

Forum:	Human Rights Council
Issue:	Addressing the issue of the human rights of Kurdish people in Turkey
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Introduction

The Kurdish people are an ethnic group of approximately 18 million people. Most of the people are concentrated in the Middle East, specifically Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, and they make up a fifth of Turkey's population. The Kurds have desired autonomy for a prolonged time; the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) promised an autonomous Kurdistan but was not ratified. Moreover, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the Kurds were promised a Turkish-Kurdish state in exchange for their participation in the war for Turkish independence. However, the succeeding government embraced an ideology that strived to eliminate non-Turkish elements within the Turkish Republic. Since then, the Kurds' human rights have been violated countless times by the Turkish government through attacks on their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity. For example, the Turkish government tried to refuse the Kurds of their identity by classifying them as "Mountain Turks". Other efforts include the ban on the Kurdish language and the words "Kurds" and "Kurdistan". Various other forms of persecution persist to this day.

Currently, Kurdish movements for human rights include the creation of Kurdish political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and armed rebellion. Turkey's discriminatory policy against the Kurds have framed and overgeneralized these movements as a terrorist threat, leading to the arbitrary imprisonment of Kurds and destruction of Kurdish land, which include 4,000 depopulated Kurdish villages and the deaths of around 40,000 people. While the Turkish government attempts to erase Kurdish identity, the Kurds have struggled resisting and stress the urgency of resolving this human rights issue.

Definition of Key Terms

Kurdistan

Kurdistan is an unofficially defined region in West Asia where a majority of the population comprises Kurdish people.

Self-determination

Self-determination is a political ideology in which a group of people has a right to form their own state and govern themselves.

Turkification

Turkification is the process that strives for the homogeneity of the Turkish population, culture, and language, often resulting in repression of minorities.

Allied Powers

Allied Powers of World War I mainly consisted of France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and the United States, and they fought against the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire.

Ankara

Ankara is the capital of Turkey and was established as the center of resistance by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Cultural Assimilation

Cultural assimilation is the process that describes a minority group absorbing the majority group's cultures, beliefs, and values.

Guerilla

Guerilla warfare is used to describe a small military group using unconventional tactics against larger forces.

Ceasefire

Ceasefire defines the temporary stopping of a conflict when each side agrees to halt fighting.

History & Developments

Post-World War I

After Woodrow Wilson's support for the self-determination of non-Turkish nationalities under the Ottoman Empire (modern-day Turkey), the Kurds submitted a request for independence in 1919 to the Paris Peace Conference. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) detailed the creation of an autonomous Kurdistan along with other territorial losses for the Ottomans, but this treaty was not ratified. In the following Treaty of Lausanne (1923), it did not include any mention of an independent Kurdish state.

Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923)

The Turkish National Movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, waged the Turkish War of Independence, countering what was seen as the Ottoman government's submission of the Allies. The Allies had pressured the Ottoman Empire to sign the Treaty of Sèvres, a disadvantageous treaty from the Turkish perspective, as it signaled major territorial losses. Foreign forces from Greece, Armenia, and France—Allied support—were also occupying Turkish regions during that time. In order to maximize support in the war, the Turks promised the Kurds autonomy under the Turkish state in exchange for their support. Turkish forces went on to defeat the Greeks in western Anatolia, the Republic of Armenia in eastern Anatolia, and French forces in modern-day Adana and Mersin.

There were also struggles between the original Ottoman government and Turkish nationalists, which led Atatürk to establish an opposing government in Ankara, the foundation for military and diplomatic efforts during the war. As Atatürk's nationalist government achieved victory on the battlefield, the Treaty of Sèvres no longer held power, which called for a replacement treaty: the Treaty of Lausanne that officially ended the war. The treaty called for the formation of the Republic of Turkey. However, the Kurds' support during the war was uncompensated. The new Turkish state instead attempted to unify the nation under one Turkish identity by removing all non-Turkish minorities through Turkification.

Koçgiri Rebellion (1920)

Although Kurds were promised autonomy within Turkey during the war, they were dissatisfied, as they wished for a separate state outside of Turkey. Upset by the Ankara government's treatment of Kurds and spurred by Woodrow Wilson's ideology of self-determination seen through the Treaty of Sèvres, they demanded for political rights and a separate Kurdish state without interference from Turkey. Turkish nationalists were initially inclined to listen to requests for more political freedom, however the Kurds clarified their desire for an independent Kurdish government. This was met with arrest and detainment of key revolutionaries and brutality from Turkish forces, ending in the crushing of the rebellion.

Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925)

The Sheikh Rebellion was the first Kurdish rebellion against the new Republic of Turkey. During the Turkish War of Independence, Atatürk had initially spoke of a unified Islamic community, therefore, it was a shock for the Kurdish people when Turkey established itself as a secular state that would oppress non-Turkish minorities. In 1923, Atatürk brought a wave of social and political reforms such as centralization, the eradication of Islamic institutions in exchange for Western ideas of dress, calendar, and alphabet, which caused the establishment of a Latin script in lieu of an Arabic one. Moreover, the Kurds resented their categorization as "Mountain Turks" and taxation from the government.

Sheikh Said, a hereditary tribal chief and head of the rebellion, saw this new change as a means against Kurdish identity and religion. He led a rebellion that broke out on February 13, 1925, among Kurdish regions in the

Eastern province of Turkey. The rebellion had weak preparation; it was originally set for May 1925 but took place earlier. However, it was successful, and the Kurdish rebels even captured Elazığ, a prominent province in east Turkey. Turkish forces reacted aggressively through the deployment of air force bombardments and 52,000 soldiers, which resulted in the capture and hanging of Sheikh Said. Within a month, there was a result of around 40,000 casualties. The rebellion ended in disappointment, as many Kurdish tribes took on a neutral sentiment and some having collaborated with the Turkish government to put down the rebellion.

From then onwards, the Turkish government took on a violent approach towards the Kurdish people, in fear of their secession. Freedom of speech became repressed through the arrest of journalists, and those who went against the government were met with torture and severe treatment. Yet, this rebellion was a huge step forward for Kurdish nationalism and laid the foundation for later Kurdish rebellions.

Ararat rebellion (1927-30)

The Ararat Rebellion began in 1927, led by İhsan Nuri Pasha, a former Ottoman officer and the Kurdistan Xoybûn (Independence Party of Kurdistan)—a provisional Kurdish government. The rebellion took place in Mount Ararat, the geography of which made it challenging for Turkish forces to put it down. The Turkish military attempted to crush the rebellion and sent several operations in 1928 and 1929. However, their underestimation of the Kurdish forces led to difficulty and obstacles.

In 1930, after learning from their previous setbacks, Turkish forces led a large-scale operation with a huge amount of soldiers and aircraft. They surrounded Mount Ararat and attacked Kurdish rebels, and through its considerable air power, the rebellion was finally brought down, which later resulted in the repression and surveillance of Mount Ararat by the Turkish government. The Turkish government also forcibly displaced many Kurdish people, banned expression of Kurdish identity and culture, and militarily occupied other Kurdish regions.

Dersim rebellion (1937-1938)

In 1934, the Turkish government passed a Resettlement Law that further hastened Turkification through systematic assimilation. Although it found success for integration with other minorities, the Turkish government found it difficult to implement this law for Kurds, due to their large population and the geography of their settlements. The Dersim region was particularly hard to gain control over, as it was surrounded by snowcapped mountains and thin valleys.

Turkish forces imposed their authority over Dersim by building military posts, roads, and bridges to gain access to the region. The Dersim population, which had already viewed themselves as a self-governing region, saw this as a threat and a violation of their unofficial autonomy. The Turkish government renamed Dersim as “Tunceli”, along with other methods of disarmament.

The rebellion began in 1937 when Kurdish fighters attacked the Turkish construction of a bridge. Taken aback by their violent stance, the Turkish government immediately launched a military operation. The rebellion’s

leader, Seyyid Riza, called for unity among Dersim tribes, however there was lack of support and unity. Nevertheless, the Kurdish people resisted Turkish attacks fearlessly with the region's mountainous terrain on their side. However, the Turkish military responded destructively by deploying thousands of soldiers and once again using modern aircraft and weapons to bombard Kurdish villages. This resulted in Riza's execution of hanging. Although the rebellion leader was killed, the rebellion did not die, which caused Turkish forces to initiate mass killings and displacement of Kurds. The Dersim Rebellion ended as one of the most violent events and instances of ethnic cleansing in the Kurdish effort against Turkey. The rebellion, also known nowadays as the Dersim Massacre, remains a sensitive topic and an event that has furthered attention towards the human rights violations conducted by the Turkish government.



Figure #1: The aftermath of the Dersim Rebellion

Kurdish-Turkish conflict (1978-present)

During the 1970s, the Turkish government arrested and killed Kurdish activists and banned the Kurdish language along with other forms of cultural repression. This, along with the denial of Kurdish identity, became the catalyst for the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, which began in 1978 between the Turkish government and Kurdish groups, mainly the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK was founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 and based itself on Marxism-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism. The PKK initially organized Kurdish communities by spreading their ideology and directed violence against those who collaborated with the Turkish government.

In 1984, the PKK attacked the Turkish military, the beginning of a decades-long guerilla conflict. Some of the PKK's tactics included ambush and sabotage, and they continuously attacked supporters of the government. The Turkish government retaliated by putting Kurdish regions under martial law, destroying Kurdish villages, and mass detainment and torture of civilians that were suspected of supporting the PKK. This caused many Kurdish people to seek refuge in Europe.

In the 1990s, the conflict intensified, as the PKK unleashed extreme and borderline-terrorist actions by targeting civilians that refused to ally with them. Meanwhile, the Turkish government continued its human rights violations of burning and attacking civilian villages with helicopter gunships and fighter jets. The PKK was

officially recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and other members of the European Union. The PKK gradually began advocating for cultural rights and autonomy after seeing the difficulty of gaining full independence as a separate nation-state. In 1999, Abdullah Öcalan was captured and imprisoned through a cooperative effort between Turkey and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Öcalan requested for a ceasefire, and the PKK withdrew many of its fighters from Turkey, in hopes for a negotiation, only to be refused by the government.

Although PKK's ceasefire witnessed a decrease in violence, the Turkish persisted in attacking PKK bases that had withdrawn itself in Iraq. Multiple declarations of ceasefires followed, however they always resulted in fighting due to the Turkish government's denial to negotiate. In 2013, there was a peace process between the Turkish government and Abdullah Öcalan that led to ceasefire and what seemed to be a negotiation for expansion of Kurdish rights. However, the peace process failed in 2015 and renewed the conflict between the PKK and Turkey. With it, followed an increase in military operations against the PKK, as well as the People's Protection Unit (YPG), a militia of Kurds in Syria. The conflict is ongoing and has caused deaths of more than 40,000 people, including civilians, members of the force, and PKK affiliates.

Moreover, the government has banned Kurdish activism and speech and restricted access to websites affiliated pertaining to such topics. Turkish government has also taken on strong security measures, such as an extended curfew to contain PKK members in the mainly Kurdish city of Cizre, which has resulted in lack of electricity, food, water, and medical treatment. There have also been extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances of suspected PKK sympathizers and torture of Kurdish prisoners through beatings, electric shocks, and various forms of abuse. Village guards, a form of local militia in Turkish towns, whose purpose is to protect against PKK attacks, have allegedly enacted abuse against Kurds, and the system has coerced multiple Kurds and other minorities into joining, setting them up as a target for the PKK.

Kurds are continuously attacked for speaking their language; bans on Kurdish persist, such as the prohibition of names containing q, w, or z, letters frequent in Kurdish. Furthermore, Kurdish NGOs have been shut down, along with private schools with Kurdish language courses, and Kurdish teachers and academics have been dismissed from their jobs. Meanwhile, many Kurdish inhabitants have been displaced due to the fighting and Turkish development projects, such as the 1,200-megawatt Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River, which is predicted to displace up to 78,000 people and destroy sites of Kurdish heritage, such as the flooding of the ancient city of Hasankeyf. Internally displaced Kurds live in urban slums and have been denied resources from the government. Their return to their villages has also been restricted by village guards and other forms of military, leaving them to continue living in terrible conditions. As illustrated above, the conflict has associated itself with multiple counts of human rights abuses that demand international attention.

Major Parties Involved

Turkey

Turkey's government is the main instigator of this human rights' issue. Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has served this role since 2014, initially attempted more peaceful methods when addressing the Kurdish people. When he was the prime minister during the 2000s, the Turkish government permitted some usage of the Kurdish language in education and media, as a means of getting admitted into the European Union (EU). Moreover, he participated in peace talks with the PKK during 2012-2015. However, his stance on this issue has constantly fluctuated from attempts at peace and full-scale military operations. As a result, in 2015, he suddenly allowed the government in resuming its military attacks against the Kurds. Moreover, he has also jailed multiple Kurdish politicians as a way of protecting Turkey against state attack. Additionally, the Turkish military continues to attack Kurdish villages, causing displacements, and it also targets the YPG in Syria, an organization that has been affiliated with the PKK.

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

As mentioned in the "History & Developments" section, the PKK plays a major role as the main Kurdish armed organization. It was founded in 1978 and initially pushed for an independent Kurdish state, however, later seeing this demand as impossible, they changed their requests for autonomy and Kurdish rights. In 1999, the founder of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, was arrested which led to his encouragement of peace talks and diplomacy. Although he remains under Turkish detainment, he continues to play a role in the conflict.

People's Protection Units (YPG)

The YPG is a strong military force comprised of Kurdish people that is active in northern Syria. This organization has been affiliated with the PKK; therefore, the Turkish government sees it as a threat. As a result, the Turkish military has launched operations such as Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019), which, respectively, invaded the Kurdish-dominated region of Afrin in Syria and attacked the YPG, leading to mass displacement of civilians.

The YPG has created an autonomous region for Kurds in Syria, which calls for local governance and gender and ethnic equality, a stark contrast between the Syrian policies and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) ideology that dominates its neighboring regions. The YPG has received support from the United States of America, however, it has also incurred fear of the Kurdish people separating from Turkey for the Turkish government.

People's Democratic Party (HDP)

The HDP is a pro-Kurdish political party that is active in Turkey. It stresses the importance of Kurdish rights and works towards resolving the Kurdish issue while promoting equality. Although it has been successful electoral-wise, it has also experienced repression from the Turkish government. Selahattin Demirtaş, is an important figure that was the co-chair of the HDP, who was vocal about the Turkish repression, however, he was

arrested in 2016 under terrorism charges. Many other HDP politicians have also been jailed. Moreover, the HDP was the only political party in the Turkish government to condemn Operation Peace Spring.

United States of America (USA)

USA plays a supportive role for Kurdish forces, especially the YPG, as it has been fighting against the ISIS, a terrorist organization. It has supplied the YPG with arms and military support, however since Turkey is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, it is difficult for the USA to fully support YPG against its fight with the Turkish government. Its support of the YPG has also strained the US' relationship with Turkey. As a result, during Donald's Trump presidency, in 2019, the US withdrew troops from Syria, which allowed Turkey to attack the Kurds through Operation Peace Spring.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has addressed this issue by condemning Turkey for their multiple counts of torture, forced displacements, village destruction, random arrests, murder directed towards the Kurdish people. For example, when the Turkish government arrested Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, the ECHR ruled it as unconstitutional according to the European Convention on Human Rights for the restriction of free speech. They demanded Demirtaş' release and a monetary compensation for him, however this request was ignored by Turkey.

Although the United Nations (UN) has not directly submitted resolutions to solve this issue, they have opted for other, more passive measures. In 2017, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report on the human rights violations conducted by Turkey spanning from July 2015 to December 2016.

The UN Security Council met in 2019 for a discussion regarding Turkey's "counterterrorist" actions towards the Kurds in northeastern Syria after Operation Peace Spring. The UN Secretary-General called for a ceasefire and de-escalation, and delegates from different nation-states discussed their different stances. While some called for sanctions and many criticized Turkey, due to disagreement, no resolution was passed during this conference. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) also sent emergency humanitarian aid to Syria while the OHCHR tried to solve the resulting displacement and refugee crisis.

Human rights NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have reported on this issue. They have documented and reported on civilian deaths and displacements, as well as other human rights violations such as extrajudicial executions and other war crimes. These organizations request the UN and international courts to fully investigate this issue and work towards spreading awareness.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- UN Special Envoy for Syria, 2012
- UN condemns Turkey's military operation after fails of the PKK peace talks, 2015-2016
- OHCHR report on human rights violations conducted by Turkey, March 2017
- The UN Security Council discuss about Operation Peace Spring, October 2019
- UNHCR and OHCHR delivers humanitarian aid, October 2019
- UN Special Rapporteurs and the UNHCR condemn the targeting of the HDP, 2019-2021
- UNHCR publishes Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR) of Turkey's human rights violations, 2015 and 2020

Possible Solutions

First and foremost, the UN needs to take a more active stance towards this issue. For example, the UN can appoint a UN Special Envoy to be responsible for this issue. Moreover, the UN needs to promote peace talks and diplomacy between the PKK and the Turkish government. In order to mitigate future human rights abuses, the conflict first need to be stopped, while peace processes should be organized and implemented by the UN to facilitate the discussion between Turkey and the Kurdish people. However, since Turkey has previously been undiplomatic towards the prospects of a peace talk, delegates should make sure to include incentives for Turkey to cooperate by including warnings of consequences.

Moreover, delegates should also address the humanitarian aspect of this issue. Collaboration with NGOs is imperative, and the UN should conduct investigations regarding human rights abuses. Since there has been documentation of torture, displacement, and extrajudicial killings, the UN should verify these reports and take necessary means to make sure that Turkey is held responsible for such unconstitutional actions. Delegates can also create an organization specifically for observing and monitoring, to ensure that Turkey does not further violate Kurdish rights without consequence. This organization should document and report on human rights abuses and should also have a mechanism to prevent any likelihood of corruption.

Furthermore, the UN should send more humanitarian aid for the Kurdish people, as well as Turkish civilians that have been displaced during the conflict. For example, this can be through provisions of shelter, food, and medical assistance. Kurdish refugees that have gone to neighboring countries could also receive humanitarian aid while the UN can also support host countries and incentivize them to host Kurdish refugees while the conflict persists. The UN can also help reconstruct damaged Kurdish villages and important infrastructure, such as by restoring destroyed cities and stopping Turkish development projects from further destroying Kurdish heritage and living spaces.

The UN could also address the repression of Kurdish culture. This can be done through addressing the Turkish government's prohibition of expression of Kurdish culture by providing consequences unless the ban is lifted. Moreover, delegates could implement education centers for Kurdish civilians and reinstate Kurdish-language curriculums. Delegates can also collaborate with NGOs or create an organization responsible for this solution. They

can also include clauses bolstering and spreading awareness of both Kurdish human rights and culture, in order to involve the international community in supporting this idea.

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