



# KURDISH COMMUNITY

by Halit Mehmet Bakay

Kurdistan or Kurdistan is a landlocked region in Asia Minor, north of the Middle East and south of Transcaucasia. Historically claimed by the Kurdish people, the ethnic group that inhabits it, its territory is divided between four current states: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, to which must be added a small enclave in Armenia. In certain Kurdish cities, urban settlement dates back to prehistoric times, notably Piranshahr with 8000 years of urban settlement and Erbil with 6000 years of urban settlement.

## **History**

The Kurds are a people of Indo-European origin who settled in southern Anatolia around the 10th century BC. Their origins are thought to go back to the Medes who fought first the Assyrians and then the Achaemenids, who defeated them in 550 BC.

The Median Empire, which lasted 128 years, was conquered by Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire, which in turn was conquered in 332 BC by Alexander the Great. During the Middle Ages the Kurdish people enjoyed relative freedom under Islamic rule. However, with the rise of the Ottoman Empire, the country was fragmented into two states: Ottoman and Persian. On the Ottoman side, the Kurdish fiefdoms maintained a large measure of autonomy until the 19th century. During this century, Ottoman interference in the Kurdish fiefdoms led to strong tensions with the authorities, which resulted in several independence rebellions between 1806 and 1880.

After the end of World War I, with the Ottoman Empire in the process of disintegration, the failed draft Treaty of Sèvres, which was never ratified and never entered into force, recognised the right to self-determination of the nationalities of the former empires, and provided for the creation of a Kurdish state. The Treaty, and in particular Article 62, defined the borders and hypothetical composition of the future Kurdistan. The Kurdistan conceived by the treaty would have been a country with two-thirds of its territory removed, including its fertile areas and traditional pastoral lands. In 1925 a Kurdish insurrection was defeated by Turkish troops.

After the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) Kurdistan was divided between Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq and the USSR. After the Second World War and the beginning of decolonisation, the current borders of the states into which Kurdistan is divided were drawn.

In 1945, the communist-inspired Republic of Mahabad was proclaimed in Iranian Kurdistan by the newly created Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDP), which remained independent for a year until the occupation of the city of Mahabad by the Iranian authorities in December of the same year.

During the Cold War there was constant Kurdish agitation for independence. In 1961 Mustafa Barzani, a historic member of the KDP, launched a guerrilla war in Iraq until he was defeated in 1975. In 1979 there was a new rebellion in Iran against the theocratic post-revolutionary regime. The Iranian response was to declare a holy war against the Kurds. In 1984 the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) launched a new guerrilla uprising with actions in Turkey.

From the late 1980s onwards, tensions in Kurdistan increased, with the PKK becoming more active and the Iraqi and Turkish authorities, in particular, increasingly repressive towards its inhabitants. After the Gulf War in 1991, a new uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was crushed by the passivity of Western troops. In 1992, the Bloody Newruz (21 March) took place in Turkey, in which an estimated 200 Kurdish demonstrators were killed by the Turkish army. A year earlier Leyla Zana, a Kurdish MP in Ankara, was arrested on charges of separatism.

At this time, the strong divisions between the different Kurdish political forces that materialised in the civil war in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1994 to 1997, in which the militias of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (UPK), a left-wing splinter of the KDP in the 1970s, clashed, began to become apparent. At the same time, the Turkish army expanded its repression against the Kurdish people by destroying more than 3,000 of their villages. In 1999, Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, was arrested in Kenya, which led to major Kurdish revolts, especially in Iran.

The outbreak of the Iraq War in 2003 prompted most Kurdish political groups to support the US with the aim of achieving greater autonomy after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, which subsequently led to the creation of the autonomous federal entity of Iraqi Kurdistan. A few years later, during the Syrian Civil War, the Kurdish armed revolt of 2012 took place in Kurdish territory inside Syria.

In 2014, a terrorist network called Islamic State conquered a portion of Syro-Iraqi Mesopotamia and founded a self-styled caliphate under the command of Caliph Ibrahim; this was considered a threat to the Kurdish population, given the statements of Islamic State leaders. Moreover, Kurdish fighters and civilians were arrested and tortured by the caliphate's army, which led to the creation of self-defence forces in part of the territory. At the same time, the Kurdish Supreme Committee is leading the fight against the Islamic State in alliance with both the US-led Western coalition and Russian forces.

## **Kurdish language**

An essential component of the cultural identity of the Kurdish people, the Kurdish language is a vibrant manifestation of their history, diversity and resilience. Classified as an Iranian language within the Indo-European language family, Kurdish has developed over centuries in the mountainous region of Kurdistan, which spans parts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The language has a variety of dialects, the most prominent of which are Kurmanji, Sorani and Zaza, each with its own linguistic characteristics and regional associations.

Kurmanji, spoken mainly in northern Kurdistan, is the most widespread dialect and used in a variety of contexts, from everyday life to literature and the media. On the other hand, Sorani, predominant in Iraqi Kurdistan and parts of Iran, is the official dialect of the Kurdish regional government of Iraq. Meanwhile, Zaza, spoken in eastern Turkey and parts of Iran, is considered both a Kurdish dialect and a separate language due to its significant linguistic differences.

As for its writing system, Kurdish has been represented in different ways throughout history. In Turkey and Syria, the Latin alphabet is mainly used, while in Iraq and Iran the Arabic-Persian alphabet is used. These different writing systems have been the subject of debates and standardisation efforts to promote the cohesion and spread of Kurdish as a written language. The Kurdish language is not only a means of communication, but also a vital expression of Kurdish culture and identity. Through their rich literary tradition, ranging from poetry to prose and drama, Kurds have transmitted their history, values and experiences over time. In addition, music, art and other forms of cultural expression have also been enriched by the use and promotion of Kurdish.

Despite the political and social challenges facing the Kurdish people, the Kurdish language continues to be a symbol of resistance and a vital link that unites the Kurdish community worldwide. Through education, promotion and preservation of their mother tongue, Kurds work tirelessly to ensure that their language and culture will endure and thrive for future generations. The Kurdish language is not only a vehicle for communication, but also a source of pride and strength for the Kurdish people in their quest for autonomy and recognition.

### *Literature*

Literature and poetry occupy a central place in the cultural expression of the Kurdish people, serving as powerful vehicles for conveying their history, values and aspirations. Over the centuries, the rich Kurdish literary tradition has flourished in a variety of forms, from epic poetry to prose and drama, reflecting the diversity and depth of human experience.

Kurdish poetry, in particular, has been a form of artistic expression rooted in Kurdish culture since ancient times. Kurdish poets have used their art to give voice to the deepest feelings of the Kurdish people, from love for the land to the struggle for freedom and justice. Through their words, they have been witnesses and chroniclers of the history of the Kurdish people, resisting oppression and preserving cultural identity in difficult times. The most common form of Kurdish poetry is the 'destan', a lyrical form that is recited or sung at social and cultural events, passing on the traditions and values of the Kurdish people from generation to generation.

Kurdish literature encompasses a wide range of forms and genres, from traditional epics to contemporary fiction. Epic stories and myths and legends passed down orally over the centuries have inspired generations of Kurdish writers, who have used their imagination and creativity to explore themes such as cultural identity, politics, religion and the Kurdish diaspora. Kurdish literature has been influenced by diverse literary traditions, but has also developed a distinctive style that reflects the unique experience of the Kurdish people and their struggle for freedom and autonomy.

## **Religions**

The Kurdish community is diverse in terms of religion, with a mix of beliefs reflecting the history and geography of the Kurdistan Region. Although the majority of Kurds are Muslim, there are also significant communities that practice other religions, such as Christianity and Yazidism. This religious diversity has enriched Kurdish culture and shaped the community's practices and traditions.

### *Islam*

Most Kurds are Muslims, and most follow the Sunni branch of Islam. However, there is also a significant minority of Kurds who are Shia Muslims, especially in Iran. Islam has had a profound influence on Kurdish culture, and many traditions and festivities are rooted in Islamic practices. The mosque plays a central role in community life, serving as a place of prayer, religious education and social gathering.

### *Christianity*

In addition to Islam, there are Kurdish Christian communities in the Kurdistan Region, especially in Iraq and Turkey. These communities include different Christian groups, such as Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syrians. Throughout history, Kurdish Christians have faced challenges and persecution, but have maintained their religious and cultural traditions through generations. Orthodox and Catholic Christian churches are important places of worship and community for Christian Kurds.

### *Yazidism*

Yazidism is a minority religion that has its roots in Kurdistan and is followed by a significant part of the Kurdish community, especially in Iraq. Yazidism is a monotheistic religion that worships a single god and has a unique belief system and practices. Yazidi temples, known as 'white temples', are sacred places where followers perform religious rituals and annual festivals.

### *Other religions*

In addition to Islam, Christianity and Yazidism, there are also small communities of Kurds who practice other religions, such as Judaism and Zoroastrianism. These communities are a minority but important part of Kurdistan's religious diversity and have contributed to the cultural and spiritual richness of the region.

### **Kurdish folklore**

Kurdish folklore is a treasure trove of traditions, stories and cultural practices passed down from generation to generation over the centuries. These stories and practices reflect the rich history, unique identity and beliefs of the Kurdish people, providing a window into their spiritual, social and cultural world. From myths and legends to traditional songs and dances, Kurdish folklore is an inexhaustible source of inspiration and wisdom.

### *Mythology and legends*

Kurdish mythology is full of gods, heroes and mythical creatures that embody the values, fears and aspirations of the Kurdish people. Among the most prominent is the epic hero Kawa, who, according to legend, overthrew the tyrant King Zuhak and liberated the Kurdish people from their oppression. Other legendary figures include Mam and Zin, whose tragic love story has been told and sung throughout the centuries.

### *Music and dance*

Music and dance occupy a central place in Kurdish folklore, with a wide variety of songs and dances reflecting the traditions and celebrations of the Kurdish people. Folk songs often tell stories of love, war, nostalgia and hope, while traditional dances, such as the halay and dîlan, are performed at festivals and cultural celebrations.

### *Celebrations and festivals*

Celebrations and festivals play an important role in Kurdish folklore, providing opportunities for the community to gather, celebrate and honour its traditions. Nowruz, or Kurdish New Year, is one of the most important celebrations, marked by public festivities, dancing, music and festive feasts. Other festivals, such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, are also celebrated by the Kurdish community.

## Tattoos

Kurdish tattoos are an expression of identity and culture rooted in the rich history of the Kurds, a people with an ancestral heritage dating back thousands of years in the mountainous region of Kurdistan, which encompasses parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. These tattoos have deep cultural and personal significance for those who wear them, serving as symbols of belonging, protection, social status, and often as bearers of family histories and traditions.

Kurdish tattoo designs vary widely by region and tribe, but often incorporate geometric, floral, animal and nature symbols. Each of these designs can have a unique meaning, conveying messages about family history, ethnicity, protection from evil or even marking important events in a person's life, such as marriages or births.

Kurdish tattoos may also include letters and words in the Kurdish language or Arabic, which may be verses from the Qur'an, traditional poems or words of protection and blessing.

Historically, tattoos among Kurds have also served as a means of identification between different tribes and ethnic groups, as well as a form of protection against enemies. In times of conflict, Kurds often tattooed protective symbols to keep themselves safe from physical and spiritual dangers.

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Although Kurdish tattoos have been an integral part of Kurdish culture for centuries, their practice has undergone changes due to factors such as modernisation, the influence of religion and social pressure. In some places, tattoos may be seen as a violation of religious or cultural norms, while in others, they persist as a form of connection to Kurdish identity and an expression of cultural resistance.



## **Kurdish refugees**

The problem of Kurdish refugees and displaced persons arose during the 20th century in the Middle East and continues to this day. The Kurds (Kurdish: كورد, Kurd) are a West Asian ethnic group. The majority of their population inhabits a geographic space known as Kurdistan, which includes territories contiguous to Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Displacements of Kurds had already been occurring within the Ottoman Empire, under the pretext of suppressing Kurdish rebellions during the period of its domination of the northern Fertile Crescent and adjacent areas of the Zagros and Taurus Mountains. In the early 20th century, Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire suffered genocide (especially during the First World War and the Turkish War of Independence), and at the same time many Kurds, whose tribes opposed the Turks, suffered forced displacement.

In Iraq, the Kurds' struggle for autonomy and independence led to armed conflict since the Great Iraqi Revolution of 1919. Kurdish displacement intensified in the wake of Kurdish-Iraqi conflicts and the Baathist regime's active Arabisation programmes,<sup>4</sup> which sought to cleanse northern Iraq of the Kurdish majority. Tens of thousands of Kurds became displaced and fled the war zones after the First and Second Kurdish-Iraqi Wars in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively. The Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, the first Gulf War and subsequent rebellions all generated several million Kurdish refugees. Most found refuge in Iran; others, however, had to disperse to Europe and America. Iran alone provided asylum to 1.4 million Iraqis, mostly Kurds, uprooted by the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) and subsequent rebellions. Today, a large number of Kurds (and their descendants) are refugees and displaced persons in, among others, Iran and Syria. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad extended the application of civil rights to the Kurdish community in an attempt to 'pacify' the 2011 uprising. However, according to human rights groups, only 3,000 of the 5.2 million Kurds were granted official status in Syria as a result of this reform.

### *The Kurdish diaspora beyond the Middle East*


The Kurdish population makes up 80-90% of all refugees from Turkey settled in Germany.<sup>131415</sup> Of Iraqi refugees living in Germany, 50% are Kurds.<sup>14</sup> In the UK, approximately 65-70% of people immigrating from Iraq are Kurdish, while 70% come from Turkey and 15% from Iran.



According to a Council of Europe report, approximately 1.3 million Kurds live in Western Europe. The first to emigrate were Kurdo-Turks, who settled in Germany, Austria, the Benelux countries, Britain, Switzerland and France during the 1960s. Successive periods of political and social upheaval in the region during the 1980s and 1990s brought new waves of Kurdish refugees to Europe, mainly from Iran and Iraq; in the latter country, then ruled by Saddam Hussein. In recent years, many of the Kurdish asylum seekers from both countries have settled in the UK (specifically in Dewsbury and other areas north of London), a circumstance that has sometimes generated media controversy over their right to stay in the UK.

The coexistence of various communities in Dewsbury has led to tensions, such as between the Kurds and the established Muslim community in Dewsbury,<sup>1819</sup> where there are very traditional mosques, such as the Markazi Mosque. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, many of the refugees from the Syrian Civil War are Syrian Kurds and, as a result, many of the current Syrian asylum seekers in Germany are of Kurdish origin.

There has been a large influx of ethnic Kurdish immigrants to Canada and the United States, mainly refugees and political immigrants seeking economic opportunities. According to a 2011 Canadian housing survey, 11,685 people of Kurdish origin were living in Canada and, in addition, according to the 2011 Census of Canada, more than 10,000 Canadians spoke the Kurdish language. In the US, from 1976 onwards, a large number of Kurdish immigrants began to settle in the city of Nashville, known in English as Little Kurdistan, as it is home to the largest Kurdish community in the US, with around 11,000 inhabitants. According to the US Census Bureau, the total number of Kurds residing in the country is estimated at 15,000.

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of a green fabric with intricate embroidery. The embroidery features several five-pointed stars in various colors: light blue, yellow, red, and pink. Interspersed among the stars are floral motifs, including daisy-like flowers and smaller blossoms in shades of pink, yellow, and red. The embroidery is done with thick, textured threads, giving it a tactile appearance.

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