

Kurds

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Profile

Kurds make up around 15-20 per cent of Iraq's population, and inhabit the mountains, foothills and parts of the plain from approximately Khaniqin in the south in an arc to Zakhu in the north, and with the outpost of Jabal Sinjar to the north-west, where the Kurds are Yezidi. The Kurds do not form a homogenous whole (see Iran, Turkey, Syria). Those north of the Greater Zab river speak Kirmanji Kurdish, as do most Turkish Kurds, while those south of it speak Sorani and have greater affinity with Iranian Kurds. The majority are Shafi'i Sunni, but about 150,000 in Baghdad and the south-east were Shi'a (known locally as Faili), mostly of Luri (see Iran) origin. In Baghdad the Failis were important both as traders and porters in the main suq. Most were expelled by the government in the 1970s.

Historical context

Kurdish society and politics were before the 1970s dominated by tribalism. Urban or educated Kurds have only assumed political leadership in the latter twentieth century. There are two main political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Mas'ud Barzani, which is dominant north of the Greater Zab and upholds more traditional values, and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which claims a 'progressive' ideology and is led by urban Kurds.

After many years of bitter fighting, which weakened both parties, Talabani was elected President of Iraq whilst Barzani became president of the Kurdistan region.

Kurdish nationalism was born during the 1930s, when young urban nationalists challenged tribalism within, and the Arab-dominated government outside, the community. It resented the way in which Kurdish political and cultural rights had been ignored by successive regimes. It acquired momentum during the 1960s, when it was still possible to resist army assaults. But until 1991 there were always almost equal numbers of Kurds who have fought for the government, either willingly or under duress.

In 1970 Saddam Hussein offered the Kurds a formal autonomy agreement. It seemed an historic landmark until it became clear that Saddam intended to rob the term autonomy of its meaning. In 1975 he defeated the Kurdish forces. The Iran-Iraq War gave the Kurds another chance to force government troops out and demand autonomy. But as Iranian offensives began to lose momentum, Iraq used chemical warfare and genocide against Kurds. In March 1988, 5,000 Kurds perished in a chemical attack on Halabja. During the same period the government embarked on genocide, the notorious 'Anfal', killing in the order of 180,000 men, women and children, and razing almost 4,000 out of 5,000 villages and hamlets in Kurdistan.

In March 1991 the Kurds followed the Shi'a example and rose against government forces, initially driving them out of Kurdistan. A counter-offensive precipitated mass flight of about 1.5 million Kurds

to the Turkish and Iranian borders. Only intervention by the international coalition to guarantee aerial protection north of latitude 36 created the conditions for Kurds to return and start rebuilding their lives. An attempted negotiation with Saddam collapsed.

In 1992 Kurds living in the de facto autonomous zone voted in a free election. The PUK and KDP won almost exactly equal shares of the vote, and so shared government. However, in 1994 fighting broke out between them, as each represented rival patronage networks. In August 1996 the partition between PUK and KDP zones broke down with open and mobile warfare between the two parties, the PUK backed by Iran and the KDP by Saddam Hussein. Despite Saddam's blockade of Kurdistan and dire economic conditions in the rest of Iraq as a result of the international embargo, Kurdistan was able to attain some economic growth through better management of its income through the UN 'Oil for food' programme. A modest quantity of relief goods entered autonomous Kurdistan from Turkey.

Kurds represent by far the largest non-Arab ethnic minority. They are the overwhelming majority in al-Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Dahuk governorates. The Kurds are almost certainly also a majority in the oil-rich region around Kirkuk.

Kurds are part of the larger Kurdish population (probably numbering close to 16 million) that inhabits the wide arc from eastern Turkey and the northwestern part of Syria through Azarbaijan and Iraq to the northwest of the Zagros Mountains in Iran. The largest numbers live in Turkey whose successive governments have prevented any independence for the Kurds in the region.

Current issues

Since the overthrow of the Hussein regime in 2003, the predominantly Kurdish north-in relative terms-has been the most peaceful in the country. It is clear that threats in Baghdad and other parts of the country are driving other Iraqis into the Kurdish areas. Many thousands of Christians and Sunni Iraqis, especially, are seeking refuge in Kurdistan.

As Kurds pursue greater autonomy and the dream of an independent Kurdistan, they have encountered resistance not only from Sunni and Shi'a Arabs who favour a unified Iraq, but also Iran, Syria and Turkey, all of which have neighbouring Kurdish minorities who, they fear, would seek to join such a new state.

Oil-rich Kirkuk has been a particular focus of attention. It lies beyond the Erbil-based Kurdistan Regional Government's reach, but within its desire. Kurds used their position in the government elected in January 2005 to secure a process that would reverse the Hussein-era process of Arabization in Kirkuk, moving toward its eventual formal inclusion in the Kurdish region by a referendum due by the end of 2007. Similarly, the Kurdish government in Erbil governate has attempted to extend its influence to the likewise disputed city of Mosul. The manoeuvring for control of the north has led militant opponents of increasing Kurdish autonomy to strike. In October 2006, a Kurdish member of parliament and his driver were found dead-the suspected work of a Shi'a Arab militia. that same month, a senior member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was assassinated in Mosul.

The Faili Kurds, who follow Shi'a Islam, live along the Iran/Iraq border and in Baghdad. Repressed as 'Iranians' under the Hussein regime, they are now targeted for ethnic and religious reasons. In November 2005, two Faili Kurdish mosques in the town of Khanaqin were bombed. A July 2007 truck bomb at a café frequented by Faili in the town of Amirli killed 105 and injured nearly 250 more. Journalists suspected that the bombing was linked to the forthcoming referendum on Kurdish autonomy.