

# **STATE BORDERS VS. CULTURAL HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS SOCIAL NETWORKS: THE CASE OF TURKISH KURDS', KURDS IN IRAQ - AND THEIR STRUGGLE FOR SELF DETERMINATION**

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## **Abstract**

There are estimated 30 million Kurdish people in the world today concentrated in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Iran. Kurds constitute the largest stateless minority in the modern world. This paper poses several questions to be delineated and discussed further. I begin with a description of the Kurds in Turkey, their history, social and cultural identity, I move to the history of challenges they have faced since the inception of the Turkish state. I then discuss the current drawbacks for their lives in Turkey of today asking if the state borders will sustain the cultural, religious and strong social networks particularly with the latest changes in the Arab world and the Kurdish advancements in the Kurdish part of Iraq. The paper also delineates the Kurds' circumstances in Iran, Iraq and **Syria**.

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**Keywords:** State borders, Turkish Kurds

## **Introduction**

It is estimated that there are currently 30 million Kurdish people living in the world today, making up the largest stateless minority in the world. Centered in what is informally known as “Kurdistan,” a majority of the world’s Kurdish population reside in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Syria, where nearly half of that population (12 to 15 million, est.) reside in Turkey. Given this sizeable population, which comprises nearly a quarter of Turkey’s total population, the main focus of this paper is to examine the challenges Kurdish Turks currently face in terms of nationality and socio-cultural identities that transcend internationally defined borders.

To begin, the situation facing the Kurdish population in Turkey—particularly the human rights abuses they have, and continue to suffer—is

not new. Indeed, the Kurdish Question<sup>1</sup>, as it is called, has received ample attention from human rights activists and regional scholars since Turkey applied for European Union membership in 1999. As such, this paper will begin with a necessary analysis of the historical context surrounding Turkish national politics and how it relates to the treatment of the Kurdish Question. Following will be a discussion of two groups in Turkey—the Democratic Society Party (DTP) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—and how they have faced repression as socio-political actors for positive change. Finally, this analysis will end with an evaluation of the current prospects the Kurds in Turkey and the surrounding region face as we reach the midpoint of this second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### The Historical Context

The Kurds are an ancient people whose history reaches back roughly 2,500 years to the times of the Medes Empire founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Medes Empire ruled over the Kurdish lands of present day northwest Iran, and most of the Kurdish lands in the eastern region of present day Turkey. After the fall of the Medes Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the region was ruled by successive empires including the Seljuk, Parthian, and Sassanid empires. It was conquered by Alexander the Great in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. As previously stated, the invasions of the Arabs beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE brought Islam to the Kurdistan region, which was progressively adopted by the Kurds as their own.



<sup>1</sup> The “Kurdish Question” is a widely used term to discuss Turkey and its treatment of the Kurdish people and its relation to the state. Without doubt, the term does not come without argument. For many, the Kurdish Question as a term is pejorative, just as many saw the “Jewish Question” offensive in the writings of the mid-to-late 1800s. No such offense is intended in this paper. I use the term that is most understandable and consistent with current scholastic nomenclature.

<sup>2</sup> Map of the Kurdish Regions, *Kurdish Human Rights Project*

The above map provides a clear visualization of the region in the present day Middle East known to the Kurdish people as Kurdistan (Land of the Kurds). As shown by this map, the Kurds inhabit a land that is divided mainly between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. There is, however, also a relatively small Kurdish community in Armenia. The Kurds are bound together by their ethnicity – they are neither Arabs nor Iranians (Persians) – the Kurdish language (including dialects thereof) and by the religion of Islam since its arrival in the region as a result of Arab invasions beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Kurds are predominantly Sunni Muslims as opposed to being Shi'a Muslims.

During the Middle Ages the Kurdistan region remained one of shifting alliances and invasions, which included the rise and fall of semi autonomous vassal Kurdish entities and principalities owing their allegiance to various Arab and Persian overlords. Kurdistan was invaded, conquered and came under the rule of the Turkish Ottoman Empire in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE when the Ottoman Turks took the region, as well as Mesopotamia, from the Persians.<sup>3</sup>

The Ottoman Empire collapsed with the end of WW I in 1918. The Treaty of Sevres, which was never ratified, divided up Ottoman possessions and included a provision for an autonomous Kurdistan. In a second treaty, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), the Turkish Republic, which was the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, was not obligated to provide for an autonomous Kurdistan. The Treaty divided Kurdistan (excluding the area of Kurdistan ruled by Persia (Iran), among Turkey, Iraq and Syria. Rather than allowing certain freedoms for the Kurds, the Turkish Republic, under its founder Mustapha Kemal, bloodily crushed a Kurdish rebellion against the

Republic in 1925, precluding any form of autonomy for those Kurds who were incorporated into the Turkish state.

A rebellion by Kurds in Iran against that country was violently put down in 1946. In 1961, the Kurds of Iraq rose up against the Arab government in Baghdad. This revolt was also crushed, but fighting between the Kurds and the government in Baghdad continued, intermittently, for many years thereafter. In 1974, resulting from a dispute between the Kurds and the government in Baghdad over the oil rich province of Kirkuk, another Kurdish rebellion was crushed by the Baghdad government. In 1979, it was the government of the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran that suppressed another Kurdish rebellion against that country. In 1984, the Kurdish

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<http://www.khrp.org/kurds/kurdish-region-map.html>

<sup>3</sup> The Rise of the Turks and the Ottoman Empire, excerpted from Turkey: A country Study, Paul Pitman III, ed. Washington DC: Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 1987.

[http://www.shsu.edu/~his\\_ncp/Turkey2.html](http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Turkey2.html)

Workers Party (PKK) that was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan, began its ongoing struggle against the government in Turkey that rules over Turkish Kurdistan. In 1988, Saddam Hussein's horrific "al-Anfal" campaign – that included the use of chemical gas warfare, which alone killed thousands of Kurds in the city of Halabja<sup>4</sup> – was launched against the Kurds in Iraq, killing tens of thousands of Kurdish men, women and children. Throughout the 1990's, the Kurds suffered continuing violent repression and slaughter at the hands of Turkey in its repeated military operations against them both in Turkey and in Iraq. During the same period thousands upon thousands of Kurds died again at the hands of Saddam Hussein after they rose up once more against him at the end of the first "Gulf War". Since the end of the second "Gulf War" in 2003, the Kurds in Iraq have enjoyed relative autonomy within sectarian-strife-torn Iraq. Such relative autonomy is not enjoyed by Kurds living in other parts of Kurdistan such as in Turkey or Iran.

### **The Kurdish Minority in Turkey**

No one group in Turkey has been as adversely affected since WWI by the country's deplorable human rights record, as have the Kurds. Deemed a threat to national unity since the founding in 1923, of the Turkey Republic's government by Mustafa Kemal – "Ataturk" (father of the Turks) – after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds have historically been subjected to persecution, genocide, and numerous other human rights abuses by the Turkish Republic government. This persecution has included the denial by the Government of their existence, and the prohibition of the use of the Kurdish language. As a people, Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without an official state. Kurdish populations exist primarily in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. There is, however, also a Kurdish community in Armenia.

Despite their dispersion throughout different countries, and despite the existence of various Kurdish dialects<sup>5</sup>, the Kurdish people have been remarkable in their ability to maintain a common and cohesive cultural identity. There are not any official Turkish Government statistics, i.e. census – *"Turkey's Constitution provides a single nationality designation for all Turks and thus does not recognize ethnic groups as national, racial, or ethnic minorities. Therefore, a true census has been historically*

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<sup>4</sup> 1988: Thousands die in Halabja gas attack, *BBC; On This Day 1950-2005, 16 March, 1988.*

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/16/newsid\\_4304000/4304853.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/16/newsid_4304000/4304853.stm)

<sup>5</sup> "Kurdish Dialects", *Language Directory.* <http://language-directory.50webs.com/languages/kurdish.htm>

unavailable”<sup>6</sup> – of the number of Kurds living in Turkey.

The Turkish Government has historically classified Kurds as “Mountain Turks” in effect, as previously stated a denial of their very existence. More recently, Kurds have been referred to as “Eastern Turks” (*Dogulu*). It is estimated that approximately 20 million Kurds live in the Kurdistan region of Turkey: the remaining approximately 20 million Kurds live in Iran, Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup> In each of these countries, the Kurds have suffered extreme violence and ongoing historical suppression (There is also a small – less than 50,000 – Kurdish population in Armenia.<sup>8</sup>) *The Kurdish Human Rights Project*, a non-governmental agency, clearly states:

*“The geopolitical importance of the region combined with significant oil and water resources there always appears to have hindered, not helped, the Kurds. The issues faced by Kurds in each country vary in nature and intensity, but there are undeniably common threads. In almost all regions, Kurds face suspicion of harboring separatist sympathies simply by virtue of their ethnic origin. Ethnic cleansing programs, ‘Arabisation’ and ‘Turkification’, have been implemented, accompanied by mass killings, displacement and prohibitions on Kurdish culture and language. Over the last twenty years, the Kurdish regions have been the scenes of genocide, crimes against humanity, extra-judicial killings, torture, mass displacement and censorship, among other abuses of international law.”<sup>9</sup>*

The approximate 17 to 20 million Kurds living in Turkey mainly inhabit the southeastern and eastern part of the country (see map nr. 2 above). Turkey’s Kurds have been subjected to a wide range of human rights abuses throughout the years of the Turkish Republic, which was founded as a result of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.<sup>10</sup> Many of the discriminatory and repressive conditions Kurds endure to this day in Turkey have remained similar and constant throughout the

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<sup>6</sup> “Kurdistan -Turkey”, *Global Security.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/kurdistan-turkey.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Dieter Farwick “The Kurds: one nation in four countries”, *World Security Network*, Apr. 19, 2011.

<http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/Religion-and-Politics-Peace-and-Conflict-Human-Rights-Europe-Broader-Middle-East/dieter-farwick-1/The-Kurds-one-nation-in-four-countries>

<sup>8</sup> Armenia, *CIA World Factbook*, Sept. 10, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> “Kurds—A History,” *The Kurdish Human Rights Project*: <http://www.khrp.org/content/view/277/126/>.

<sup>10</sup> Treaty of Lausanne – 1923: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/332502/Treaty-of-Lausanne>

years of the existence of the Turkish Republic. Turkey's Kurds face a unique situation as the Turkish Government has attempted to gain membership in the European Union (EU).

Turkey's ongoing human rights abuses are a major factor behind the EU's reluctance to accept the country as a member of the EU. While it may seem logical that the Turkish Government take a more rational approach to the "Kurdish Question" and take more seriously its image in the eyes of Europe in its drive to become a member of the EU, the opposite has actually taken place. Turkey's ambitions to obtain EU membership have in fact caused it to increase its repression of the Kurdish minority in Turkey in an attempt to demonstrate to the EU that it is a "united country". According to the *Kurdish Human Rights Project* (KHRP), Turkish Government abuses of its Kurdish minority include the widespread use of torture and the use of its military forces against civilians. The KHRP also notes that military officers often go unpunished for their violent tactics against Kurds, and that the Turkish State generally refuses to account for Kurdish fatalities and injuries at the hands of its agents.<sup>11</sup> Recent anti-terror legislation enacted in Turkey has paved the way for further abuse of Turkey's Kurds;

*"More worrying are the conditions set out in new anti-terror legislation such as the wide definition of 'terrorist', the permission given to officers to use weapons 'without hesitation' and the decision to allow suspects to be held 'incommunicado' for 24 hours. These regulations give the Turkish state wide scope to arrest, prosecute or shoot 'undesirables' and remain within the law. Although the legislation does not meet international human rights standards, the EU has failed to condemn it."*<sup>12</sup>

The KHRP notes serious ongoing issues for Kurds that include the lack of freedom of speech and restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language including imprisonment – in public places or in public schools, and the right of Kurds to demonstrate peacefully in support of their grievances against the Government. According to "everyculture.com";

*"although the use of Kurdish in public speech and print has been legal since 1991, prosecutors often arrest Kurdish speakers and confiscate Kurdish publications under the Anti-Terror Law, which prohibits the dissemination of separatist propaganda. Prosecutors also have used other parts of the*

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<sup>11</sup> "Kurds Today," *The Kurdish Human Rights Project*.  
<http://www.khrp.org/content/view/279/128/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

*criminal code to limit ethnic expression. As of 1999, the Kurdish language broadcasts remained illegal.”<sup>13</sup>*

The U.S. Department of State’s 2013 Human Rights Report concerning Turkey states;

*Self-censorship was common because individuals feared that criticizing the state or government publicly could result in civil or criminal suits or investigations. The government harassed and prosecuted persons sympathetic to some religious, political, and Kurdish nationalist or cultural viewpoints. Authorities used excessive force to disperse protests, detained thousands of persons, including many journalists, academics, lawyers, and students, during demonstrations, and charged many under the antiterror law. Of particular note, authorities used excessive force in response to the summer’s Gezi Park protests, leading to mass casualties (including seven deaths) and an overall diminution of freedom of expression and press.<sup>14</sup>*

Perhaps most alarming, is the fact that the law is applicable to children as well. To provide one harrowing example offered by the State Department;

*“On June 19 and July 3 (2008), a Diyarbakir court tried nine children, ages 12 to 17, for "promulgating propaganda on behalf of an illegal organization" after they sang a Kurdish folk song that is also the anthem of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government at the San Francisco International Music Festival in October 2007. Three boys were tried in an adult court in Diyarbakir on June 19 and the other six members were tried in children's court on July 3... An arrest warrant remained active for the choir director, Duygu Ozge Bayar, who had not returned to the country after the festival.”<sup>15</sup>*

In addition to warning of the danger that individuals could be arrested and imprisoned for voicing their pro-Kurdish views, the State Department also warned of the increase in the use of torture in Turkey’s prison and security facilities. According to the report, there was an increase in the use

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<sup>13</sup> Countries and Their Cultures – Turkey, <http://www.everyculture.com/To-Z/Turkey.html>

<sup>14</sup> “Turkey,” U.S. State Department 2013 Report on Human Rights, released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 27, 2014: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

<sup>15</sup> “Turkey,” US Department of State Human Rights Report, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 25, 2009: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/eur/119109.htm>.

of torture by the Turkish Government during the reporting period, and that in a survey of 275 credible reported cases of torture, 210 individuals were Kurds, with a majority of them claiming their political views as being the reason for their torture.<sup>16</sup> Supporting these findings, Amnesty International, in its 2009 *State of the World's Human Rights* noted that not only was the use of torture by the Government increasing within its prisons, but that its use was also on the increase outside of them.

The report stated; *“Reports of torture and other ill-treatment rose during 2008, especially outside official places of detention but also in police stations and prisons. People accused of ordinary as well as politically motivated offences were vulnerable to ill-treatment.”*<sup>17</sup> According to Amnesty International's 2010 report, conditions in Turkey had not changed in this respect.<sup>18</sup> It reaffirmed in its 2013 report that the same conditions were still ongoing, despite legislative attempts to address the issue.<sup>19</sup>

The Human Rights Watch 2014 report on Turkey again confirmed ongoing mistreatment and persecution, judicial and extra-judicial, of any Kurds deemed by the Turkish State as being subversive of it in any socio-political manner whether peaceful or otherwise.

*Reforms undertaken in 2013 did not remedy the situation of the thousands of prosecutions of individuals on charges of “membership of an armed organization” (article 314, Turkish Penal Code) for activities amounting to nonviolent political association. Demonstrating the government's widespread misuse of terrorism laws to prosecute and incarcerate individuals, hundreds of Kurdish political activists, elected mayors, parliamentarians, officials of the Peace and Democracy Party, students, and lawyers have been in prison for long periods, in some cases for over four-and-a-half years, during their trials for association with the KCK.*<sup>20</sup>

The report, as do all such reports, once again confirms that in spite of some attempts by the Turkish Government to moderate its treatment of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “Turkey,” Amnesty International, 2009 *State of the World's Human Rights*: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/turkey/report-2009>

<sup>18</sup> “Turkey,” Amnesty International, 2010 *State of the World's Human Rights*: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/turkey/report-2010>

<sup>19</sup> “Turkey,” Amnesty International, 2013 *State of the World's Human Rights*: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/turkey/report-2013#section-151-4>,

<sup>20</sup> “Turkey,” Human Rights Watch 2014 World Report: <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/turkey?page=2>.



Kurds in Turkey, neither real nor actual change has taken place. It is one of the reasons one million Kurds have left Turkey to live in Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Taking into consideration these recent and authoritative reports, it is evident that the Kurdish minority living in Turkey suffers continuing persecution by the government and that it remains the target of wide spread human rights abuses. Virtually no Kurdish individual – including women and children – is exempt from state-sanctioned violence. Those who speak out against the Government’s actions are ever more vulnerable to Government persecution as the Government attempts to strengthen its façade of “national unity” for European consumption in its continuing drive for EU membership.

### **Repression of Advocates for Peaceful Change: example The Democratic Society Party (DTP) in Turkey**

The persecution of The Democratic Society Party is one example of the persecution suffered by any party working for peaceful change in Turkey on behalf of Turkey’s Kurdish population.

The Democratic Society Party (DTP – “*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*” in Turkish) is essentially an outgrowth or successor of the Democratic People’s Party. The DTP is a pro- Kurdish party that considers itself to be social-democratic. The DTP denounces the use of violence. It has been active in promoting the rights of Turkey’s Kurdish community. Over the years, the Turkish Government has been at odds with the DTP, as it believes it to be affiliated with separatist movements and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a group deemed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S. and the EU. Although the DTP continually professes its support of a unified, democratic Turkey that upholds the rights of the Kurdish people, the Government has attempted to disband the party.

Living under an umbrella of constant suspicion, members and leaders of the DTP live continually in fear that they will be accused of being “separatists” and “enemies of the state.” Indeed, over the years, they have consistently been targeted for prosecution and violence. One well-known example was the 1994 arrest of Kurdish activist and DTP member Leyla Zana. During her MP (Member of Parliament) swearing-in ceremony, Zana chose to use the Kurdish language while taking her oath of office. Zana, as well as other Kurdish politicians were immediately arrested, charged with numerous counts related to “separatism,” and sentenced to 15 years in prison. They were released in 2004. Zana was again arrested on July 28, 2009, for pro-Kurdish remarks she made at a seminar at London’s SOAS

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<sup>21</sup> Dieter Farwick “The Kurds: one nation in four countries”, World Security Network, Apr. 19, 2011.

[http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/showArticle3.cfm?article\\_id=18556&topicID=42](http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/showArticle3.cfm?article_id=18556&topicID=42)

(School of Oriental and African Studies) University in May 2009. Turkish courts sentenced her to a one-year, three-month prison term.<sup>22</sup>

The incidents suffered by Leyla Zana are not rare in Turkey; similar cases are ongoing to this day. Utilizing its language laws, the Turkish government has found a new and under-handed way to target and punish DTP members and pro-Kurdish supporters. As the U.S. State Department noted in its 2008 Human Rights report, *“Throughout the year, law enforcement and the judiciary increased pressure on members of the pro-Kurdish DTP. The most common tactic used was investigation and prosecution of DTP leaders for speaking in the Kurdish language or for making statements critical of the government.”*<sup>23</sup> Providing some examples, the Report documents the following instances;

- *In February the DTP sub-provincial chairman in Istanbul's Fatih district, Mehdi Tanrikulu, was convicted for speaking Kurdish during judicial proceedings in 2007, and was sentenced to five months' imprisonment.*
- *On April 22, a court convicted DTP Diyarbakir provincial chairman, Hilmi Aydogdu, of inciting hatred and sentenced him to 15 months in prison for suggesting that Kurds would fight the government if government forces ever attacked Kurds in Iraq. He was found guilty of threatening public safety after he warned the government against taking any action in Kirkuk and was banned from politics. In February 2007, police had arrested Aydogdu for the statements; Aydogdu later clarified his remarks to mean that he was suggesting the government extend a hand of friendship to Kurds in northern Iraq.*
- *In September a Mersin penal court convicted the DTP Mersin Province deputy and 2007 election candidate Orhan Miroglu for using Kurdish during his electoral speeches. The court put Miroglu on probation for five years. On September 28, an Antalya penal court sentenced the former DTP Antalya Province branch chairman, Mustafa Gul, to 18 months' imprisonment for using the honorific "sayin" (esteemed) to describe jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in a January 27 speech.*

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<sup>22</sup> “1 Year 3 Months Imprisonment for Leyla Zana,” *Alliance for Kurdish Rights*  
<http://kurdishrights.org/2009/07/28/bianet-1-year-3-months-imprisonment-for-leyla-zana/>.

<sup>23</sup> “Turkey,” US Department of State Human Rights Report, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 25, 2009:  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/eur/119109.htm>.

- *Mayor of Diyarbakir Osman Baydemir continued to face multiple charges and investigations for use of the Kurdish language. At year's end, he faced four cases for sending Kurdish language holiday cards during the year. In October 2007, the Diyarbakir public prosecutor opened two cases against Baydemir, demanding sentences of five and four and one-half years, for referring to the PKK as the "armed Kurdish opposition." The cases were pending at year's end.*

Attacks and arrests aimed at DTP supporters escalated in 2009, particularly following the success the party had in elections held earlier that year. According to the *Kurdish Herald*, Turkish police embarked on a harsh campaign against DTP and pro-Kurdish supporters in April 2009;

*"[O]n 14 April 2009 the police conducted simultaneous operations in 15 different cities, mostly located in the Kurdish region, and took more than seventy DTP executives and members under custody with the accusation that they had ties with the PKK. While strongly denying these accusations, the DTP announced that the number of its imprisoned executives and members had reached 222 as of 7 May 2009, including 3 vice-chairs of the party. In addition, the mayors of Diyarbakir and Batman received ten-month sentences for using the word "guerilla" to name the PKK members, instead of the word "terrorist," and if the Court of Appeals approves the sentence, they will also lose their posts."*<sup>24</sup>

These arrests were accompanied by various pro-Kurdish political rallies throughout the spring of 2009, in which police forces used extreme violence to suppress demonstrators. In one public rally commemorating the imprisonment of Abdullah Ocalan (a PKK leader), police responded quickly:

*"According to several reports, security forces attacked the participants of the rally with nightsticks, plastic bullets and tear gas in order to force them to disperse. The single incident resulted in the deaths of two people, Mustafa Dağ (27), and university student, Mahsum Karaoğlan (21). Shortly after, videos surfaced on the Internet showing the attacks on the rally by security forces. The video confirmed early reports about Mustafa Dağ's death resulting from the deliberate shooting by security forces of a tear-gas canister, which caused his*

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<sup>24</sup> "DTP announces number of imprisoned members in Turkey reaches 222," <http://kurdishrights.org/2009/05/11/kh-dtp-announces-number-imprisoned-members-in-turkey-reaches-222/>.

*skull to open and resulted in profuse bleeding.”<sup>25</sup>*

In another incident, police attacked a rally calling for the release of DTP prisoners. A video of the attack recorded one officer severely beating a 14-year old boy. According to reports, and as can be witnessed by a graphic video posted on “You Tube,” the boy sustained substantial injuries and was hospitalized for two weeks.<sup>26</sup>

The developments that have taken place since the 2009 elections have brought sharp condemnation from the international community. Foreign governments and NGOs alike have condemned the Turkish Government for its draconian actions against demonstrators. The arrests and violence led the highly respected Council of Europe to draft a Declaration entitled “*The Oppression of the Democratic Society Party in Turkey*”. The declaration states:

***“The undersigned***

*1. Are deeply concerned by the latest large-scale raids carried out by Turkish police against the Democratic Society Party-DTP, which forms the fourth largest group -with 21 members- in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. During these operations more than 300 members and executives were arrested, and 153 of them including 3 vice presidents of DTP were put in prison.*

*2. The mass arrests and intensive oppression which are now underway after the local elections in Turkey are unacceptable in a country which is a founding member of the Council of Europe.*

*3. The results of the last local elections in South Eastern Turkey show that the Kurdish people want a peaceful political solution to the Kurdish issue.*

*4. in order to have stability, democracy and human rights and to prevent violence in the country, there should be respect for the struggle for the democracy and the activities of political parties.*

*5. We call on the Turkish authorities for the immediate release of all those who were arrested and to stop the oppression of the DTP.”*

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<sup>25</sup> “Turkish security forces kill two people and police reportedly attack elected Kurdish MP,” <http://kurdishrights.org/2009/04/08/turkish-security-forces-kill-two-people-and-police-reportedly-attack-kurdish-mp/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Kurdish boy is severely beaten by Turkish officer,” <http://kurdishrights.org/2009/04/27/kurdish-boy-is-severely-beaten-by-turkish-officer/>.

Despite these admonishments, the Turkish Government continues to place pressure on the DTP and pro-Kurdish supporters. According to a report issued in October 2009, the government was targeting DTP conventions. In one instance, a prosecutor undertook an investigation against the DTP citing allegations that the party was participating in terrorist propaganda.<sup>27</sup>

### **Repression of Advocates for Violent Change: example The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)**

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, in Kurdish), is the most radical of the Kurdish movements supporting Kurds in Turkey. The Party was founded, as previously stated in 1978, espousing radical Marxist ideology. It launched a guerrilla campaign in 1984, to establish an ethnic Kurdish homeland in eastern and southeastern Turkey. Thousands of people died and hundreds of thousands of people became refugees as a result of the ensuing vicious conflict between the PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces.

The conflict continues to the present day in spite of the capture and imprisonment for life of one of its main leaders, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1999. He was specifically not given a death sentence, as he normally would have received, in light of Turkey's efforts to join the EU, which has banned the death sentence in its member states. Ocalan has since renounced his orthodox Marxist ideology. An attempt to resolve the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government was initiated at the beginning of 2013 and a cease fire was declared in March 2013, by the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the ceasefire is under pressure and remains fragile with no assurance of a permanent halt to the conflict, as exemplified by the September 2013 declaration by the PKK that it was stopping its agreed to pull out of Turkey.<sup>29</sup>

Many of the PKK fighters, including teen-age boys and girls, are based in Northern Iraq, the mainly Kurdish inhabited part of that country. PKK cross border attacks against Turkish targets, both military and civilian, are regularly launched from these bases. Consequently, the Turkish Armed Forces have repeatedly carried out

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<sup>27</sup> "Convention held by Turkey's DTP under investigation," *Turkey Daily News*, October 8, 2009: <http://www.turkeydailynews.com/news/117/ARTICLE/1844/2009-10-08.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Why Erdogan Wants Peace With the PKK, *Foreign Affairs*, F. Stephan Larrabee, March 27, 2013.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139081/f-stephen-larrabee/why-erdogan-wants-peace-with-the-pkk>

<sup>29</sup> Kurdish PKK rebels 'Halt Turkey pull-out, *BBC News Europe*, Sept. 09, 2013.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24013837>

retaliatory air strikes and armed land incursions into Iraq in pursuit of PKK fighters. One of the more recent major Turkish incursions, involving thousands of Turkish troops and air power, was launched in October 2011.<sup>30</sup> The conflict between these two adversaries is merciless and pitiless. Turkey has not been able, in spite of its overwhelming military superiority in terms of manpower and armaments, to destroy the PKK, which has the support of many Kurds in Turkey, and in spite of the Turkish Government's efforts to turn Kurds in Turkey against one another.<sup>31</sup> Ethnic Turks on the other hand do support the Government's efforts to crush the PKK, as most of them have historically supported the oppression of the Kurds in general, further widening the gap between ethnic Turks and Kurds in Turkey.<sup>32</sup>

### **Outlook for Turkey's Conflict with the Kurdish Minority in Turkey**

There seems to be no end in sight for the historic conflict between the majority Turks and minority Kurds in Turkey as long as the Turkish Government overtly or covertly denies Turkey's ethnic Kurdish citizens the right to be themselves. The conflict will not be resolved in a Turkey that does not fully recognize in law and in practice the diverse make up of Turkey's citizens. The conflict will not be resolved as long as Kurds in Turkey are culturally oppressed, discriminated against in a de facto or de jure manner. Articles (article 3) in the Turkish Constitution enshrining Turkish as the only language of Turkey must be amended to allow Kurds to freely express themselves and educate their children in the language of their choice. As long as Kurds are not recognized as such, nor allowed to live honorably as Kurds in Turkey,<sup>33</sup> they will continue, peaceably or violently, their struggle for a self-governing autonomous homeland there.

When former Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan (now President) first came to power in 2003, he indicated his desire to arrive at a settlement

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<sup>30</sup> Turkey Invades KRG territory again, *The Kurdistan Tribune*, Editor, October 21, 2011.  
<http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/turkey-invades-kr-g-territory-again/>

<sup>31</sup> Liam Stack, For Kurds in Turkey, a Country's Conflict Rends Families, *New York Times*, Oct.29, 2011.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/world/europe/kurds-in-turkey-ruled-by-war-that-haunts-country.html?\\_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/world/europe/kurds-in-turkey-ruled-by-war-that-haunts-country.html?_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=all)

<sup>32</sup> Liam Stack and Sebnem Arsu, Clashes With Kurdish Rebels Are Pushing Turkey Back Toward Conflict, *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2011.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/world/europe/clashes-with-kurdish-rebels-push-turkey-back-toward-](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/world/europe/clashes-with-kurdish-rebels-push-turkey-back-toward-conflict.html?n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Turkey?ref=turkey)

[conflict.html?n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Turkey?ref=turkey](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/world/europe/clashes-with-kurdish-rebels-push-turkey-back-toward-conflict.html?n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Turkey?ref=turkey)

<sup>33</sup> "We will not recognize a constitution that doesn't recognize the Kurds" says DSC leader", *Kurdistan News*

*Agency-Iraq Independent News*, June 4, 2011.

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/244614/>

of the conflict with Turkey's Kurds. He has since then, however, in words and in deeds, been contradictory. In fact, when he launched the 2011 attack on the PKK in Iraq with 10,000 troops<sup>34</sup>, he was joined in this military venture by Iran, a long time rival of Turkey and another oppressor of the Kurds (those Kurds living in that part of Kurdistan that is located in northwestern Iran).<sup>35</sup> It seems the Turkish Prime Minister's focus on peace with the Kurds has waned and that his;

*“attention has shifted to the wider stage of Arab emancipation and the "re-Ottomanisation", as some call it, of the Middle East. For him, it seems, the role of grand regional rainmaker is more alluring than that of down-home, hard-slog peacemaker.”*<sup>36</sup>

In a moving and perceptive commentary regarding the Turkish Republic's historical attitudinal relationship with the Kurdish population under its dominion, Kendal Nezan, President of the Kurdish Institute of Paris (France), stated the following at the end of a speech about the history of the Kurds and their existence under the Turks;

*“The former conquerors and empires contented themselves with certain economic, political and military advantages and privileges. None of them set about preventing the population from expressing its cultural identity or hindering the free practice of its spiritual life. None of them devised a plan to destroy the Kurdish personality or to depersonalize an entire race by cutting it off from its ancient cultural roots.*

*This was the project of the Turkish nationalists, who wanted to make Turkey, an eminently multicultural, multiracial and multinational society, into a uniform nation; this was later taken up again by Iraq and Iran. We can join Nehru in his surprise "that a defensive nationalism turns into an aggressive nationalism and that a struggle for freedom*

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<sup>34</sup> Turkey Deploys Thousands in Pursuit of Kurdish Rebels, *The New York Times*, Sebnem Arsu, Oct. 20, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/21/world/europe/turkey-deploys-thousands-of-troops-against-pkk.html>

<sup>35</sup> Erdogan: Turkey-Iran to Continue Efforts Against Kurdish Rebels: *Voice of America*(VOA), Nov. 11, 2011.

<http://www.voanews.com/english/news/middle-east/Erdogan-Turkey-Iran-to-Continue-Efforts-Against-Kurdish-Rebels-130538778.html>

<sup>36</sup> Simon Tisdall, Erdogan plays Palestinian saviour, but what about the Kurds, *The Guardian*, Sept. 21, 2011.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/21/erdogan-palestinian-kurds-abbas>

*becomes a struggle to dominate others". Indeed, since these lines were written by Nehru from the depths of prison, the nationalist or messianic ideologies have caused other ravages under other skies, often in the name of progress, modernity, mission of civilization, even freedom. Victim of its geography, of history and also, undoubtedly of its own leaders' lack of clear-sightedness, the Kurdish people have undoubtedly been the population who have paid the heaviest tribute and who have suffered the most from the remodeling of the Near-Eastern map. To paraphrase a formula formerly used for Poland, I'll say that since the dividing up of Kurdistan, the Near-East has been a sinner against itself and this sin hasn't finished poisoning its relations."*<sup>37</sup>

### **Kurdistan's Whirlwind**

As already stated, Iran joined Turkey in that country's 2011 large scale attack on the Kurdish PKK in northern Iraq, which Turkey justified because of a cross border PKK raid into Turkish Kurdistan that allegedly killed 26 Turkish troops. It is precisely this area of Iraq which forms another part of greater "Kurdistan" (the predominantly Kurdish populated areas of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria – as well as the small area of "Kurdistan" in Armenia) – by virtue of the Kurdish majority population in these areas of "Greater Kurdistan."

Iran for years has been trying to eradicate an offshoot of the PKK in northwestern Iran (Iranian "Kurdistan"), the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK). So it seems Turkey and Iran are once again were on the same side, united against the Kurds. In the words of Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu;

*"Our determination continues, we should fight them with a more serious co-ordination," Mr. Salehi said.*

*His Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoglu, said the two countries' "joint determination to struggle against the PKK and the PJAK will continue in the strongest way".*

*"From now on, we will work together in a joint action plan until this terrorist threat is totally eliminated."*<sup>38</sup>

The independent Kurdish newspaper RUDAW-English published in Erbil, the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq

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<sup>37</sup> A Brief Survey of the History of the Kurds, Kendal Nezan, President of the Kurdish Institute of Paris(France), Nov. 05, 2013.

[http://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/who\\_are\\_the\\_kurds.php](http://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/who_are_the_kurds.php)

<sup>38</sup> "Turkey and Iran Collaborating Against Kurdish Rebels", BBC News Europe, October 21, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15407142>



reported in an article that according to Gareth Jenkins – Senior Associate Fellow with the Silk Road Studies Program and Turkey Initiative – regarding Turkey and Iran that;

*“From 2004 onwards there has been a lot of cooperation in terms of intelligence sharing and even the coordination of military operations: e.g. the two launching separate operations at the same time to squeeze the PKK/PJAK...”*

*“The Turkish military despises the Iranian regime, but they share a common enemy in the PKK/PJAK”.*<sup>39</sup>

It seems the old Middle Eastern maxim, *“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,”* was most *a propos* in this case. Turkey and Iran, however, have also regularly used “each other’s Kurds” against one another. Throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s both Turkey and Iran commonly accused each other of supporting the “other’s” Kurds, including, respectively, the PJAK in the case of Turkey and the PKK in the case of Iran;

*“Turkish leaders believe that Iran supports the PKK and even provides sanctuary and bases for it in the area of northwest Iran that borders Kars, Agri, Van, and Hakkâri provinces.”*<sup>40</sup>

A very similar scenario has been played out over the years in Turkey’s relationship with Syria, at times bringing Syria and Turkey to the edge of armed conflict. The latest example of this friction between the two countries, is the actual ongoing confrontational scenario playing itself out between Sunni Muslim Turkey’s response to the mainly Sunni “Arab Spring” uprising in Syria against the embattled Alawite (an offshoot of Shi’a Islam) Syrian Government of Bashar al-Assad;

*“Turkey is hosting the armed opposition groups who are trying to topple President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. By most accounts here, the rebels are even orchestrating attacks across the border, a risky move for Turkey given Syria’s support for the separatist Kurds in Turkey who are responsible for recent attacks.”*<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Wladimir van Wilgenburg, History of Turkish-Iranian Cooperation Against Kurdish Rebels, *Rudaw-English*,

Sept. 30, 2011. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/turkey/4017.html>

<sup>40</sup> Helen Chapin Metz, ed. Turkey: A Country Study. Washington: GPO for the *Library of Congress*, 1995.

<http://countrystudies.us/turkey/>

<sup>41</sup> Julliete Kayyem, A model in others’ eyes, Turkey sees itself anew, *Boston Globe*, Nov. 14, 2011.

<http://bostonglobe.com/opinion/2011/11/14/model-others-eyes-turkey-sees-itself-anew/JqYECbtu6bmmH4hEkcYDN/story.html>

The historical relationship between the Kurds in Iraqi “Kurdistan” and the Iraqi Arab central government in Baghdad has been similarly traumatic for the Kurds in Iraq as it has correspondingly been for the Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Syria *vis a vis* their respective governments. The years of slaughter Iraqi Kurds endured at the hands of Saddam Hussein are infamous, as is famous their resistance to him and their struggle for survival in spite of him. The Kurds in northern Iraq endured Saddam’s grotesque “Al-Anfal” campaign in 1988;

*“Al-Anfal, which is Arabic for “the spoils of war,” is the name of the eighth sura, or chapter, of the Qur’an. It tells a tale in which followers of Mohammed pillage the lands of nonbelievers. Some say the government chose the term for its campaign against the Kurds of northern Iraq because it suggested a religious justification for its actions. Saddam’s Anfal was a mammoth campaign of civic annihilation, displacement and mass killing. The Anfal was unleashed against the Kurds from February through September 1988...”*<sup>42</sup>

As previously stated, during the Al-Anfal offensive Saddam slaughtered Kurdish, men, women and children by the thousands using air strikes, conventional land attacks and poison gas attacks;

*“Human Rights Watch estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 people were killed during al-Anfal; Kurdish officials have put the number as high as 182,000. When presented with this figure, “Chemical” Ali Hassan al-Majid took exception. “It could not have been more than 100,000” he said.*<sup>43</sup>

The horror of the chemical/poison gas attack carried out by Saddam’s forces in March of 1988, on the Iraqi Kurdish city of Halabja, which killed an estimated 5,000 men, women and children, leaving thousands more maimed for life, will forever remain etched in Kurdish memory. Sadly; *“At the time, the United States largely ignored Iraq’s use of weapons of mass destruction, and vetoed U.N. efforts to condemn Iraq for their use.”*<sup>44</sup>

The defeat by the United States of Saddam Hussein brought respite, a tentative peace, no matter how uncertain, for the first time in generations to the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is a fragile peace threatened from all sides. From the north it is threatened by Turkey, with its armed incursions into northern Iraqi Kurdistan in pursuit of the PKK. From the east it is threatened

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<sup>42</sup> Dave Johns, The Crimes of Saddam Hussein, *PBS Frontline World*, Jan. 24, 2006.

[http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq501/events\\_anfal.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq501/events_anfal.html)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

by Iran seeking to destroy the PJAK in Iran's northwestern border area and by Iran's attacks across that border into Iraqi Kurdistan.

From the west, peace is under threat by the ongoing vicious and pitiless conflict in Syria, which has drawn in anti-Kurd radical Islamic, al-Qaeda associated jihadists, such as the Jabhat al Nusra, battling the Bashar al-Assad Government in their drive to establish an Islamic state in Syria. Fighting between this Jihadist group supported by its radical associates and the Kurds of Syria supported by the Kurds in Iraq has already flared<sup>45</sup> and is ongoing with no immediate end in sight.<sup>46</sup>

And finally, from the south, Iraqi Kurdistan remains under threat by the continuing uncertainty in Iraqi Kurdistan's relationship with the Arab Iraqi government in the south of Iraq, whether Sunni or Shi'a Muslim. Yet, with this fragile and uncertain peace the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan have for the first time succeeded in realizing their goal of *de facto* if not quite yet *de jure* self-governance. They have for the time being tentatively accepted the idea, the possibility, of autonomy within a federated Iraq rather than outright independence. In an interview with the Washington Post, the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Barham Salih, stated;

*"I genuinely believe that a democratic, federal Iraq may well represent a very viable option for the Kurds of Iraq."*

Mr. Salih went on to say;

*"Kurdistan stands out as a Muslim community that is grateful to the United States, that appreciates what the Americans have done to give us a chance at building a functioning, free society, and this model should continue, should be enhanced, should be supported - not just for Kurdistan but for the rest of Iraq and for the rest of the region."*<sup>47</sup>

This is a very important statement for a Kurdish leader to have made. It could portend a new approach in fulfilling Kurdish aspirations for self-rule, even if it does not completely satisfy the Kurdish dream of an independent Kurdistan encompassing all of "Greater Kurdistan". It could also, as the prime minister said, be an example, an inspiration for countries

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<sup>45</sup> Syria's Kurds mobilize to fight rebel groups linked to al-Qaeda, *The Washington Post*, Bassem Mroue, July 30, 2013.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-kurds-mobilize-to-fight-al-qaeda-groups/2013/07/30/eed933f6-f94d-11e2-b018-5b8251f0c56e\\_story.html?wpisrc=nl\\_headlines](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-kurds-mobilize-to-fight-al-qaeda-groups/2013/07/30/eed933f6-f94d-11e2-b018-5b8251f0c56e_story.html?wpisrc=nl_headlines)

<sup>46</sup> Kurdish fighters seize Syrian border post from Islamists, *Reuters*, Oct. 26, 2013.

<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/10/26/uk-syria-crisis-idUKBRE99P02D20131026?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

such as Turkey that claims it wants a settlement of the conflict with its Kurdish population. Yet, the Kurdish struggle for recognition by the world community, and by the regional powers that surround it could, to the detriment of the entire region, go on for years to come.

## Conclusion

To be certain, the situation currently facing the Kurdish people in Turkey looks rather bleak given the Turkish draconian drive to put forth the face of national unity. Still, some argue that Turkey's goal of EU membership will eventually aid in the plight of the Kurdish people. According to Turkish scholar, Michael M. Gunter, for example,

*Turkey's successful EU candidacy would have the additional fortuitous side effect of granting that country's ethnic Kurds their full democratic rights, which have hitherto been denied. Although this evolving solution to the Kurdish problem in Iraq and Turkey remains cautiously fragile and would not apply to the Kurds in Iran and Syria because they have not experienced recent developments their co-nationals in Iraq and Turkey have, it does represent a strikingly positive future that until recently seemed so bleak.*<sup>48</sup>

Gunter is correct in many respects—particularly noting that recent developments have given reason for hope. However, his optimism may be somewhat premature. Politically speaking, the Turkish government has a long way to go in terms of answering for its history of human rights abuses against the Kurdish people—a people that represents nearly a quarter of the entire Turkish population. As has been documented in this paper, these are issues that are ongoing. There seems to be no end in sight for the historic conflict between the majority Turks and minority Kurds in Turkey as long as the Turkish Government overtly or covertly denies Turkey's ethnic Kurdish citizens the right to be themselves. The conflict will not be resolved in a Turkey that does not fully recognize in law and in practice the diverse make up of Turkey's citizens. The conflict will not be resolved as long as Kurds in Turkey are culturally oppressed, discriminated against in a “de facto” or “de jure” manner.

However, as we progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Kurdish sense of nationality and socio-cultural identity has not been quashed. Rather, during the past decade, we are witnessing a revival of Kurdish social cohesion, not just in Turkey, but across borders. Following the fall of Saddam Huessien in Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established, and gave birth to a thriving Kurdish society. While Kurds living in Turkey (as well as

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<sup>48</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending*: (Palgrave: New York, 2008).

in Syria and Iran) have not experienced the level of success as the Kurds living in Iraq, the developments are encouraging. Furthermore, Turkey's determination to gain accession to the EU may *eventually* have some positive effects on the Kurdish population.

As such, and sociologically speaking, optimism concerning the Kurdish people is well warranted. While the political situation facing Kurds in Syria and Iran continues to remain problematic, we are witnessing a revival of Kurdish social identity throughout the region, as they draw on their centuries-old bonds of a shared cultural identity—an identity that transcends internationally defined borders.

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