



**AMERICAN
FRIENDS OF
KURDISTAN**

Fact Sheet on the Kurds in Turkey

American Friends of Kurdistan
Washington, DC

Background

American Friends of Kurdistan Mission

American Friends of Kurdistan (AFK) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(4) advocacy organization.

AFK strengthens, protects, and promotes American-Kurdish relations and supports policies that advance the national security and prosperity of Americans, Kurds, and our other allies.

AFK is the first organization of its kind, founded in 2019 by a group of Americans who believe American policy toward Kurds and greater Kurdistan is lacking and all-too-often ignored.

A century after the Sykes-Picot Agreement divided Kurdish communities across four countries, we believe the status quo has largely failed the Kurds and America's strength in the region has been undermined as a result.

AFK advocates for the development of a unique, realistic, and tailored policy for every region of Kurdistan which includes northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. With an estimated 45 million Kurds worldwide, and over 40 million of them living in the greater Kurdistan region, we believe it is in the American interest to empower Kurds to lead their own peaceful efforts toward democratic self-determination in keeping with American values. Kurds are on the frontline in the war against radical Islamic terrorism and are one of America's strongest allies in the Middle East.

AFK is independent and nonpartisan. We will achieve greater support for the U.S.-Kurdish alliance by advocating for bipartisan Congressional solutions, while also working to educate American civic and national security leaders at all levels of government.

AFK is the only advocacy organization established specifically to enhance American-Kurdish relations. We are not affiliated with any American or Kurdish political party, and we do not accept financial assistance from any government.

The Kurds have a saying, "no friends but the mountains." At AFK we believe the Kurds have a mountain of American friends.

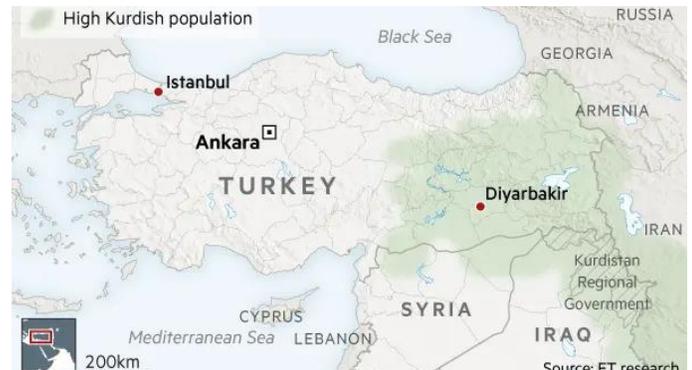
Background

Turkey has an estimated population of over 80 million, with the Kurds in Turkey making up an estimated 20% of the total population. The vast majority of the population in Turkey is Sunni Muslim with religious minorities representing 0.2% of the population. With the Kurdish population primarily inhabiting the southeastern region of Turkey or Northern Kurdistan, Bakur. The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 as a secular democracy by former Ottoman general Mustafa Kemal. Ataturk launched reforms within the country to westernize Turkey. As a result, the government has persecuted the Kurds by outlawing traditional Kurdish clothing, language, and culture. Turkey has launched a multitude of programs to assimilate the Kurds and erase their national identity.

After decades of repression, the “Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan” or Kurdistan Workers party (PKK), a left-wing movement was founded in 1974 by Abdullah Ocalan. In 1984 the PKK began a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish government. The Turkish government views the PKK as terrorists and a threat to national security. While there has been a slew of ceasefires between the PKK and the Turkish government since the 1990s, a long-lasting peaceful resolution has not been achieved. The most recent ceasefire breaking down in 2015 leading to a renewed insurgency.

In the wake of the failed 2016 Coup, President Recep tayyip Erdogan has cracked down on dissidents, political opponents, and the Kurds. Erdogan has also made moves to reduce the political representation of the Kurds in the Turkish Parliament by arresting members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP). Since the failed coup, Erdogan has continued to shift towards a more Islamic government challenging its longstanding status as a secular democracy.

Kurdish population in Turkey



President Recep tayyip Erdogan



Source: [Brookings Institution](#)

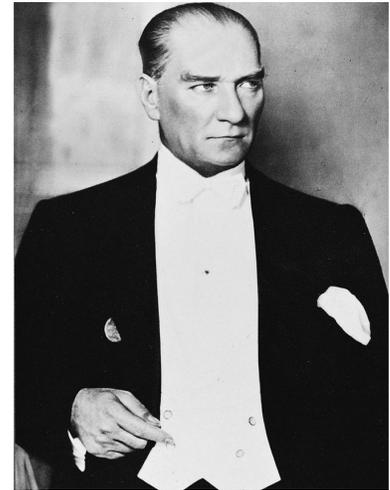
Kurds Under Ataturk's Rule

Under the rule of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk the Kurds suffered decades of repression. During the reforms instituted by Ataturk, the Kurds were forced to wear western clothing and faced mass deportations from their native homelands in southeastern Turkey. Ataturk's new republic sought to unify all people in Turkey under one Turkish national identity without any minorities. Doing so meant subduing the Kurds and erasing Kurdish identity.

Ataturk abolished the use of the Arabic numerals in favor of Latin numerals and erased many traces of the former Islamic Ottoman Empire. Kurdish resistance to Turkish assimilation policy was fierce, with the Turkish military quashing the first of these rebellions in 1925. That same year the Turkish Ministry of Education would ban the use of terms such as "Kurd" or "Kurdistan" as they were seen as contradictory to Turkish national identity. In 1934 the government would pass the Law of Resettlement, which forcibly removed Kurds from their native villages to western Turkey to assimilate them into the Turkish nation. It was during Ataturk's rule that Kurds began being referred to as "Mountain Turks", in further attempts to erase their identity.

Kurdish tribes revolted again in 1930 in what came to be known as the Hoybûn Revolt, where the Turkish military would massacre an estimated 15,000 civilians in the province of Van. In addition, in 1938 a major rebellion would take place in Dersim where an estimated 10,000-30,000 Kurds would be killed by the Turkish military. Kurdish civilians would be bombed, gassed, and burned alive by the Turkish military. Many Kurds continue to view these massacres as a genocide perpetrated by Ataturk and his regime.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk



Source: [Wikipedia](#)

Kurdish civilians during the Dersim Rebellion



Source: [Jacobin Magazine](#)

The PKK and Kurdish Nationalism

The founder of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan was first exposed to ideas on socialism and marxism as a college student at the University of Ankara in 1971. Like many political leaders, it was his time in prison that fomented his ideology and beliefs. When he launched the insurgency against the Turkish government he also targeted Kurds who he viewed as collaborators with Ankara.

During the conflict, Abdullah Ocalan would often use Syria, Lebanon, and northern Iraq as training bases and sanctuary. In 1998 Abdullah Ocalan was forced to flee Syria as Turkey threatened war if Syria continued harboring him. In 1999 Abdullah Ocalan was captured while hiding in Nairobi, Kenya by Turkish special forces with alleged U.S. support. He was originally sentenced to death in 2002 but had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment. He has been imprisoned on the island of Imrali since 2009.

The PKK has predominantly combatted the Turkish government through means of guerrilla warfare. To combat the growing insurgency the Turkish government established the Village Guard system or Koy Korucala in 1985. These village guards were primarily Kurds who were recruited to fight against their people. The Village Guards have been responsible for a plethora of human rights violations ranging from forced disappearances and executions to sexual assault.

Many Kurds have been forced to join the Village Guards under threat of deportation, while others have joined willingly. As of 2016, the Village Guards number almost 70,000, with some being paid a salary and while others are just given a rifle by the government.

Abdullah Ocalan, Founder of the PKK



Source: [New York Times](#)

PKK forces moving into Northern Iraqi Kurdistan



Source: [Arab News](#)

Female PKK fighters training in northern Iraq



Source: [BBC](#)

The Turkish government would declare a State of Emergency in the southeastern region of Turkey in 1987. The original goal of the PKK insurgency was to establish an independent Kurdistan separate from Turkey. By the 1990s shifted to a more moderate position, only asking for equal rights and autonomy for Kurds.

Post-Gulf War, the PKK began using Northern Iraq as its primary place of sanctuary. This has caused Turkey to launch incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan. The U.S. did not designate the PKK as a terrorist organization until October 8th, 1997.

Since the start of the conflict, there have been several ceasefires, the first occurring in 1993 and the most recent falling apart in 2015 with a renewed insurgency against the Turkish government.

With the conflict renewed, the PKK began to shift its strategy from guerrilla warfare to striking Turkey in major urban areas. These urban provocations have been used to force Turkish security forces into acts of brutality. Ankara's anti-PKK operations have led to heavy civilian casualties and the demolishing of buildings, often trapping civilians inside. The PKK's shift in strategy has on one hand helped garner western condemnation of Turkey's aggression, yet at the same time has failed to bring a resolution to the conflict.

Since mid-2015, the International Crisis Groups (ICG) has reported over 5,000 casualties from the conflict with over 500 being civilians. The Turkish-PKK conflict as a whole has left more than 40,000 lives lost in the conflict.

Turkish soldiers patrolling southeastern province of Şırnak



Source: [The Guardian](#)

Aftermath of Turkish forces razing of Sur district in the city of Diyarbakir



Source: [Middle East Research and Information Project](#)

In addition, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government has seen spillover in the Syrian Civil War. The YPG is an offshoot of the PKK in Syria, whom President Erdogan considers terrorists. The Turkish government does not differentiate between the PKK and YPG, having launched strikes against the YPG in Syria. The PKK has played major roles in military campaigns such as the rescue of Yazidi minorities at Mt. Sinjar, and the offensives in Kobani and Manbij.

During the civil war, Turkey has continued to launch military incursions into northwestern Syria and northern Iraq in pursuit of the PKK. In 2018 Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch into Afrin and confiscated millions of dollars worth of the local olive produce, claiming that it was done so that it wouldn't fall into the hands of the PKK. Turkey and its allies have since occupied the Afrin region with no signs of withdrawing.

Subsequently, Turkey launched a series of offensives in northern Iraqi Kurdistan in the summers of 2020 and 2021 to eradicate PKK sanctuaries. During Operation Claw-Lightning and Thunderbolt, Turkey has used its Village Guards to deforest thousands of acres of lumber in Iraqi Kurdistan. This large-scale deforestation has caused severe environmental impacts in the region.

Similar to Afrin's olives, Turkey has been selling the lumber from Iraqi Kurdistan and claiming the profits as its own. Turkey has committed such acts as a means to deny the PKK sanctuary and eliminate their training camps in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Turkish soldiers during invasion of Afrin



Source: [Middle East Eye](#)

Stolen Kurdish lumber in Poland



Source: [AL-MONITOR](#)

Kurdish Politics in Turkey

List of banned Kurdish Political Parties

1. The People's Labor Party (HEP)
2. Social Democratic Party (SHP)
3. The Freedom and Democracy Party (OZDEP)
4. Democracy party (DEP)
5. People's Democracy Party (HADEP)
6. Democratic People's Party (DEHAP)
7. Democratic Society Party (DTP)

Source: [HDP Europe](#)

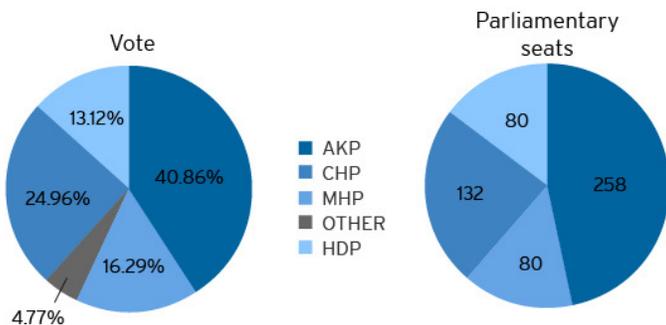
The Turkish government has consistently cracked down on Kurdish political parties, typically by banning them through the Constitutional Court. For several decades now Kurdish parties have been banned by the court only for a new one to be established soon after, an occurring trend since the early 1990s. In 2015 the HDP became the first pro-Kurdish political party to achieve 13% of the national vote. Thus surpassing Turkey's 10% minimum electoral threshold needed to be represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TNGA).

This formally allowed the HDP to be represented in the TNGA. This election was also important because the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has lost its overwhelming percentage of the vote in the Grand National Assembly. The AKP had previously won the majority seats in the 2002, 2007, and 2011 parliamentary elections.

In 2017, President Erdogan using nationalist feelings spurred by the failed 2016 coup to hold a referendum for a new constitution which granted him vast executive powers. Some of these included the power to appoint government officials, vice presidents, judges, and serve up to two 5-Year terms. The new constitution also abolished the position of "prime minister", a position Erdogan once held himself. In 2018 President Erdogan would hold early elections as the next election cycle was not to occur until 2019. Erdogan would go on to win over 50% of the presidential vote, further solidifying his position.

Parliament seats won in 2015 election

Distribution of the Turkish vote and parliamentary seats



Source: [Brookings Institution](#)

2018 Presidential Election results

Erdogan's vote share in each province

June 2018 presidential election

0-19% 20-39% 40-59% 60-79% 80% +



Source: Supreme Electoral Council of Turkey, Anadolu Agency

Source: [BBC](#)

In recent years the face of Kurdish political representation in Turkey has been that of the pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP). Founded in 2012, the HDP is a left-wing party that was founded on the basis of democracy and socialism. It is the third-largest political party in the parliament and supports policy platforms such as gender equality, minority rights, and environmentalism. The HDP is also unique in that it has also sought a negotiated settlement for the ongoing Turkish-PKK conflict. This reflects the HDP's non-violent approach to a political solution in Turkey. Erdogan and the AKP consistently try to depict the HDP as working in concert with the PKK to stir up anti-Kurdish sentiment. While there are members of the HDP who are sympathetic to the PKK, the HDP continues to operate independently often working against the PKK.

In the wake of the failed 2016 coup, Erdogan was granted a State of Emergency by parliament and began removing Kurds from political office as well as arresting them. More notably, then HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtas was arrested on a variety of terrorism-related charges. The HDP is often accused of collaborating with the PKK, yet Demirtas has denied ties and has publicly highlighting differences between the two groups. He would also run unsuccessfully for president in 2018, managing his campaign from his prison cell, where he remains today.

Since 2016 Kurdish MPs of the HDP and Kurdish mayors have continually been removed from office and jailed. Pressure against the Kurds in Turkey has continued to mount in 2021 with the Turkish Constitutional Court opening a court case to officially ban the HDP, a fate that all of its predecessors have faced. With protests erupting immediately in regard to the infringement on Kurdish rights.

In addition, an HDP office was recently attacked in the city of Izmir in an act anti-Kurdish sentiment, leaving one woman dead. These two recent developments further accentuate the stance the Erdogan regime has taken against the Kurds in recent years.

HDP



Source: [HDP Europe](#)

Selahattin Demirtas



Source: [CNN](#)

HDP supporters protest the arrest of its MP's



Source: [HDP Europe](#)

US-Turkish Relations

The United States and Turkey have historically had positive yet delicate relations with each other often cooperating to deter a common enemy. During the Cold War, both countries cooperated to deter the Soviet Union. Turkey is a member of NATO and holds a special place in the alliance as Turkey guards NATO's southern flank. The U.S. does house currently military personnel at Incirlik Airbase in southern Turkey as well as U.S. nuclear weapons. However, during the U.S.-led 2003 Iraq invasion, Turkey did not allow U.S. ground troops from Turkish soil.

After a series of falters U.S.-Turkish relations have deteriorated. Under the rule of President Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development party, Turkey has become a more revanchist power expressing Neo-Ottoman sentiment. Erdogan and his regime have worked to promote Islam in civil society, curb civil freedoms, human rights, and silence political opponents.

In 2016, after President Erdogan survived the attempted coup he went on to blame the attempted coup on prominent Sunni cleric and religious leader, Fethullah Gulen. Fethullah Gulen and his supporters were once close supporters of Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). More importantly, Fethullah Gulen has lived in self-exile in rural Pennsylvania since 1999, since the failed coup in 2016 the United States has refused Turkey's call for extradition to stand trial for allegedly plotting the coup. This has been a major source of tension between the U.S. and Turkey.

The following year Turkey would signal a shift to the east with the purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system instead of purchasing the U.S.-made Patriot missile system. Russian S-400 missiles are not compatible with NATO defense systems, which poses a significant hindrance to defense cooperation. As a result, the U.S. removed Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program in 2019 causing further strain between both nations. The United States would go on to place economic sanctions on Turkey through the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2021.

Fethullah Gulen



Source: [CNN](#)

S-400 Missile Defense System



Source: [Middle East Institute](#)

F-35 Fighter Jet



Source: [US Naval Institute News](#)

During the U.S.-led campaign to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, Turkey failed to act as a reliable partner, causing the United States to rely on the Kurdish Peshmerga and Kurdish-led SDF. During the Syrian Civil War, Turkey has repeatedly targeted the YPG and YPJ, the U.S.'s main ally in the fight against Daesh. Turkey and the myriad of Syrian opposition groups it backs targeted Kurdish forces in Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Turkey's offensive into northeastern Syria in 2019. To make matters more complicated, Turkey has exacerbated the conflict by allegedly arming and supplying radical Islamist groups in Syria.

Furthermore, Turkey has also acted as a regional instigator in the Mediterranean. Turkey antagonizes its neighbor Greece almost on a day-to-day basis, by violating its air space and holding Greece hostage with the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. Turkey also stokes the flames in the ongoing conflict in Libya by sending Syrian mercenaries to support the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). According to a 2020 Pentagon report, Turkey had sent almost 4,000 fighters to fight in Libya, with many having ties to Islamic extremist groups.

Turkey would replicate this same strategy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by sending thousands of Syrian fighters to fight on behalf of Azerbaijan against Armenia. President Biden would go on to recognize the Armenian Genocide on April 24th, 2021, a bold move that previous U.S. presidents stayed away from. This move has raised tensions as Turkey continues to deny that the Armenian Genocide occurred and has been fiercely opposed to U.S. recognition for years.

In July 2021, the State Department formally added Turkey to the list of countries implicated in the use of child soldiers. Specifically, due to its operations in the Libyan Civil War and Turkey's support of the Sultan Murad Division, one of the Turkish-backed groups operating as a part of the Syrian opposition. This is the first time a member of NATO has been placed on such a list. Turkey responded by refuting the claim and backlash against the United States.

Turkish-backed forces fighting the Kurds in Syria



Source: [The Guardian](#)

Joe Biden recognizes Armenian Genocide



Source: [POLITICO](#)

Syrian boy disassembles an AK-47



Source: [Al-Monitor](#)

Recent Developments

Women's Rights

On July 1st, 2021 Turkey formally withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, an international treaty designed to help end violence against women. Protests immediately erupted in Istanbul over the withdrawal. The same day President Erdogan would announce his "Action Plan for Combating Violence against Women" as a means to replace the Istanbul Convention. The Turkish government withdrew from this treaty because it believes that the Istanbul Convention is being used to promote homosexuality in Turkey and impose on Turkey's traditional family values. This withdrawal would spark major outcry and protests from feminist and LGBTQ groups in Turkey.

Naval Developments

Lastly, Turkey has recently made significant efforts towards improving its military capabilities. Turkey has just purchased six German-made Reis-class submarines. Reis-class submarines have can virtually emit no noise while submerged and have the ability to remain submerged for several weeks without surfacing. This will give Turkey an advantage in the Mediterranean as it is engaged in multiple conflicts. This new type of submarine could potentially make it easier for Turkey to harass Greece's navy in territorial disputes.

Crackdown on LGBT community

In recent years, the Turkish government has been cracking down on members of the LGBTQ community. Part of Turkey's reason for withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention had to do with the tolerance of LGBTQ groups in the country. During last month's Pride Parade in Istanbul, parade marchers were met by police armed in riot gear attempting to disrupt the parade. The Turkish government has used the COVID-19 Pandemic to try and ban Pride Parades arguing that they could help spread the disease. President Erdogan has expressed his belief that the LGBTQ community threatens national security and that homosexuality promotes pedophilia.

Turkey in talks to takeover Kabul Security

With the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan almost complete and daily gains being made by the Taliban, the U.S. has few options to salvage its efforts. There is a growing concern in the U.S. government that the Afghan government will not be able to resist the Taliban resurgence and ultimately collapse into civil war. The Biden Administration has been negotiating with Turkey, confirming that Turkey will takeover security at Kabul Airport after full U.S. withdrawal. While there is potential for US-Turkish relations to mend on this issue, Turkey has a history of occupying territory and not leaving willingly (i.e. Cyprus & Syria).

Fact sheet created by James Motamed and edited by Diliman Abdulkader.

AFK fact sheets will be periodically updated.

The goal of AFK fact sheets is to give an overall picture, it does not cover all aspects of the topic.

AFK fact sheets are sourced in the form of hyperlinks, if any links are missing please reach out to the AFK team and we will include the most accurate source.

Please feel free to use any AFK fact sheet as a resource.

AFK is the leading independent advocacy and education organization in Washington working to enhance U.S.-Kurdish relations.