Chapter 1

GEOGRAPHY

BOUNDARIES & POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

The vast Kurdish homeland consists of about 200,000 square miles of territory. Its area is roughly equal to that of France, or of the states of California and New York combined (see Map 1).

Kurdistan straddles the mountainous northern boundaries of the Middle East, separating the region from the former Soviet Union. It resembles an inverted letter V, with the joint pointing in the direction of the Caucasus and the arms toward the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf (Map 2).

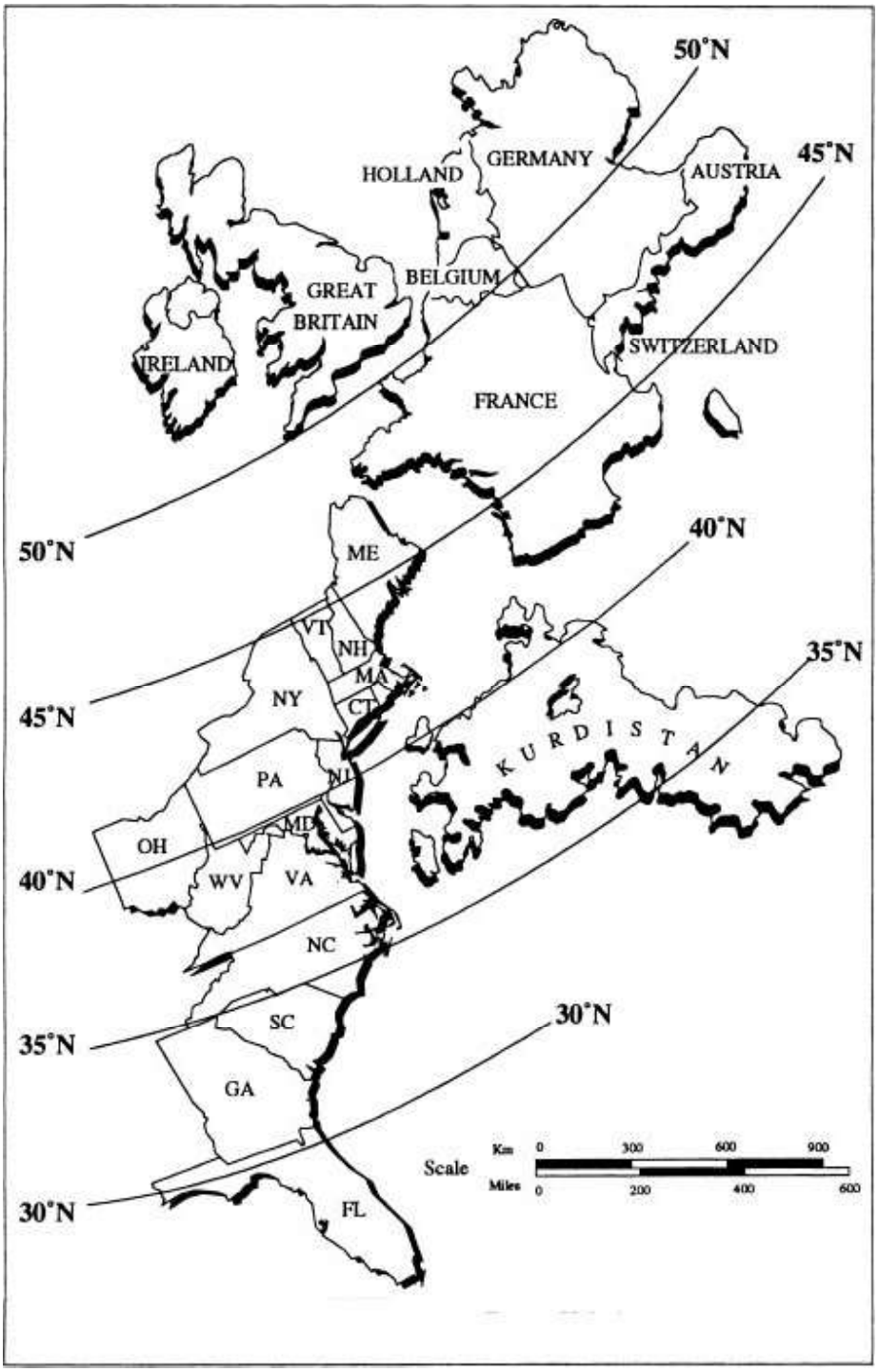
In the absence of an independent state, Kurdistan is defined as the areas in which Kurds constitute an ethnic majority today. Kurdish ethnic domains border strategically on the territories of the three other major ethnic groups of the Middle East: the Arabs to the south, the Persians to the east, and the Turks to the west. In addition to these primary ethnic neighbors, there are many smaller ethnic groups whose territories border those of the Kurds, such as the Georgians (including the Lâz) and the Armenians to the north, the Azeris to the northeast, the Lurs to the southeast, and the Turkmens to the southwest (Map 3).

The range of lands in which Kurdish populations have predominated has, historically, fluctuated. Kurdish ethnic territorial domains have contracted as much as they have expanded, depending on the demographic, historical, and economic circumstances of given regions of Kurdistan (Map 4). A detailed analysis of migrations, deportations, and integration and assimilation is provided under **Human Geography**.

In the north of Kurdistan, Kurds now occupy almost half of what was traditionally the Armenian homeland, that is, the areas immediately around the shores and north of Lake Vân in modern Turkey. On the other hand, from the 9th to the 16th centuries, the western Kurdish lands of Pontus, Cappadocia, Commagene, and eastern Cilicia were gradually forfeited to the Byzantine Greeks, Syrian Aramaeans, and later the Turkmens and Turks. This last trend, however, has begun to reverse itself in the present century.

Vast areas of Kurdistan in the southern Zagros, stretching from the Kirmânshâh region to Shirâz (in Fârs/Pârs/Persis country) and beyond, have been gradually and permanently lost to the combination of the heavy northwestward emigration of Kurds and the ethnic metamorphosis of many Kurds into Lurs and others since the beginning of the 9th century AD. The assimilation process continues today and can, for example, be observed among the Laks, who, although they still speak a Kurdish dialect (see **Laki**) and practice a native Kurdish religion (see **Yârsânism**), have been more strongly associated with the neighboring Lurs than with other Kurds (Map 4). The distinction between the Kurds and their ethnic neighbors remains most blurred in southern Kurdistan in the area where they neighbor the Lurs, that is, on the Hamadân-Kirmânshâh-Ilâm axis.

Since the 16th century, contiguous Kurdistan has been augmented by two large, detached enclaves of (mainly deported) Kurds. The central Anatolian enclave includes the area around the towns of Yunak, Haymâna, and Cihanbeyli/Jihânbeyli, south of the Turkish capital of Ankara (the site of ancient Cappadocia). It extends into the mountainous districts of north-central Anatolia (the site of ancient Pontus), where it is bounded by the towns of Tokat, Yozgat, Çorum, and Âmâsyâ in the Yisilirmâq river basin. The fast-expanding north-central Anatolian segment of the enclave now has more Kurds than the older segment in central Anatolia. It is doubtful that, except for some very small Dimili-speaking pockets, this colony harbors any of the ancient Pontian Kurds who lived here until the Byzantine deportations of the 9th century.



Map 1. The Comparative Size of Western Europe, Eastern United States, and Contiguous Kurdistan.

The north Khurâsân enclave in eastern Iran is centered on the towns of Quchân and Bujnurd and came into existence primarily as a result of deportations and resettlements conducted from the 16th to the 18th centuries in Persia.

Since World War I, Kurdistan has been divided among five sovereign states (see **Modern History**), with the largest portions of Kurdish territory in Turkey (43%), followed by Iran (31%), Iraq (18%), Syria (6%), and the former Soviet Union (2%). These states have at various stages subdivided Kurdistan into a myriad of administrative units and provinces. Only in western Iran has the Kurdish historical name, even though corrupted, been preserved, in the province of "Kordestan," with its capital at Sanandaj (Map 5).

A rather peculiar and confusing by-product of the division of Kurdistan among contending states and geopolitical power blocs (see **Geopolitics**) is its four time zones (five if Khurâsân in Turkmenistan is also counted). The continental United States, 15 times larger than Kurdistan, also has four time zones. Geographically, Kurdistan fits perfectly into one time zone, 3 hours ahead of Greenwich, England. The standard - 3 - hour time zone is defined as the area between 35 and 50 degrees east of Greenwich. With its western and eastern borders at, respectively, 36 and 49 degrees east, Kurdistan should naturally fall into a single time zone.

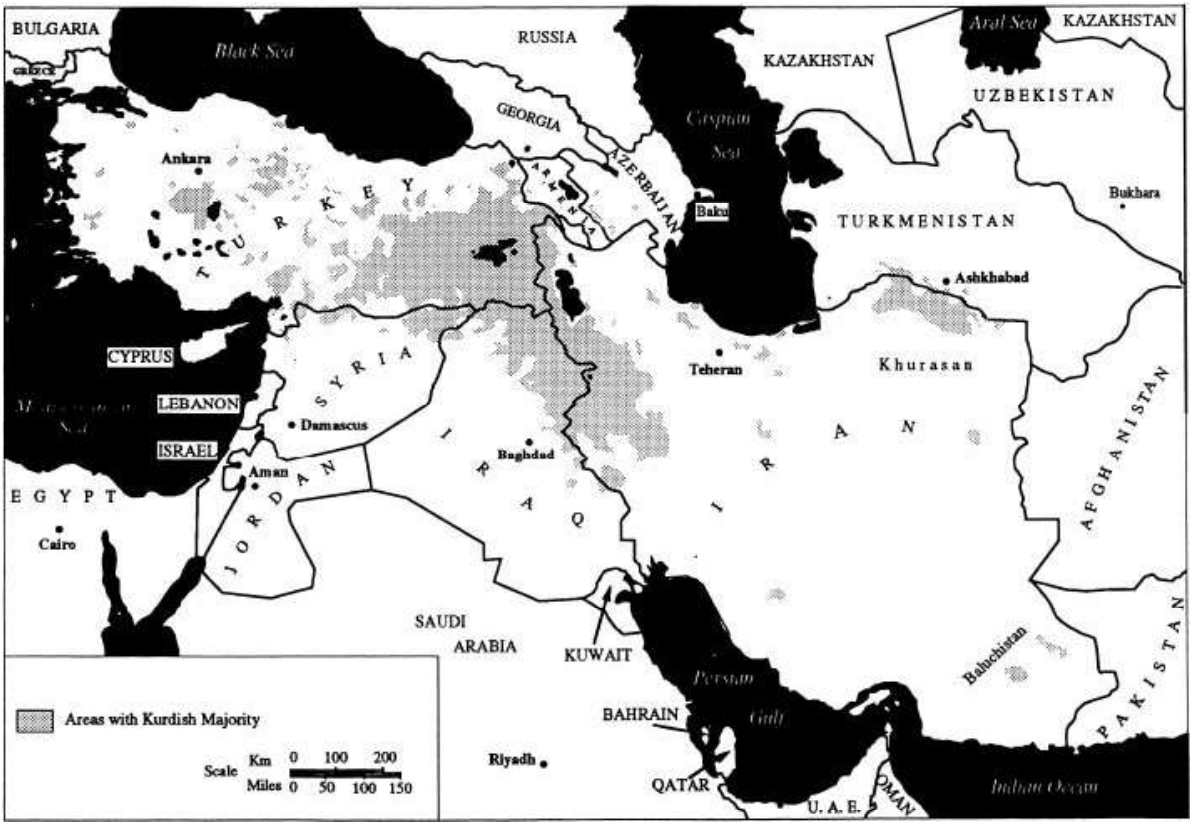
Plotting the Geographical Distribution of Kurds. Like many other aspects of their national existence and identity, the extent of the areas in which Kurds constitute the majority is the subject of dispute. While neighboring ethnic groups, in particular those in a ruling position, have consistently underestimated the extent of areas with a Kurdish majority, the Kurds have often tended to exaggerate them. This problem has naturally affected the works of non-local scholars as well.

Surprisingly, it is not difficult to plot the extent of Kurdish lands. There are plenty of old and new primary and reliable data available for such an attempt.

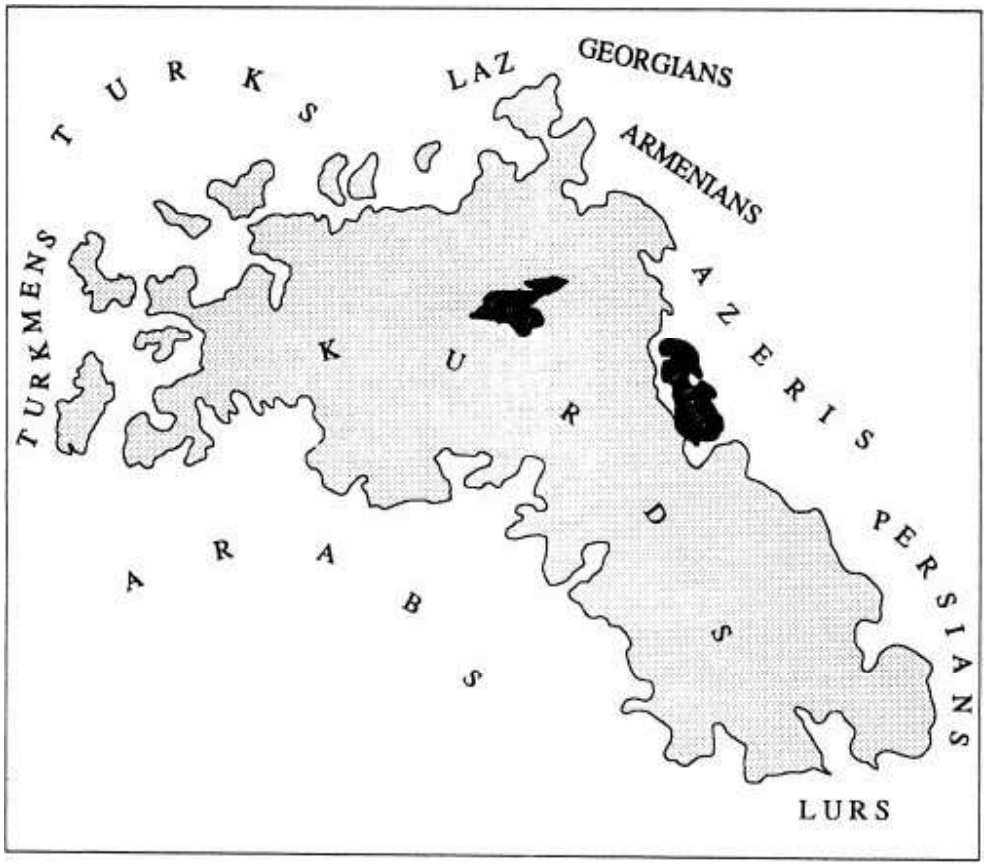
In the last century and the first half of the present, many trustworthy scholars and institutions have provided detailed lists of Kurdish tribes, their locations, distributions, and populations in various corners of Kurdistan (see

Tribes). There were also attempts to plot these statistics and lists on maps: one of the best results was a large, multicolored British Royal Geographical Society ethnic map of this area, entitled *Map of Eastern Turkey in Asia, Syria, and Western Persia (Ethnographical)* (1906), which serendipitously is centered on Kurdistan. Few changes need be made today to this extremely valuable map, except of course to account for the obliteration of the Armenian ethnic element from around Lake Vân and other corners of eastern Anatolia as a result of World War I.

In the course of the 1960s, the Turkish government embarked on a project entitled *Köy Envanter Etüdleri*, or "village inventory studies," which was later aborted and suppressed after 1967. Still, the "inventory" provided a great deal of information on the ethnic composition of Turkey down to the village level. In a data-packed work, Nestmann (in *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, P. Andrews, ed., 1989) provides a convincing ethnic map of Kurdistan in Turkey (excluding the central Anatolian enclave), utilizing the very same village inventory. The data in the inventory closely support the depictions of Anatolia in the 1906 British Royal Geographical Society map mentioned above. The only difference, and a surprising one, is that the inventory depicts the Kurdish ethnic domain as being even larger than on the British map. This may be an inadvertent reflection of the large-scale deportations and resettlements of Kurds within Turkey in 1929–38, and the relatively recent Kurdish demographic revolution (see **Deportations & Forced Resettlements** and **Demography**).



Map 2. Kurdistan in the Context of the Middle East



Map 3. Kurds and Their Ethnic Neighbors

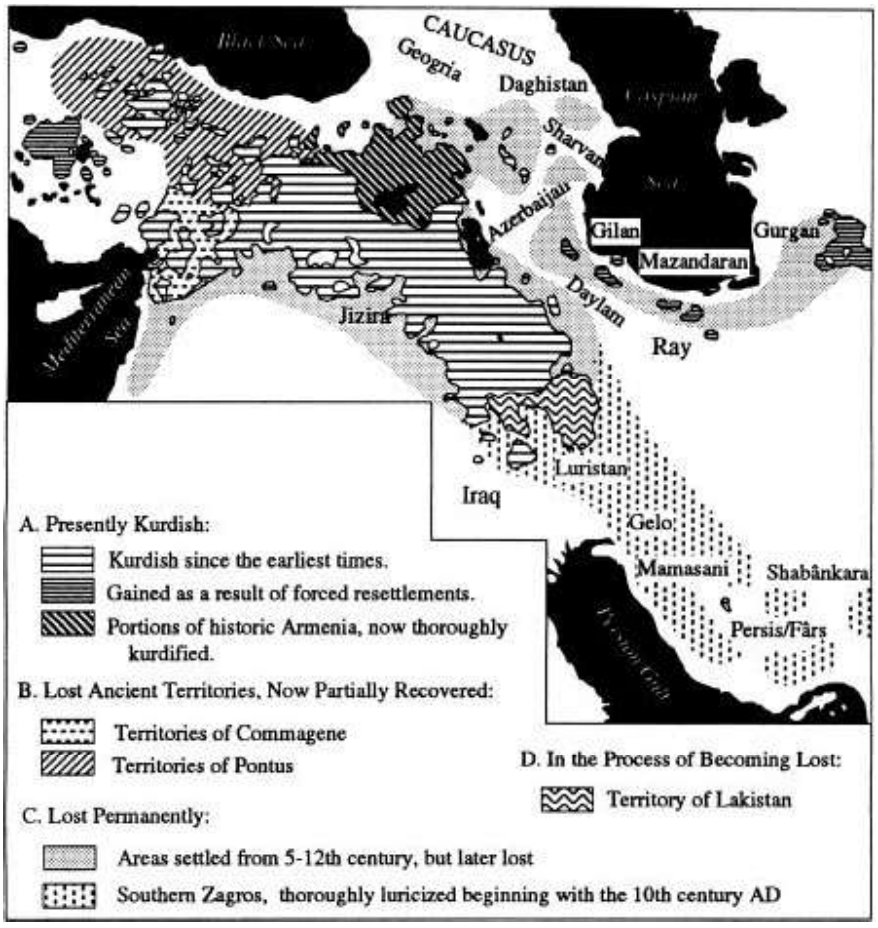
The Iranian Armed Forces Geographical Bureau carried out a similar project in the 1940s, and the results appeared in the ten-volume *Geographical Dictionary of Iran* (A. Razmara, ed., 1949–1951). This was later supplemented by the *Village Gazetteer of Iran* (Iranian Statistical Center, 1968–present). The British colonial government of the Mandate of Iraq and the French in Syria (which included the Antioch district before its transfer to Turkey in 1938) provided sufficient data on the ethnic breakdown of those areas to refine the boundaries and extent of Kurdistan.

Russian maps created in the 1960s, utilizing just such primary data, also demarcate Kurdish regions, and have served ever since as models for others, including the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's published ethnic maps of the region. The best such Soviet material is found in the works of Bruk, *Narody Peredney Azii* (1960), with an accompanying sheet map at 1:5,000,000 scale, and Bruk and Apenchenko, *Atlas Narodov Mira* (1964).

Both of these works also provide population figures for various segments of Kurdistan.

Maps provided for the present study have been based on these reliable sources.

Further Readings and Bibliography: *Map of Eastern Turkey in Asia, Syria, and Western Persia (Ethnographical)* (London: Royal Geographic Society, 1906, updated in 1914), with full-color sheet map at 1:2,000,000 scale; *Ethnographische Karte der Türkei: Vilayet Darstellung der amtlichen Türkischen Statistik 1935* (Berlin: Presse E. Zagner, n.d.), with sheet map at 1:2,500,000 scale; S. I. Bruk and V. S. Apenchenko, *Atlas Narodov Mira* (Moscow: Academy of Science, 1964); S.I. Bruk, *Narody Peredney Azii* (Moscow: Ethnographical Institute, 1960), with sheet map at 1:5,000,000 scale; J. F. Bestor, "The Kurds of Iranian Baluchistan: A Regional Elite," unpublished masters thesis, based on the author's field work (Montreal: McGill University, 1979); W. Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (London: Cass, 1966, reprint of the 1905 original); H.W. Hazard, *Atlas of Islamic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); L. Nestmann, "Die ethnische Differenzierung der Bevölkerung der Osttürkei in ihren sozialen Bezügen," in Peter Andrews et al., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989); *Annual Abstract of Statistics, 1970* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1971); *Statistical Abstract 1973* (Damascus: Government of Syria, 1973); *Population Census 1970* (Damascus: Government of Syria, 1972); Captain Bertram Dickinson. "Journeys in Kurdistan," *Geographical Journal* 35 (1910), with map of Kurdistan at 1:2,000,000 scale; Captain F.R. Maunsell "Kurdistan," *Geographical Journal* 3–2 (1894), with map at 1:3,000,000 scale; Captain F.R. Maunsell "Central Kurdistan," *Geographical Journal* 18–2 (1894), with map at 1:1,000,000 scale; Lieut. Col. J. Shiel, "Notes on a Journey from Tabriz, through Kurdistan via Vân, Bitlis, Se'ert and Erbil, to Suleïmaniyeh, in July and August 1836," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 8 (1838), with map at 1:4,060,000 scale; T.F. Aristova and G.P. Vasil'yeva, "Kurds of the Turkmen SSR," *Central Asian Review* 13–4 (1965).



Map 4. Major Territorial Fluctuations of Kurdish Ethnic Domains in the Past 3000 Years.

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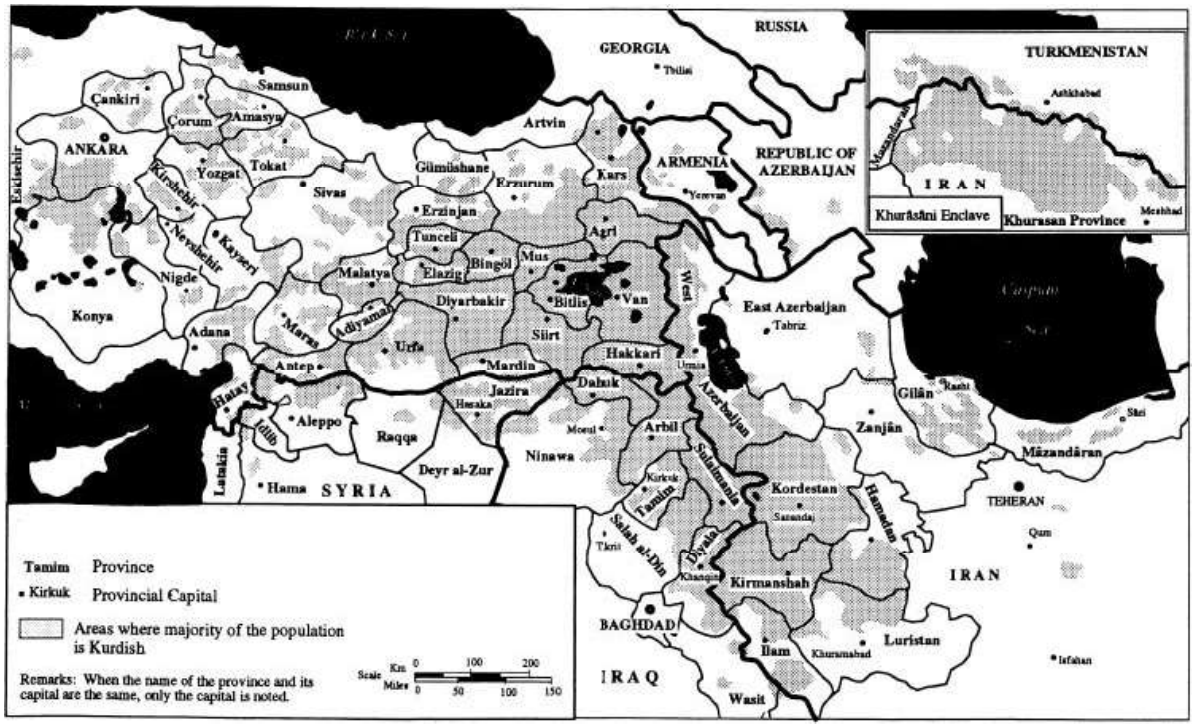


Map 5. Administrative Units of Contemporary Kurdistan

INTERNAL SUBDIVISIONS

Kurdistan can be divided historically, and on a socioeconomic, cultural, and political basis, into five major subdivisions: southern Kurdistan centered historically on the city of Kirmânshâh, central Kurdistan centered on Arbil, eastern Kurdistan centered on Mahâbâd, northern Kurdistan centered on Bâyazid, and western Kurdistan centered on Diyârbakir. The two large, detached Kurdish enclaves in Khurâsân and central Anatolia merit separate treatment (Map 6).

There exist "fossilized" records of two major historical subdivisions of Kurdistan, each following an epoch of ethnic homogenization. They have left their marks in the dialects spoken by the Kurds, their material culture, the elements of their religious beliefs, and their world outlook. Detailed analyses of the elements causing and/or fortifying the contemporary internal subdivisions, as well as the earlier ones, are found in the sections on

Language, Religion, Urbanization & Urban Centers, Historical Migrations, and **Deportations & Forced Resettlements**.

A long episode of southeast-to-northwest migration of the Kurds culturally homogenized Kurdish society by the end of 3rd century AD. This homogeneity was subsequently diluted by a four-centuries-long separation of northern and western Kurdistan in Anatolia, which had come under the jurisdiction and/or influence of the Byzantines, from the rest of Kurdistan in the Muslim domains (see **Medieval History**). This ultimately resulted in the modern north-south split between the Kurmânji dialect groups, with the Greater Zâb river in Iraq marking the current linguistic and old cultural boundaries.

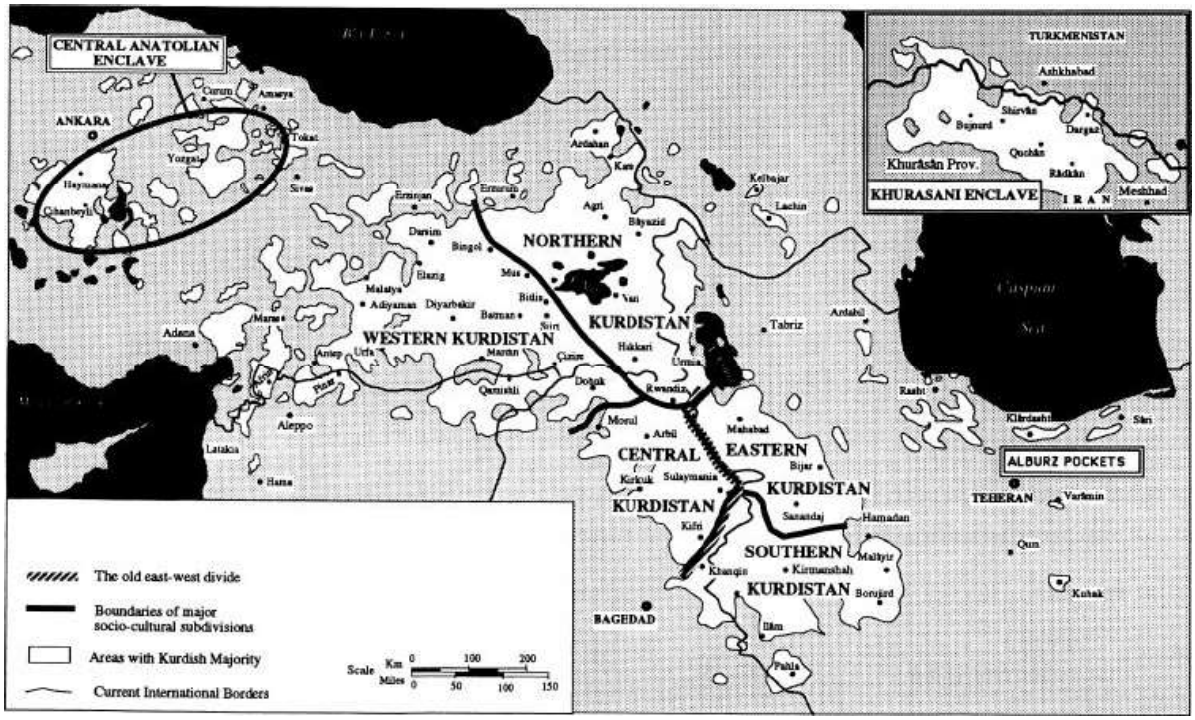
The boundaries drawn between Persian and Ottoman territories in the course of the 16th century proved to be as lasting—and divisive to the Kurds—as the older ones between the Byzantines and Muslims. The result is now a very perceptible east-west divide, which runs from Lake Urmiâ, intersecting the older north-south division, south along the present Iran-Iraq border.

Southern Kurdistan. Southern Kurdistan is now the last domain of the Gurâni-Laki language, and the center of the Yârsân religion. Here, South Kurmânji is the language of a rather small minority, and it may in fact be less common than Persian, a non-native language. The area is urbanized and its people cosmopolitan. Its inhabitants have a strong sense of history, informed primarily by its close contact with Persian culture over the past five centuries.

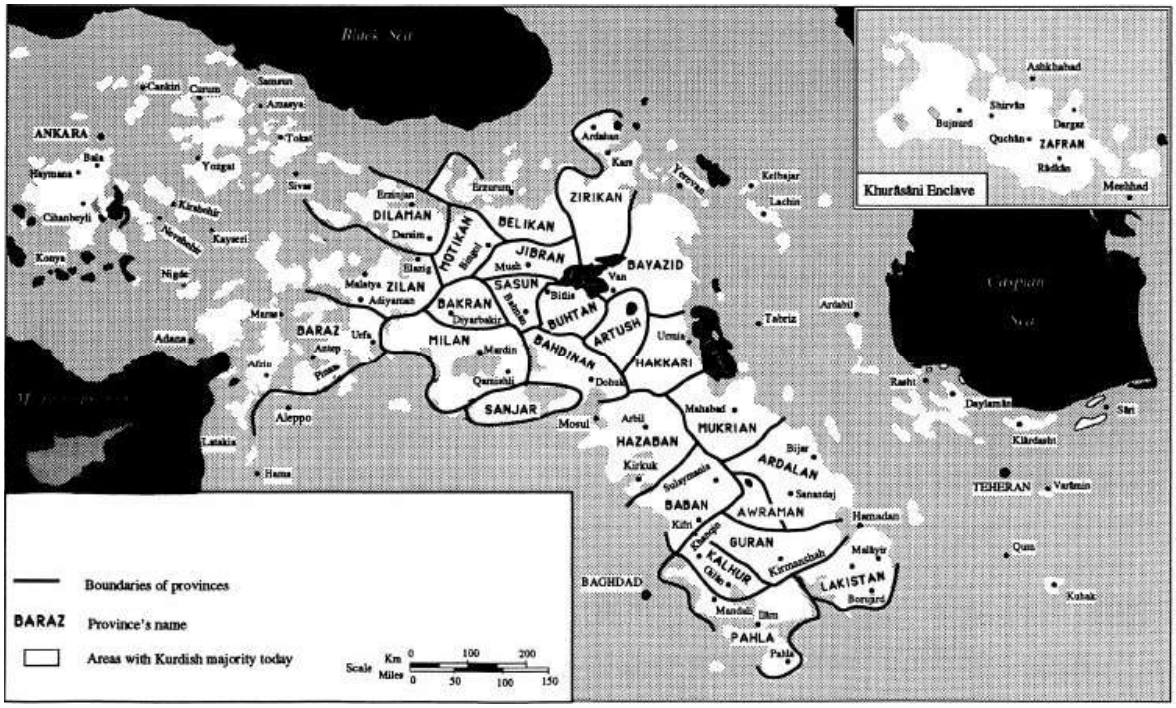
Eastern Kurdistan. Large portions of eastern Kurdistan, particularly south from the Bijâr-Marivân axis, were culturally part of southern Kurdistan until recently. South Kurmânji is now almost the only language there, and Sunni Islam the religion of a vast majority. The country folk, with their nomadic background, are markedly alien to the city people, creating a double-personality. While cities like Sanandaj, Bijâr, and Marivân have the feel and open culture of southern Kurdistan, the countryside is conservative and stark. The failure of many Kurdish political parties formed in this area is attributable to their difficulty in gaining allegiance from both sectors of their local society. The point of cultural inspiration for the area is surely Iran, but the links are not as strong as in southern Kurdistan, particularly with respect to the country people.

Central Kurdistan. Central Kurdistan has always tilted towards Mesopotamia, and its history is connected to that region. Like southern Kurdistan, it has an urban-oriented past, but the climate and terrain are not very much like southern Kurdistan. Central Kurdistan is the least mountainous, and on average, the warmest part of Kurdistan. In fact, the area is often referred to as *garmasir*, or "warm country." Culturally, however, central and southern Kurdistan are in many respects extensions of one another, despite five centuries of Persian political rule over southern Kurdistan. (Prior to the Persian-Ottoman division, and since the beginning of recorded history, southern Kurdistan also showed a cultural tilt towards Mesopotamia.)

While Sunni Islam is the religion of the majority in central Kurdistan, Shi'ite Islam, Yârsânism, Alevism, Yezidism, Christianity, and Judaism are all present. In addition, every major dialect of Kurdish is spoken there, rendering it the one area linking together, culturally as well as geographically, all the subdivisions of Kurdistan.



Map 6. The Seven Major Internal Subdivisions of Kurdistan



Map 7. Native Kurdish Provincial Subdivisions.

Western Kurdistan. Western Kurdistan is Mediterranean in outlook, although geographically it ranges from the Mediterranean coast near Alexandretta to mountain elevations of over 11,000 feet just north of Darsim. Throughout, the climate is benign, agriculture bountiful, and woodlands plentiful. Historically, it has been urban-centered, and its many large cities have always been populous and worldly, looking toward the West and the Mediterranean for inspiration, whether from Antioch, Rome, Byzantium, or Istanbul.

There are about as many followers of Alevism in this subdivision as there are Sunni Muslims. Linguistically, the area is divided between Dimili and North Kurmânji speakers, but since there is presently only a weak correlation between language and religion, the internal differences have not manifested themselves as clear-cut social or cultural divisions.

Western Kurdistan is physically isolated from the rest of Kurdistan, despite its long borders with northern Kurdistan. This is due to the desolate character of northern Kurdistan and the mountains that separate the two regions.

Northern Kurdistan. Northern Kurdistan has the harshest, most inhospitable land and climate of contiguous Kurdistan. Large portions of this subdivision, particularly the shores of Lake Vân and the area north of it, are historical Armenia. They have gotten their almost exclusively Kurdish character only since the end of World War I. The area once had a strong agricultural sector and an urban-based, trade-oriented economy, which was devastated by the past five centuries of wars, deportations, and massacres, as well as through environmental abuse (see **Early Modern History** and **Land & Environment**). The inhabitants are inward-looking, strongly tribal, and the least developed economically and technologically in Kurdistan.

Although the town of Vân is the largest in the area, it is a bit misleading to point to a city as the center or hub of northern Kurdistan. There are no cities of note in the region, but there are numerous city ruins. Northern Kurdistan is the land of many great past cultural centers. Even a smaller town like Bâyazid (modern Dogu Bâyazit) was once a major city and cultural center, to which was born Ahmad Khâni, perhaps the greatest Kurdish poet and the versifier of the national epic *Mem o Zin* (see **Literature**).

Khurâsân. Of the two large detached enclaves of Kurds, the one in northeastern Iran in the province of Khurâsân owes its existence to the deportations from mainly northern and western Kurdistan of the 16th to 18th centuries by the Safavid monarchs. This enclave spills over the Iranian borders into the Republic of Turkmenistan, onto the heights overlooking the Turkmen capital of Ashkhâbâd. This enclave is as large in area as eastern Kurdistan, with half its population. The area is milder, and environmentally less abused, than northern Kurdistan, has a respectable number of cities for its size (including Quchân, Shirvân, and Bujnurd), and rich agriculture. It has also had a far less tumultuous history in the past few centuries than the northern Kurdistan most of its inhabitants left behind. The Khurâsâni Kurdish community preserves a tradition now lost to its original home, as their deportations coincided with the beginning of a sustained cataclysmic military ravaging of northern Kurdistan by the Persian and Ottoman empires. The milder customs and intricate costumes of these Kurds preserve for posterity a glance at what northern Kurdistan might have been, had it been spared this devastation.

Almost all the Kurdish population in Khurâsân therefore speaks North Kurmânji, but centuries of exposure to the Shi'ite Persian community of Khurâsân and the proximity to the Shi'ite holy city of Mashhad have rendered the community a mixture of Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, with a peppering of Alevi adherents.

The Khurâsâni enclave also is home to some smaller communities of Laki-speaking Yârsân Kurds. These were deported here from southern Kurdistan during the reign of the Afshârid monarchs of Persia in the middle of the 18th century. Indeed, Karim Khân, the founder of the Zand dynasty of Persia that succeeded the Afshârids, was himself born to a family of these Lak deportees (of the Zand tribe). After ascending the Peacock Throne, Karim brought most of his people back to their original home. Those who chose to stay behind are the ancestors of the modern Laks of the Khurâsâni enclave and Birjand in Qohistân.

Central Anatolia. The enclave in central and north-central Anatolia in Turkey is a two-lobed entity with two personalities. The southern lobe is on the arid and inhospitable lands to the west of Lake Tuz Gölü (south of Ankara), with the impoverished towns of Cihanbeyli, Yunak, and Haymâna being its major urban settlements. The northern lobe is by contrast on the agriculturally rich and populous highlands in a quadrangle between the towns of Tokat, Yozgat, Çorum, and Âmâsyâ. The cities of Yozgat and Tokat, although not yet having a Kurdish majority, are the focal points of the northern lobe.

The southern lobe owes its existence to the same 16th-18th-century deportations that created the Kurdish community in Khurâsân, while the northern lobe is more the result of a natural and steady migration of Kurds into the region from contiguous Kurdistan. The northern lobe is bustling and dynamic, with the highest overall living standards among Kurds. It is fast expanding today.

The overwhelming majority of the Kurds in the central Anatolian enclave speak North Kurmânji, but Dimili is also spoken by perhaps 10% of the community. Sunni Islam may be the religion of the majority of these Kurds, with Alevism retaining a sizable minority.

Each of the major internal subdivisions delineated above is further subdivided and informally administered by an array of large and small tribal organizations with deep historical roots. In the absence of a sovereign

Kurdish government, the traditional internal subdivisions and large tribal domains may be properly perceived to serve as the national Kurdish substitute for administrative units, similar to the ordinary provincial entities devised for modern state administration. After all, these units have come into existence on the basis of historical and cultural realities, some thousands of years old (see **Tribes**) (Map 7).

General Bibliography

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