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Forging Connections: Building a Community Among States Through Diplomacy

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Security Council Update No. 1: The Kurdish Struggle

Introduction

The Kurds are an indigenous group located primarily in the Middle East, specifically in the “Mesopotamian plains, south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq, north-western Iran, and south-western Armenia.”¹ The Kurdish population numbers between 25 and 35 million people and are an idiosyncratic culture for the region, unified via their race, culture, and language, even without a standard dialect.² The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim people, though there are groups and individuals of many different religions and creeds.³

The Kurds modern struggle began in the early 20th century. With the conclusion of World War I (WWI), the Kurds sought sovereignty after centuries under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.⁴ While WWI was ongoing, the British and French secretly created the Sykes-Picot Agreement.⁵ The goal of the Sykes-Picot Agreement was to divide the Middle East into states that were under British and French colonial rule for the benefit of said Western Powers.⁶ The Kurds believed that this settlement would allow them to have a territory with defined boundaries, even if under colonial rule.⁷ However, after the conclusion of the Turkish War for Independence and the resulting formation of the Turkish Republic, the Turks rejected the Sykes-Picot Agreement and instead ratified a new treaty, titled the Treaty of Lausanne, which made no mention of consideration of a Kurdish homeland and resulted in minority status for the ethnic group across multiple Member States.^{8,9} Since then, the Kurds have encountered repression particularly in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

Current Situation

In Iraq, since the 1970s, attempts were made for an autonomous region for the Kurds but violent conflicts delayed such plans until 1991.¹⁰ Following the Gulf War, a safe haven region for Kurds was created, known as Iraqi Kurdistan, and a parliament was established in 1992.^{11,12} In 2005, Iraq's Constitution formally recognized Iraqi

¹ "Who are the Kurds?" BBC News, October 15, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>

² "Who are the Kurds?" BBC News.

³ "Who are the Kurds?" BBC News.

⁴ "Sykes-Picot: The map that spawned a century of resentment," BBC News, May 16, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36300224>

⁵ "How the Curse of Sykes-Picot Still Haunts the Middle East," The New Yorker, April 30, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-curse-of-sykes-picot-still-haunts-the-middle-east>

⁶ "How the Curse of Sykes-Picot Still Haunts the Middle East," The New Yorker.

⁷ "Sykes-Picot: The map that spawned a century of resentment," BBC News, May 16, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36300224>

⁸ "Sykes-Picot: The map that spawned a century of resentment," BBC News,

⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., *Treaty of Lausanne*, February 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Lausanne-1923>

¹⁰ "Iraqi Kurdistan profile," BBC News, April 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28147263>

¹¹ "Iraqi Kurdistan profile," BBC News.

¹² "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post, October 14, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/11/who-are-kurds-why-is-turkey-attacking-them/>



Kurdistan as an autonomous region.¹³ Sectarian tensions within Iraq, however, continued, which strengthened the Islamic State jihadist militant group across the Middle East.¹⁴ In July 2014, Iraqi Kurdistan's government announced plans for an independence vote from Iraq.¹⁵ The growth of the Islamic State delayed referendum efforts as the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurdistan government partnered to defeat the jihadist militant group.¹⁶ In September 2017, despite warnings from the United Nations (UN) Security Council that a referendum vote would destabilize Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan voted in favor of independence.¹⁷ The Iraqi government reasserted its authority towards Iraqi Kurdistan, which included Iraqi troops securing oil fields and territory.^{18, 19}

An autonomous region in Iraq, strengthened by Iraqi Kurdistan's referendum efforts, raised alarms for surrounding UN Member States with their own minority Kurdish populations. In Turkey and Syria, policies restricted Kurds from expressing their ethnic identities and cultures. Turkey's policies instructed Kurds to assimilate into the Turkish ethnic identity.²⁰ Syria's policies saw the restrictions of the Kurdish language in public settings and literature and prohibited Kurdish events, such as the traditional Kurdish New Year of Nowruz.²¹ With the United States of America's (US) invasion of Iraq, the Syrian Kurdish population monitored the war's developments with renewed aspirations in Syria.²² While the Iraq War continued, Syrian security forces further repressed Kurdish political and cultural public gatherings.²³

The Islamic State militant group's growth in the Middle East led to the US's partnership with Syrian Kurdish forces, known as the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG), and other Arab groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).²⁴ The US, France, United Kingdom, and other Member States supplied the SDF with weapons and resources.²⁵ The partnership resulted in the weakening of the Islamic State.²⁶ Despite the YPG's battles against the Islamic State, Kurdish forces also encountered pressure from Turkey.²⁷ In October 2019, US President Donald Trump withdrew his troops from northern Syria, and this allowed Turkey to launch an offensive titled "Peace Spring Operation" against Kurdish forces.²⁸ According to the UN, more than 130,000 people were displaced within days of the offensive.²⁹

¹³ "Iraqi Kurdistan profile," BBC News, April 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28147263>

¹⁴ "Iraqi Kurdistan profile," BBC News.

¹⁵ "Iraqi Kurdistan profile," BBC News.

¹⁶ "Iraqi Kurdistan profile," BBC News.

¹⁷ "UN Security Council opposes Kurdish independence vote," France 24, September 22, 2017,

<https://www.france24.com/en/20170922-united-nations-security-council-says-opposes-kurdistan-iraq-independence-vote>

¹⁸ "Iraqi Kurdistan profile," BBC News, April 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28147263>

¹⁹ "News in Brief 20 October 2017 (PM)," UN News, October 20, 2017,

<https://news.un.org/en/audio/2017/10/634822>

²⁰ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post, October 14, 2019,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/11/who-are-kurds-why-is-turkey-attacking-them/>

²¹ "Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria," Human Rights Watch, November 26, 2009,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/26/group-denial/repression-kurdish-political-and-cultural-rights-syria>

²² "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post, October 14, 2019,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/11/who-are-kurds-why-is-turkey-attacking-them/>

²³ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

²⁴ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

²⁵ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

²⁶ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

²⁷ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

²⁸ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

²⁹ "Trump orders US troops out of northern Syria as Turkish assault continues," The Guardian, October 13, 2019,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/trump-us-troops-northern-syria-turkish-assault-kurds>



Approximately half of the entire Kurds population reside in Turkey.³⁰ For decades, Turkey has fought against the threats of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish nationalist militant group.³¹ Through those years, the conflict between Turkey and Kurdish nationalists has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths.³² While numerous UN Member States and the SDF fought against the Islamic State, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan believes that efforts to counter the YPG and PKK takes precedence over combating the Islamic State.³³ Erdoğan claimed the offensive in northern Syria will establish a "safe zone" for nearly a million Syrian refugees to return.³⁴ The US threatened Turkey with economic sanctions if civilian populations were attacked.³⁵ France and Germany halted arms sales to Turkey.³⁶ The Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, which had its own conflicts against the SDF, formed an alliance to push back against Turkey's territorial gains in northern Syria.^{37,38} The alliance, brokered by the Russian Federation, would allow the Assad government to once again regain the SDF's Syrian territory.³⁹

In a press conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, in October 2019, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said he does not "believe in military solutions for the Syrian problem, also for any other problem in the world. I always strongly believe in political solutions."⁴⁰ Guterres also expressed concern regarding the civilian displacement and humanitarian situation.⁴¹ The UN Security Council has held meetings regarding Turkey's military operation. Turkey, in a letter to the UN, stated its offensive would be "proportionate, measured, and responsible."⁴²

³⁰ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

³¹ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

³² "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

³³ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

³⁴ "Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them?" The Washington Post.

³⁵ "Turkey pushes deeper into Syria as U.S. draws red lines," NBC News,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/turkey-pushes-deeper-syria-u-s-draws-red-lines-n1064956>

³⁶ "Kurds agree to Russian-brokered plan to allow Assad into their territory," The Telegraph, October 14, 2019,

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/13/kurds-agree-russian-brokered-plan-allow-assad-territory/>

³⁷ "Kurds agree to Russian-brokered plan to allow Assad into their territory," The Telegraph.

³⁸ "Who are the Kurds?," BBC News, October 15, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>

³⁹ "Kurds agree to Russian-brokered plan to allow Assad into their territory," The Telegraph, October 14, 2019,

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/13/kurds-agree-russian-brokered-plan-allow-assad-territory/>

⁴⁰ "De-escalation of Turkish military operation in northern Syria 'absolutely essential'," UN News, October 10, 2019,

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/10/1049021>

⁴¹ "De-escalation of Turkish military operation in northern Syria 'absolutely essential'," UN News.

⁴² "UN Security Council Meets on Turkey's Offensive Against Kurds," Voice of America, October 10, 2019,

<https://www.voanews.com/europe/un-security-council-meets-turkeys-offensive-against-kurds>