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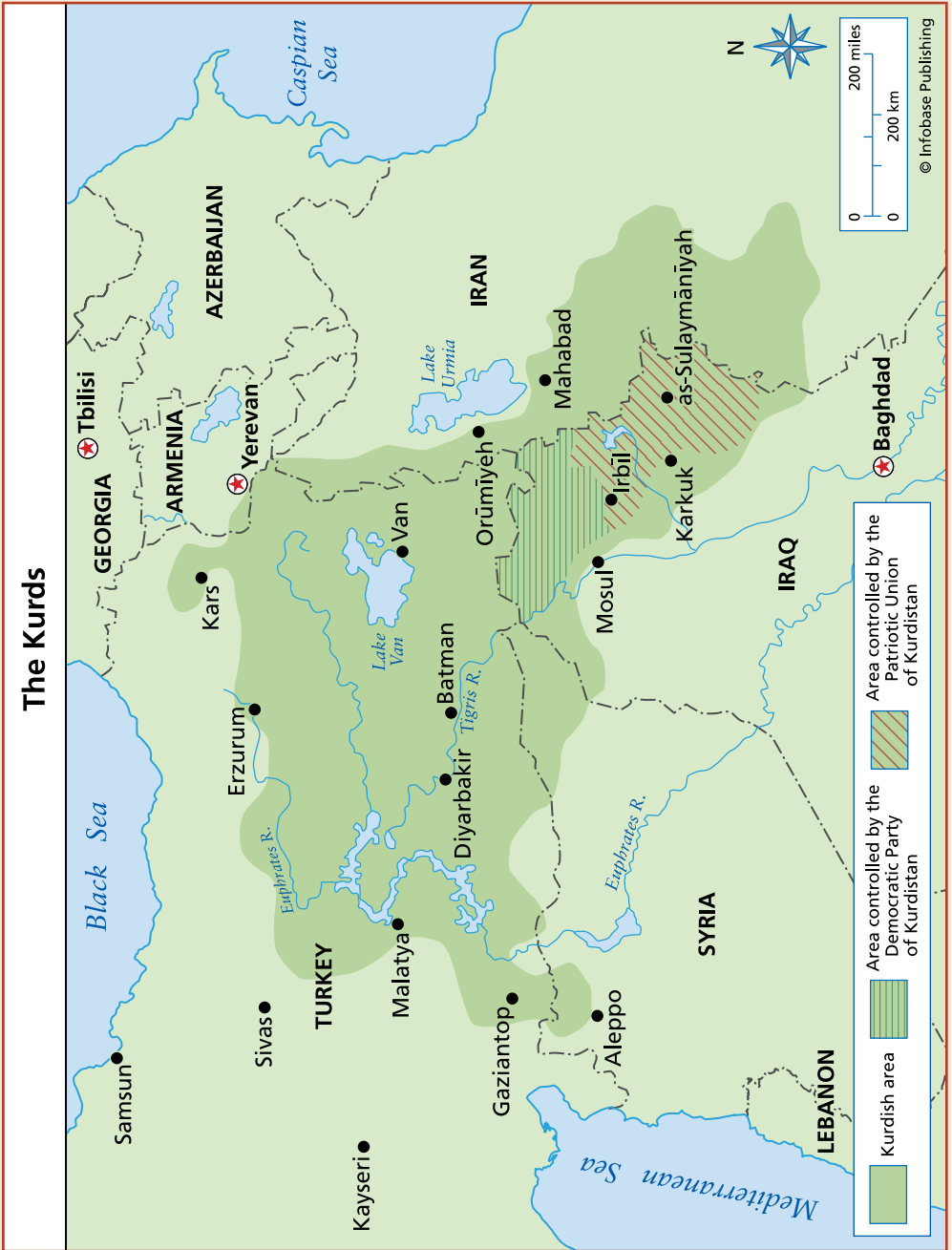
The Kurds

The Kurdish population has for many years sparked fierce debate, both within and beyond the borders of Turkey, about exactly what constitutes a nation and what qualifies a people to govern its own territory. The Kurds, more than any other people, were left behind in the scattered ashes of the Ottoman Empire. Living principally in the region where Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq come together, they are divided artificially by borders and territorial claims into four separate countries, when in reality they are a single people unified by customs and language. For many years they had sought independence from the nations that governed them, yet no nation was willing to grant them self-rule.

In Turkey's view, the Kurdish region was economically valuable and not something simply to be handed away. As an agricultural center, it was important principally for its production of cotton and tobacco. It also contained valuable oil and water resources. Nonetheless, the region was wracked by poverty. The great gains Atatürk and his successors had achieved in modernizing Turkey provided little benefit to the Kurds.

To understand why the Turkish government so strongly resisted the Kurds' calls for independence, it is important to

(opposite) The Kurds have inhabited parts of present-day Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq since the 2400s B.C. in a region often referred to as Kurdistan. Kurdish communities can also be found in Lebanon, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, as well as some European countries and the United States.



remember how bitterly the wars for independence were fought to ensure that no more of Turkish territory slipped away after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. All successors have held fast to this principle—that the boundaries of Turkey were defined in 1919, and no part of it should be given up without a fight.

The Kurdish calls for independence were certainly not a new development but dated back almost to the founding of modern Turkey and are reflected in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. Atatürk's early reform policies were deeply divisive in the Kurdish region. Since the Kurds wanted a Muslim state, the decision to abolish the caliphate was alarming to them. More disturbing still were Mustafa Kemal's later steps to strengthen Turkey's national identity, but which had the effect of diminishing the Kurdish character of the southeastern region. Places were no longer known by their Kurdish names, but only by Turkish ones. Turks moved into the Kurdish region to fill the middle- and senior-level government positions. The Kurdish language could no longer be spoken in courts or used in schools, a law that drastically affected the quality of education and legal representation available to the Kurdish people.

The result was inevitable: a revolt among the Kurds in 1925 as the effects of these Turkification policies became clear. Martial law was declared in all of Kurdistan, hundreds of rebels and suspected rebels were executed, and other brutal actions were yet to come. Many Kurds were forcibly evacuated to western Anatolia. Villages were burnt, and their inhabitants—men, women, and children—were killed. Cattle and other animals were seized and removed, effectively condemning the people to starvation. All religious organizations were shut down. In Turkey, Kurds were officially referred to as “mountain Turks.”

Such cruel policing of this segment of the population became a routine assignment for the Turkish army. In fact, the majority of Turkish military activities in the past 50 years, with few

exceptions, have been against the Kurds, not against aggressive invaders or foreign armies.

The rebellions continued to break out as the Kurds fought fiercely, both in Turkey and in neighboring regions, for the survival of their culture and people. In June 1934, Turkey passed a strict law intended to stamp out the Kurdish rebellion for good. The law essentially divided Turkey into three parts: (1) regions reserved for people who already possessed the necessary “Turkish culture”; (2) regions where people of “non-Turkish culture” were to be moved in order to be educated in Turkish language and culture; and (3) regions that were to be evacuated. It is clear that the goal of this law was to eliminate significant Kurdish populations from any region, but the very real problems of relocating the 3 million Kurdish people in small groups throughout the rest of Turkey prevented this law from being fully carried out.

The Republican People’s Party, first under Atatürk and later his successors, carried out an effective campaign to quiet rebellions—whether from Kurdistan in the southeast or other parts of Turkey. But the opening up of political power to other parties revived the cries for independence that had been silenced for many years. As the Democratic Party won power and restored a religious presence to the state, mosques and places of worship once more began to issue the call for a return to the traditional Islamic values that had flourished under the Ottomans.

The Kurds first rallied behind the Democrats, but soon became disillusioned when the reality of their policies differed greatly from what had been promised. Political freedom, however, sparked a revival of Kurdish separatism, and the Kurdish homeland became an important campaign site for the many different political parties that swept across Turkey, including a secret (because it was illegal) Kurdish party. The region was poor; increased mechanization and modern but costlier farming methods had left many farmers unemployed. The people were undereducated and living closely together. More significant, although

Turkey's population was holding fairly steady, the population in Kurdistan was nearly doubling.

THE PKK (THE KURDISTAN WORKERS' PARTY)

These were the conditions that concerned Özal (who himself was part Kurdish) and his government in the 1980s, when news of increasing numbers of rebellions in Kurdish territory reached Ankara. In the early 1980s, the violence was so widespread that two-thirds of the Turkish army was patrolling the Kurdish region to keep the peace there and, possibly, to intimidate the



Oppression of the Kurds led to the formation of the Kurdistan Workers Party, known as the PKK. Intent on defending Kurdish and workers' rights, this organization initiated rebel attacks against the public, and also targeted tourist sites in Turkey. Above, bomb experts search for evidence after a Kurdish rebel threw herself in front of a bus with a bomb strapped to her waist.

Kurds. At first, it seemed that the violence was being contained. But then, in August 1984, a new series of attacks began against Turkish forces. The source was the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

This group was unusual among Turkish political parties because its members were drawn largely from the working class. The PKK fought not merely for Kurdish rights, but also for workers' rights. It was rebelling against the horrible living conditions of the average Turk while wealthy merchants and the ruling elite enjoyed prosperity and the benefits of wealth in far-distant Ankara and Istanbul. The PKK was intent on launching not merely a civil war, but also a class war. And its targets were not only soldiers: In addition to attacking military bases and ambushing troops, the PKK also began killing wealthy landowners and seizing their estates.

The government drastically increased the number of soldiers sent to patrol Kurdistan. By 1987, a state of emergency was declared in eight Kurdish provinces and a governor-general was appointed to coordinate the efforts of the various forces fighting the PKK. The governor-general was given wide-ranging powers, including the authority to evacuate villages if he felt it was necessary. Torture was common, and hundreds of villagers were routinely arrested and beaten until they confessed to aiding the PKK efforts.

These efforts backfired horribly. Initially, a minority of Kurdish villagers had supported the PKK's campaign of intimidation and its arbitrary murders of landlords and village guards. But as the government's violent and brutal tactics eclipsed those used by the PKK and resulted in Kurdish families living in constant fear of imprisonment and abuse, the number of Kurds supporting the PKK increased steadily.

Hoping to weaken the PKK and gain popular Turkish support, President Özal announced that any Turkish publishing house that "falsely reflected events in the region" would be closed down. The same law gave the governor-general of Kurdistan the right to relocate anyone he chose to an area determined

by the government. Hundreds of villages were burned following the passing of this law, leaving thousands of people homeless.

Turks as well as Kurds began to protest against these actions. The images of their own citizens turned into refugees by the Turkish military offended the average Turks, and the government soon realized that the crisis had been transformed from a regional to a national one.

By 1992, President Özal drastically changed his policy toward the Kurdish situation and called for recognition of the PKK as a possible participant in Turkey's political system. The PKK responded with a brief cease-fire in March of 1993, but the overtures for peaceful compromise made by Özal vanished at his death on April 17, 1993. The new president, Süleyman Demirel, was less willing to negotiate with the PKK, and ordered the army to capitalize on the cease-fire by rounding up as many PKK fighters as it could find. In six weeks, the army killed about 100 people (fighters and civilians), arrested hundreds more, and resumed its destruction of homes and whole villages. The chance for peace had vanished.

A WIDENING CONFLICT

President Demirel had appointed Tansu Ciller as Turkey's first female prime minister, but she was unable or unwilling to challenge the military officers. The violence and intensity of the struggle grew at a frightening pace. Towns were subjected to military assaults. Civilians died in numbers equal to the soldiers and guerrilla fighters. The recently formed Kurdish political party, the People's Labour Party (HEP), was banned in July 1993.

The PKK responded by bringing the conflict to other parts of Turkey. Tourist sites in southern Turkey were attacked. European tourists in Kurdish areas were seized as hostages. Kurdish separatists attacked Turkish embassies and business locations in Europe. By the end of 1993, it was reported that 10,000 people

had died since the conflicts first began in 1984. Within one year, that number would double.

The national nightmare was rapidly becoming a foreign policy disaster. As Turkey sought to establish itself as an active and democratic participant in the international community, these human rights abuses against its own people made foreign investors wary. And as more Kurds were heard calling for autonomy, or the right to govern their own region, rather than for complete independence and separation from Turkey, the horrific



Protestors from Great Britain's Turkish community marched through London to call for Great Britain to be more active in opposing the PKK. The PKK has frequently used violence and intimidation in its campaign for Kurdish rights.

response of the Turkish government was increasingly difficult to understand or excuse.

The dreams of Atatürk for Turkey—a strong nation unified by language, education, and Westernized ideas—seemed noble on the surface, but they have left an expensive legacy. The 12 million Kurds living in Turkey continue to pay the price.