

## Summary – Presentation “Kurds in Syria and Iraq”

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There are large disagreements in the literature about the Kurds in the past and the present, whether it is about the linguistics, their number, and in terms of the right of self-determination and minority rights. However, scholars seem to agree on one thing: The Kurdish question is a problem of territory: it is a nation that spreads over four states. Indeed southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern Iran and northern Syria are historically regions where Kurdish people are or have been the majority population. There have been movements seeking independence in all of the four regions. These movements have a transnational character too, because whatever happens in one of the mother states affects the Kurdish community in the other states. According to the UN, there are four main components of the so-called Kurdistan: Northern Kurdistan (Turkey), Southern Kurdistan (Iraq), Eastern Kurdistan (Iran), Western Kurdistan /Rojava (Syria). The question is therefore: how did a nation end up in four states?

The answer should be traced back to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916. It was a secret treaty between the United Kingdom and France. Britain controlled southern Israel and Palestine and southern Iraq for instance, while France controlled southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon etc. Moreover, the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 drew another border between the Ottoman Empire and French Protectorate in the North, even though this treaty had provisions guaranteeing independence to the Kurdish territories. This golden opportunity has been missed for a number of reasons, but the most important one is that the treaty failed and was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 which divided Kurdistan between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Azerbaijan. Furthermore, at that time, the Kurds were not politically organized nor had interest in having a state when the other groups started their nation building process. The largest Kurdish population is in Turkey, followed by Iran and Syria. Because of the ban of the use of the Kurdish language, the culture and the arrests of Kurds in Turkey escalated in an armed conflict in 1984. The Turkish Government and the PKK started a peace talk in 2013, but only two years later, the violence resumed, and Kurdish mayors were removed. Similarly, in Iran, armed conflict and severe repression started again in 2015, even though the situation of then Kurds was relatively calm since the mid-1990's. In Iraq, Kurdistan is recognized as a region with self-rule and is therefore quasi-independent. The issue in Iraq are however the borders which are disputed. And finally, the Kurds in Syria have acquired autonomy in the north since 2012 after a difficult period in the 1960's and 1970's. Before new elections can happen in Syria the state needs a new constitution. But there is no agreement on the new constitution and major questions depend on the future of the regime and its leaders. The Kurdish questions is not on the priority list in Syria.

To sum up: the Kurds have para-states in Iraq and Syria, while it is movement engaged in armed conflict and repression in Turkey and Iran. Meanwhile a pan-Kurdish identity is developing notably in relation to increase of migration, armed struggle, trade and media. This makes the Kurdish question even more complicated. According to Michael Wolffsohn, federalism is the solution to the Kurdish problem. He suggests that a confederal layer on top of the four regions would solve the problem and bring peace. That would also solve the issue that an independent Kurdistan in this conflict area might not be the solution for all Kurds.