of WWI, the Treaty of Sevres proposed the division of the Ottoman Empire and creation of a Kurdish state, but the treaty was not ratified. The subsequent, ratified Treaty of Lausanne did not stipulate the creation of a Kurdistan.^{75, 76}

Turkey



Abraham's Pool at Rizvaniye Mosque, Şanlıurfa (Urfa)
Wikimedia / Bgag

After WWI and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the new Turkish government denied Kurdish identity by forbidding displays of Kurdish culture and labeling Kurdish as a Turkish dialect. The use of Kurdish was prohibited and Kurdish clothing was banned. Kurds were labeled “Mountain Turks” by the Turkish government. In 2002, Turkey legalized the education of children in the Kurdish language as well as the broadcasting of Kurdish TV. The Turkish government started broadcasting Kurdish programs in 2004. Further language rights were granted to the Kurds in 2009.^{77, 78}

Abdullah Ocalan founded the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in 1978. The group was founded as a Marxist organization intent on creating an independent Kurdish state, but the PKK is now fighting for Kurdish rights and autonomy within Turkey. The United States labeled the PKK a terrorist organization in 1997 and the European Union followed suit in 2002. Ocalan was arrested in 1999 on treason charges, and sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted to life in prison. Secret negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK took place between 2009 and 2011. From 2013 to 2015, there was a ceasefire between the Turkish government and the PKK. Throughout the PKK's existence, it has waged a violent insurgency against the Turkish government. The Turkish government has attacked PKK targets within its borders and throughout the region, especially in northern Iraq, and pursued PKK-linked officials worldwide. The Turkish Army launched ground offensives into northern Iraq in 1992 and 1995.^{79, 80, 81}

Syria

Syria banned Kurdish media in 1958, but the Syrian government authorized some utilization of Kurdish in university settings in 2014. In 1962, the Syrian government stripped the citizenship of Kurds who could not prove that they lived in Syria before 1945. These stateless Kurds could not exercise basic rights such as owning property, operating businesses, voting, holding a passport, or getting married. In 1973, the Syrian government displaced Kurds who lived near northern Syria's natural resource centers. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) was founded in 2003. The party advocates

for Kurdish rights and autonomy, and it has links to the PKK. In 2004, a soccer riot in Qamishli led to riots throughout Syria's Kurdish region. The Syrian government violently suppressed the riots and even shot mourners at funerals of those killed in the riots.

The PYD declared the autonomy of Kurdish regions in northern Syria in 2013. Collectively, these regions are called Rojava (western Kurdistan). Syrian-Kurd militias have been active participants in the Syrian Civil War and anti-ISIS campaigns. The United States has supported PKK-linked Kurdish militias in Syria in the fight against ISIS, which has caused some diplomatic tension with Turkey. Government suppression of the Kurdish language and culture, including the arrest of Kurdish activists, continues to the present day.^{82, 83, 84}



The Krak des Chevaliers: Hisn al-Akrad (Castle of the Kurds)
Wikimedia / James Gordon

Iran



Qazi Muhammed establishing the Republic of Mahabad
Wikimedia / The Foundation For Kurdish Library and Museum

The Republic of Mahabad was established in northwest Iran in 1946, but Iran quickly reestablished control of the region. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran launched a military campaign to punish the Kurds for opposing the revolution. Iran supported Iraqi-Kurd separatists and political parties in Iraq before and during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). During the war, Iran and Iraq armed each other's Kurdish populations. Kurdish militias conducted cross-border attacks on other Kurdish militias. In 2004, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) was founded in Iran. The United States designated PJAK a terrorist organization in 2009. The Iranian government launched a military campaign against the group in 2011. Iran has prohibited major forms of Kurdish media and Kurdish political entities, as well as hindered the operations of Kurdish-oriented non-government organizations.^{85, 86, 87}

Iraq

Throughout the late 1970s, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein displaced Kurds in northern Iraq and replaced them with Iraqi Arabs. Kurds along the Iraq-Iran border were displaced during the Iran-Iraq War. In 1988, the Iraqi Army destroyed over 4,000 Kurdish villages and killed an estimated 100,000 Kurds in a punitive campaign against the Kurds. Chemical weapons were used against the Kurds in Halabja, which killed thousands of people.



*Kurdish Genocide, Anfal Barzani Kurdistan
Flickr / jan Sefti*

After the Gulf War in 1991, there was a Kurdish uprising; the Iraqi counteroffensive displaced over a million Kurds. A U.S.-led coalition enforced no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq. Iraqi Kurds used the absence of the Iraqi government to attain autonomy and elect a regional government. In 1996, the Iraqi government attacked Kurdish cities. After the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Kurdish politicians reasserted the autonomy of the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq and supported the Iraqi government. The 2005 Iraqi constitution recognized the Kurdish Autonomous Region and the KRG. In 2014, in the midst of the Islamic State's offensives in Iraq and Syria, the KRG and the Peshmerga seized Kirkuk and expanded its borders. The KRG held an independence referendum in 2017. Although the referendum passed by a wide margin, the status quo was maintained due to international pressure, including threats from Iran, Turkey, and Iraq.^{88, 89, 90}

Economy

The security situation in southeastern Turkey limits economic activity, despite the region's fertile farmland, textile factories, shale deposits, and rock quarries. The official unemployment is between 16-28%, but if seasonal work is excluded and those who have given up looking for work are counted, the unemployment rate is around 40%. The household income of Turkey's Kurdish region is half of the national



*Fish market in Diyarbakir
Flickr / - Adam Reeder -*

average. The Turkish government justifies its dam building projects in southeastern Turkey because of projected economic benefits; the government also provides loans and tax incentives to businesses in the region. Government investment has been focused on repairing and the damage that took place during the PKK conflict in 2015.^{91, 92}

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG controls about 20% of Iraq's oil. If Iraqi Kurdistan were an independent state, it would be among the world's top oil exporters. Oil flows through northern Iraq, and it is exported through the Turkish port city of Ceyhan. Control over northern Iraq's oilfields and revenue sharing of oil profits have been sources of conflict between the KRG and the Iraqi government. In 2017, a Russian oil company signed a deal to operate Kurdistan's main oil pipeline.^{93, 94, 95}

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Yazidis



Two Yazidi men at the new year celebrations in Lalish
Wikimedia / Bestoun94

The Yazidis are a religious minority, and they primarily inhabit the Kurdish region of the Middle East. Sinjar (Şengal), in northern Iraq, is the center of Yazidi society. Yazidis speak the Kurdish language and are ethnically Kurdish, but they believe that the Yazidi origin is unique and different from all other peoples. The religion, Yazidism, combines elements of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is not possible to convert to Yazidism, and Yazidis who marry non-Yazidis

are no longer considered Yazidi. Yazidi society is organized into castes and governed by secular and religious authorities. Yazidis have faced religious persecution and violence. During Saddam Hussein's efforts to shift the demographics of northern Iraq, Yazidi villages were demolished and Yazidis were relocated to cities such as Sinjar. The governance of Sinjar is disputed between the Iraqi government and the KRG.^{96, 97, 98}

In 2014, the Islamic State's campaign through northern Iraq forced tens of thousands of Yazidis to flee to Mount Sinjar. In response to this crisis, the United States commenced airstrikes against Islamic State targets. In 2017, the United Nations called on the international community to protect the Yazidis from genocide.^{99, 100, 101}

Assyrians

The Assyrian people are a minority group of northern Mesopotamian descent, and they can trace their heritage to the ancient Assyrian empire. The Assyrians are concentrated around Nineveh, Iraq, but Assyrian communities are also found in Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Assyrians are typically Christians, and they speak Aramaic (also referred to as Assyrian), Syriac, and Chaldean. Assyrians have a history of being subjected to persecution and human rights violations. During WWI, the Ottoman Empire carried out a genocide campaign against the Assyrians. In recent years, ISIS has brutally targeted Assyrians throughout the region. Iraq's Assyrian population is shrinking rapidly, and the Assyrian language is disappearing. An Assyrian militia in Syria was formed to fight ISIS; the militia was integrated into the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces.^{102, 103, 104}



*Assyrians attending Orthodox Easter Vigil Mass in Erbil
Flickr / Catholic Church England and Wales*

Turkmen



*A Turkmen woman in Bandar Torkaman
Wikimedia / Mostafa Hassanzadeh*

The Turkmen are a Turkic people who migrated to the Kurdish region around the 11th century. The Turkmen speak Turkmen, a Turkish dialect. Turkmen is one of the official languages of the KRG. Turkmen throughout the region have suffered human rights abuses at the hands of ISIS-linked militants. Iraq's Turkmen population is concentrated around Kirkuk.^{105, 106, 107} Political parties representing Turkmen interests hold five seats in the KRG parliament. Syria's Turkmen population

is concentrated in northern Syria. Turkmen militias in Syria have participated in offensives against the Syrian government, and some have sided with U.S.-backed Kurdish militias. The Turkmen population within Iraq and Syria has faced political marginalization and discrimination. Kirkuk's Turkmen population was strongly against the KRG independence referendum because the proposed independent Iraqi Kurdistan

would have included Kirkuk.^{108, 109, 110} Kurdish and Turkmen militias have clashed in Iraq due to sectarian differences.¹¹¹

Arabs and Turks

During the mid-1970s, the Iraqi government displaced tens of thousands of Kurds and replaced them with Arabs. The campaign caused long-term resentment among the Arab and Kurdish populations as well as disputes between the KRG and the Iraqi government.^{112, 113} Approximately 75-80% of Iraq's population is Arab; 90% of Syria's population is Arab.^{114, 115}



*Turks in Diyarbakir
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Turks are the largest ethnic group in Turkey, accounting for about 70-75% of the population. Turkish is the official language of Turkey. About 75% of Turkey's population lives in urban centers. Istanbul, in western Turkey, is home to 20% of the country's population. Turkey's constitution labels all citizens of Turkey as Turks, without recognizing any ethnic minority populations.^{116, 117}

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Chapter 1 | Profile

Assessment

1. The U.S. government has designated the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization.
2. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) administers three provinces in northern Iraq.
3. The Soviets assisted in the establishment of an independent Kurdish republic in northwestern Iran.
4. A treaty that divided the Ottoman Empire after WWI included the creation of a Kurdish state.
5. Iraqi Kurdistan has large deposits of oil.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. True; 5. True



*The Great Mosque, Hewler (Erbil) Kurdistan
Flickr / Chris De Bruyn*

Chapter 2 | Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Religion

Introduction

Although most Kurds adhere to Sunni Islam, Kurds are religiously diverse; there are Kurdish Christians, Jews, Alevis (Alewîs), Yazidis, and Shia Muslims. Kurdish identity isn't strictly tied to religious belief. Some estimates claim that as much as 98% of Iraq's Kurdish population is Sunni, but in Iran, the Kurdish population is split about evenly between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Overall, Shia Islam is the dominant religion in Iraq and Iran, putting the Kurds at odds, religiously, with the populations of these countries.^{1, 2, 3} In Turkey, the government has a government agency to promote Sunni Islam; the religious freedom of other faiths is limited by the state. Turkey has a history of suppressing non-Muslims, especially Alevis. Religious minorities in Turkey

face discrimination and threats of violence. In Syria, the military and Shia militias have attacked Sunni neighborhoods and religious minorities in the ongoing civil war. ISIS-linked militants have attacked Shia Muslims, uncooperative Sunni Muslims, and religious and ethnic minorities. Kurdish Yazidi women were taken prisoner by ISIS militias and trafficked throughout Syria.^{4, 5}

Major Religions

Islam

After the Prophet Muhammad died in 632 CE, there was a disagreement over who would succeed him; this dispute led to the division of Islam into two sects: Sunni and Shia. The Sunnis believed Muhammad's successors should be named based on merit, but the Shia believed that Muhammad's successors should be his descendants. Shias believe Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, was his rightful successor. Ali led Islam for five years (656-661 CE), before his assassination. Hussein, Ali's son, was martyred in 680 CE. The death of Hussein is considered to be the point of separation between Shia and Sunni Islam. Although there are religious and political differences between the two sects, tolerance for those differences varies throughout the world. Communities that were forced to convert to Islam by Sunni governments often chose to follow Shia Islam as a subtle form of defiance.^{6, 7}



Muslims visiting Balikli Göl, a sacred lake, Şanlıurfa
Wikimedia / Bgag

Both Shia and Sunni Muslims adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam, which define the core beliefs and practices of Islam. The first pillar is the *shahada*, the declaration of faith. Second pillar is *salat*, prayer five times a day. The third pillar is *sawm*, fasting during Ramadan. Muslims are to be charitable and generous, which is stipulated by the fourth pillar, *zakat*. The fifth pillar, the *hajj*, is the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁸

Over 90% of Iranians are Shia, around 50-55% of Iraqis are Shia, and 15-20% of Syrians are Shia. The Iranian government has supported Syria's Shia minority throughout the Syrian Civil War.⁹ The Turkish government states that 99% of the country's population is Muslim, and of that figure, 77.5% are adherents to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. About 42% of Iraqis follow Sunni Islam. Sunnis controlled Iraqi governmental power under Saddam Hussein. The majority of Kurds are followers of Sunni Islam.^{10, 11, 12}

Alevism

Kurds and Turks in Turkey and the Balkans practice Alevism. Alevis are Turkey's largest religious minority. The Alevi leadership estimates that 25-30% of Turkey's population consists of their followers; other estimates put the number at 15-25%. The Turkish government views Alevism as an illegitimate sect of Islam and has adopted policies that have suppressed the religious freedoms of the Alevi community. Within the Alevi community, there is a debate as to whether they are a sect of Islam or not. A tenet of Alevism, and Shia Islam, is that Ali was to be Muhammad's successor. However, there are many differences between Alevism and Islam. The Alevi house of worship is the *cemevi (cemxane)*, not the mosque. There is no gender segregation in a *cemevi* during Alevi worship services, and Alevis do not fast during Ramadan. Alevis are often confused with the Alawites; although both groups share some Shia beliefs, they are distinct religions.^{13, 14, 15}



Sheikh-Safi tomb, Ardabil
Wikimedia / Elmju

Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, is Alevism's most venerated religious figure; Alevi spiritual leaders, Dedes, are considered to be decedents of Ali. Other prestigious religious figures include poets, saints, and the twelve Imams. Alevis believe that God, the cosmos, and humanity are unified, and they consider any place to be an acceptable location for communal or private worship. The wilderness is considered sacred to the Alevis, and many trek to the outdoors to worship and offer sacrifices. The Alevis believe in the concept of heaven and hell, but earth is the setting of the afterlife. The high regard of Ali puts Alevis at odds with Sunni Islam and often results in the grouping of Alevis with Shia Islam. Due to persecution and political oppression, Alevis have historically lived in rural and insular communities. Characteristics of Alevism include the pursuit of truth, egalitarianism, charity, and an emphasis on morality. Weekly community gatherings include a communal meal, hymns, and a community meeting. Music and dance are important aspects of worship and community life.^{16, 17}

Yazidism



Yazidi site: Tomb of Şêx Adî in Lalish
Wikimedia / YZD

Yazidism integrates Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions and beliefs into a distinct religion. Yazidis are a Kurdish religious minority, but Yazidism teaches that the Yazidi are decedents of Adam only, whereas the rest of the population is descended from Adam and Eve. Because of their beliefs, some Muslims characterize Yazidis as heretics and devil worshipers. Yazidis worship Yasdan (Yezdan), the Supreme Being and creator of the Earth. Yasdan is so exalted that he is worshiped through seven intermediary spirits; an angel named Malak Taus is the most powerful of the seven spirits. Rules governing purity are an important aspect of Yazidi life. There are two holy Yazidi texts: the Book of Revelation and the Black Book. Yazidis have faced religious-based violence and discrimination for generations. Yazidism is an insular religion: Adherents are born into the faith and there are no converts allowed. Yazidis are centered in Sinjar, Iraq, but Yazidi communities exist throughout the region.^{18, 19, 20} ISIS massacred Yazidi men, kidnapped over 6,000 Yazidi women, and destroyed many Yazidi shrines, temples, and religious artifacts. In 2016, the KRG estimated that over 3,700 Yazidis kidnapped, captured, or enslaved by ISIS remained missing. About 400,000 Yazidis were displaced by the ISIS conflict. ISIS left behind dozens of mass graves, filled with Yazidi bodies, in northern Iraq.^{21, 22, 23}

Christianity and Judaism

Religious minorities prefer Iraqi Kurdistan over Iraq because of the religious freedoms and personal security offered by the Kurdish Regional Government. Iraqi Christian leaders estimate that Iraq's Christian population has declined from 800,000-1.4 million to fewer than 250,000. Prominent Christian churches in the region include the Syrian Orthodox (the Syriac Church, Assyrian Orthodox) and Armenian Orthodox churches; and



Church in Kurdistan
Flickr / Michael Dr Gumtau

Catholic denominations such as the Chaldean, Syriac, and Armenian Catholic churches. About 450 Jewish families live in Iraqi Kurdistan, approximately 17,000 Jews reside in Turkey, and a few small Jewish communities exist in Syria.^{24, 25, 26} Syria's oldest synagogue was destroyed in 2014. Assyrian Christians kidnapped in the region by ISIS were held for ransom.^{27, 28} Iraq persecuted its Jewish population, especially in the 1950s and 1970s; Iraqi Jews hid their Jewish identity, converted to Islam, often nominally, or emigrated to Israel. In 1991, the Israeli government carried out two evacuations of Iraqi Jews from Iraqi Kurdistan. The KRG has appointed a representative for the Jewish community in the Ministry of Religious Affairs.²⁹

Yarsanism (Aliheq)

The Yarsanis, also known as the Kaka'i, are concentrated in eastern Iraq and western Iran. About 300,000 live in Iraq and an estimated million live in the Kurdish region of western Iran. Yarsanis consider themselves to be a unique faith, but the Iranian government has labeled Yarsanis as Shias who practice mystical Islam, known as Sufism. Yarsanis in Iran are not allowed to distribute religious media, and they are prohibited from giving their children Yarsani names. Iran has imprisoned Yarsanis who have engaged in religious activities; some Yarsanis in exile claim that thousands have been imprisoned. Yarsanis report discrimination in Iran's educational system, in the Iranian military, and in the legal system. Yarsanism is not a recognized religion in Iraq or Iran.^{30, 31, 32}



*The Tambur as a sacred symbol of Yarsanism
Wikipedia / allauddin*

Religion and the Government

Turkey

The 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which established Turkey after WWI, required the Turkish government to recognize three non-Muslim minorities: Armenian Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Jews. Other religious minorities have had limited religious rights; some religions are grouped with others or labeled as sects of Islam. Although the Turkish constitution defines the country as secular, it establishes a religious council to promote Islam, favoring the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. The diverse religious beliefs of the Kurds put the Kurds at odds with the Turkish



Turkish Sema whirling dervishes
Wikipedia / Cenkkö

government. Religious organizations must register with the government before they can hold services. Members and leaders of non-Sunni religious organizations complain of government discrimination. Sufi religious organizations are prohibited in Turkey. A religious organization may not defame the government during religious services. Insulting a recognized religion can lead to a year-long prison sentence, interfering with a religious service can be punished by a three-year sentence, and destroying religious property can be punished with a four-year prison sentence.^{33, 34, 35}

Turkish ID cards list a person's religion, but the government has only a few religions available to choose from. Students whose IDs identify them as Jewish or Christian may opt out of mandatory religious education in public schools. Religious minorities have complained that the religious affiliation on their ID cards leads to their harassment or discrimination. The Turkish government does not recognize Alevi *cemevis* as legal places of worship, and the government has shut down an Alevi TV station. Civil liberties, including religious liberty and freedom of speech, were restricted after the 2016 Turkish coup attempt. Many religious figures, places of worship, and religious communities were subjected to threats, slander, and violence after the attempted coup. In 2016, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Turkey violates the Alevi community's freedom of religion.^{36, 37, 38}

Iraq

According to the Iraqi constitution, Islam is the state religion and the foundation of Iraq's government. Although the constitution protects the religious freedom of Yazidis and Christians, the Baha'i religion and Wahhabism are prohibited. (Being Baha'i is punishable by 10 years in prison.) The constitution prohibits religious coercion and provides equal protection of religious minorities under the law. Although religions are required



Yazidi new year celebrations in Lalish, Iraqi Kurdistan
Wikipedia / Leviclancy

to register with the state, there is no way to register new faiths in Iraq (but there is a way to register with the KRG). The KRG pays for the construction of Sunni, Yazidi, and Christian religious establishments. The Iraqi government and the KRG fund trips to Mecca for the *hajj*. The KRG reserves 11 seats of its parliament for religious minorities; Iraq reserves eight seats for religious minorities. Islamic education is mandatory in Iraqi schools, except in Christian communities. The KRG does not mandate Islamic education. The Iraqi government provides security for pilgrimage sites and routes to those sites. Shia militias and Iraqi security forces have been accused of human rights abuses during Iraq's fight against ISIS. Christians in the KRG complained about the occupation and looting of their homes during the KRG's campaign against ISIS. The KRG has enacted bans against imams who have slandered or encouraged violence against religious minorities.³⁹

Iran

Shia Islam is the state religion of Iran, and all rights are to be exercised within the limits of Islam. State recognition of religious minorities is limited to Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Followers of these recognized minority religions must register with the state and prove their family's religious affiliation existed prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. All Iranians who are not members of these recognized religious minorities are considered Muslims.

Iranians who are members of unrecognized religions have limited religious rights. The practice of Sunni Islam and the operations of Sunni institutions are restricted. Members of the Baha'i faith are subjected to government harassment, confiscation of property, discrimination, and arrest. According to the Iranian constitution, Iranian laws must conform to Sharia law.⁴⁰



*The demolished Baha'i cemetery in Yazd
Wikipedia / Taedxy*

Renouncing Islam or attempting to convert a Muslim to another religion is punishable by death. Iran recently executed 20 Sunni Kurds for religious offenses such as association with Salafist organizations; non-government organizations claim that the convictions were based on torture-induced confessions. The Iranian government often raids non-Shia religious institutions to enforce religious restrictions. Five seats of Iran's parliament are reserved for recognized minority communities, but non-Muslims are

prohibited from holding all other government leadership positions. Religious minorities may not have authority over Muslims in the Iranian military, and minority officers are only allowed to serve their mandatory service obligation. Access to education for religious minorities is restricted. The Iranian government allows the limited operation of some Jewish institutions, but Iranian officials often engage in anti-Semitic rhetoric and Holocaust denial.⁴¹

Syria

Syria does not have a state religion, and the Syrian constitution stipulates that the government is to respect religious freedom as long as religious practices do not disrupt public order. Yet the Syrian government routinely restricts religious literature, media, and activities. Authorities limited Israeli Syrian Jews' contact with Syria while producing anti-Semitic media. The U.S. government estimates that 74% of the Syrian population is Sunni, 13% are Shia (including Alawites), 10% are Christian, and 3% are Druze. Alawites are often portrayed as a sect of Shia Islam, but despite some similarities, Alawites consider themselves to be a unique religion. Alawites have been at the forefront of Syrian politics since 1971. The Syrian government has outlawed Salafist organizations, and being a Salafist is punishable by death. Syrian law prohibits the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. The Syrian Civil War has ushered in an era of religious-based violence. The country's displaced populations have gathered along religious and sectarian lines.^{42, 43}



The old Christian quarter of Jdeydeh, Aleppo
Wikimedia / Kevorkmail

Shia militias and the Syrian military have attacked, arrested, and killed religious minorities and Sunni Muslims during the Syrian Civil War and anti-ISIS offensives. Pro-government militias evicted Sunnis from their homes and replaced them with Shia Muslims and Alawites. ISIS targeted people of all religions who did not conform with their strict interpretation of Islamic law. ISIS militants perpetrated outrageous human rights abuses including crucifixions, beheadings, kidnappings, lashings, imprisonment, forced conversions, and extortion of religious minorities. Harsh punishments were carried out against men, women, and children. ISIS targeted Syrian Kurds, including civilians, in its offensives against YPG units. ISIS has labeled Syrian Kurds and the YPG as apostates and atheists.⁴⁴

Religion in Daily Life

Religious liberty varies within the Kurdish region; there are a large number of religious restriction imposed by the governments of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Islam is the most widely observed religion, so Islamic customs are followed by a majority of the region’s population. Non-state actors, societies, militias, and government officials impose religious restrictions and carry out religious violence. Religious, ethnic, and cultural minorities are often grouped together and targeted for discrimination based on a few small similarities. A person’s language, culture practices, religion, or ethnicity may single them out for discrimination in one country or region, but not in another.^{45, 46,}
⁴⁷ The lack of security in Syria during the Syrian Civil War has inflamed religious and ethnic violence.⁴⁸



Muslims carrying Misbaha
 Flickr / Chris De Bruyn

▶ When do you pray?		
Visitor:	kangee dey naveyzhee kee?	When do you pray?
Local:	neevro dey naveyzhee kam	I pray at noon.

Exchange 1

Religious Holidays

Alevism

Alevis fast from 11-13 February to honor the angel Khizir, and a festival is held on 14 February. Newroz, meaning “new day” in Kurdish, is held on 21 March. Newroz is a celebration of springtime as well as a religious holiday. Alevis, as well as Shia Muslims, celebrate the Ashura holiday; a special soup is prepared as part of the holiday. Ashura is observed according to the Islamic calendar, commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of Ali, in



Kurds celebrating Newroz, Tangi Sar village
 Wikimedia / Bakhtiar Samadi

the battle of Karbala. Rather than Ramadan, Alevis fast for 12 days to commemorate Hussein’s martyrdom.^{49, 50}

▶ I’d like some soup.

Visitor:	min peechak soop devet	I’d like some soup.
Local:	baasha	Sure.

Exchange 2

Orthodox Christianity



*Orthodox Easter Vigil Mass with Syrian Archbishop, Erbil
Wikimedia / Bakhtiar Samadi*

The separation of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches took place in 1054. The two religions parted ways over disagreements regarding doctrines and practices.⁵¹ Some Orthodox Christians observe religious holidays according to the Julian calendar, rather than the widely-observed Georgian calendar. Orthodox Christmas is often observed on 7 January, not 25 December. Armenian Christmas is celebrated on 6 January. Easter is also celebrated in the springtime,

but it usually differs from the Easter celebrated by Western churches. Epiphany is celebrated on 19 January.^{52, 53, 54}

Islam

Islamic holidays are celebrated according to the Islamic calendar, so they fall on different days every year. Islamic holidays include the Prophet Muhammad’s Birthday (Mawlid al-Nabi).⁵⁵ Shia Islam commemorates the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Hussein, on the Ashura holiday.⁵⁶ The end of Ramadan is celebrated by the Eid al-Fitr holiday.⁵⁷ Eid al-Adha celebrates the events surrounding Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. The day is celebrated



*Praying during Ramadan in Diyarbakır
Flickr / Marcel Oosterwijk*

with a large feast; an animal is slaughtered and distributed among friends, the poor, and neighbors. The final day of the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is on Eid al-Adha.^{58, 59}

▶ **Will you join us for the feast?**

Visitor:	too dey bshegdareeya jazhney key ilgalma?	Will you join us for the feast?
Local:	bali soopaas	Yes. Thank you.

Exchange 3

Places of Worship

Mosque



Great Mosque of Mosul, Kurdistan
Flickr / DFID - UK Department for International Development

Although each mosque’s design varies, mosques generally have a few common features. Inside the mosque, there is a wall known as the *qibla*. The *mihrab*, a niche located within the *qibla*, designates the direction of Mecca, the proper direction to face during prayers. To the right of the *mihrab* is a pulpit, known as the *minbar*, where the imam conducts services. Calls to prayer are announced from the minaret of some mosques. Another feature of mosques is an ablution fountain, known as the *sahan*, located in the center of the courtyard.^{60, 61}

▶ **May I enter the mosque?**

Visitor:	az dishem beyma zhor?	May I enter?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 4

Cemevi (Cemxane)

Alevism does not require a specific place to practice the religion, but in urban centers it is necessary to have a suitable place for gathering and communal worship. The Turkish government does not recognize cemevis as legitimate places of worship; the government considers *cemevis* to be cultural centers. There are instances in which the Turkish government has seized and repurposed *cemevis* for use as Sunni mosques

or built a mosque near an operating *cemevis*. Overall, the number of *cemevis* has tripled since the year 2000. Unlike Sunni mosques, *cemevis* do not receive state funds for construction or maintenance because they aren't recognized places of worship.^{62, 63}

Other Places of Worship

The Syrian Civil War, the violence of ISIS, and other conflicts throughout the region have displaced much of the region's Christian community. Numerous Christian churches and villages have been destroyed in recent years.^{64, 65, 66} Many Yazidi temples and shrines throughout northern Iraq that were destroyed by ISIS are being rebuilt.^{67, 68} Jewish religious infrastructure was destroyed or abandoned after the departure of most of the Jewish populations of Iraq and other countries throughout the Middle East. Jewish neighborhoods, villages, and buildings have been repurposed. ISIS destroyed Jewish heritage sites throughout the region.^{69, 70, 71}



Alevi cemevis in Kadıköy
Wikimedia / ErzincanlıGenc24

▶ Do you have a cover for my head?

Visitor: ta dasrok heya bo sarey min?

Do you have a cover for my head?

Local: bali

Yes.

Exchange 5

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Chapter 2 | Religion

Assessment

1. A *Cemevi* is a house of worship.
2. The Baha’I faith cannot be practiced in Iraq or Iran.
3. Yazidi is a Supreme Being worshiped by Iraqi Kurds.
4. Turkey’s largest minority religion, Alevism, is one of the country’s major recognized religions.
5. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) supports religion minorities.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True



*The Shire of Kurdistan
Flickr / Tom Blackwell*

Chapter 3 | Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Traditions

Introduction

The Kurdish region is home to a millennia-old cultural heritage, but Kurds have struggled to preserve their culture. Kurdish identity and cultural practices have been suppressed by national governments, but political factions, linguistic ties, and tribal affiliations are often more influential than national governments.^{1, 2}

Kurdish identity and traditions are more influential among Kurds residing in rural areas, than among Kurds who have moved to large cities.^{3, 4} Kurdish cuisine incorporates dishes from the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Meals are social affairs that bring family and friends together.⁵ The Kurdish media provides entertainment and education, but it

is often influenced by politics and censorship.^{6, 7}

Gender Issues

In Rojava, gender equality is a government priority. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is linked to the PKK, governs the Kurdish region of northern Syria. The PKK's founder, Abdullah Ocalan, made gender equality a tenet of his organization's philosophy. The law requires that female and male co-chairs lead every government department in Rojava. Women's centers have been established to educate women of their rights, provide social support, arbitrate disputes, and advocate for women's rights.



*Women's Defense Forces (YPJ) fighters
Flickr / Kurdishstruggle*

New rights pertaining to gender equality have been granted. Gender equality in Rojava clashes with long-established social norms and attitudes.^{8, 9}

The PYD has women's combat units, known as the Women's Defense Forces (YPJ), as a part of its People's Defense Forces (YPG). YPJ units operate independently in order to avoid subordination to the male-dominated command structure of the YPG. Many women in the YPJ are eager to have the opportunity to liberate women oppressed by ISIS and to oppose established gender norms.^{10, 11} The YPG and YPJ have been known to recruit, train, and send underage soldiers to engage in combat.^{12, 13} YPJ units have fought in major engagements against ISIS in Kobani and Raqqa as well as against Turkey in Afrin.^{14, 15, 16}

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has made domestic violence a crime. The KRG has established police task forces to investigate gender-based violence, but these forces' effectiveness has been questionable. There are five women's shelters in Iraqi Kurdistan, but the services provided by these shelters have generally been inadequate. Government assistance for women is often in the form of mediating so a woman can return home. According to the KRG, in 2015, there were almost 7,500 cases of violence against women, including 54 homicides, 64 suicides, and 125 instances of self-immolation. The KRG has banned female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), but it estimated that the practice is still common in rural areas, but occurs less often for younger generations of women. Ongoing problems include temporary, forced, and underage marriages as well as honor killings.¹⁷

Cuisine



Traditional Kurdish bread and tea
Wikimedia / Archasia

All courses of a traditionally Kurdish meal are served simultaneously. Breakfast consists of yogurt, eggs, fresh produce, and cheeses; black tea and the yogurt drink known as *mastew* are popular beverages to consume at any meal. A Mediterranean salad, topped off with a light salad dressing, is a popular meal. *Nisk*, a spicy lentil soup, is enjoyed on cold days. Warm, fresh bread and hummus are popular with any meal. Chicken, lamb, and veal kebabs are favored main courses.

Another common main course is *shifta*, which is similar to a hamburger patty. *Kufte*, which is similar to a meat empanada, as well as vegetable stews are commonly consumed. Grape leaves are often used to make wraps of meats and vegetables. Rice with vegetables, meat, raisins, and spices is a common side dish. Fruit, baklava, cream cheese- and pudding-based sweets, and cookies known as *kulicha* are popular desserts.^{18, 19}

▶ The meal was very good.

Visitor: Khwarnekaa galek baazhbee

The meal was very good.

Local: soopaas

Thank you.

Exchange 6

Secular Holidays

On 5 March, the KRG celebrates Uprising Day, which commemorates the Kurdish rebellion against Saddam Hussein after the Gulf War. On 11 March, Iraqi Kurds celebrate the peace accords between the Iraqi government and Iraq's Kurdish population, which was signed on that day in 1970. Baghdad Liberation Day commemorates the end of Saddam Hussein's control of the Iraqi government. The victims of the of the 1988 chemical weapons attack on Halabja are remembered on Halabja Day, 16 March. Labor Day is celebrated on 1 May, honoring workers around the world.^{20, 21, 22} On 10 May 2015, Iraqi Kurdistan held its first Holocaust Remembrance Day.²³

Newroz

Newroz is celebrated from 21 to 23 March, coinciding with the spring equinox.²⁴ Meaning “new day,” Newroz is celebrated throughout the region, from Turkey to Afghanistan. Celebrations include bonfires, candles, picnics and cookouts, dancing, and traditional folk music. To some Kurds, Newroz has religious significance, a day of reflection, reconciliation, and prayer; to others, the holiday has political undertones. In March 2018, Turkish police arrested dozens of Kurds who were accused of demonstrating in favor of Kurdish militants during Newroz.^{25, 26, 27}



Kurds celebrating Newroz in Palangan, Kurdistan
Wikimedia / Keyvan Firouzei

▶ Will you celebrate the festival next week?

Visitor:	aaya todey ahangey key hafteya beyt?	Will you celebrate the festival next week?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 7

Traditional Clothing



Kurdish men wearing ranku choxa
Wikimedia / Kurdirasti

Traditional Kurdish clothing is most often worn around traditional holidays, but it is common for daily use. Kurdish women often wear long dresses or dress in layers. Women sometimes wear a dress or a skirt over baggy pants, and it is common for women to wear a belt around the waist. A short jacket, *helak*, is a common article of traditional women’s clothing. Wintertime may necessitate a coat, known as a *kawa*. Kurdish men wear a combination of baggy pants, shirt, jacket, and a wide belt; this attire collectively is called a *ranku choxa*. Kurdish clothing varies by geography, and incorporates a variety of fabrics, patterns, and styles. Modern, Western-style clothing is popular among younger people.^{28, 29}

▶ How should I dress?

Visitor:	chi jilkaa ilbar Kho bikam?	How should I dress?
Local:	har i'tiyaadee ba	Just be casual.

Exchange 8

The Arts and Media

Dengbej singers are artists who sing Kurdish folk music. Traditionally, these musicians traveled and sang for entertainment, but also fulfilled the role of historians by preserving traditional songs and keeping formative cultural events fresh in the minds of the audience. Songs range from as short as a minute to as long as an hour. *Dengbej* music has been on the decline due to the cultural suppression of the Kurds and a lack of interest among young Kurds, but modern recording techniques have helped preserve it. Some Kurdish folk music singers have been imprisoned under Turkish national security laws.^{30, 31, 32} “Kurd Idol,” a spinoff of the American singing competition TV series, is popular among the region’s Kurdish population.³³



Dengbej singer
Flickr / Ocumare

Kurdish literature dates back to at least the ninth century CE. The classic age of Kurdish poetry began in the 13th century. Some prominent poets were Ell Heriri in the 13th century and Nali in the 18th century. In the 20th century, Kurdish writers such as Celadet Alî Bedir-Xan (1893-1951) and Mahmut Baksi (1944-2000) were influenced by the Kurds’ experiences with colonialism and exile. Today, despite political pressure and turmoil, Kurdish literature is on the rise. In 2016, the German translation of Bachtyar Ali’s celebrated Sorani dialect novel, *The Last Pomegranate*, achieved critical and commercial success.^{34, 35}

Turkish literature that paints the Kurds in a positive light is subjected to government censorship, and writers could face legal consequences for writing controversial materials. Self-censorship regarding controversial topics is common due to the fear of prosecution.³⁶ The Turkish government has closed many Kurdish media outlets due to security concerns because Kurdish news outlets have been accused of spreading terrorist statements and propaganda. Kurdish journalists and news editors have

faced police intimidation because of their work. Turkish police have conducted raids in southeastern Turkey to confiscate books. Possession of Pro-Kurdish literature is considered evidence of belonging to an illegal organization.³⁷

In Iraqi Kurdistan, members of the media who criticize government institutions or political parties have been subjected to arrest, violence, and publication bans. Public officials bribe journalists and media outlets for positive coverage. Media outlets aren't profitable, so they are supported by political parties. News outlets KTV and Rudaw are associated with the KDP, while Kurdstat TV and GK TV are associated with the PUK. Libel is a civil and criminal offense in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the law can be used to censor journalists. The KRG censors media coverage due to security concerns. Books that are imported to or published in Iraqi Kurdistan need to be approved by the Ministry of Culture.³⁸



View of Erbil Citadel
Wikimedia / Serchia

Iraqi Kurdistan is full of archeological treasures. The Erbil Citadel has been the site of settlements for millennia. In addition to the rich archeological and cultural heritage, the citadel houses a textile and a gem museum.^{39, 40} Islamic State militants have destroyed many ancient heritage and religious sites; looters have also taken artifacts from historical sites. In 2015, the Sulaymaniyah Museum discovered that looted tablets that the museum purchased in 2011 contained lost passages from the

Epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian epic poem that is considered to be one of the earliest examples of literary writing, dating back to the early third or second century BCE.^{41, 42}

Other Art Forms

Among older Kurdish women, there is a tradition of tattooing, known as *deq*. Women who receive tattoos typically have them on their hands, neck, or face; some women have tattoos in multiple locations. Tattoos may consist of a few dots to a group of dots, lines, and small symbols. The placement of the tattoos is symbolic, and the type of tattoo holds significance. Tattoos can be tribal and family identifiers or hold religious significance; other tattoos symbolize desired traits. Popular symbols include animals, planetary symbols, and plants. *Deq* has been in decline for decades, and the practice is seen as outdated or forbidden in Islam.⁴³

Film

The first Kurdish film was a 1926 Soviet-Armenian movie called *Zare*. The title reflects the name of the movie's female protagonist, and the film touches on many popular Soviet themes. The region's governments have a history of suppressing Kurdish media, including filmmaking. Kurdish cinema started gaining prominence in the 1980s, with popular themes such as the hardships of daily life, coming of age, and inspiring Kurdish stories. International artistic institutions have provided funding, venues, and promotions for Kurdish filmmakers. Recent Kurdish films and documentaries have centered on the recent Kurdish-ISIS conflict.^{44, 45}



Poster of Kurdish film, *Voice of My Father*
Wikimedia / Ibrahim Tafida

Weaving



Kurdish Anatolian carpet
Wikimedia / St. Lois Art Museum

Weaving textile products such as carpets and clothing is a Kurdish tradition and art form. The art and trade of weaving has been in decline, and it is often attributed to Saddam Hussein's brutal *anfal* campaign to displace the Kurds. There are few women left to pass this skill down to the next generation. In addition to its cultural significance, weaving is an important source of income for rural women.⁴⁶

Dos and Don'ts

Dos

- To call a person to you, use your entire right hand only, and wave inward.
- If you are visiting Kurds and sit on the floor, show respect by sitting with your feet flat on the ground, or tucked under you.

Don'ts

- **Do not** show the bottoms of your shoes or the soles of your feet to people because this is considered an insult. Do not sit with your legs extended in front of you.
- **Do not** use the “Western” way of beckoning someone with one finger. This gesture is used for calling animals, and beckoning a human in this manner is considered very rude.
- **Do not** summon or shake hands with a Kurdish woman if you are a male.
- **Do not** keep your hands in your pockets when you are standing and talking to someone.
- **Do not** use the “A-OK” sign as it may be perceived as an obscene gesture by some Kurds.
- **Do not** use the “thumbs up” sign, which is also considered obscene.
- **Do not** cross your legs while you are sitting, as this is considered rude in Kurdish society.

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Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Chapter 3 | Traditions

Assessment

1. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), centered in northern Syria, operates all-female military units.
2. Iraqi Kurds commemorate their rebellion against Saddam Hussein on Uprising Day.
3. Despite political pressure, prominent Kurdish authors are widely read in Turkey.
4. Major media outlets in Iraqi Kurdistan are supported by the region's political parties.
5. *Deq* is a tradition of tattooing observed by older Kurdish women.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True



*Erbil Citadel with houses on top and surrounded by urban sprawl
Wikimedia / jan Sefti*

Chapter 4 | Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Urban Life

Introduction

Urban life provides a mixture of opportunities and hazards. Universities that offer advanced degrees lack academic freedom; equal opportunity shortcomings are detrimental to students who pursue higher education.^{1, 2, 3} Healthcare is available in northern Iraq, but many Iraqi Kurds seek medical treatment in southeastern Turkey because the standard of care is higher than it is in Iraqi Kurdistan.^{4, 5} Damaged urban infrastructure and the loss of public services harms the quality of life.⁶ The urban economy has been shaped by recent armed conflicts and political strife.^{7, 8} ISIS terrorist attacks, the PKK-Turkey conflict, and crime pose a threat to life in urban areas.⁹

Some urban areas require extensive rebuilding projects. Government funding and international aid has been made available for reconstruction projects.^{10, 11}

Urban Environment

In southeastern Turkey, there are periodic clashes between the Turkish government forces and Kurdish militias. During times of conflict, the government can impose curfews, conduct neighborhood searches, and shut off electrical and communication networks. Civilian protests can turn violent. Kurdish militias attack government, civilian, and military targets. In 2017, ISIS carried out several attacks in urban Turkey.^{12, 13}



*Destroyed Cizre after clashing between the Turkish government forces and Kurdish militias in 2016
Flickr / Nedim Yilmaz*

After the KRG's independence referendum passed in 2017, Kurds in western Iranian cities celebrated the results. The festive atmosphere culminated in clashes with Iranian security forces.^{14, 15} In late 2017, Iranian Kurds in Sanandaj and Kermanshah protested the Iranian government's policies of ethnic, economic, and political suppression of the Kurds as well as against the regime itself.¹⁶

Political, ethnic, and religious strife continues in northern Iraq. Although the large-scale contingency of ISIS militants was defeated in northern Iraq, small ISIS cells can still carry out attacks. The Iraqi Army pushed the Kurdish Peshmerga forces out of Kirkuk after the failed Kurdish independence referendum. There are occasional demonstrations and protests. Structures damaged by war may be unstable or contain unexploded ordinance. Iraq's infrastructure has been damaged by recent conflicts. Power outages are common, especially in the summer months.¹⁷

The Syrian Civil War and the ISIS conflict have destroyed Syrian cities and neighborhoods. About 80% of the Kurdish city of Kobani, located on the Syria-Turkey border, was destroyed during the fight between ISIS and U.S.-backed Kurdish militias, but residents are returning and rebuilding.^{18, 19} Reconstruction is slow due to a lack of building supplies. Utilities and government services are very limited, but some international relief organizations are providing limited services. Qamishli, another city in northern Syria, has depended on the delivery of aid from the UN, but the

complex security and political situation has made receipt of aid difficult.^{20, 21} The security situation in northern Syria is still volatile due to attacks by ISIS militants and Turkey’s military operations in and around Afrin. The YPG (People’s Protection Units in Syria) and the Syrian military have remained somewhat amicable toward each other since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War.^{22, 23, 24}



*Kobanî/Kobanê destroyed during the fight between ISIS and U.S.-backed Kurdish militias
Flickr / Ştefan Mako*

Healthcare



*Field hospital in Mosul
Flickr / MarinaCherbonnier*

In Iraqi Kurdistan, most people live near a healthcare facility, but just under 30% of these facilities have a doctor on staff. Iraqi Kurdistan has been able to attract doctors from Iraq to practice medicine in the region. Most healthcare providers are dedicated to their patients, but there are no uniform healthcare practices or training standards. Poor healthcare data collection and inadequate medical recordkeeping have led to ineffective care and the poor distribution of resources. Hospitals

are overcrowded and small clinics cannot treat all their patients. Most healthcare services are financed by the KRG. Patients pay out of pocket for private hospitals and physicians, but private health insurance is rare. Doctors work a 35-hour week, but most only spend a few hours a day seeing patients before leaving to work in the more profitable private practice. Facilities are given a budget and doctors are paid a set amount. There aren’t any incentives for facilities to use funds or deliver services efficiently and doctors are not paid according to their job performance.^{25, 26, 27}

Many Iraqi Kurds travel to Turkey to seek medical treatment. The standard of care in Turkey is better than in Iraqi Kurdistan, and it is more profitable for hospitals to treat travelers paying out of pocket than it is to treat patients at the rates paid by the government. In 2016, it was reported that after the failed coup, Turkey’s security forces disrupted access to healthcare by imposing curfews, preventing emergency medical services from reaching patients, destroying medical facilities, and punishing

doctors who were treating casualties of the Turkey-PKK conflict.^{28, 29}

Education



*The American University of Kurdistan
Flickr / William John Gauthier*

There are 11 universities funded by the KRG as well as some private universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, including two English-language universities. The Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy, located in Qamishli, Rojava is a secular co-ed university. The school's curriculum includes the teachings of Abdullah Ocalan, the founder of the PKK.³⁰

Some Turkish universities have Kurdish language departments or Kurdish courses.

Academic freedom in Turkish universities is limited. After the failed coup, all deans of Turkish universities were removed from their positions, 15 universities were closed, and an estimated 6,000 university faculty members were fired or disciplined.^{31, 32, 33}

In Iran, there is a University of Kurdistan. Minority groups, such as Kurds, have complained about discrimination at Iran's universities. Academic freedom is severely restricted in Iran; students and faculty are arrested or removed from school for religious or political reasons. The activities of student groups are restricted.³⁴

Employment

About one in six residents of Iraqi Kurdistan are on the KRG's payroll. The government of Iraq agreed in October 2017 to pay the wages of the Peshmerga. The Iraqi government suspended payments of the KRG's share of Iraq's national budget from 2014 to 2018.^{35, 36} The KRG struggled to fund the government while funds were cut off, and government employees, including the Peshmerga, were paid infrequently. The Iraqi government plans to audit the KRG's payroll and staffing as part of the



*Peshmerga soldiers, Erbil
Flickr / Kurdishstruggle*

agreement to restore the KRG's funding.^{37, 38} Unemployment in Turkey's Kurdish region is estimated to be over double the national unemployment rate.^{39, 40}

Urban Economy

The KRG makes about USD 7.7 billion annually from its oil sales. Production is down due to the loss of KRG territory and oil fields to the Iraqi Army after the independence referendum. Rosneft, a Russian oil firm, is investing in the KRG's oil infrastructure, in exchange for oil exports. The KRG's oil exports and revenue sharing between the KRG and the Iraqi government have been long-running disputes between the Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.^{41, 42, 43} In response to the independence referendum, Turkey threatened to stop the flow and export of KRG oil through its territory. The gross regional product of the KRG, excluding oil revenue, is over USD 23.5 billion.^{44, 45} The KRG is struggling financially despite its oil reserves. The region spends USD 1 billion a month on payroll and is burdened by significant debt. Oil price fluctuations, the oil revenue sharing and exporting dispute with Iraq, and the war against ISIS have caused economic hardship for the KRG.^{46, 47, 48}



*The Kirkuk oil refinery
Flickr / Aslak Ormestad*

Renewed clashes between the PKK and the Turkish government in 2015 caused economic devastation in Diyarbakir.⁴⁹ An estimated USD 40 million in export revenue was lost and thousands of businesses were forced to close. An estimated 6,000 buildings were destroyed in the conflict. The Turkish government has committed about USD 3.5 billion to rebuild southeastern Turkey. The Turkish government used eminent domain to demolish and redevelop damaged property.^{50, 51, 52}

The Syrian Civil War and ISIS conflict has caused economic devastation to urban areas. These affected cities require extensive rebuilding, but security remains poor, services are limited, and foreign aid has been insufficient to meet the reconstruction needs. The situation is further complicated by the various foreign relations challenges among western governments, Turkey, Syria, the PKK, and the PYD. The population in Kobani has decreased by 80%. The United States has committed USD 875 million toward humanitarian projects in Syria. The Defense Department and USAID are working with local organizations, without permission from the Syrian government, to meet the immediate and essential needs of northern Syrian cities.^{53, 54}

Commerce

Erbil has modern shopping malls as well as a sprawling bazaar with many small shops.^{55, 56, 57} After the Kurdish independence referendum, the Iraqi government briefly placed economic restrictions on the KRG, including on currency exchanges, money transfers, and international financial transactions. Businesses pay foreign employees in the KRG with U.S. dollars because the Iraqi dinar is not accepted internationally.^{58, 59} There are many scams in the United States involving the Iraqi dinar. Scammers promise huge returns on a future revaluation of the dinar and charge large fees for their services because of the lack of formal currency exchanges between the United States and Iraq.^{60, 61, 62} As of April 2018, USD 1 was equal to 4 Turkish liras, 1,184 Iraqi dinars, 515 Syrian pounds, and 37,854 Iranian rials.⁶³



*Inside the Bazaar, Erbil
Flickr / Adam Jones*

▶ Do you accept US currency?

Visitor: paaret amreekee war degree?

Do you accept US currency?

Local: naKheyr am bas deenaara wardegrin

No, we only accept dinars.

Exchange 9

Transportation

The roads in urban Iraqi Kurdistan are adequately constructed, but drivers can use dangerous driving techniques and ignore traffic signs. Drivers should use GPS devices and know where disputed and recently liberated zones are located. Busses are not reliable due to inadequate maintenance and constant changes of routes and stops. Taxi rides should be arranged in advance, rather than flagging down a driver curbside. A personal security detail is recommended while traveling in northern Iraq.⁶⁴



*Road in urban Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil
Flickr / Erbil Kurdistan*

▶ Can I get a cab around here?

Visitor:	aayaa az dishem takseeeye bigram ilveree?	Can I get a cab around here?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 10

Road conditions in southeastern Turkey are good, but driving can be quite dangerous. Drivers are aggressive and ignore street signs and traffic signals. Pedestrians often cross the street in an unsafe manner. Panhandlers and street vendors occupy major intersections. City buses and minibuses are common forms of transportation. Taxis are a reliable form of transportation, but only use a metered taxi and record the license plate number.⁶⁵

▶ Will the bus be here soon?

Visitor:	paas zee degahat verree?	Will the bus be here soon?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 11

Crime



A memorial ceremony in honor of Mustafa Akarsu at the US embassy at Ankara
Flickr / U.S. Government

In southeastern Turkey, petty crimes, drug-related crimes, and theft are common, but violent crime is rare. Cybercrimes and internet fraud are common, including travel visa fraud and scams that involve the transfer of large sums of money. Dating scams are on the rise: The scammer will build a relationship with a foreigner, and the scammer will eventually request a large sum of money due to an incident. Terrorist organizations single out Westerners and target tourist destinations, malls, restaurants, clubs, parks, and sporting

events as well as government and military infrastructure. In 2013, a suicide bomber struck the U.S. embassy in Ankara, and there was a shooting at the U.S. consulate in Istanbul in 2015.⁶⁶

In northern Iraq, property crime has risen in recent years, and ISIS has been able to operate in the area despite territorial losses. In 2017, there were demonstrations at the U.S. consulate over the response of the United States to the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum. Westerners in Iraq are at high risk of being kidnapped, especially for ransom. Homicides are often related to terrorism, family or tribal conflicts, and sectarian/religious differences.^{67, 68}



*Kurdistan independence rally in Erbil
Wikimedia / Leviclancy*

▶ Give me money.	
Visitor:	paaraa bidamin? Give me money.
Local:	na min paara naman No, I don't have any.

Exchange 12

In Syria, there have been rampant human rights abuses and crimes against humanity attributed to government actors, various militias, and ISIS.⁶⁹

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Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Chapter 4 | Urban Life

Assessment

1. Many Iraqi Kurds travel to southeastern Turkey to seek medical treatment.
2. There are no higher education institutions in Iraqi Kurdistan.
3. The military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan (Peshmerga) are on the payroll of the Iraqi government.
4. In 2015, Diyarbakir was the site of clashes between the PKK and the Turkish government.
5. After the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum, Kirkuk and its nearby oil fields were officially integrated into Iraqi Kurdistan.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. True; 5. False



*A Kurdish village, Palangan, Kurdistan
Flickr / Ninara*

Chapter 5 | Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Rural Life

Introduction

Kurdish rural life takes place amid armed conflict and oppression. Rural life in Turkey has been disrupted by the PKK-Turkey conflict; rural, southeastern Turkey has been the setting of most of the conflict.^{1, 2} The ongoing conflict in Syria has caused severe hardship for Kurds in northern Syria.^{3, 4} The Iranian government has adopted policies that suppress the rights and culture of the Kurdish population.⁵

Since 2014, the Iraqi government, the KRG, and ISIS have exchanged large tracts of territory in northern Iraq. After the 2016 Kurdish independence referendum, the Iraqi

government regained disputed territory that was held by the KRG. Amid the chaotic security situation, numerous local defense forces and militias emerged to protect their communities; these militias generally formed around ethnic and religious divides, especially among Iraq's minority communities. The two dominant militias are on opposite sides of the KRG-Iraqi government divide: the Popular Mobilization Forces, a collection of Shia militias, has been integrated into the Iraqi security forces; however, the Peshmerga operates under the authority of the KRG. This ever-changing security situation is a dominant feature of rural northern Iraqi life.⁶

Rural Economy

Food production in Syria has decreased since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. The 2015-2016 planting season covered nearly a million fewer hectares than pre-war levels. Agricultural infrastructure has been damaged by the conflict, which could lead to long-term production problems for Syria. Due to poor security, many farmers are unable to transport their crops to market.⁷



*Fertile farmland, Kurdistan
Flickr / jan Sefti*

Northwestern Iran is one of the most fertile regions in the country. Wheat, corn, rice, sugar, beans, fruit, and vegetables are the predominant agriculture products, and the land in higher elevations is used to raise livestock. The leading industries include textile manufacturing, metal fabrication, food processing, and oil refining.^{8, 9}

Combat operations have reduced access to water throughout the KRG. Before the conflict, about 62% of rural households had access to clean water. The KRG's lack of water sharing agreements with neighboring countries, who opposed Kurdish independence, may degrade water resources in the future.¹⁰

In southeastern Turkey, the average household income is half of the national average. Private investment in the area is hindered by poor security, but fertile farmland, shale deposits, and rock quarries are natural resources that could lead to economic growth. The Turkey-PKK conflict has damaged the region's mining and agriculture sectors. Until recent years, the conflict had been fought in the countryside.^{11, 12}

Rural Transportation

Traffic accidents are common throughout Turkey, and the road maintenance needs of small streets and rural roads are often ignored.¹³ Rural roads in northern Iraq are narrow and most do not have a shoulder to pull over. Drivers taking long car trips should take emergency provisions with them. Iran has many bus and rail lines that connect the country.^{14, 15}



Short distance buses
Flickr / Malcolm Williams

▶ Is there a gas station nearby?

Visitor:	paanzeenKhaanek neyzeek heya ilveree?	Is there a gas station nearby?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 13



Sulaymaniyah International Airport
Wikimedia / U.S. Army photo / Maj. Juanita Chang, 5th

Iraqi Kurdistan has two international airports: Erbil International Airport and Sulaimaniya International Airport. The United States does not allow U.S. civilian flights to fly over Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2015, rocket attacks near the Erbil International Airport suspended international flights. Russian missiles flying through KRG airspace also temporarily closed airports.¹⁶ In response to the KRG independence referendum, Turkey and Iran banned flights to the KRG; Iraq suspended the KRG's international air traffic for nearly six months.^{17, 18, 19}

▶ Which direction to the airport?

Visitor:	keesh laa bofroka Khaaney cheet?	Which direction to the airport?
Local:	avlaaya	That way.

Exchange 14

Healthcare

The Peshmerga uses a network of field hospitals in order to provide medical treatment to wounded combatants. Ambulances are used to evacuate casualties, but wounded soldiers can even be flown to Erbil by helicopter for medical treatment. Peshmerga hospitals suffer from a lack of supplies and are not equipped to handle chemical weapons attacks.²⁰ There is a shortage of medical professionals in rural Iraqi Kurdistan.²¹



*Peshmerga soldier treated by a doctor, Zarek mountain
Flickr / nzibari*

▶ Is there a medical clinic nearby?

Visitor:	aaya binkey tandristyeh ilveree heya?	Is there a medical clinic nearby?
Local:	bali ilvereeya	Yes, over there.

Exchange 15

The Turkish incursion into northern Syria caused Afrin’s hospital to run low on supplies due to the influx of casualties.²² Kurdish YPG casualties, who were fighting ISIS, received medical care in hospitals in southeastern Turkey.²³ The World Health Organization airlifted medical supplies to provide relief in Qamishli, northern Syria.²⁴

Rural Employment



*Kurdish children working at the shoe repair shop
Flickr / Michael Dr Gumtau*

In Turkey, government enforcement of child labor laws is not strict enough to deter the use of child labor, especially in agriculture and the textile manufacturing sectors. However, the Turkish government claims that child labor has decreased in recent years. Children of Syrian refugees are prone to hazardous employment.²⁵

Throughout the Syrian conflict, Syrian government-linked militias, anti-government militias, and ISIS have recruited or forced children to engage in combat. However, the YPG has agreed to

discharge underage soldiers from its ranks. Kurdish militias in northern Syria have subjected Christians and Yazidis to forced conscription.²⁶

In Iraqi Kurdistan, PKK-linked militias have recruited and mistreated minors within their ranks. Yazidi minors have been recruited into Yazidi self-protection units. Shia militias have provided training to minors and have placed minors in combat roles. ISIS forcibly recruited children and forced children into combat, including Turkmen and Yazidi children; the group even trained Yazidi children to be suicide bombers.²⁷

Education

Children in Iraqi Kurdistan are required to attend school, but children in rural areas, especially girls, face a lack of access to educational resources. An estimated 65% of children in Iraqi Kurdistan complete their primary education, but internally displaced children are often unable to attend school. Political patronage networks provide improper educational benefits. The UN estimates that 20% of schools were shut down by regional conflicts. Since 2014, the region's educators and schools have been targets of violence, and hundreds of schools have been sheltering internally displaced people. ISIS restricted women's education in territory it controlled; the group also changed curricula to adhere to its ideology.²⁸



*Kurdish school in Dogubeyazit
Flickr / Pavel Dobrovsky*

Education in Turkey consists of three consecutive four-year phases. About one third of girls who complete the second phase do not attend the final phase; the government provides financial incentives for poverty-stricken families in order for them to keep their daughters in school. Schools in southeastern Turkey were hit particularly hard by the government's purges of the educational system. Students who were still able to attend school were forced into overcrowded classes. The government does not allow public schools to educate children in the Kurdish language. A few Kurdish private schools were shut down due to Turkey's post-coup purges.²⁹

The Syrian government provides free education for its citizens, but Kurds are generally not considered citizens. Kurds who want to receive an education must apply for permission to attend school, otherwise they are excluded from receiving an

education. The conflict in Syria has closed schools, displaced teachers, and prevented children from receiving an education. Girls in rural parts of the county are pressured to drop out of school and get married. ISIS restricted women’s education, imposed gender segregated classrooms, closed private schools, and instituted a curriculum that favored their ideology.³⁰

In Iran, children are provided a free primary school education. The Iranian government limits minority access to educational opportunities and resources and Kurdish language studies are not included in the curriculum.³¹ Women’s literacy is above 98%, but there has been a decrease in women’s attendance of Iranian universities. Women who attend Iranian universities face limited educational opportunities.³²

Border Crossings and Checkpoints

Checkpoints



Syrian soldiers at a checkpoint
Flickr / Freedom House

The Syrian government has used checkpoints to restrict the freedom of movement throughout the country. According to the United Nations, the Syrian government and allied militias utilize checkpoints to arrest those who are wounded in conflict zones. Arbitrary arrest of those accused of supporting government opposition or not sufficiently supporting the Syrian government are common at government-aligned security checkpoints. Government checkpoints have been used

to seize property and extort bribes. ISIS has utilized checkpoints in its operations in Syria. Torture and arbitrary imprisonment were common at checkpoints in Syria. ISIS does not permit women to travel without a male relative. The YPG has used checkpoints as a means of forcing men and women into its ranks.³³

▶ Where is the nearest checkpoint?		
Visitor:	neyziktireen Khaalaa ibshkineeny il keeveya?	Where is the nearest checkpoint?
Local:	doo keelometra deera	It’s two kilometers.

Exchange 16



Iraqi Kurdistan checkpoint, Zalgeh
Flickr / Fredrik Malm

The KRG initiated security checkpoints to monitor entry into its borders from the south. Checkpoints hindered the movement and return of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Ethnic and religious minorities have experienced difficulty returning to certain locations. KDP-linked security forces restricted humanitarian supplies from reaching Sinjar. The Iraqi military, ISIS, and Shia militias have all used checkpoints in Iraq.³⁴

In southeastern Turkey, the Turkish government utilized checkpoints, curfews, and roadblocks during its conflict with the PKK.³⁵

▶ Are you carrying any weapons?	
Visitor:	ta chichak heya?
Local:	bali
	Are you carrying any weapons?
	Yes.

Exchange 17

Border Crossings

The KRG relinquished some control over its border crossing with Turkey after the failed independence referendum. The KRG managed its border independently, but it will now operate under Iraqi government supervision. Crossing the border will subject a vehicle to being searched by the KRG, Iraq, and Turkey.^{36, 37}



Iraq-Syria border
Flickr / AudreyH

The lack of border security between Syria and Iraq allowed ISIS militants to travel between the two countries. Shia militias, which are supported by Iran, have been used to provide security along the Iraq-Syria border.^{38, 39} Key border crossings between Iraq and Syria were seized from ISIS in 2017.^{40, 41} The KRG has periodically closed its border with northern Syria, which cut off supplies to Rojava’s Kurds.^{42, 43}

In 2015, the Turkish government shut down its Kobani border crossing, which connects Turkey and Syria. Turkey's southern border region, connecting Turkey with Iraq and Syria, has been designated as a military zone, and special permission from the Turkish government must be obtained before crossing the southern borders by land. The Turkish and Syrian governments have prohibited the transit of goods and relief from Turkey to northern Syria.^{44, 45, 46}



*Turkish soldiers near the Syrian border
Flickr / AudreyH*

After the Kurdish independence referendum, Iran closed its borders with Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran reopened its borders after Iranian-aligned Shia militias and the Iraqi Army seized Kurdish-held territory, including Kirkuk. Iran opened more border crossings in early 2018, which had been closed at the request of the Iraqi government.^{47, 48, 49}

Landmines, IEDs, and Other Hazards

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are rare, but present in Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS has carried out attacks by utilizing vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and suicide bombers. ISIS has used mortars to attack civilian areas.^{50, 51, 52}

Southeastern Turkey experienced VBIED attacks on government buildings in 2016 and 2017. Indirect fire is a concern in southeastern Turkey, and there have been instances of indirect fire and small arms fire near the Turkey-Syrian border.⁵³ Turkey has been accused of utilizing artillery indiscriminately on civilian areas of Afrin, although Turkey disputes this claim.⁵⁴



*A shell explodes in the Syrian city of Kobane
Flickr / Jordi Bernabeu Farrús*

The Syrian government has used barrel bombs, which are drums or cylinders packed with explosives that are dropped indiscriminately from an aircraft, onto rebel-held areas and civilians. It is estimated that the Assad regime dropped 13,000 barrel bombs in 2016 alone, despite warnings from the United States.^{55, 56} In 2012, the Syrian military planted anti-personnel mines near the country's borders with Lebanon

and Turkey. ISIS planted extensive minefields throughout its formerly held territory in Iraq and Syria; up to 100,000 mines may have been planted in Syria and Iraq. ISIS has used everyday objects such as toys, light switches, food, and appliances to conceal and trigger IEDs.^{57, 58, 59}

▶ Is this area mined?		
Visitor:	meen ilvey jahey hena?	Is this area mined?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 18

IDPs and Refugees



*Syrian refugees cross from Syria to Turkey via the Orontes River, Hacıpasa, Turkey
Flickr / William Proby*

As of 2015, the Turkish government only allows a small number of refugees from Iraq and Syria. Turkish border guards have used violence against refugees in order to deter refugees from entering Turkey. The Turkish government does not allow Syrians with higher education to leave Turkey, even though these educated Syrians have trouble finding employment in Turkey. There are approximately one million internally displaced people within Turkey. The government allocates funds for people who have had property losses due to terrorist attacks and conflicts.⁶⁰

It is estimated that there are over 6 million internally displaced people in Syria. The Syrian government has hindered the delivery of aid and medical treatment to internally displaced people, and it has restricted the entry and activity of aid workers. IDPs are vulnerable to attack, struggle with food security, and lack sufficient shelter and medical care.⁶¹

The defeat of ISIS in Iraq has allowed formerly displaced people within the country to return home, but it is estimated that there are still over 3 million IDPs in Iraq. Approximately 225,000 Syrian refugees reside in Iraqi Kurdistan, but the KRG lacks the funding to meet their needs. Many IDPs lack security, shelter, medical treatment, and food.⁶²

Rural Issues

Contested Areas

Combat operations in contested areas such as Afrin have forced families to seek shelter in the rubble of destroyed buildings and even caves. The Turkish government does not distinguish between the PKK, YPG, or the PYD-run government of Rojava; the Turkish government views the Kurdish enclave as a national security threat. Humanitarian aid delivery and evacuation of civilians are hindered by ongoing operations.⁶³ In late 2017, the Iraqi Army and Shia militias seized territory in northern Iraq that the Peshmerga held since 2014. Both Iraq and the KRG claim these disputed zones.^{64, 65, 66}



*Destroyed Diyarbakir
Flickr / ippnw Deutschland*

▶ Do you own this land?	
Visitor:	av 'arda ye teya?
Local:	bali
	Do you own this land?
	Yes.

Exchange 19

Forced Displacements



*Yazidi refugees in Kurdistan
Flickr / Defend International*

In Kirkuk, the Iraqi government-linked militias evicted and destroyed the homes of hundreds of suspected ISIS sympathizers. The United Nations has blamed Shia militias for retaliatory demolition of Sunni homes and businesses. Peshmerga forces have been accused of unnecessary destruction of homes and villages, which the KRG said was due to counter-IED operations. The PYD has forcefully removed Arabs, Yazidis, and Christians from their homes in northern Syria. Turkey's military objectives in Afrin

may also include attempts to shift the demographics of the area. ISIS looted, sold, and destroyed homes and property.^{67, 68, 69}

The Syrian government and ISIS forcefully displaced civilian populations within the country. An estimated 75,000 people have disappeared in Syria. About 72,000 disappearances have been attributed to the Syrian government, nearly 1,500 to ISIS, and almost 400 to Kurdish forces.⁷⁰

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Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Chapter 5 | Rural Life

Assessment

1. There are no international airports in Iraqi Kurdistan.
2. After the KRG independence referendum, neighboring countries closed their borders with Iraqi Kurdistan.
3. Yazidi children were forcibly recruited by ISIS and sent into combat.
4. The KRG keeps the border with northern Syria open to support the Kurds of Syria.
5. The YPG has used checkpoints to forcibly recruit men and women.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True



*Kurdish family picnic in Kurdistan
Flickr / Ninara*

Chapter 6 | Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Family Life

Introduction

The urban Kurdish family does not typically have strong tribal connections. Urban Kurds are more integrated into national societies and have greater access to economic opportunities than rural Kurds. Kurdish tribes have played a pivotal role in the Syrian Civil War and the formation of Rojava.^{1, 2} Iraqi Kurdistan's population has shifted from primarily rural to mostly urban. Rural Kurds marry within their communities and at a young age, but there are many marital norms and practices within the region.^{3, 4} The Kurdish population in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan is growing.^{5, 6} The region's armed conflicts and government policies have negatively affected Kurdish families, especially Kurdish children. Syria's Kurdish community visibly commemorates its war-time casualties.^{7, 8, 9}

Family Life

Turkey's Kurdish population is growing. The Kurdish population, which is concentrated in southeastern Turkey, has a much higher birthrate than the rest of the country. This trend has political, demographic, and economic implications.^{10, 11} For example, the Kurdish HDP political party won 80 seats in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, causing President Erdogan's party to lose the parliamentary majority it held for 13 years. Subsequent elections were called in November 2015, and the HDP was able to retain 59 seats.^{12, 13}



*A Kurdish man with his children
Flickr / Giorgio Montersino*

Iranian government authorities intimidate and prosecute Kurdish political activists on weak charges, and family members of activists are subjected to similar maltreatment. Kurdish political prisoners are disproportionately executed, and the deceased may not be returned to their families for an Islamic burial. Women in Iran can receive the death penalty for committing adultery, and a woman's court testimony does not carry the same weight as a man's.^{14, 15}

▶ Does your family live here?

Visitor:	Kheyzaana ta ilveree dzheen?	Does your family live here?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 20

Kurdish families in Turkey have been torn apart by the PKK-Turkey conflict. Some families have relatives who have left home to join Kurdish militias in the region or the PKK, others have been arrested on charges of supporting PKK, and some have been killed in the region's conflicts. Kurdish families in Syria have been displaced by the Turkish military's ground incursion and air campaign.^{16, 17} Many Iraqi Kurdish families have migrated from rural areas to cities within Iraqi Kurdistan.^{18, 19}

Status of Children and the Elderly



*Kurdish children in Sulaymaniyah
Wikimedia / Abigor*

Iraqi Kurdistan has a young and growing population; the elderly population is somewhat small, which is attributed to past regional conflicts involving the Kurds and the inhumane policies of Saddam Hussein. Iraqi Kurdistan has some of the highest infant and child mortality rates in the Middle East. Children residing in southeastern Turkey have been wounded or killed during the Turkey-PKK conflict. The Turkish government has accused the PKK of recruiting minors to fight the government.

Kurdish children in Turkey are not educated in their native language in public schools. Kurdish refugee and internally displaced children are able to adapt to a new life in Iraqi Kurdistan, but poverty prevents many children from getting an education.^{20, 21, 22} Elderly men are elected to positions of authority within Kurdish tribes, and tribal elders settle disputes, sit on regional councils, and act as representatives of the tribe.^{23, 24}

▶ Did you grow up here?

Visitor:	too ilveree mazan bee?	Did you grow up here?
Local:	bali	Yes.

Exchange 21

Weddings and Marriage

Religious and civil wedding ceremonies are held several days prior to the wedding celebration. The wedding celebration takes place over the course of about 36 hours. Guests are offered appetizers and much of the time is spent dancing. Many candles adorn the celebration. It is customary for the bride to arrive later in the party and to refrain from appearing cheerful, in order to mourn the occasion of leaving her parents' household.²⁵



*Kurdish Wedding, Sanandaj
Flickr / Aryo Zare'e*

► **Congratulations on your marriage.**

Visitor: zhen eenaana ta peeroz bet

Congratulations on your marriage.

Local: soopaas

Thank you.

Exchange 22

In Turkey, the minimum marriage age is 18, but unofficial wedding ceremonies take place in poor and rural areas of southeastern Turkey. The Turkish government doesn't recognize religious weddings, and a marriage is only legal after it is ratified by the local statistics bureau. It is estimated that 28-35% of brides in Turkey were married before age 18.^{26, 27, 28}



*Kurdish bride
Flickr / Chotura Ranga*

► **I wish you both much happiness.**

Visitor: heeveeya Khoshye bo wa hardookaa Khaazem

I wish you both much happiness.

Local: soopaas

Thank you.

Exchange 23

Forced marriages have been used to entrap women into domestic servitude. Stateless residents are prohibited from getting married in Iraq. Extramarital sexual relations can lead to criminal prosecution. ISIS in Iraq and Syria kidnapped women, including many Yazidi women, and subjected them to forced marriages and other cruel crimes. Early and forced marriages are common among Syrian refugees. Early marriage is more common in rural areas of Syria.^{29, 30} It is forbidden in Yazidism for an adherent to marry outside of their caste or religion.³¹

Divorce

Divorces in Turkey are granted through civil family courts. People who were married outside Turkey, but now reside in Turkey, are permitted to divorce. Divorce hearings are conducted in open court, but the judge may grant a request to conduct proceedings privately. If the judge feels the couple could reconcile, a separation may be instituted

before the divorce is final. Women must adhere to remarriage restrictions stipulated in the divorce decree, but if there are no special restrictions, she is restricted from remarriage for 300 days after the divorce is finalized.^{32, 33}

Divorced women in Iraq are vulnerable to labor exploitation. Strong attitudes against divorce sometimes prevent a divorced woman from returning to her family.³⁴ Women in Syria may file for divorce, but the law favors men in divorce proceedings. A divorced Syrian woman has full custody of her children, but the father receives custody when their children are teens. Some women forfeit alimony in order to obtain a divorce.³⁵



*Young mother with her child, Urfa
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

In Iran, a woman can receive a divorce if her husband consents, or if he has significant faults, but a husband can divorce his wife for any reason. A woman may sue if her ex-husband has not fulfilled his financial obligations to her, but women's divorce rights are not strongly protected. Women are favored in custody cases involving children under seven, but a child's father will still be a legal guardian. A father is given custody of any children over the age of seven, but older children have a say in determining custody.³⁶

Death and Funerals



*Kurdish women and children at the gravesite
Flickr / DVIDSHUB*

Muslims are buried shortly after death, typically within 24 hours. Family members, close friends of the same gender, or a spouse, wash the deceased. After the washing is complete, the deceased is sprinkled with scented oil and wrapped in a white burial shroud. Autopsies and embalming are avoided. Those killed in battle are not washed and are buried as is.^{37, 38, 39} The imam leads a funeral prayer service at a mosque. At the gravesite, the body is placed on its right side with

the head facing toward Mecca; mourners often drop handfuls of dirt into the grave. Occupied burial plots are often raised from the ground and marked with a simple marker

of headstone. Walking over graves or sitting on graves is inappropriate; mementos or flowers should not be placed on a grave.⁴⁰

▶ I would like to offer my condolences.		
Visitor:	sera Khoshye il taw Kheyzaana tadmek	I would like to offer my condolences to you and your family.
Local:	soopaas	Thank you.

Exchange 24

Fallen members of Kurdish militias are held in high regard among Rojava’s Kurdish community. Throughout northern Syria, memorials for deceased fighters are prevalent. Well-kept cemeteries, museums, and monuments have been built to honor fallen comrades. Memorabilia, photos, and mementos are publically displayed and widely distributed to the public, and billboards and museums display hundreds of photos of the deceased. Fallen YPJ and YPG fighters are honored with large funeral services. Family members of those who were killed fighting for Rojava are highly respected, and many consider it an honor to be a relative of a fallen fighter.⁴¹



*Martyrs cemetery, Rojava
Flickr / Janet Biehl*

Naming Conventions



*Kurdish children playing
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

In recent years, children have been named after deceased members of the YPG and YPJ; friends and family members may take on the name of a fallen relative or introduce themselves as a relative of the fallen fighter. The Iranian government has a list of approved names, which excludes names used by the country’s linguistic and ethnic minorities.^{42, 43} The Turkish government prohibited Kurdish names as a means of assimilating the Kurdish population into Turkish society.

Since 2009, Kurds in Turkey have been allowed to name their children Kurdish names, but only with the letters of the Turkish alphabet, which prohibits names containing W, X, and Q.^{44, 45}

Kurdish Tribes

Tribal membership is passed down through a father's line. Over time, tribes divide and form alliances. Tribal governance is hierarchical and leadership roles are inherited. Tribes can lend support to, or undermine, government initiatives. Tribal interactions with governments has led to the development of patronage networks: Political parties appoint tribal members to government positions and direct funds to tribes in order to gain tribal loyalty. Urban Kurds don't typically abide by the tribal hierarchy that rural Kurds observe. The loyalties of rural Kurds often don't extend beyond the tribe or tribal network.^{46, 47}



*A Kurdish tribe
Flickr / jan Sefti*

The Yazidis adhere to a strict caste system as a pillar of religious and daily life and do not accept religious converts. At the top of their hierarchy, is the *mir*, who is the temporal head of the tribe; below him is the sheikh caste, headed by the Baba Sheikh, who is the spiritual leader. At the bottom reside the majority of Yazidis, who are the commoners.^{48, 49}

▶ How many people live in this house?		
Visitor:	chand kas ilvey Khaaney dzheen?	How many people live in this house?
Local:	da	Ten.

Exchange 25

The PYD has been able to integrate the Kurdish tribal structure into the government of Rojava. Historically, relations between Kurdish and Arab tribes in Syria have been strained. Most Arab tribal leaders feel that the Kurds are taking advantage of the situation in order to push them out of northern Syria. The divided loyalties among Syria's diverse population add to the complexity of its civil war.⁵⁰

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Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Chapter 6 | Family Life

Assessment

1. The Kurdish population in Turkey is growing faster than the ethnic Turk population.
2. Syrian Kurds are not allowed to honor their fallen fighters in public.
3. Muslim fighters killed in battle have to be washed and wrapped in shrouds before burial.
4. Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, women cannot ask for a divorce.
5. Kurds in Turkey are allowed to give their children Kurdish names, provided they correspond with the Turkish alphabet.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. False; 5. True

Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Further Readings and Resources

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Kurmanji Cultural Orientation

Final Assessment

1. During Saddam Hussein's rule, many Yazidi men joined the Iraqi Army to fight the Kurds.
2. The Turkish government is building a large dam on the Tigris River in order to stimulate the economy of the Kurdish region.
3. Rojava is the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.
4. Peshmerga is a derogatory term Turks use to call ethnic Kurds.
5. An independence referendum held by the Kurdish Regional Government was rejected by a majority of Kurds because of security reasons.
6. Gender equality is a priority for the local government in the Kurdish-held areas of northern Syria.
7. *Dengbej* is a popular mutton stew served in the winter.
8. The Epic of Gilgamesh is an award-winning film directed by a Syrian Kurd.
9. The Kurdish Regional Government considers domestic violence a private matter beyond the scope of the police.

10. Kurdish Yarsanis enjoy special protection in Iran because they are the decedents of the earliest Shia followers.
11. Alevis celebrate Ramadan with Shia Muslims, who also recognize Ali as the successor of the Prophet Muhammad.
12. Kurdish Jews were expelled from Iraqi Kurdistan after the creation of the state of Israel.
13. Kurds are a religiously diverse ethnic group.
14. The spiritual leaders of the Alevis are called Alawites.
15. Syrian Kurds fought alongside ISIS during the civil war in Syria and Iraq.
16. Foreigners who work in Iraqi Kurdistan are paid in U.S. dollars.
17. Kobani was one of the few Kurdish cities that remained untouched by the Syrian Civil War.
18. The government of Turkey prohibits teaching Kurdish courses in universities.
19. The Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy is a Kurdish co-ed university.
20. The KRG exports its oil through Kuwait.

21. The Peshmerga of Iraqi Kurdistan depend on the local villagers to care for their wounded fighters.
22. The Kurds are among the poorest people in Turkey.
23. The Assad regime accused Turkey of dropping barrel bombs on Kurdish towns in northern Syria.
24. Turkey considers major Kurdish organizations in Syria to be a security threat to Turkey.
25. The PYD (Kurdish Democratic Union Party of Syria) protects minorities who reside in the Kurdish region of Northern Syria.
26. The Kurds of northern Syria bury their fallen fighters in secret to avoid attacks by Syrian government forces or ISIS.
27. Iranian Kurds can give Kurdish names to their children.
28. The Yazidi society is organized according to a caste system.
29. Elderly men hold positions of authority within Kurdish tribes.
30. It is common to name children after deceased members of the YPG and YPJ in Syria.

29. True; 30. True

19. True; 20. False; 21. False; 22. True; 23. False; 24. True; 25. False; 26. False; 27. False; 28. True; False; 10. False; 11. True; 12. False; 13. True; 14. False; 15. False; 16. True; 17. False; 18. False; 9. Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. False; 4. False; 5. False; 6. True; 7. False; 8. False; 9.