

Committee: The Special Political and Decolonisation Committee

Issue: The issue of Kurdish self-determination

Student Officer: Christopher Davris

Position: Deputy Chair



PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear Delegates,

My name is Christopher Davris, I am 16 years old and I attend the 11th grade at Ekpedeftiki Anagennisi. It is my pleasure to serve as a Co-Chair in the Special Political and Decolonisation Committee of the 7th Campion School Athens Model United Nations. I enjoy Politics and International Relations and I, thus, consider such simulations priceless. Participating in MUN for the last 3 years has offered me general knowledge regarding politics and international relations and has been an invaluable experience for me, shaping the person that I am today.

The question of the Kurdish self-determination is an issue of immense importance. The Kurds, an ethnic group of 35 million people ask for a homeland of their own, however, their demands for independence have been deemed as implausible thus far. The question of the validity of their demands and the measures that have to be taken in order to stabilize the region should both be examined throughout the draft of the resolutions and the debate.

The purpose of this study guide is to provide you with a strong basis and to act as a useful tool in order for you to familiarize yourselves with the issue. Having said that, I strongly encourage you conducted further research on your own, so as to understand the case in depth. Should you have any questions regarding the topic, do not hesitate to contact me through my email address (christopherdavris13@gmail.com).

I wish you luck with your preparation and look forward to meeting you all!

Best regards,
Christopher Davris

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Kurdistan

Region located in eastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, northwestern Iran, and northern Iraq which is inhabited by approximately 35 million Kurds.¹



Self-determination

A right that allows a group of people of a territorial unity to gain autonomy, form their own government and determine their own political status. Having been listed explicitly in the UN Charter, it is recognised as an international legal right.²

Autonomy

Autonomy allows a region within a country to control or govern itself but without forming its own state.³

Independence

A region with independence, has its own state, its own government and is not ruled by any other country.⁴

Separatism

The belief held by people of a particular race, religion or another group within a country that they should be independent and they should have their own government or in some way live apart from other people.⁵

¹ "Kurdistan: Definition and Meaning." *Collins English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/kurdistan>.

² "Self-Determination: Definition and Meaning." *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-determination>.

³ "Autonomy: Definition and Meaning." *Lexico Dictionaries*, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/autonomy>.

⁴ "Independence: Definition and Meaning." *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/independence>.

⁵ "Separatism: Definition and Meaning." *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/separatism>.

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

The Kurds are the largest stateless ethnic group in the world right now and are characterized by a strong sense of distinct Kurdish identity and an evident drive for independence. With a population of approximately 35 million people, they live in a mountainous region that includes southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northern Syria. As far as language and religion are concerned, they speak Kurdish and Zaza-Gorani and their majority identifies themselves as Sunni Muslims. Though they are a 97% Muslim country, women are extremely prominent in their society, unlike their Middle Eastern neighbors.

Originally, they were inhabitants of the region constituting ancient northern Mesopotamia. In the Bible, Kurds are mentioned as descendants of Medes and even though the Kurds are Muslim, they do not identify themselves as Arabs as most Muslims do. Since the 6th century, they have been fighting with Arabs to maintain their territory during their Middle Eastern expansion, while generally, over the course of history, the Kurds have separated themselves from Arabs due to their continuous hostile relations that often included conflicts. In the early 20th century and after World War I (WWI), they were promised by the Western Powers negotiations regarding an independent nation through the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. The Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 annulled Sèvres in order to meet the Turkish demands and the Western Powers could not live up to the Kurdish expectations.

The obvious reason behind Kurdish statelessness is that Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq are not willing by any means to grant them land to gain their independence, as they have no interest in giving away a considerable part of their territory in favor of creating a Kurdish State. A Kurdish State would mean the redraw of borders in the region of the Middle East and for the involved countries to, as mentioned, lose part of their land, and in this way weaken their economy to a great extent as their oil revenues would reduce significantly.

To add to that, there is the fear that granting independence to Kurdistan will lead to other minorities uprising and protesting, furthermore demanding autonomy. The Kurds remain indifferent towards any issue, however, as they have stated they will continue fighting for their right to self-determination as they have done throughout the years. The idea for Kurd separatists is to eventually create the Greater Kurdistan requiring land from Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

In most cases, countries that are not geographically involved with the issue do not wish to recognize the Kurdish State, aiming to avoid hostile relations with Turkey, Syria, Iran, or Iraq. This has been a very disturbing factor to the Kurds who have not been able to find support from many states in their efforts for independence.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Kurdish separatism in Iraq

The only Kurdish minority that has managed to gain some sort of authority is the Iraqi one but in spite of this, the Kurds have suffered outrageous human rights violations in the Iraqi region. The worst situations they faced were under Saddam Hussein's rule, when horrible atrocities were committed against the Kurds because they did not share common aspirations for the Iraqi nation. After the Iran-Iraq war and the Kurds siding with Iran, Saddam Hussein destroyed whole Kurdish villages and used chemical weapons against the Kurds as part of the Anfal Campaign, an anti-Kurd movement that took place between 1986 and 1989 and by the end of which more than 180,000 Kurds were killed.⁶

The Gulf War held a pivotal role in achieving autonomy for the Kurds, as in the aftermath of it due to US intervention an autonomous region with its own government and army was granted to the Iraqi Kurds. Therefore, in 1992, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the Peshmerga Armed Forces were established, that led to the region becoming the most stable and prosperous entity in the whole country. The KRG is the only official Kurdish authority currently in the world, it governs 6 million people and makes up for 20% of the Iraqi population. Iraq's Kurdish region occupies parts of the country that are bursting with oil and gas, with the Kurdish economy heavily benefiting from selling these resources independently from Iraq.



⁶ "GENOCIDE IN IRAQ: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds" Human Rights Watch Report, 1993, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/>.

The Peshmerga whose name in Kurdish means “those who face death”, have proven to be a more efficient fighter unit than the Iraqi army and in fact, have managed to sustain ISIS attacks more efficiently than the Iraqi army. They have assisted the US in the fight against ISIS and they were the ones who captured Saddam Hussein as well as Osama Bin Laden’s messenger, leading to his capture by the US troops.

Kurd separatists in Iraq have fought intensely for independence during the past years, in this way drawing global attention. In order to clarify their intentions, in 2005 Iraqi Kurds held an unofficial referendum, which resulted in 98% of the population supporting independence, however, no significant changes took place. In 2017, in need of desperate measures, the KRG decided to conduct another referendum for independence with 93%, again, being in favour of independence.

Nevertheless, the Iraqi government refused, once again, to recognize the referendum, claiming that it was unconstitutional and that their stance on the matter was irrevocable. notwithstanding the lack of impact the referendum had on the official status of the Kurds in the region, it put the issue back on the table after a long time. Iraqi officials have claimed that those having independence aspirations can easily make statements that they, however, fail to actualize. All in all, Iraqi Kurds have been very active in their protests for independence and this is why they are in the best position out of all Kurdish minorities.

Kurdish separatism in Turkey

The biggest part of the Kurds has settled in Turkey and have created the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) an organization that is considered a terrorist group by Turkey. The organization was founded by Abdullah Ocalan in 1978 and the group’s endeavors for independence have cost thousands of lives since then. The Turkish authorities arrested Abdullah Ocalan in 1999 and since then the group has shifted their position from independence calls to protests for autonomy.

There are currently 14 million Kurds in Turkey, that make up for 20% of the Turkish population and live in the southeastern part of the country. Turkey believes that Kurds have no reason to mess with the territorial integrity of any state and is not willing by any means to grant

them neither independence nor autonomy. Kurdish villages in the past have been destroyed, set on fire and suffered food embargoes by Turkey, with approximately 3,000 Kurdish villages being virtually wiped from the map by the Turkish government, resulting in the displacement of more than 378,000 people. All these actions from the Turkish government were in response to the PKK's violent protests.

Besides the ceasefire reached by the two sides between 2013 and 2015 that was ultimately interrupted by Turkey's interference in the Syrian Civil War, things have been extremely hostile between the two parties. Turkey's President Tayyip Erdoğan has been advocating for the



creation of a safe zone in Syria along the Turkish-Syria border in Kurdish populated regions. The proposal of Turkey is, however, not supported by other countries because in the past Turkey has often violated such safe zones and attacked Kurdish strongholds.

Kurdish separatism in Syria

In 2012 Kurdish separatists in Syria formed an unofficial government, the Rojava, which, even though, might not be recognized by the Syrian government, is a de facto autonomous region in northern Syria that runs along the borders with Turkey. It is home to two million Kurds and makes up for 10% of the Syrian population. Until a few years ago, Rojava was in a "forgotten" corner of Syria, where the Kurds were denied legal status by the Syrian government, but today it is a



self-governed region with a powerful militia, currently leading the fight against ISIS. Surrounded by Assad's authoritarian regime, ISIS militias and a hostile neighbor, Turkey, it is difficult to imagine that the Middle East's youngest democracy has been established in this region.

It was the Syrian Civil War that made this unlikely democratic revolution possible in the first place. With uprisings on multiple fronts, Assad had to

withdraw most of his army from the Kurdish populated regions in order to defend major cities in the West. The already existing Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party took advantage of the situation and stepped up to govern Rojava, but just as Rojava started taking shape, it came under attack from ISIS. With Assad being engaged in the civil war, Rojava was leading operations against the Islamic State, while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Rojava's army, fought with ISIS for 4 years, with the support of the US up until March 2019, when they announced that ISIS had been defeated.

The Kurds have promoted the model of Rojava as a post-war solution for Syria but there has also been some criticism about it, namely in the form of claims of human rights violations against the non-Kurdish population and ties with the PKK, that has committed terrorist acts in the past. Consequently, in August 2016 Turkey decided to send troops to fight both ISIS and the SDF. It is important to note the impact of the aforementioned Turkish strikes on Rojava regions as well as the US lack of interest for the defense of the Kurds against the Turkish.

Kurdish separatism in Iran

Since the end of WWI in 1918, there has been a long-lasting separatist dispute in Iran between the Kurds and the Iranian government, as 6 million Kurds live in the northwestern part of Iran and make up for 10% of the population there. Despite the fact that it is referred to as the eastern part of Greater Kurdistan by Kurd nationalists, they have not managed to establish any kind of autonomy and just like in any other country in the Middle East, the Kurds have faced suppression and discrimination.

Human rights abuses have alerted humanitarian organizations, such as Amnesty International, that have reported incidents regarding executions of dozens of political prisoners with not even one case having received a fair trial. Kurdish separatists have formed the Kurdistan Free Life Party, a local military group striving for Kurdish self-determination. They have protested time and time again for independence and they are considered a terrorist group due to them having affiliations with PKK.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

United States of America (USA)

The USA has provided vital aid to the Kurds since WWI, when they first supported the creation of a Kurdish State after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Even though such a thing did not occur, the US and the Kurds have helped each other in various ways. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the US imposed a no-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan, preventing further Kurdish repression by Iraq and in this way, played a significant role in the establishment of the Kurdish government in the region. Moreover, when Turkey denied passage into Iraq for the invasion of 2003, the Kurds took the opportunity to help the US overthrow Saddam Hussein. As far as their common enemy is concerned, the US has pledged support funding and giving weapons and training the Peshmerga as well as the SDF in the fight against ISIS. Other than that, they did not support the 2017 independence referendum as they claimed it distracted the Kurds from fighting ISIS. Overall though, the US currently has an official policy of having Kurdistan as a non-state ally.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

ISIS has been troubling the Kurds for some years now. but they have managed to raise their international profile through the success of their armed forces against them. Many experts regard the Kurds as a key player in the fight against it as their forces have proven that they are even more efficient than the Iraqi and Syrian ones. Peshmerga women warriors are very much feared by ISIS fighters because they believe that if they get killed by a woman they may not go to paradise. The Kurds seem to be taking advantage of that belief sending often women fighters against them. Now that ISIS has reached territorial defeat it is important though to secure that there are no remaining pockets of it that could bring chaos to the region once again. The Kurds believe that even though ISIS has lost their last stronghold this does not mean the end of the organisation and they call for an international tribunal to try suspected ISIS members.

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)⁷



The Kurdistan Workers' Party has played an essential role in the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds since its foundation in 1978 until today. The far-left political and militant organisation started as a form of opposition against the suppression that Turkish Kurds faced at the time. Armed clashes between them and Turkish Authorities are very common and due to the conflict more than 40,000 Kurds have lost their lives. International organisations such as NATO and EU as well as several countries like the US and the UK after Turkish demands have designated PKK as a terrorist group. However, the UN and member nations including Russia and China do not wish to list PKK as such a group. Temporary ceasefire has been reached in the past on numerous occasions but it did not last long with one of the two parties breaking its promises. Under the status quo, PKK is willing to make peace with Turkey only under US guarantees.

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO)

UNPO is an organisation that strives for self-determination and autonomy in regions that the minorities are not represented. The organisation addresses representation of the minorities in institutions of national and international governance. Iranian Kurdistan is an active member and Iraqi Kurdistan used to be a member until 2015. The organization strongly condemns policies and actions taken by the Iranian government against the Kurd separatists and the human rights abuses that have taken place. It believes that the issue of federalism is neglected there and supports democratic decentralization in order for minorities to participate in social affairs.⁸

⁷ "PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party." Al Jazeera News, 25 Feb. 2008, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2008/02/2008525184459230889.html>.

⁸ Fathi Nazila, "Relatives of Kurds Executed in Iran Are Denied the Remains, and 2 Are Arrested." The New York Times, 12 May 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/12/world/middleeast/12iran.html>.

TIMELINE

- 10 August 1920: The Treaty of Sèvres is signed
- 24 July 1923: The Treaty of Lausanne reverses Treaty of Sèvres
- 25 November 1978: Abdullah Ocalan founds the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)
- 12 March 1986 - 7 June 1989: The Anfal Genocide takes place
- 28 February 1991: The Gulf War ends
- 5 April 1991: Security Council passes Resolution 688
- 15 July 1992: The Kurdish Regional Government is created
- 15 February 1999: Turkish authorities arrest Abdullah Ocalan leader of the PKK
- 20 March 2003: US invades Iraq
- 30 January 2005: Unofficial Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum
- July 2012: Rojava establishes de-facto autonomous region
- 28 October 2016: Turkey attacks ISIS and Kurdish population in Western Rojava
- 25 September 2017: Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum of 2017 takes place
- 23 March 2019: Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announces ISIS defeat in Syria

RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

United Nations Security Council Resolution 688

<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/688>

The resolution was submitted after the end of the Gulf War in 1991 and touched upon the Kurdish issue. Primarily, it condemned Iraq's hostile actions and its suppression towards the Kurdish population. Furthermore, it defended the Kurds' human rights, called for humanitarian aid in the region. That was the first out of many reports regarding the region to end Iraqi human rights violations and it raised awareness internationally in order to aid the Kurds after the disasters they suffered.

Treaty of Sèvres

Over the years, Kurds lived border free under the Ottomans until World War One when they were promised homeland of their own. Then, after the end of WWI, the borders of the Middle East were redrawn and the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 officially formed the nations of Syria, Iraq, and Kuwait. The treaty declared no independent Kurdistan but decided to leave room for discussions regarding forming a Kurdish State as promised by the Western Powers at that time.

Treaty of Lausanne

What the Treaty of Sèvres promised the Kurds was never applied and it was reversed by the Treaty of Lausanne which was signed in 1923. Due to the refusal of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq to recognise an independent Kurdistan, no more negotiations for the Kurdish matter were made. Thus, in 1923 the Treaty of Lausanne formed modern Turkey and eventually excluded Kurds from any kind of recognition leading to the absence of a sovereign nation to themselves and forcing them to be a minority to every country they settled.

Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum of 2017

Despite 93% of the Kurdish population seeking independence, the Iraqi government claimed that the referendum was unconstitutional. To add to that, the referendum was unable to initiate any negotiation for independence with the KRG, even after the results came out. The referendum was subject to criticism internationally with Turkey and Iran siding with Iraq. The US stated that the vote would distract the Kurds from the fight against ISIS and UN Secretary-General Antonio Gutierrez, said it may have potentially destabilizing effects and thus, they both failed to support it.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

It is clear that the issue at hand is quite complex and has concerned the Middle East for over a century. Just like any ethnic group, the Kurds do not want to lose their cultural heritage, their background and just simply be merged into another culture, and thus it is vital for measures to be taken in order to prevent this from happening. That being said it is pivotal to understand that if autonomy or independence are to occur, they cannot happen overnight, but it is a process that should be approached in stages. Although the creation of an independent Kurdish state would be ideal in the minds of the Kurdish population, such a drastic measure would bring further instability in the Middle East.

To start with, it is the moral responsibility of the global leaders to apply pressure to the governments of Syria, Iran, Turkey and Iraq in order to grant fundamental human rights to their Kurdish population. To make sure that no violations occur humanitarian agencies can take part in monitoring and report to the UN. Incidents such as the imprisonment of Kurdish activists with inadequate evidence should be addressed. Thus, it can be made clear that human rights abuses cannot be tolerated.

Moreover, UN overviewed talks between the involved governments and the Kurdish minorities should, first of all, be held in order to discuss matters of autonomy and independence. For this to happen though, parties shall be open to negotiations and willing to cooperate, in order for both sides to benefit from the negotiations. Through peaceful dialogue, the Kurds can request for the increased autonomy and representation they have been advocating for, while the different governments can secure greater unity within their states. These talks can include issues such as the prosecution of Kurdish activists, the recognition of Kurdish languages and their introduction in education, the sustainability of Kurdish autonomy and Kurdish representation in parliament.

In addition, a ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK should be made in order to find a solution in the decades-long issue of militarism. The strikes in western Rojava and the conflict in eastern Turkey cost lives on a daily basis. Through mediated peace negotiations, parties will have the ability to formally express their demands and come closer to a settlement. Kurds will continue to be a vulnerable target even if a ceasefire is made, therefore security could be established through UN peacekeeping forces.

Lastly, even now that ISIS has reached territorial defeat, it is not to be neglected because even though the group has reached territorial defeat it still commands thousands of fighters that may resurge their past actions. There are no grounds for complacency and it is important for local governments and armies to secure that there are no remaining pockets of it that could bring chaos to the region once again.

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