

CRS Insights

The Kurds and Possible Iraqi Kurdish Independence

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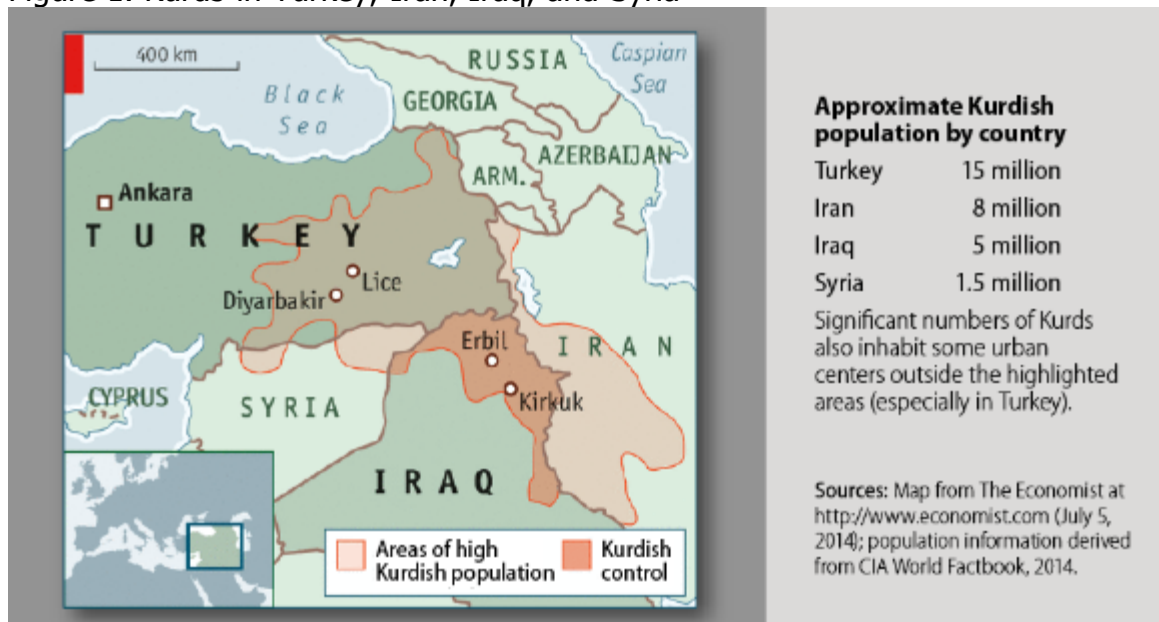
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Approximately 30 million ethnic Kurds inhabit a largely mountainous region at the [intersection of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran](#). In recent years, Kurdish populations have increasingly influenced regional developments, particularly given ongoing conflict and change in Iraq and [Syria](#) and long-standing efforts by Turkey's Kurds to obtain greater political rights (see CRS Report R43612, [Iraq Crisis and U.S. Policy](#)). These developments are of interest to Congress and the Obama Administration, in light of [recent indications that the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq may seek outright independence](#).

Regional Context

Kurds share strong historical, cultural, and interactive bonds across countries, and are known as [one of the largest ethnic groups without control of a state](#). Yet Kurds are also riven by a host of linguistic and political differences, and vary in religiosity and Muslim confessional identity—though the majority is Sunni. Members of the sizeable Kurdish diaspora (more than 1 million) can be found throughout the world, but [primarily in Europe](#). Precise demographic and economic data regarding Kurds in various states are generally unavailable.

Figure 1. Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria



Since the early 20th Century, Kurds have periodically engaged in conflict with and faced repression by the governments of the states in which they live. They have also experienced economic disadvantages. Kurdish nationalist insurgencies or political struggles in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran have received support of varying kinds and extents—resources, manpower, logistics, public relations, territorial safe havens—via transnational Kurdish ties in the region and the diaspora in Europe. In Iraq, [Kurds acquired de facto autonomy following the 1991 Gulf War](#), and have [formalized and increased this autonomy](#) since the U.S.-led removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003. This was the result of several factors, including:

- rights conferred upon the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) under Iraq's 2005 constitution;

- geographical features that aid the defense of their territorial domain;
- command of their own security forces (or *peshmerga*);
- control over natural resources; and
- international support.

[Turkey has reportedly become the KRG's largest trading partner and external source of investment](#), particularly as a consumer of and transport hub for oil extracted from Kurdish-controlled territory. Turkey appears to have established these economic linkages partly in order to cultivate and leverage good political relations with the KRG in the hope of enabling Turkey to

- better manage [its efforts to mitigate conflict and reach greater political accommodation with Turkish Kurds](#); and
- [contain potential cross-border influences from conflict-ridden Syria and Iraq](#), including influences from Islamist groups, and influences from Syrian Kurds who have gained a measure of de facto autonomy.

For several months, Turkey appears to have been aiding [the KRG's efforts to export oil through Turkey without the approval of Iraq's central government](#), which U.S. officials have reportedly asserted could further undermine Iraq's already shaky political stability and sovereign unity.

The KRG's sway with Kurdish nationalist groups outside Iraq appears to be limited, partly given its own security and governance challenges—including [Iraqi Kurds' historical legacy of infighting](#)—and the other groups' country-specific conditions.

Possible Iraqi Kurdish Independence and its Potential Implications

In mid-June 2014, KRG peshmerga took control of the [disputed, resource-rich city of Kirkuk](#) as Iraqi army divisions abandoned their positions in the face of a Sunni Arab militant advance spearheaded by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, now calling itself the Islamic State). Iraq's Kurds have long claimed Kirkuk as Kurdish territory and sought to formally integrate it into the KRG. They may sense an opportunity to secure formal control over more territory, and greater rights to export oil independent of Baghdad's control. In early July 2014, [KRG President Massoud Barzani asked the KRG parliament to plan a referendum on independence](#). Obama Administration officials have reportedly privately urged the KRG [to defer such plans](#), while [expressing continual public support for Iraqi unity](#). Despite this U.S. stance, active Kurdish participation in the formation of a new national government is reportedly on hold. KRG leaders strongly oppose a third term for the current Shiite prime minister, Nuri al Maliki, and have [suspended their participation in Iraq's current government](#) in response to Maliki's July 2014 accusations that Kurds were complicit in the June ISIL-led offensive. On July 11, peshmerga reportedly [seized control of two key oil fields near Kirkuk from a state-controlled company](#). The same day, [Maliki replaced Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, a Kurd, with Hussain al Shahrastani, a Shiite](#).

KRG leaders might be using the independence issue as leverage in their disputes with Baghdad, and it is unclear whether and [when](#) a referendum might take place, or what the implications might be for U.S. interests. Some observers anticipate that a more independent Iraqi Kurdish entity (either housed within an Iraqi confederation or as its own state) would be a [stabilizing factor in the region](#), given its prospects for economic self-sufficiency; the KRG's pro-U.S. and -Western outlook; and support from [Israel](#). [Turkey may even acquiesce to the idea](#), which would be a significant reversal—apparently gradually in the making during the past decade—from its previous opposition. Others assert that [a move for formal independence might exacerbate instability in or around Iraq](#), possibly by provoking military responses from Iraq's central government, Sunni and Shiite militias, and neighboring countries ([Iran](#), Syria, maybe even Turkey depending on how security concerns evolve). Additional questions that could affect U.S. perceptions of potential Iraqi Kurdish independence and its possible implications include:

- What precedent might [redrawing a post-World War I Middle Eastern national border](#) have for neighboring states with current or potential separatist movements, [including Kurdish nationalist groups](#)?

- Will [Iraqi Kurds seek arms](#) or other assistance ([including humanitarian assistance for displaced persons from other parts of Iraq](#)) from the United States, and/or oppose their provision to Baghdad?
- How quickly and to what extent could [an independent Iraqi Kurdish entity use its own resources to replace its current share of the oil revenue collected by Iraq's national authorities](#)?