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Definition: **Kurd** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(1595) : a member of a pastoral and agricultural people who inhabit a plateau region in adjoining parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan

Kurd·ish \ ■■■ kūr-dish, ■■■ kər-\ *adj*



Image from: [Kurds in Cassell's Peoples, Nations and Cultures](#)

Summary Article: **Kurd**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Member of a people living mostly in the Taurus and Sagros mountains of eastern Turkey, western Iran, and northern Iraq in the region called Kurdistan. The Kurds have suffered repression in several countries, most brutally in Iraq, where in 1991 more than 1 million were forced to flee their homes. They speak an Indo-Iranian language and are predominantly Sunni Muslims, although there are some Shiites in Iran.

There are 12 million Kurds in Turkey, 5 million in Iran, 4 million in Iraq, 500,000 in Syria, and 500,000 in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Several million live elsewhere in Europe. Although divided among several states, they have nationalist aspirations, and the growth of a pan-Kurdish movement has been helped by the recent move to towns (undertaken in search of work and to escape repression). About 1 million Kurds were made homeless and 25,000 killed as a result of chemical-weapon attacks by Iraq in 1984–89. A Kurdish parliament in exile was established in 1995 in The Hague, the Netherlands, by exiles from Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, where the Kurds suffer discriminatory legislation. The Kurdish communities of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia suffer few restrictions on the use of their language and culture.

History References to what may have been the Kurds are found in Sumerian inscriptions dating from 2000 BC. The Greek historian Xenophon mentions Assyrian battles with the Kurds (c. 400 BC). The Kurds were ruled in succession by the Medes, the Persians, the Parthians, and the Arabs from the 7th century. After accepting the Islamic faith following persecution by the Arabs, they won a degree of autonomy which they retained for several hundred years. During the 13th century, Saladin (Salah-ad-Din), a Kurd, emerged as the foremost leader in the struggle against the Crusaders. There was an ill-fated attempt to set up an autonomous Kurdish state within the Ottoman Empire during the 1880s. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) provided a draft scheme for Kurdish independence, but the treaty was not ratified by Turkey, and Britain and France instead divided Kurdish territory between their Middle Eastern client states. The Kurds found themselves fragmented, a minority in many countries. Despite this, the Kurds maintained a cultural unity, and nationalism has since been strong. A succession of revolts by the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran were all put down. In 1922–23 Sheikh Mahmud of Sulaimaniya proclaimed himself king of Kurdistan; in 1944–45 a Kurdish republic was created in Mahabad with Russian support. The Kurds were again in revolt in 1961–75 to obtain a fully autonomous Kurdish state. As a result, they were moved from north to south, a policy that led to further revolts in 1974–75 and 1977, suppressed

with many civilian deaths and the destruction of whole villages.

Culture The Kurdish language is a member of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family, and the Kurds are a non-Arab, non-Turkic ethnic group. They are predominantly shepherds and farmers, cultivating a wide range of crops and fruit. Seminomadism, for which land ownership was collective, is declining. Kurds traditionally have a strong sense of family honour; feuding between rival families is not uncommon. Larger groups are brought together under an aga, or lord; these are often landowners and marry outside the village to strengthen alliances with other leaders. Commoners prefer to marry the daughter of their father's brother (a parallel cousin) in order to maintain resources and assets within the kin group. National dress is still worn in the more mountainous regions and there is a strong tradition of poetry and music. Kurdish professionals are found in many Middle Eastern cities.

Kurds of Turkey inhabit an area of Anatolia covering 230,000 sq km/88,780 sq mi (almost a third of the Turkish republic). Although the Treaty of Sèvres guaranteed minority rights, it was rejected by Atatürk, the ruler of the newly founded Turkish state. In 1925 a rebellion of Kurds, led by Sheikh Said, was savagely put down by the authorities in an attempt to eradicate Kurdish identity. Atatürk banned Kurdish from official use and from schools, and implemented a programme of 'Turkization' in an attempt to unify the new republic. Southeastern Turkey remained a military area, banned to foreigners, from 1925 until 1965. In 1983 Kurdish provinces were placed under martial law to combat the separatist activities of the recently formed Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK). Until 1991, speaking or writing Kurdish or even owning a recording of Kurdish music was an offence in Turkey, and 670,000 Kurds were arrested 1981–91. Unlike ethnic Turks, Kurds may by law be held incommunicado for 30 days. Speaking Kurdish was legalized 1991 but publishing or broadcasting in Kurdish remained prohibited. The concessions made to the Kurds during the presidency of Turgut Ozal (1989–93) were ignored by his successor Suleiman Demirel, who opposed any recognition of Kurdish rights and launched a military crackdown against the PKK from 1992. During 1993 Turkish diplomatic offices and businesses in leading Western European cities were attacked by the PKK. An estimated 11,000 people were killed in battles between Turkish forces and PKK fighters from 1984 until 1993. Turkish government troops launched a major offensive into northern Iraq in March 1995, aimed at eliminating several PKK strongholds in the region. In 1997 Turkey started a massive military onslaught against rebel Kurds in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq. Despite calls on Turkey to pull out by UN secretary general Kofi Annan and the EU, the Turkish foreign ministry said its troops would not leave until the rebels were 'rendered inefficient'. Late 1997 saw a wave of immigrant Kurds fleeing to Italy. Relations between Turkey and Italy, already strained because of the Kurdish question, became even more tense in December 1998 when Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, whom Turkey wanted extradited from Italy as a terrorist, requested political asylum and, after a month's house arrest, was freed by an Italian court. Turkey imposed an embargo on imports from Italy. Ocalan was captured and put on trial in Turkey in May 1999; he received death sentence in June. This met with widespread protests amongst Kurds throughout Europe, and with the condemnation of several European governments. In February 2000 Turkey's hopes for joining the European Union (EU) were jeopardized, and domestic peace troubled, when the leader of Turkey's only legally recognized Kurdish party, the People's Democracy Party (Hadep), and the mayors of three cities in Turkey's Kurdish southeastern region (also members of Hadep), were charged with helping the outlawed PKK. Turan Demir, head of Hadep, was sentenced to three years and nine months imprisonment. The president of the European parliament urged Turkey to free the mayors, and although her request was initially rejected, the mayors were set free at the end of February, pending the outcome of their trial.

Kurds of Iran inhabit an area covering 125,000 sq km/48,250 sq mi to the west and south of Lake Urmia and including the Iranian province of Kurdistan. Under the centralizing regime of the Persian commander Pahlavi (1925), Kurdish dress and language were banned and political movements repudiated. Rebellions, led by chieftains such as Simko ('the Cannibal'), led to repression; Simko was himself assassinated during negotiations with the Persian government in 1930. The Kurds established the short-lived republic of Mahabad with Soviet backing in 1946, were repressed under the shah, and, when they revolted against the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, were savagely put down in 1979–80. However, concessions were granted in the form of limited self-rule and linguistic and cultural freedom. Guerrilla activity by the separatist Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP-I) continued. It was promised that the four provinces would be united in an autonomous unit; the Kurdish region, however, remains divided.

Kurds of Iraq live in the mountainous northeastern province of Kirkuk. When the British nominee for king, Faisal I, failed to establish a Kurdish state in the 1920s, the Kurds of Iraq rebelled. They were defeated with the help of the British RAF, which carried out bombing raids in support of the king, but rebellions continued during the 1920s and 1930s, although under the monarchy, the Kurds were recognized as a national minority, and their language was allowed in places for local administration, elementary education, and legal proceedings. The Ba'athist revolution of 1958 raised hopes of a greater measure of autonomy, but the Kurds were again in revolt in 1961–75 to obtain a fully autonomous Kurdish state. As a result, they were moved from north to south, a policy that led to further revolts in 1974–75 and 1977, suppressed with many civilian deaths and the destruction of whole villages. During the Iran–Iraq War in 1980–88, Kurds fought on both sides, although the separatist Kurdish Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (backed by Iran) carried out acts of sabotage in northern Iraq. In 1988, Iraq used chemical weapons to drive Kurds into Turkey; over 6,000 were killed in one attack on the village of Halabja. The attacks formed part of the **Anfal campaign** (instigated by Hassan al-Majid, cousin of Saddam Hussein), which lasted from February to September 1988 and left an estimated 50,000–100,000 killed and thousands of villages destroyed. In November 1989 the Iraqi army moved an estimated 100,000–500,000 people and again destroyed their villages to create an uninhabited 'security zone' on its borders with Iran and Turkey. In the wake of Iraq's defeat by a US-led alliance in the Gulf War 1991, Iraqi Kurds revolted and briefly controlled many northern Iraqi cities. The Iraqi counterattack forced more than one million Kurds to flee to regions on both sides of Iraq's borders with Turkey and Iran, where thousands died of hunger, exposure, and waterborne diseases. The USA and its allies subsequently stationed a military task force in Turkey to deter Iraqi attacks on the Kurds and, in May 1991, set up a 'safe zone' within which humanitarian aid for the refugees was provided for three months. Following the withdrawal of forces from the safe zone and the return of Kurdish and other Iraqi refugees to their homes, a multinational force, called Operation Poised Hammer, was retained in Turkey. The area protected covers only a third of Iraqi Kurdistan but Kurdish forces have extended it and established their own government. Iraq's two largest Kurdish guerrilla factions signed a peace agreement in November 1994, ending eight months of fighting in which some 4,000 people had reportedly died.

Kurds of Syria form a small settlement along the Turkish border. Kurdish language and culture are proscribed and there have been attempts to 'Arabize' Kurdish areas. Despite its suppression of Kurdish identity at home, the Syrian government has backed the activities of the Kurdish PKK in neighbouring Turkey.

Civil warAfter two months of fighting, rival Kurdish parties signed a peace accord to bring an end to the latest phase of the civil war in Kurdistan in November 1996. The agreement was mediated by the USA, the UK, and Turkey at a meeting in Ankara, Turkey, and committed both sides to not seek support from outside powers. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal al-Talabani, had attacked first, allegedly with Iranian support, on 17 August 1996. Facing defeat, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Massoud Barzani allied itself with the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, and drove the PUK out of most of Kurdistan, only to see the PUK, again with Iranian support, regain most of their losses in a counteroffensive. Despite declarations by the PUK and KDP that they will not rely on outside powers, this latest two-month phase of the civil war has increased the influence of Iraq and Iran in Iraqi Kurdistan. The USA lost a degree of credibility by failing to stop Saddam Hussein using tanks there. The civil war between rival Kurdish factions in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan erupted again in October 1997, breaking a year-old ceasefire. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), backed by Iran, launched an offensive aimed at driving the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) from the strategic town of Shaqlawa. Fierce fighting took place over control of the 'Hamilton Road', the strategic key to the Kurdish mountains. Talks between European police authorities and security officials were held January 1998 to agree a plan to deal with a wave of Kurdish immigrants who landed in Italy late 1997.

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