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## **The Kurd Issue in the Middle East**

### *Kwestia kurdyjska na Bliskim Wschodzie*

#### **Summary:**

This article surveys the developing situation of Kurdish minority in the Middle East and tries to predict the future of this ethnic group. The emergence of Kurd nationalism is gaining importance nowadays as a challenge for the stability and unity of the states in the region. The Kurdish question is not only connected with the political identity of the Kurds and their willingness to create their own state, but also with their economic weakness and poverty which has caused a violent ethnic conflict between government forces and the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey. This paper is aimed at better understanding and analysis of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, which are Kurds' homelands in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Kurds, Middle East, Kurdistan Workers Party

#### **Streszczenie:**

Celem niniejszego opracowania jest analiza sytuacji i genezy mniejszości kurdyjskiej w wybranych państwach na Bliskim Wschodzie. Współcześnie wzrost kurdyjskiego nacjonalizmu stanowi wyzwanie dla stabilności i unitarności państw regionu. Jest to kwestia związana nie tylko z potrzebą tożsamości politycznej mniejszości kurdyjskiej i dążeniem do stworzenia własnego państwa, ale przede wszystkim z niedorozwojem gospodarczym i społecznym regionów kurdyjskich. Najwięcej Kurdów zamieszkuje na terytorium południowo – wschodniej Turcji. Państwo to od wielu lat boryka się z problemem terroryzmu Partii Pracujących Kurdystanu. Tym samym kwestię kurdyjską należy analizować uwzględniając szereg uwarunkowań politycznych, kulturowych, społecznych i gospodarczych stanowiących specyfikę państw zamieszkałych przez tę mniejszość.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mniejszość kurdyjska, Bliski Wschód, Partia Pracujących Kurdystanu

## 1. Introduction.

Kurds are one of the largest stateless community in the world. There are an estimated 30 million Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. More than half of the world's Kurds live in Turkey where they represent approximately 20% of the population<sup>1</sup>. The Kurds are the fourth – largest ethnic group in the Middle East (after Arabs, Persians and Turks).

Kurdish separatism is not a simple expression of discontent, but a movement that demands changing the boundaries of states to make room for an independent Kurdish state or to create some kind of autonomy. A Kurdish state would probably only emerge if there were a major collapse of the existing state system of Turkey, Iran, Iraq or Syria. With the exception of Iraq, this is highly unlikely to happen. The Kurdish issue is most politically troublesome and challenging for Turkish security. The war between the Turkish government and the Kurdish terrorist organization, Kurdistan Workers Party (*Parti Karkerani Kurdistan* - PKK) has left more than 30,000 people dead. The Kurdish issue is one of the problems in international relations which can not be effectively solved by one state. No state in the Middle East or the U.S. will support Kurdish independence, because it would create instability in the region.

## 2. History and identity of Kurds.

The present situation of the Kurds can only be understood in its historical context. The reconstruction of Kurdish history is very difficult because of the variety of sources. Middle Eastern history has often been written in accordance with the official ideology of the states or their dictators. The result is that Kurdish historic sources have been ignored<sup>2</sup>. There is no definitive answer to the question of Kurdish origins, except for the fact that Kurdish people have inhabited the mountainous regions north of Mesopotamia for a period of two to four thousand years<sup>3</sup>. Some researchers have suggested the possibility that some Kurdish tribes moved from Europe to Mesopotamia four thousand years ago<sup>4</sup>.

The term “Kurdistan” first appeared in the fourteenth century, but its boundaries shifted through time<sup>5</sup>. Kurdistan means “land of the Kurds”, but this area is not ho-

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<sup>1</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker's Party*, “American Foreign Policy Interests”, 2008 no. 30, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> M. R. Izady, *The Kurds: a concise handbook*, Washington 1992, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> J. Harvey, *No friends but Mountains: The Tragic History of Kurds*, “Middle East Journal”, 1993 vol. 47, no. 4, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> D. McDowall, *The Kurds: A Nation Denied*, London 1992, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> M. Rubin, *Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?*, “Social Research”, 2003 no. 1, p. 295.

mogenous and contains Arabs, Turks, Persians, Assyrians and Armenians<sup>6</sup>. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the shahs of Iran's Safavid dynasty transferred Kurds to northeastern Iran to guard the frontier against Uzbeks.

Modern studies about the Kurdish people increased during the period of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The roots of the Kurdish issue in southeastern Turkey go back as far as the nineteenth century when it was known as the "Eastern Question"<sup>7</sup>. The Ottoman Empire was organized along religious community lines. Thus, the Kurds, unlike the Greeks, Jews, and Christian Armenians, were not considered as ethnic minority but were full members of the Muslim majority<sup>8</sup>. There had been *de facto independent* Kurdish Emirates in the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Special status for Kurdish land, called "an area under Kurdish rule" guaranteed the self-government of the Emirate<sup>9</sup>. The centralization of the Ottoman Empire after 1826 affected the Kurdish Emirates which came out strongly against the conquest of their territories. After the military defeat of the Kurdish Emirates, Ottoman civil servants replaced the Kurdish rulers<sup>10</sup>.

The Republic set up in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk aimed to homogenize the Turkish population in order to protect its unity. According to Atatürk, Turkey had to become more homogeneous to sustain stability and security<sup>11</sup>. The government does not recognize a Kurdish minority and views Kurds simply as citizens of Turkey. This was a legacy of the strong assimilationist policies<sup>12</sup>. Atatürk was determined to create a new Turkish nation-state on the basis of a specifically "Turkish" national identity. As a result, all existing Muslim minorities, including the Kurds, were "granted a kind of Turkishness"<sup>13</sup>. In Iran and Syria, similarly, the Kurds faced massive discrimination by governments whose official ideologies are based on ethnic or religious chauvinism. Iraqi Kurds have better status than in any other country.

Terms set by the allies in the Treaty of Sevres (1920) in the wake of World War I partitioned Turkey, reducing it to one – third of its current territory, and promised

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 295.

<sup>7</sup> P. Lacinier, I. Bal, *The Ideological and Historical Roots of the Kurdist Movements in Turkey: Ethnicity, Demography and Politics*, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics", 2004 no. 10, p. 473.

<sup>8</sup> F. P. Larrabee, I. O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Santa Monica 2003, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> F. Ibrahim, G. Gürbey, *The Kurdish conflict in Turkey: obstacles and chances for peace and democracy*, New York 2000, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> P. Lacinier, I. Bal, *The Ideological and Historical Roots of the Kurdist Movements in Turkey...*, p. 483.

<sup>12</sup> F. P. Larrabee, I. O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty...*, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> D. Ergil, *Identity Crisis and Political Instability in Turkey*, "The Journal of International Affairs", 2000 vol. 54, no. 1, p. 51.

the Kurds a country of their own in eastern Turkey and northern Iraq. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk rejected the treaty and started a “war of liberation” that led to the replacement of Treaty of Sèvres with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. In response, Kurds launched an insurgency in 1925 with the goal of establishing an independent state. The rebellion was put down, and its leaders were hanged in the central square of Diyarbakir. After a series of uprisings that culminated in another rebellion in 1937, Turkey adopted measures, denying the existence of Kurds, and their language, culture and geographical place names were strictly banned<sup>14</sup>.

Ideological motives shape the arguments about the roots of the Kurds. Kurdish nationalists claimed that Kurds are the first owners of the Anatolian territory and that many other nations followed them in these territories. Some of the Kurdish publications argue that the Greek, Hittite, Lydia, Assyrian, and many other Anatolian and Mesopotamia civilizations were originally Kurdish<sup>15</sup>. According to most Turkish scholars, Kurds are one of the Turkish tribes who lived in the mountainous regions; these scholars call them “Mountain Turks”<sup>16</sup>. However, what cannot be disputed is the fact that the people living in this area of Asia today call themselves Kurds and identify with the particular area called Kurdistan. The region of Kurdistan has such a complex history and has been conquered by so many nations that it is practically impossible to establish a true regional identity.

According to the David McDowall a specialist on Middle Eastern affairs: “it is extremely doubtful that the Kurds form an ethnically coherent whole in the sense that they have a common ancestry”<sup>17</sup>.

The historical evidence suggests that Kurdish society was essentially tribal. The tribal characteristic of Kurdish society may have changed, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, but it remains a cultural hallmark of the people<sup>18</sup>. Historians suggest that unlike the Arabs, Kurdish tribal cohesion is based on a mix of blood ties and territorial loyalty<sup>19</sup>. Kurdish tribes include the Hakkari of Turkey, the Baban and Hamawan of Iraq, the Jaff of Iraq and Iran and the Mukri and Bani Ardelan of Iran<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker's Party*..., p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> P. Laciner, I. Bal, *The Ideological and Historical Roots of the Kurdist Movements in Turkey*..., p. 477.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 478.

<sup>17</sup> D. McDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds*, New York 2000, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> P. Laciner, I. Bal, *The Ideological and Historical Roots of the Kurdist Movements in Turkey*..., p. 482.

<sup>19</sup> D. McDowall, *The Kurds: A Nation Denied*..., p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> M. Rubin, *Are Kurds a Pariah Minority*..., p. 297.

The Kurds speak different languages. Kurdish is an Indo – Iranian language similar to Persian spoken in Iran. It is divided into numerous dialects. The majority of the Kurdish - Sunni people in Turkey, Iraq and Syria speak a dialect of Kurmanji. Fewer than 10% speak dialects known as Zaza, Sorani or Gurani<sup>21</sup>. Another important factor in Kurdish identity is Islam. There is a strong loyalty to the sheiks and local leaders of religious brotherhoods.

Despite the frequent use of the term “Kurdistan” only in Iran and Iraq does this name have an official definition. In Iran, it is a province inhabited by Kurds; in Iraq there is an area recognized by the 1954 census to have a Kurdish majority, which includes Dohuk, Ebril and Sulaymaniyah, but Kurds have long disputed the census and make claims also on Kirkuk<sup>22</sup>.

There were periods in the Middle Eastern history, when the Kurds gained some kind of independence. In Iraq in 1923, Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji presided over an autonomous Kurdish region centered in Sulaymaniyah, but it lasted only for two weeks<sup>23</sup>. The Mahabad Republic, established in the aftermath of World War II, did not survive for one year. After the downfall of the shah in 1979, the Kurds again established autonomy in Iran, but were not able to sustain their resistance against the Islamic Republic<sup>24</sup>. A *de facto* Kurdish state appeared in northern Iraq in 1991, but *de iure* it is not recognized in international relations.

### 3. The Kurds in Turkey.

The Kurdish minority issue has influenced domestic and foreign policies of Turkey in a very effective way since the 1990s. There is much at stake for both Turks and Kurds, and the Kurdish question in Turkey will be long debated<sup>25</sup>. Former Turkish president and prime minister, *Süleyman* Demirel declared, that: ”opening of the Kurdish issue will lead up to disintegration of the state, so it is strongly connected with the state security”<sup>26</sup>.

There are about 12 millions Kurds in Turkey. They live mostly in southeast Anatolia. The Kurdish issue is strongly connected with the economical underdevelopment of this region of Turkey. Poverty and a strong desire for independence are the

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<sup>21</sup> P. A. Andrews, *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, Wiesbaden 1989, p. 152.

<sup>22</sup> D. McDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds...*, p. 336.

<sup>23</sup> M. Rubin, *Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?...*, p. 299.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 299.

<sup>25</sup> H. Bağcı, *Zeitgeist. Global Politics and Turkey*, Ankara 2008, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> R. Olson, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*, Kentucky 1996, p. 88.

main reasons for the rise of ethnic terrorism. It is a key factor of the internal and foreign policy of Turkey. The recently-ended war between Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers Party creates the climate of fear and danger in the society and the political leaders. PKK is recognized as a terrorist organization by the European Union and the United States as well as Turkey<sup>27</sup>.

Nowadays, accession to the EU is a foreign policy priority of Turkey. The Kurdish issue is one of the most important problems connected with this process. Turkey is often accused of violating the human rights of the Kurdish minority. There is also a concern in Europe, that with an unresolved Kurdish problem, Turkey will bring instability to the whole European Union<sup>28</sup>. The Copenhagen Criteria (1993) required stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and protection of minority rights of all EU countries. There is no bargaining on these criteria. Turkey is required to accept them for entry into the EU<sup>29</sup>.

The governing Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP), prepared short-, medium- and long-term action plans for the solution to the Kurdish issue in 2002. The Turkish Parliament passed a law which liberalized the policy towards the Kurdish minority according to the EU standards. The most important reform faced by the government is to create a new civil constitution of Turkey. It should include the transformation of the legal system and cultural rights for minorities<sup>30</sup>.

To advance the goal of EU membership, Prime Minister, R. T. Erdoğan vigorously pursued legislative reforms that liberalized the political system and relaxed restrictions on freedom of the press, association and expression. The government abolished the death penalty, revised the penal code, reduced restrictions on minority language broadcasts, ended random searches without a court order and implemented a zero tolerance policy on torture. Turkey signed and ratified protocols 6 (restricting application of the death penalty to periods of war) and 13 (providing for the total abolition of the death penalty) of the European Convention on Human Rights<sup>31</sup>. The government's plan includes easing the remaining bans on Kurdish broadcasting, al-

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<sup>27</sup> E. F. Keyman, Z. Onis, *Turkish Politics In a Changing World. Global Dynamics and Domestic Transformations*, Istanbul 2007, p. 291.

<sup>28</sup> J. Misiągiewicz, *The Kurdish minority issue in the context of integration Turkey with the European Union*, "Revista Universitaria Europea", 2010 no. 12, pp. 23-42.

<sup>29</sup> M. M. Gunter, *Turkey's Floundering EU Candidacy and Its Kurdish Problem*, "Middle East Policy", 2007 vol. 14, no. 1, p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker's Party...*, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

lowing turkified villages to regain their Kurdish names, setting up Kurdish language and literature departments in universities, and scrapping laws under which thousands of young Kurds are jailed for allegedly acting for the PKK<sup>32</sup>. Already, independent Kurdish cultural associations exist with branches in different cities in the country, especially in Istanbul and Izmir. Among the better known ones is the Mesopotamia Cultural Association. A potentially positive development is the recent licensing of the Kurdish Foundation for Research and Culture<sup>33</sup>. The European Commission will be screening the implementation of those reforms.

The longstanding Kurdish problem entered a potentially new phase in October 2005 when the European Union formally initiated accession negotiations with Turkey. Although this process promises to be long and complicated, it also could be a turning point for the solution of the Kurdish problem in Turkey.

The Justice and Development Party, recently announced the “Kurdish plan”, which aims to build and foster reconciliation to solve the long-standing Kurdish issue by continuing talks with different segments of Kurdish society<sup>34</sup>. President Abdullah Gül called for greater cultural rights for minorities in a new constitution, including official use of minority languages and underscoring the need for greater individual rights<sup>35</sup>. The president declared that the Kurdish issue is an internal problem and any solution must uphold the country’s unitary structure. He was warmly received when he chose to visit Kurdish cities in the southeast as his first domestic trip after the presidential election.

As far as the political aspect is concerned, any solution or set of solutions will require substantial time to work out. Too many emotions are involved to permit quick or easy resolution of the problem. The two sides have to start talking to each other to establish a minimum common ground for substantive discussions. Initially, to insulate the government from unhelpful and destructive criticism, the representatives of respected Turkish nongovernmental organizations, rather than state officials, should be selected to meet with Kurdish leaders not actively associated with the PKK. The participation of European Union countries in these discussions could also prove helpful<sup>36</sup>. Turks need to be aware that their problems are not unique. Many other states in the EU have faced and still face such problems. The international community has

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<sup>32</sup> “Economist”, 27 August 2009.

<sup>33</sup> H. J. Barkey, G. E. Fuller, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question*, New York 1998, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> “Hürriyet”, 16 August, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker’s Party...*, p. 78.

<sup>36</sup> E. Uslu, *Turkey’s Kurdish Problem: Steps Toward a Solution*, “Studies in Conflict & Terrorism”, 2007, p. 162.

accumulated much experience and developed a wide variety of formulas and mechanisms that might prove relevant to an eventual Turkish – Kurdish solution<sup>37</sup>.

It is very important to improve the economic conditions of Kurds living in Turkey. The economic deprivation of the southeastern provinces of Turkey with high Kurdish populations is a crucial problem, and breeds discontent that can nourish terrorism or other forms of political violence<sup>38</sup>. The Turkish government invested 20 billion dollars in the Southeast Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi – GAP*) – a massive irrigation and hydroelectric scheme on Tigris and Euphrates rivers between 1982-1992, building 20 dams, including great Atatürk Dam, the ninth largest in the world<sup>39</sup>. Its irrigation network was designed to service 1,7 million hectares, increase agricultural production and create 3,3 million jobs in the Kurdish provinces of Gaziantep, Urfa and Mardin<sup>40</sup>. This has brought a new prosperity to both agricultural laborers and textile factory owners and employees in the area. Turkey also introduced a GAP Social Action Plan, emphasizing human development and social services.

One of the most radical solution of the Kurdish issue is a federal conception for the Turkish state. While a number of Kurds in Turkey speak readily of federalism, few actually perceive the difficulties associated with such an arrangement<sup>41</sup>. First, there is a debate over the question of whether Kurds consider themselves a minority. Unlike Ottoman Empire policies toward Christians and Jews, legally established minorities within Turkey, the Turkish state has never had provisions for Muslims as minorities. The state probably will eventually grant recognition to the Kurds as a minority within Turkey. But the Kurds are reportedly not willing to settle for such minority status, because they are not in fact a minority at all but rather a majority in large parts of Turkey. They seek the right to exercise their own local self – government as the majority in those regions<sup>42</sup>.

There is also the question about what the European Union will look like in the future. Turkey could accommodate far more easily to the development of a Kurdish autonomous region inside Turkey, if it were a member of the EU, and the EU, itself, developed a federal structure. In such circumstance, Turkey would have to completely rethink the concept of the state. Because federalism is designed to transform countrywide minorities into majorities in their own areas, in a federal Turkey the regions

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<sup>37</sup> H. J. Barkey, G. E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question...*, p. 180.

<sup>38</sup> E. Uslu, *Turkey's Kurdish Problem: Steps Toward a Solution...*, p. 159.

<sup>39</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker's Party...*, p.74.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p.74.

<sup>41</sup> H. J. Barkey, G. E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question...*, p. 201.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 202.



in which Kurds constitute a majority could potentially be granted federal status, with regional powers granted to a Kurdish capital in Diyarbakir, powers roughly equal to those in Ankara<sup>43</sup>.

The federal solution gives rise to as many problems as it pretends to resolve. The questions include: what regions would be considered Kurdish, what would be the cultural rights and minority protections granted to Turks in the Kurdish regions, and what would be corresponding Kurdish cultural rights be in Turkish regions? Nearly half of the Kurds in Turkey today no longer live in their ancestral lands in the south-east but have moved to more western parts of Turkey. It might further aggravate inter-communal tensions.

#### **4. PKK terrorism.**

The Kurdish question has involved not only growing Kurdish ethnic assertiveness in the form of identity politics but also a campaign of violence and terrorist activities of the PKK, a Marxist-Leninist movement founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978<sup>44</sup>. Öcalan saw the establishment of a Kurdish state in southeast Anatolia as the first step toward the creation of an independent Greater Kurdistan which would include Kurds from Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria<sup>45</sup>. The PKK is a rigid hierarchical structure that operated with Stalinist discipline. Öcalan demanded that Kurds choose between loyalty to Turkey and support for the PKK. Brutal punishment was meted out to those who refused to cooperate. Between 1995 and 1999 its guerrilla teams were responsible for 21 suicide terrorist attacks<sup>46</sup>. The United States listed the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 2001. Soon after, Canada and the UK classified the PKK as an FTO. The EU added it to the terror list in May 2002<sup>47</sup>.

The PKK was run like a criminal gang. Financing came from a “revolutionary tax”<sup>48</sup> provided by Kurdish businessmen in Turkey who were forced to pay or face the consequences, including murder or kidnapping. In addition, voluntary financing was provided by the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe through cultural associations and information centers, like Kurdish Employers Association, the Kurdish Islamic Move-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 203.

<sup>44</sup> K. Kirişci, G. M. Winrow, *The Kurdish question and Turkey: an example of a trans-state ethnic conflict*, London 1997, p. 227.

<sup>45</sup> D. Eril, *Suicide Terrorism In Turkey*, „Civil Wars”, 2000 vol. 3, no. 1, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker’s Party...*, p.73.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

ment and the Kurdish Red Crescent<sup>49</sup>. These organizations raised funds for the PKK and facilitated money transfers through subsidiary foundations in Switzerland, Great Britain, Sweden, Belgium, Denmark or Cyprus. The PKK also financed its operations through drug and arms smuggling, human trafficking and extortion. In 1998 the British government maintained that the PKK was responsible for 40% of the heroin sold in Europe<sup>50</sup>. Turkish officials maintain that the PKK was still receiving 150 million dollars in annual revenue<sup>51</sup>.

Öcalan was captured in Kenya in February 1999. He was found guilty of mass murder by a Turkish court and is serving a life sentence in isolation on İmralı Island on the Sea of Marmara. Öcalan declared a cease-fire on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1999 that lasted until June 2004, and most of the PKK guerrillas retreated to the mountains of northern Iraq, an area controlled by Iraqi Kurds. Despite the cease - fire, PKK terrorist attacks increased from 584 in 2000 to 1500 in 2003<sup>52</sup>. During the first half of the 2007, 225 people died as a result of attacks by the PKK<sup>53</sup>.

From his prison cell Öcalan stated that he had given up his separatist ambitions and was prepared to endorse a resolution of Kurdish demands within the framework of the Turkish state<sup>54</sup>. The Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) organization was established in 2002 to provide a new image for the Kurdish movement and to coordinate the leadership of its political and military wings<sup>55</sup>. Compatible with Öcalan's position, KADEK declared that the movement's goal had shifted from an "independent Kurdistan" to a "democratic Turkey"<sup>56</sup>. After the U.S. Department of State added KADEK to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, on 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2003, it was renamed Kurdistan Society Congress (Kongra-Gel) but it, too, was soon declared a terrorist organization by the U.S.

The former Turkish Chief of General Staff, Hilmi Özkök ruled out any negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers Party. He said, "there cannot be any negotiation with the terror organization ... You cannot talk with a person who took a gun and ascended the mountains"<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>50</sup> „The Spectator” 28 November 1998.

<sup>51</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker's Party...*, p.74.

<sup>52</sup> E. Uslu, *Turkey's Kurdish Problem: Steps Toward a Solution...*, p. 159.

<sup>53</sup> „Zaman” 17 August 2007.

<sup>54</sup> E. Uslu, *Turkey's Kurdish Problem: Steps Toward a Solution...*, p. 159.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, 159.

<sup>56</sup> “Milliyet”, 11 November 2003.

<sup>57</sup> “Hürriyet”, 17 August 2009.

Turkish government effectively responded to Kurdish terrorism. It put several southeastern provinces under martial law and declared a state of emergency in the late 1980s. It also invoked article 14 of the constitution to crack down on activities that threatened the “indivisibility of the state”<sup>58</sup> and article 8 of the Law for Fighting against Terrorism, which defined terrorism so broadly that it was used to criminalize any discussion about Kurdish problem, as well as the article 125 of the penal code, which stipulated that: “any person who carries out any action intended to destroy the unity of the Turkish state or separate any part of the territory shall be punishable by death”<sup>59</sup>.

Turkey established army camps, police checkpoints, and military airports near the border with Syria. Major military operations against the PKK were launched in 1989 and 1993. PKK activities peaked in 1993 when there were 4 198 reported clashes between the PKK and Turkish security forces<sup>60</sup>. By 1995, up to 150 000 Turkish troops and police were involved in search-and-destroy missions within Turkey as well as across international frontiers.

Nowadays, northern Iraq is a “safe heaven” for PKK terrorism, since it is an autonomous region. Independent Kurdish regime in northern Iraq encourages separatist tendencies among Turkish Kurds. Turkey insists that the territorial integrity of Iraq has to be maintained.

There were many interventions into Iraq by the Turkish Army to hunt for the PKK guerrillas. On 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2008, 10,000 Turkish soldiers, supported by artillery fire, F – 16 fighters and Cobra helicopters, moved into Iraqi territory<sup>61</sup>. These troops had been concentrated in the south – east of Turkey, near the Iranian border. Their objective was to displace the PKK fighters<sup>62</sup>. The Turkish Air Force bombed PKK camps, and Turkish soldiers advanced 90 km into Iraqi territory.

R. T. Erdoğan recognized that the PKK problem could not be solved through military means alone. During a visit to Diyarbakir in August 2005, he declared, that: “Turkey will not retreat from the point we have reached. We will not step back from our process of democratization ...Turkey has to face this (Kurdish) problem and

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<sup>58</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Worker’s Party...*, p.74.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p.74.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>61</sup> P. Boulanger, *Kurdish autonomy in Iraq under threat*, “Defense nationale et securite collective” January 2009, p. 76.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

solve it through democracy... Time has come for a radical solution to the problem. We will take steps at any cost”<sup>63</sup>.

Turkey cannot be expected to tolerate PKK terrorism forever. Turkey’s already unstable domestic politics is facing another division following the government’s new initiative to resolve the Kurdish question, a problem that has killed more than 30,000 people in the past 25 years<sup>64</sup>. An important issue for Prime Minister Erdoğan’s “Kurdish overture” is how to get the PKK to stop fighting without negotiating with their imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who continues to hold sway over both his men and millions of ordinary Kurds<sup>65</sup>.

### 5. The Kurds in Iraq.

Clashes between Iraqi government forces and Kurds occurred both under the Iraqi monarchy (1921 – 1958) and the succeeding republic<sup>66</sup>. Arab nationalism cemented antipathy toward the Kurds not only because of ideological reasons but also because Kurds inhabited Iraq’s richest agricultural region and one with oil fields<sup>67</sup>. The ethnic cleansing in Kurdish regions quickly expanded after Saddam Hussein consolidated his dictatorial control<sup>68</sup>. Between April 1987 and August 1988, 250 Kurdish towns and villages were exposed to chemical weapons<sup>69</sup>.

*A de facto* Kurdish “state” has arisen in northern Iraq since 1991 and the Kurdistan Regional Government was established in 1992<sup>70</sup>. Nobody recognizes this “state”. Turkey has even warned that it would be a *casus belli* if the Iraqi Kurds declared their independence. Northern Iraq is perceived as a “safe heaven” for Kurdish separatist groups. There are an estimated 3,000 - 4,500 PKK fighters in the country, some are located near the Turkish border<sup>71</sup>. Turkey maintains a contingent of 1,200 - 1,500 soldiers in northern Iraq to watch out for PKK cadres<sup>72</sup>. Iran and Syria also oppose independence for Iraqi Kurds, because of the influence it might have on their own

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<sup>63</sup> “Hürriyet” 14 August 2009.

<sup>64</sup> “Hürriyet” 11 August 2009.

<sup>65</sup> “Economist”, 27 August 2009.

<sup>66</sup> M. Rubin, *Are Kurds a Pariah Minority...*, p. 301.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 301.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>70</sup> M. M. Gunter, *The Kurds in Iraq*, „Middle East Policy”, 2004 vol. 11, no. 1, p. 108.

<sup>71</sup> H. J. Barkey, E. Laipson, *Iraqi Kurds and Iraq’s Future*, “Middle East Policy”, 2005 vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 66 - 76.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*.

Kurdish populations<sup>73</sup>. This “state” was protected by the U.S. no-fly zone. At the same time, the Iraqi Kurds played a major role in the creation of an Iraqi opposition organization, the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Its aim was the creation of a democratic and federal post-Saddam Iraq in which the cultural and national demands of the Kurds would be solved<sup>74</sup>.

The collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime was a key factor in the creation of a modern history of Iraq<sup>75</sup>. Since then, Iraqi Kurds face an enviable situation. They have regional self-government in the new Iraq<sup>76</sup>. They have made themselves key players in Iraqi politics by the fact that they had consolidated their territory and politics ahead of constitutional and electoral developments. The Kurds won recognition of Kurdish as one of the official languages of the Iraqi state (Arabic, Turkomen and Assyrian are additional official languages)<sup>77</sup>. The Kurdish area is politically divided between the two main political parties: Masud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Both Kurdish leaders, Barzani and Talabani opted federalism in a post-Saddam democratic Iraq<sup>78</sup>. After the June 2005 elections, Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani became president of Iraq.

The Iraqi Kurds have a powerful ally in the U.S. Relations with Washington remain the Kurds’ top priority. This situation was brought about by Turkey’s refusal to allow the U.S. to use its territory as a base for a northern front to attack Iraq in March 2003. This made the Kurds more critical partners, working alongside American forces in the capture of key northern towns<sup>79</sup>.

The Kurds also did not achieve any closure on the status of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which would be the most important element of the economic development of the state. With access to oil revenues generated within its territories, Kurdistan-Iraq would be more able to survive economically and would be able to normalize relations with its neighbors on a state-to-state basis<sup>80</sup>. The economic development and political stability of Kurdistan-Iraq would provide fertile ground for improved social and

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<sup>73</sup> M. M. Gunter, *The Kurds in Iraq...*, p. 108.

<sup>74</sup> Idem, *The Kurdish predicament in Iraq: a political analysis*, New York 1999, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> K. Salih, *Kurdish reality in an emerging Iraq*, „Middle East Policy”, 2004 vol. 11, no. 1, p. 122.

<sup>76</sup> H. J. Barkey, E. Laipson, *Iraqi Kurds and Iraq’s Future...*, pp. 66 - 76.

<sup>77</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>78</sup> M. M. Gunter, *Kurdish future in a Post-Saddam Iraq*, “Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs”, 2003 vol. 23, pp. 2-23.

<sup>79</sup> H. J. Barkey, E. Laipson, *Iraqi Kurds and Iraq’s Future...*, pp. 66 - 76.

<sup>80</sup> R. Olson, *Turkey and Kurdistan-Iraq, 2003*, “Middle East Policy”, 2004 vol. 11, no. 1, p. 116.

cultural relations among the peoples of the region<sup>81</sup>. Jalal Talabani called Kirkuk “the Jerusalem of Kurdistan”<sup>82</sup>. Kirkuk was also the place where oil was first struck in Iraq in 1927, and it became a center of state’s oil industry. Oil-rich and strategically located, Kirkuk also represents the center of KRG - Baghdad tensions. It is: “a classic divided city... over which people are prepared to fight and die... The numbers of actors involved, resource dimensions, and international involvement add... layers of complexity that are matched by few other disputes over territorial ‘ownership’”<sup>83</sup>.

There are several practical difficulties to the setting up of a Kurdish state on Iraqi territory. First of all, the Kurdish leaders tend to devote their energies to the divided local governments that they represent, rather than in favor of an independent state<sup>84</sup>. Moreover, the leadership derives its legitimacy from the region’s tribal-based social system. Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani are the leaders of the largest and best-organized Kurdish tribes in the Middle East. Tribal social hierarchy provides its members with economic advantages, political power, social status and security. The establishment of an independent state could change the existing order creating competition and even military conflict between Iraqi Kurdish groups<sup>85</sup>. Such a scenario would be very dangerous for the whole region. Therefore, the key interest of the Kurdish groups is to keep the status quo.

Secondly, Iraq’s Kurdish regions are not homogeneous. One of the important minorities are the Turkomens, who represent an estimated 2-3 percent of the total Iraqi population<sup>86</sup>. Kurdish-Turkomen relations, especially those between the Sunni Turkomen and Kurds residing in Kurdish-controlled regions and Kirkuk, have been tense. In part, this is the result of Turkish interference<sup>87</sup>. Turkey has seen itself as the protector of Turkomen in Kirkuk and has opposed KRG annexation of Kirkuk, because it might inflame its own restless Kurdish population and the activity of the PKK<sup>88</sup>. There are also Arabs in the north of the country. The stronger economy in the north has attracted approximately 20,000 Arabs to Kurdistan to seek jobs<sup>89</sup>. Disputes

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<sup>81</sup> Ibidem, p. 117.

<sup>82</sup> M. Rubin, *Are Kurds a Pariah Minority...*, p. 301.

<sup>83</sup> L. Anderson, G. Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise*, Pennsylvania 2009, p. 9.

<sup>84</sup> N. A. Ozcan, *Could a Kurdish State be set up In Iraq?*, “Middle East Policy”, 2004 vol. 11, no. 1, p. 119.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem, p. 119.

<sup>86</sup> H. J. Barkey, E. Laipson, *Iraqi Kurds and Iraq’s Future...*, pp. 66 - 76.

<sup>87</sup> Ibidem, p. 66 - 76.

<sup>88</sup> M. Gunter, *New Tensions in Kirkuk as Kurdish Peshmerga Surround City*, “Terrorism Monitor”, 2011 vol. 9, no. 13, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> H. J. Barkey, E. Laipson, *Iraqi Kurds and Iraq’s Future...*, pp. 66 - 76.

continue over the status of Mosul and Kirkuk in northern Iraq as home not only for Kurds, but also for other ethnic communities. Kurds would eagerly try to expel them from their state. So, the possibility of the armed conflict would be very high and it could eventually result in ethnic cleansing.

The scheduled U.S. troop withdrawal by the end of 2011 probably invites further tensions over Kirkuk<sup>90</sup>. The violence and public protests that erupted in Kirkuk and elsewhere in Iraq in February 2011 had the dangerous possibility of escalating into a civil war between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)<sup>91</sup>. Shaykh Ja'afar Mustafa, the Kurdish Minister of Peshmerga (militia) Affairs, announced that: "the Kurdish forces would not withdraw from Kirkuk... Kurds had to protect Kirkuk from al-Qaeda, Arab groups, and Ba'athists and were acting on the basis of intelligence reports that indicated that these groups had been planning to take over the city during the protests... the Kurds were coordinating their actions with the Iraqi army units in the region"<sup>92</sup>.

The third problem is the fact that neighboring countries have little sympathy for Kurdish separatist aspirations in northern Iraq. The new Kurdish state could be a threat to not only Iraq, but also Turkey, Syria and Iran. The emergence of Kurds as an important force in Iraq has created significant problems for these countries, which have troublesome Kurdish minorities of their own<sup>93</sup>. This provoked the Kurds of these countries and created a serious security problem. The political achievements of Kurdistan-Iraqis inspired Kurds of Iran, Syria, Turkey and Europe throughout the 1990s. There was a growing awareness among the political elites in Turkey, Iran and Syria of their own Kurdish populations' desire for more cultural, civil and political rights<sup>94</sup>. In the past those states tried to collaborate on limiting Kurdish progress. The relationship between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government was "characterized by suspicion, animosity and brinkmanship that threaten the stability of the (Iraqi) state at a far deeper political level"<sup>95</sup>.

In such circumstances, the controversial Kurdish state will need some kind of "big brother" to protect it from its neighbors. The U.S. could play such a role, but it probably will not, because it is not in the U.S. interest to fight against Middle Eastern

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<sup>90</sup> M. Gunter, *New Tensions in Kirkuk as Kurdish Peshmerga Surround City...*, p. 7.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> H. J. Barkey, E. Laipson, *Iraqi Kurds and Iraq's Future...*, pp. 66 - 76.

<sup>94</sup> R. Olson, *Turkey and Kurdistan-Iraq...*, p. 117.

<sup>95</sup> G. Stansfield, L. Anderson, *Kurds in Iraq: The Struggle between Baghdad and Erbil*, "Middle East Policy", 2009 no. 16, p. 134 - 45.

states and destabilize the international relations in this region. Nowadays, it is difficult to predict how Washington will look at Iraq in the years ahead. It is possible that the U.S. will seek to construct bases there, most probably in Kurdish areas<sup>96</sup>. After all, if the Iraqi Kurds continue to maintain their status in northern Iraq into the foreseeable future, it could be the first step to create the Kurdish state in the Middle East.

## 6. The Kurds in Iran.

The Kurds comprise 7% of the total Iranian population<sup>97</sup>. They live in the western and northwestern provinces of the country along the border with Iraq and Turkey. The Kurds of Iran have appeared less threatening to political stability, perhaps because the government controls Iran's population so stringently. The antagonism between Iranian regimes and the Kurds is not new<sup>98</sup>. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Kurds in Iran were brutally suppressed.

The political activity of Iranian Kurds started during the Second World War. By 1942, the first political parties, Komala J. K., or the Committee of the Resurrection of Kurdistan, were established. Their aim was to achieve the independence of Kurdistan. In August 1945 the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) was formed under the leadership of Qazi Mohammad, a well-known leader from Komala J. K. In 1969, a group of young Kurdish intellectuals founded a new secret organization called the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan, or Komala. Similar to the KDPI, Komala desired autonomy for Kurdistan within a democratic Iran<sup>99</sup>.

Since the end of the Second World War, Iranian Kurdistan has been a place of major Kurdish national uprisings. The most effective Kurdish national movement appeared in 1946 with the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad, which is still a major Kurdish symbol<sup>100</sup>. The Republic survived for only eleven months, but achieved many of its demands. In the city of Mahabad, for example, schools started to teach in Kurdish, translating Persian textbooks into the local dialect<sup>101</sup>. The Republic was not recognized by any state in the world, but did receive practical support from

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<sup>96</sup> H. J. Barkey, E. Laipson, *Iraqi Kurds and Iraq's Future...*, pp. 66 - 76.

<sup>97</sup> *CIA The World Fact Book*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>, 12.04.2011.

<sup>98</sup> M. Rubin, *Are Kurds a Pariah Minority...*, p. 318.

<sup>99</sup> G. F. Gresh, *Iranian Kurds in an Age of Globalization*, "Iran and the Caucasus", 2009 no. 13, p. 190.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.



the Soviet Union<sup>102</sup>. The areas under the control of the Republic stretched from Urumiya to Saqiz. Due to weakening Soviet support, the Republic was defeated by the Iranian army in the middle of December 1946.

In August 1979, Khomeini declared war against the Kurds. At the end of 1979, the KDPI no longer considered itself an Iranian organization, but, rather, a revolutionary Kurdish party that called for the formation of a Kurdish independent state. Iranian Kurds had begun a struggle for autonomy against Khomeini's military forces with the support of Iraqi and Turkish Kurds. The Iranian government was not strong enough to control the Kurdish areas. The new theocratic government did not have an understanding of ethnic issues in multi-ethnic state such as Iran. Consequently, there was no chance for finding a peaceful solution for the Kurdish demands<sup>103</sup>.

Regular clashes broke out between the Kurds and the government forces during the 1980s<sup>104</sup>. The Iraq – Iran war was a key opportunity for Kurds to demonstrate their demands. The KDPI declared that if the government accepted Kurdish autonomy, the Kurds would fight alongside Iran against Iraq<sup>105</sup>. But the government intensified its attacks on the Kurds. According the KDPI sources, more than 10,000 people had been killed<sup>106</sup>. The pressure by the Iranian regime forced Kurdish guerrillas to move towards the Iraqi border.

Iran has witnessed a rise in the nationalist activity within its Kurdish population since the establishment of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Motivation for this activity stems from the political success of the Iraqi Kurds and the desire of the Iranian Kurds to pressure the government for increased ethnic minority rights<sup>107</sup>. Like Syria and Turkey, Iran fears a resurgence of Kurdish separatism due to the success of the KRG<sup>108</sup>.

President Muhammad Khatami has opened up some cultural and political space for Kurdish activity after 1996<sup>109</sup>. Inspired by the situation in northern Iraq and the escalation of the PKK in Turkey, Iranian Kurds began their cultural activities. Many

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<sup>102</sup> H. Ahmadzadeh, G. Stansfield, *The political, cultural and military re-awakening of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iran*, "Middle East Journal", 2010 vol. 64, no. 1, p. 14.

<sup>103</sup> Ibidem, p. 18.

<sup>104</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> Ibidem, p. 20.

<sup>106</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>107</sup> G. F. Gresh, *Iranian Kurds in an Age of Globalization...*, p. 188.

<sup>108</sup> Ibidem, p. 191.

<sup>109</sup> H. Ahmadzadeh, G. Stansfield, *The political, cultural and military re-awakening of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iran...*, p. 21.

Kurdish journals and cultural societies were established in Iran. Kurds were also very active on the political scene.

The election of Mahmud Ahmedinejad as the Iranian President in 2005, was a hard time for Kurds. Iranian security forces killed a young Kurdish activist, Shwane Seyyed Qadir in Mahabad<sup>110</sup>. This incident was a proximate cause of demonstrations started in Kurdish cities. The security forces killed approximately 20 people and hundreds of demonstrators were arrested. Kurdish journals, like *Rojhelad*, *Aso*, *Ashti* or *Peyami Kurdistan* have been banned. KDPI started its underground activity.

There is a large Iranian Kurdish diaspora in Europe. It is very active in establishing political parties such as the Kurdistan Independence Party and the Social Democratic Party of Kurdistan – East. In 2005 a group of Kurdish activists founded the Kurdish United Front in Teheran<sup>111</sup>. It struggles for equal cultural, social, political and economic rights. It also claims that the Iranian constitution should be changed in the accordance with ethnic minority issues. Another organization is the Coalition of Kurdish Reformists, composed of political groups and various reformist organizations.

The future of the Iranian Kurds is uncertain. There are some factors, which influence their situation. First of all, the fragmented character of the Kurdish political parties means that Kurdish organizations are too weak to advocate successfully for Kurdish rights. Secondly, the unwillingness of the Iranian regime to open a debate about the status of Kurds or any other ethnic minority<sup>112</sup>.

## 7. The Kurds in Syria.

The Kurds of Syria tend to be characterized as “forgotten” or “silent” because they have been far less visible and active than the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq<sup>113</sup>. The situation of the Syrian Kurds should be analyzed within the context of Syria’s lack of democratic governance, which affects all Syrians<sup>114</sup>.

It is estimated that more than two million Kurds live in the northern areas of Syria along its borders with Turkey and Iraq, making them the largest non-Arab minority in the country<sup>115</sup>. The Kurds of Syria speak the Kurdish Kurmanji language

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<sup>110</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>113</sup> R. Lowe, C. House, *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered*, “Middle East Programme”, 2006 no. 1, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> R. Ziadeh, *The Kurds in Syria. Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?*, “Special Report”, United States Institute of Peace 2009, no. 220, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> H. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: an existence denied*, Berlin 2005, p. 7.

and the vast majority are Sunnis. They primarily inhabit three areas along the northern border: the Kurd-Dagh, Kûbanî and al-Hasaka provinces. There are also sizeable Kurdish populations in Aleppo and Damascus. They retain a cultural and ethnic identity that is distinct from Syria's Arab majority. Although Kurds constitute more than twelve percent of the Syrian population, they are defined as Arabs in the 1973 constitution. The Kurds are not recognized as a national or ethnic minority in Syria, and they are not permitted to practice their culture and traditions freely<sup>116</sup>. Kurds are perceived as a threat to national unity and sovereignty by the government. Accordingly, it has pursued policies of arabisation, forced assimilation, denial of their autonomy in Kurdish areas<sup>117</sup>.

Kurdish regions are very valuable to Syria because of their economic and strategic importance. Kurdish areas comprise some of the most agriculturally productive land in Syria. In terms of the state's security, the borders with Turkey and Iraq are historically sensitive<sup>118</sup>. Relations between Syria, Iraq and Turkey have been dominated by conflicts over land, water, and PKK activity in the region. Syria maintained a close relationship with the PKK, in the early 1990s hosting its leader Abdullah Öcalan. It was a main reason for the serious conflict between Turkey and Syria.

Official discrimination against the Kurds in Syria dates back to the 1930s, but increased greatly in the 1950s and 1960s during the height of Arab nationalism<sup>119</sup>. During the years of Syria and Egypt's union in the United Arab Republic (UAR, 1958 - 1961) Kurdish intellectuals and leaders were targeted and arrested. Following Syria's secession from the UAR in 1961, the state was renamed the Syrian Arab Republic<sup>120</sup>. This was the end of the Kurdish hopes for national recognition and equality within Syria<sup>121</sup>. Kurdish areas and people became subject to a state-initiated arabisation process.

In October 1962, the Syrian government issued a special census in Hasakah province, the northeastern Syrian province in which the majority of Kurds have their origins. The census aimed to differentiate between Kurds who had a right to live in Syria and those who had entered the country illegally from Turkey or Iraq after 1945<sup>122</sup>.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>119</sup> R. Lowe, C. House, *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered...*, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> H. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: an existence denied...*, p. 8.

<sup>121</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>122</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

Thousands of Kurds were stripped of Syrian citizenship and became stateless<sup>123</sup>. These stateless Kurds are not allowed to get passports, cannot vote or own property and are forbidden, as “foreigners,” to work in the public sector<sup>124</sup>. This situation created a climate of frustration among denationalized Kurds, and made them supporters of secessionist Kurdish parties<sup>125</sup>.

Moreover, Kurds do not have a right to own land or to register land ownership, especially in the Kurdish areas in northern Syria<sup>126</sup>. Under the government of Hafez al-Asad there was an “Arab Belt” plan: a kind of “cordon sanitaire” around the northern and northeastern rim along the borders with Turkey and Iraq<sup>127</sup>. Kurdish land was confiscated and Kurds were resettled in the Syrian interior to make room for Arabs. Additionally, the land within fifty kilometers of the border with Turkey in the area of Kûbanî and north of Afrîn, had special security regulations in case of a military threat from Turkey<sup>128</sup>.

Kurdish identity has also been a subject of arabisation policies. The Syrian regime has imposed a number of restrictions on the free expression of Kurdish cultural identity, including using the Kurdish language, organizing festivals and cultivating traditions. This policy aims at assimilating the Kurds to the Arab society<sup>129</sup>. The Kurdish language, Kurmanji, is not recognized in Syria. Moreover, it is forbidden to learn and teach Kurdish in schools or even privately<sup>130</sup>. In the 1990s, the Syrian government issued orders banning registering Kurdish names<sup>131</sup>. The formation of private Kurdish civil forums and cultural associations are also forbidden<sup>132</sup>. Kurds can not celebrate any cultural events, for example the Norouz – a Kurdish new year. In March 2008, Syrian security forces opened fire on Kurds celebrating the cultural festival<sup>133</sup>.

Kurdish political activity is not allowed either. Despite this, there are currently thirteen Kurdish political parties operating clandestinely to put forward Kurdish demands<sup>134</sup>. Most of these parties currently operate in two larger political groups, the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> R. Lowe, C. House, *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered...*, p. 4.

<sup>125</sup> R. Ziadeh, *The Kurds in Syria. Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region...*, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> H. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: an existence denied...*, p. 13.

<sup>127</sup> R. Lowe, C. House, *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered...*, p. 3.

<sup>128</sup> H. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: an existence denied...*, p. 13.

<sup>129</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>130</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>131</sup> R. Ziadeh, *The Kurds in Syria. Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region...*, p. 4.

<sup>132</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>134</sup> H. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: an existence denied...*, p. 17.

Kurdish Democratic Alliance and the Kurdish Democratic Front<sup>135</sup>. The Syrian government is defining Kurdish political activity as a threat to its sovereignty. Kurdish parties were banned and their leaders and members arrested and imprisoned. Some of them, like the leaders of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekiti Party), Marwan Othman and Hasan Salih, became political prisoners after being arrested in 2002. They were detained for organizing a human rights demonstration in Damascus<sup>136</sup>.

Kurdish demands in Syria include citizenship for up to 200,000 Kurds living in the country, the right to register their land, and recognition for the Kurdish language<sup>137</sup>. Syrian officials fear that those demands could lead to pressure for Kurdish autonomy or even to Kurds breaking away to join an Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>138</sup>.

Kurdish unrest following a March 2004 football match in Qameshli left about 30 people dead and more than 100 injured. This incident gave rise to large demonstrations and riots and a dramatic increase of Kurdish national feeling and brought the Kurdish issue to the discussion in Syria<sup>139</sup>. Reports indicate that torture has been regularly employed against Kurdish activists. Some individuals were arrested, tortured and released without charge<sup>140</sup>.

More unrest flared in May–June 2005 after the murder of Sheikh Ma'shuq Khaznawi, a respected Kurdish religious leader who disappeared in Damascus, was tortured and killed. Sheikh Khaznawi's funeral in Qamishli attracted thousands of people. At a demonstration following the funeral, the police beat protesters. About 60 Kurds were arrested and, according to some Kurdish sources, tortured<sup>141</sup>.

The growing Kurdish self-confidence in Syria was fuelled by developments in Iraq. The support of the Iraqi Kurds for the allied invasion of Iraq and the inclusion of the Iraqi Kurds in the centre of the political process determining the future of Iraq have increased anti-Kurdish policy by the ruling regime in Syria<sup>142</sup>. The Kurds will probably become a challenge to Syria, especially during the future transformation of the regime<sup>143</sup>.

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<sup>135</sup> R. Ziadeh, *The Kurds in Syria. Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region...*, p. 10.

<sup>136</sup> R. Lowe, C. House, *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered...*, p. 4.

<sup>137</sup> G. Baghadi, *Iraq: Kurd uno.est spreads to Syria*, "The New York Amsterdam News", 2004 June 17, p. 1.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>140</sup> H. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: an existence denier...*, p. 19.

<sup>141</sup> *Kurdish groups say Syria arrested 60 during protests*, "The Daily Star", 20 June 2005.

<sup>142</sup> H. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: an existence denier...*, p. 19.

<sup>143</sup> R. Lowe, C. House, *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered...*, p. 1.

## 7. Conclusions.

It is very important to separate the Kurdish issue and the problem of ethnic terrorism. From the one side, we have the economical and social underdevelopment of Southeastern Anatolia, where there are the largest number of Kurds. From the other side, PKK terrorism is a very dangerous movement not only in Turkey but in the entire Middle East and even in Europe. It is a simple mechanism: poverty and discontent lead to violence and aggression, but terrorism is something more. PKK is not an organization that seeks to improve living conditions of Kurds. It is most of all a political, radical and criminal movement. Until the PKK is disarmed, Turkey cannot concentrate enough on internal political and social reforms necessary for the process of integration with the European Union and which are also beneficial for the Kurds. During a war with terrorists, it is impossible to protect human rights or to limit the military power in politics.

In both Iraq and Turkey, many Kurds state their desire to see an independent Kurdistan in any part of the ancestral homeland. Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed de facto independence since 1991. The autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, protected by Americans, is often described by the Kurds as “the other Iraq”<sup>144</sup>. It stands as an interesting experiment in the Middle East in spite of its endemic corruption, high unemployment, a low level of foreign investment, high rate of emigration to the West, and Turkish military activity<sup>145</sup>. Iraqi Kurds are conscious of their economic weakness. They consider access to the Kirkuk oil fields as the only way to create an independent and self-sufficient state. But for now it is impossible. Turkey could not accept such a solution, thus resulting in a resurgence of warfare and bloodshed<sup>146</sup>. A Kurdish state born under such circumstances would be quite isolated and unprepared for an independent existence.

Nowadays, it is in no one’s interest to create an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East or anywhere in the world. In contemporary international relations, territory and sovereignty are still important values for every state. Continued separatist discourse will only increase the internal pressures on the Kurdish populations in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. General Kurdish public opinion in those countries demands cultural rights and the right to political participation, things a democratic system should guarantee to all citizens in any case.

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<sup>144</sup> P. Boulanger, *Kurdish autonomy in Iraq under threat...*, p. 71.

<sup>145</sup> Ibidem, p. 71.

<sup>146</sup> H. J. Barkey, G. E. Fuller, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question...*, p. 205.

Map 1. AREAS OF HIGH KURDISH POPULATION



Source: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/Kurdishinhabited\\_area\\_by\\_CIA\\_%281992%29.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/Kurdishinhabited_area_by_CIA_%281992%29.jpg), [last viewed: 12.06.2009].

