

Presentation Notes: The Kurds

1. (Slide 1) Overview of the Kurds:

A. The Kurds are a large people (about 15-27 million – a huge difference, depending on who is counting them, how they determine who is who, and when they are counting) with their own language and culture but *without* their own country. (Slides 2, 3, 4)

B. Kurds are a pre-dominantly Indo-European people with their own language and culture. Their language is more closely related to Persian than to Arabic or Turkish, and Kurds celebrate some Iranian holidays such as the Persian New Year in March. However, the Kurdish language is different from Persian (a separate language, **not** just a dialect), and unlike Iranians, most Kurds are **Sunni** Muslims.

C. Kurds live in a mountainous area of eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, and small parts of northern Syria. “Kurdistan” (which is not a recognized country but divided among the countries listed above) is an area of 230,000 square miles, an area about as big as Texas. (Slides 5, 6, 7)

D. About half of all Kurds (8-12 million) live in Turkey, where they make up more than 20% of the Turkish population. There are 7 million Kurds in Iran (10% of Iran’s population), and 4-5 million in Iraq (23% of Iraq’s population). Smaller numbers live in Syria. (Slides 8, 9)

2. Modern History:

A. The turning point for the Kurds – as for most Middle Eastern people - came in 1919 after World War I.

1. Before World War I, much of the Middle East was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. (Note: Iran was *not* under the Ottomans.)
2. During the war, the Kurds suffered a lot. The Ottomans used them to help kill Armenians in the Armenian genocide of 1915. But the Kurds suffered during the war too: fighting the Russians, dying from famine as well as war. About 800,000 died.
3. When the Ottoman Empire fell, the Great Powers signed the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, giving Kurds the right to form a country (Iraqi and Turkish Kurds).
4. But the Turks, who were treated badly by the treaty, rebelled and fought a war of independence under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. A new treaty in 1923 created the state of Turkey and totally overlooked the Kurds, who were split between Iran and the newly-created states of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. (Slide 10)

B. Kurds in Turkey (Remember: About ½ of all Kurds – 8-12 million, one organization says 20 million – live in Turkey, where they make up more than 20% of the population.)

1. The Kurds were treated badly by the Turkish government. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s there were revolts. Kurds were denied separate status (labeled by Ataturk as “Mountain Turks) and forbidden to speak their language, wear traditional Turkish clothing, play Kurdish music, or even to give their children Turkish names. (This lasted until the 21st century). Often, there were checkpoints and curfews.

2. From the mid-1980s through the 1990s, a violent guerilla war broke out between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish military. Tens of thousands were killed, and many people fled. **(Slide 11)**
 3. In 1991, Turkey changed its law, making it legal to speak Kurdish in private. However, it remained illegal to speak Kurdish in the public sphere. That same year, Leyla Zana became the first Kurdish woman elected to the Turkish parliament. **(Slide 12)** In her inaugural speech, she said one sentence in Kurdish (about her commitment to the brotherhood of the Turkish and Kurdish peoples). This caused outrage, and the government looked for a reason to strip her of her parliamentary immunity so that they could arrest her. In 1994, she was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to prison for “treason.” An international uproar ensued (and she was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize). She was released from prison in 2004 after 10 years.
 4. Life is slowly improving for the Kurds (especially as Turkey wants to qualify to join the European Union and so can’t treat a minority group so badly. There is even a government-sponsored Kurdish-language television station now. But problems still remain. In 2006, a tough new anti-terrorism law classified many Kurdish political groups as “terrorist groups.” Since then, hundreds of children, some aged 15 or younger, have been sent to prison just for attending a Kurdish demonstration. **(Slide 13)** In other words, positive changes have occurred; problems still remain. **(Slide 14)**
- C. Kurds in Iraq (4-5 million or about 20% of Iraq’s population)
1. Iraq was created after World War I and put under a British “mandate.” Scholars disagree about how many Kurds live in Iraq or what percentage they make up of the population, but some say the new country included approximately 60% Shi’ite Muslim Arabs, 20% Sunni Muslim Arabs, between 15 and 20% Sunni Muslim Kurds (with small minorities making up the rest). Note that the Kurds are in a minority twice over: as Kurds in a state that is 80% Arab, and as Sunnis in a state that is 60% Shi’ite.
 2. Iraqi Kurds rebelled, twice declaring Mahmoud Barzinji to be “king of Kurdistan,” between late 1918 and 1927.
 3. Mulla Mustafa Barzani was involved in Kurdish rebellions in Iraq from his teenage years in 1919 until his death in 1979. (He wasn’t a religious leader – “Mulla” was just part of his name.) During World War II, he led a rebellion against the Baghdad government, demanding an autonomous Kurdish region in the north of Iraq, Kurdish to be made an official language, and a share in the Iraqi government. When the war ended, his rebellion was put down.
 4. 1960-1975 was a period of warfare between Kurdish forces (led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani) and the Iraqi government. **(Slide 15)** Fighting was especially intense after 1968 when the Baath Party came to power. By the early 1970s, it looked as if the Kurds might succeed in getting autonomy in northern Iraq.
 5. In 1975, however, the shah of Iran (the Iraqi Kurds’ main patron) with drew his support and signed the Algiers Accord with Iraq. The result was that the Kurds lost out, and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership split into two factions: one led by Massoud Barzani (Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s son) and the other led by Jalal Talabani. Low-level fighting continued.

6. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which began shortly after Saddam Hussein came to power, some Iraqi Kurds favored Iran. From 1986-1989, the Iraqi government launched the Anfal campaign, a genocide against the rural Kurds of northern Iraq. Ali Hassan al-Majid, a cousin of Saddam Hussein, took charge and became known as “Chemical Ali” because of his use of chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians. The most infamous episode was the poison-gas attack against the Kurdish town of Halabja, killing 5,000. **(Slide 16)** More than 100,000 civilians were killed; 1.5 million people were left homeless; and thousands fled into Turkey.
 7. A few years later, in 1991, following the invasion of Iraq by a U.S.-led international coalition (Desert Storm), the Kurds rebelled against the Iraqi government and called on the U.S. for support. **(Slide 17)** The U.S. failed to provide military assistance as the Iraqi government put down the revolt, and millions of Kurds, fearing Iraqi retaliation, fled towards Turkey.
 8. An international “No Fly Zone” kept another massacre from occurring, and the U.N. demanded that the Iraqi government come to terms with the Kurds. But sporadic fighting continued, and different Kurdish factors also battled each other. Over the next years, the Kurds gradually got greater autonomy.
 9. In 2003, when the U.S. again attacked Iraq, the Kurds supported the U.S. Since that time, the Kurds have increased their autonomy in Iraq and have control over a greater territory. **(Slide 18)** The Kurds now have their own elected parliament. They also can play a key role in national elections since neither the Shi’ite Arabs nor the Sunni Arabs can command a majority without Kurdish support. However, tensions remain between the Kurds and the Arab majority (and Arab-dominated central government). But unrest remains here too. **(Slide 19)**
- D. Kurds in Iran (maybe 7 million, about 10% of Iran’s population)
1. Immediately after World War I, Kurdish leaders in Iran carved out their own territories, but as the new Pahlavi dynasty took shape in the early-mid 1920s, a central Iranian government took control. Kurdish leaders were deported, and the government took over their lands. During World War II, the Kurds once again tried to regain autonomy.
 2. As World War II ended and the Cold War began, the Kurds of Iran established the Mahabad Republic, lasting from January 1946-December 1946. The Kurds had hoped for Soviet backing but didn’t really get it. **(Slide 20)** The Iranian government eventually reasserted control over the region, banning the teaching of the Kurdish language and Kurdish-language materials (newspapers, books). They also executed the leader of the republic, Qazi Muhammad, for treason.
 3. During the events culminating in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iranian Kurds, in general, were not opposed to the revolution since the shah had suppressed their liberties too. However, as an Islamic government was set up, the Kurds, who were mostly Sunni Muslim, found themselves left out. Iran’s new government (under Ayatollah Khomeini) did not allow Kurdish representation on the committee to create a constitution and eventually declared a ‘holy war’ against Kurdish separatism. **(Slide 21)** Maybe 10,000 Kurds were killed.
 4. Iran had been suspicious of the Kurds not only because of their Sunni religion but also because of their ties to Kurds in other countries. However, during the Iran-Iraq

War of 1980-1988, the Iranians found that Iraqi Kurds favored the Iranians more than their own country's government under Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi Anfal campaign against the Kurds furthered that process.

5. Within Iran, Kurds have been generally oppressed (their Sunni religious institutions disallowed, separatist political leaders executed), but there have not been massacres (as in Iraq) and cultural institutions (newspapers, etc.) have been only sporadically closed.

6. Kurds have clashed with the Iranian police and army since 2004.

E. Kurds in Syria (maybe 3 million or 16% of Syria's population, its largest ethnic minority)

1. Kurds live mostly in the northeastern parts of Syria, bordering Turkey and Iraq.

2. In the early 1960s, Syria created an Arab republic and tried to "Arabize" all parts of Syria. Many Kurds lost their status as Syrian citizens (were classified as "aliens") and become stateless people without rights. According to Refugees International: "The lack of nationality and identity documents means that stateless Kurds, for all practical purposes, are rendered non-existent. Their basic rights to education, employment, property ownership, political participation, and legal marriage are severely limited, relegating them to the outermost margins of Syrian civil society. The stateless people can also not immigrate to another country because one has to have a passport to apply to immigrate. "It is like being buried alive," said one man."

3. Sporadic demonstrations have occurred: in 1986 following an incident when Syrian police fired on a crowd of Kurds celebrating Noruz (Persian New Year) because they were 'illegally' wearing Kurdish traditional clothes and 40,000 attended the funeral of the person killed in the shooting; in 2004 when Kurds clashed with police after an incident at a soccer game. **(Slide 22)**

3. Conclusions

A. Some Kurds have been victims: Kurds have faced (and still face) discrimination in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. **(Slide 23)**

B. Some Kurds have become militants: Kurds have been involved in demonstrations and revolutionary movements. **(Slide 24)**

C. Most Kurds are people trying to make a good life for themselves and their families: Kurds are struggling to advance economically, have a share of political power, and ensure that some schools, radio/television stations, and newspapers will be in the Kurdish language. **(Slide 25)**

4. Discussion

A. Why don't the Kurds have a country of their own?

B. What are some of the problems faced by the Kurds? In which places/time periods have Kurds suffered the worst?

C. What possible solutions to "the Kurdish Question" have been proposed? (a Kurdish state, autonomy within each of the countries within which they live, participating within the majority-dominated government but with some guarantees of their rights)

D. How effective has each of them been, and why did they succeed or not?