

The Kurds and President Trump

by Michael Curtis

What is the largest ethnic group that wants but does not have a nation state of its own? No, it's not the "Palestinian people," but the Kurds who number between 30 and 35 million. Living in areas of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia, they constitute the fourth largest ethnic group. They constitute 18% of the Turkish population, 10% in Iran, 17% in Iraq, and 10% in Syria.

In all the four countries they have suffered persecution, discrimination, and marginalization, though they were protected to some extent in Syria by the French mandate. In Turkey the repression of Kurds has been constant and the language forbidden for a time. In Iran the Ayatollah Khomeini declared "holy war" against them, and 10,000 Kurds were killed. Saddam Hussein in Iraq removed thousands of them in his "Arabization" program. At best, there has been an uneven relationship between Kurds and government authorities who may see Kurds as a security problem.

Calls for Kurdish autonomy began in the late 19th century under the Ottoman Empire. Organizations to that end were formed after World War I and again after World War II in the four countries in which Kurds lived.

The Kurds have played a role in history, especially when the Kurdish Saladin the Magnificent took power in the 12th century. Saladin, renowned as a liberator and good ruler, is regarded as a symbol of courage and resistance not only by Kurds but also by Arabs as a unifier of the Middle East and the conqueror of Jerusalem. Throughout history the Kurds have maintained their ethnic identity in spite of divisions and conflicts among them, which has made their situation complex.

They have become more important in the context of international politics since they have been playing a prominent courageous role in the fighting in Syria and Iraq, particularly in the struggle against ISIS. The Kurds, with support of US led coalition airpower, have been responsible for a number of victories against ISIS in northern Syria and controls territory along the Turkish border. They have driven ISIS out of a number of towns. There is a virtual partnership between the Kurds and the US in the war against Radical Islam.

This indigenous people are a distinct people because of common race, culture, and language, though they differ religiously. The question is why do they not have a state of their own. With the end of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the Western Allies by the Treaty of Sevres of August 10, 1920 suggested both local autonomy and a Kurdish independent state.

But there were acute international and Kurdish differences on this and the proposals were put aside in the Treaty of Lausanne of July 24, 1923 which set the boundaries of Turkey and left the Kurds in minority status in the various four countries. The argument can be made that the Kurds were the great losers in the international machinations to establish political entities after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

Since then, Kurdish groups, both legal parties and organizations, and those calling for armed struggle and guerrilla tactics, have struggled for a state of their own, or for some autonomous status. These groups developed in a number of countries, starting in 1927 with the Khoybun in Syria and Lebanon, and then in Iran in 1946 the PDK (Democratic Party of Kurdistan) in which Mustafa Barzani was a central figure. Their cause has not been helped by the tensions between the Kurdish groups, which at one point led to civil war.

That struggle has been particularly acute in Turkey where Kurds constitute almost 18% of the population. After a number of Kurdish uprisings Turkey imposed brutal treatment on its

Kurdish citizens. Among other things, Kurds were removed from their areas, the Kurdish language was restricted, and Kurdish names and costumes were banned. Kurdish ethnic identity was denied.

In response, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a leftist Marxist and militant group, was formed by Abdullah Ocalan in 1978, calling for an independent state in Turkey, and soon in 1984 began an armed struggle in which 40,000 were killed and thousands were displaced. The PKK withdrew the demand for an independent state. Instead, it called for greater cultural and political autonomy, though fighting continued.

A temporary ceasefire was ended in July 2015 with clashes in southeastern Turkey and air strikes on PKK camps in Iraq. However, the PKK whose leader, Ocalan, has been imprisoned since 1999, operates a number of camps in northern Iraq. It is a sign of his political blindness that Turkish President Erdogan declared in 2015 that Turkey does not have a Kurdish problem.

Further violence resulted from a suicide bomb attack in Ankara in February 2016 that Turkey blamed on the Syrian Kurdish YPG, (Popular Protection Units), aligned to the PYD (Democratic Unity Party) that Turkey labels terrorist organizations. Turkey views the YPG as an extension of the PKK. In fact, the PKK, though not the YPG, is officially regarded as a terrorist group by the U.S. and the EU.

Kurds make up about 10 % of the population of Syria and an estimated 15-20 % of Iraq. In Iraq the Kurds have created the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) which has the Peshmerga as its armed forces, and the Iraqi Kurdish Party led by Massoud Barzani. The Peshmerga force of 150,000 has been a significant part of the forces in the war against ISIS in Iraq, especially in Mosul. It has suffered severe losses and more than 1,000 have been killed by ISIS.

In Syria the basic rights of Kurds have been suppressed. Many have been denied citizenship while Kurdish land has been taken and given to Arabs. All demands for greater autonomy have been suppressed.

In January 2014 the Syrian PYD and other groups declared the creation of an autonomous government with three branches. This was not an independent state, but a democratic administration within a federal framework.

The PYD leader, Salih Muslim, has declared that a political settlement to end the conflict in Syria must recognize Kurdish autonomy. The PYD has fought against rebel groups though not allied to Assad whom it believes should not be in power.

After a Kurdish revolt against British rule failed, the KDP was formed by Mustafa Barzani in 1946 to struggle for autonomy in Iraq, but this proposal for self-rule was rejected by the central government, and KDP launched an armed struggle in 1961. In 1975 divisions in the KDP led to Jalal Talabani leaving and forming the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan).

The Kurds took the side of Iran in the war with Iraq. As a result, Saddam Hussein in 1988 attacked the Kurds including a poison gas attack on Halabja. A Kurdish rebellion was brutally suppressed. Some 1.5 million Iraqi Kurds fled into Iran and Turkey after the 1991 rebellion was crushed.

The Iraqi Kurds cooperated in the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that ended the rule of Saddam Hussein. In 2005 the Iraqi constitution recognized the autonomy of Kurdistan. The KRG (Kurdistani Regional Government) was created to administer three provinces in the country. It controls an area of about 16,000 square miles, one tenth of Iraq, and has oil reserves of 4 billion barrels. In February 2016, Massoud Barzani, president of Kurdistan since 2005, called for a referendum on independence.

It is unclear what will be the boundaries of an independent

state, beyond the three provinces, especially with claims to the oil rich Kirkuk area. Yet irrespective of the boundaries, it is incumbent on the Trump administration to support such an outcome. There has been no overall US policy concerning the Kurds, though it has included secret relationships and humanitarian aid.

Now there is collaboration in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Though increased US support for the Kurds may involve problems with Middle East countries, especially Turkey, the Kurds have proved they are the most effective fighters in the war against ISIS. The Trump administration must persuade Turkey that the Kurds are not a threat to their national security, and that they would benefit from an established Kurdistan.