

A People Without Their Nation: Lingual and Dialectal Roots of Kurdish Nationalism and Its Failure

By Phillip Chao

There are over 30 million Kurds around the world, most of whom live within the national borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, while others reside in immigrant communities in continental Europe and North America. The Kurdish people were able to survive the rule of the Assyrians, the Sumerians, the Sassanid Empire, the Persians, the Safavid Dynasty, and the Ottomans, while still retaining their own language, rituals, religious beliefs, and cultural identities, despite centuries of foreign rule and many attempts of forced assimilation.¹ Entering the nineteenth and twentieth century, the lingual and cultural distinctiveness of the Kurds has since led to the birth and rise of contemporary Kurdish nationalism, inspiring many attempts across the world to establish an independent Kurdish state. Notable independence movements include the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which set up training camps in the Qandil mountains and launch frequent attacks on the Turkish government, and the Syrian Kurds, who took advantage of the regional power vacuum left by the Syrian civil war and achieved temporary self-rule until their defeat by a Turkish invasion in 2019.² Despite these valiant attempts to organize armed resistance and lobby for western intervention, the establishment of an internationally recognized, independent republic, the ultimate goal of Kurdish nationalists across the world, never seemed to materialize.

As a result of prolonged foreign rule and lack of statehood, the contemporary Kurdish population is sharply divided along lingual, cultural, and religious lines, with contrasting ideologies and political beliefs. The differences in Kurdish dialects and the incohesion among their speakers have formulated due to a combination of historical rifts, geographical disparities, and contemporary political struggles. Such a split reflected the broader cultural and ideological division within the Kurdish diaspora, which contributed to its inability to organize concerted, cross-national efforts towards independence and statehood.

One people, divided: Kurdish dialects and incoherence within nationalist movements

The Kurdish nationalist movement does not share a singular, coherent national language as most Kurds have adopted one of the two major dialects, namely: Northern (Kurmanji) Kurdish, spoken in Turkey, Syria, and Northern Iraq and written in Latin script, and Central (Sorani) Kurdish—used widely in Central and Southern Iraq as well as Iran and written in Arabic-Persian script.³ These differences resulted in the absence of an unified and distinct literary tradition, as most books and records in Kurdish language in the contemporary era were split between

the two local dialects. The Kurds in Turkey, Armenia, Northern Iran, and part of Syria spoke Kurmanji, which itself was the conglomeration of dozens of minor dialects. Influenced by the Latinization of the modern Turkish language, the Kurdish communities in Turkey have adopted the Hawar alphabet to write Kurmanji, which was based on a Latin alphabet. Meanwhile, Kurdish literary communities in Iraq and Iran primarily used Sorani Kurdish for daily communication and administrative tasks, which became standardized based on the modern Arabic alphabet and borrowed a great number of words from Arabic and Persian.⁴ Ethnic Kurds also speak a series of other local dialects, such as the Zazaki language used in Northwestern Iran, which is not part of the Kurdish language tree linguistically, and Southern Kurdish spoken in villages alongside the Iraqi-Iranian border, a dialect that also adopted the Arabic-Persian script and bears many similarities to Sorani. Concerted efforts by the international Kurdish diaspora, European activists, and local political factions led Sorani Kurdish education to thrive, as it was elevated to one of the two official state languages in Iraq.

Although the Kurdish lingual and cultural traditions were purposefully suppressed under the regime of the nationalist Ba'ath party and Saddam Hussein, the recent democratization of the Iraqi Government has allowed for more rights and autonomy of the country's Kurdish inhabitants, who predominantly reside in the Northwestern Mosul region. With the help of flourishing autonomous movements and cultural campaigns, Kurdish youth in Iraq are now encouraged to master their ethnic language. On the other hand, the use of Kurdish language and practices of cultural rituals remain marginalized in today's Turkey. For the past decades, the country's nationalist factions feared the promotion of a unique Kurdish identity and the incorporation of the Kurdish dialect into public education would help strengthen the cause and rally the support base of pro-independence insurgency groups like the PKK. Although the Kurds make up almost one fifth of the country's population, their language still lacks legal standings within the judicial, political, and education system, oftentimes referred to as "unknown sounds" by news media and government officials.⁵ In recent years, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has taken gradual steps to guarantee more rights for the country's minorities, such as allowing the Kurdish dialect to be taught as an elective in public schools or used in broadcasting systems.⁶ Despite these temporary progresses, Erdoğan's reforms are nevertheless a symbolic, political move, as he needs to show his European allies an improved human rights record. His ruling alliance also requires support from the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party to secure its majority in the upcoming election in May.⁷

The current Turkish republic inherited most of its political legitimacy from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who led the nationalist forces to prevail amidst the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and coined “Kemalism”—the mixture of lingual, ethnic, and cultural nationalism and state capitalism.⁸ One of the key pillars of “Kemalism” was the predominance of a single, national language (Turkish) which, due to the secular views held by Atatürk, has since replaced religion as a defining feature of the national identity in Turkey.⁹ The existence of Kurmanji and other Kurdish dialects spoken in the area, thus, stood in the way of a coherent Turkish identity envisioned by nationalists and conservatives. Partly in order to curb the increasing freedom granted to Kurds by the civilian government, the Turkish military, known for its Kemalist affiliation, staged the 1980 coup d’état and overthrew Süleyman Demirel, the democratically elected president, after which minority rights were largely limited and Kurdish language and education became outlawed across the nation.¹⁰ In Iraq, however, ever since the downfall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, the rights and autonomy of the Kurdish minority became safeguarded by the new, democratically elected government.¹¹ Since Kurdish media outlets, language schools, local administrative divisions in Iraq and parts of Iran all adopted Sorani Kurdish, a lingual and cultural rift between Iraqi and Iranian Kurds and Turkish Kurds arose and further deepened the two communities’ geographical isolation. Although the Kurdish regional government in Iraq now lists both Kurmanji and Sorani as official languages and has ordered that both dialects should be taught in schools, most Kurds living in the area are still unable to master both dialects, since it requires years of formal schooling for someone to pick up one of the dialects even if he or she is already proficient in the other.¹² In a way, the proliferation of Sorani education in Iraqi public schools also signaled the growing influences of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Iraqi Kurds in the international Kurdish community, which inevitably sidelined their peers in Turkey and deepened their pre-existing discords over ideologies and methods of achieving independence.

Kurdish youth in the West: an emerging force with new agendas

Aside from Kurds who reside in their ancestral homeland in the Middle East and West Asia, millions of Kurds, escaping persecution and political instability back home, immigrated to Western Europe and North America and settled down in ethnic communities. In the past century, many overseas Kurds had formed cultural organizations and research institutions and used their influences to promote Kurdish language, music, and literature, cultivating an international voice within the independence movement.¹³ As time goes by, while Kurmanji and Sorani Kurdish are still routinely used by elder members of these communities, the younger generation, who were born and raised in an environment where the local language predominates daily life, news media, and pop culture, can now speak the local language more fluently than their

native tongue of Kurdish. Many found it unnecessary to study their traditional language and scripture as they gradually moved out of traditional emigré communities and deviated away from their parent’s coethnic networks, attempting to integrate themselves into the mainstream society. While the loss of Kurdish language among the young generation in the West may be attributed to social, cultural, and economic factors, a similar trend happening in Turkey was rather the result of forced cultural assimilation and political oppression by the nationalist government, who hoped to erase the distinct Kurdish lingual and cultural identity to quell separatist factions and domestic insurgency forces like the PKK.

Instead of an armed resistance strategy adopted by the PKK or the educational reform approach in Iraq, young Kurds residing in European countries often focused their efforts on marginalized populations and sub-sectors within the broader movement. For instance, the Kurdish community in the UK formed non-profit organizations like Make Rojava Green Again, which funds and promotes ecological preservation in the Kurdish ancestral land in Northern Syria, and the Kurdish Women’s Movement, which advocates for the expansion of women’s rights within the Kurdish diaspora.¹⁴ Kurds in Europe and North America also utilize social media to enlist support, mobilize resources, and insinuate nationalist sentiment.¹⁵ Lingually, culturally, and ideologically, the young generation of the Kurdish overseas diaspora formed a distinct force and resorted to tactics that were drastically different from their peers, which nevertheless complicated the unity and cohesion within the cross-national independence movement.

Long road ahead: the uncertain future of Kurdish statehood

Despite valiant efforts by guerilla fighters and activists across the Kurdish homeland and overseas, lingual, cultural, and ideological divisions thwarted the successful formulation of a cohesive nationalist identity and a united independence movement among the Kurdish diaspora. The inconsistencies within the movement, compounded by the group’s vulnerability to foreign interferences and nationalist sentiments in neighboring countries, rendered the hope for independent statehood fruitless after decades of struggles.

Looking forward, education reforms within the Kurdish autonomous region, expansion of cultural infrastructure, and increasing international activism by young immigrants has helped to bring Kurds across the world closer together despite their long-standing differences. Although the goal of establishing an internationally recognized Kurdish republic remains extremely challenging, the tireless efforts by these reform and activist groups may nevertheless pave a solid foundation for the emergence of a cross-national, cross-lingual, and cross-cultural front for seeking more autonomous rights for Kurds in the Middle East, enhancing Kurdish language education at home and abroad, and perhaps, one day, full independence.