

Martin van Bruinessen, “Turkey’s relations with Mosul province and the Kurds, from the late Ottoman period to the rise of ISIS”

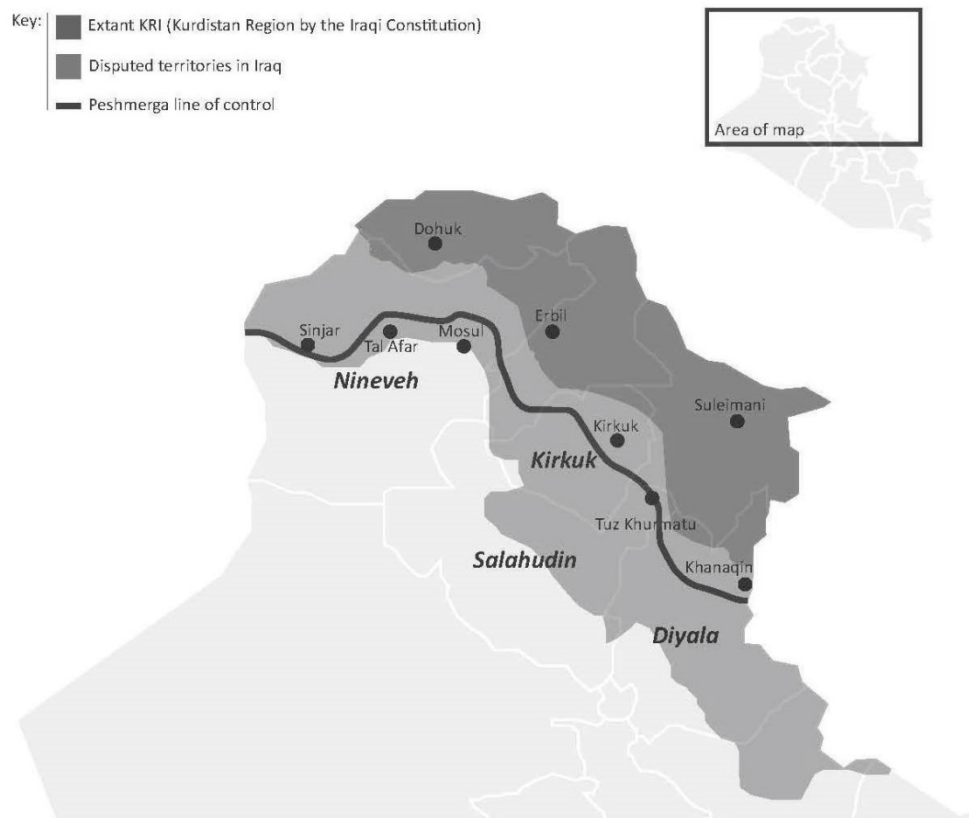
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Turkey's relations with Mosul province and the Kurds, from the late Ottoman period to the rise of ISIS

Martin van Bruinessen

1. The Kurdistan region in northern Iraq, together with the broad contested zone bordering on it to the south and west (which include oil-rich Kirkuk, Khaniqin, Sinjar and the city of Mosul) correspond roughly to the former Ottoman province (Vilayet) of Mosul. Of all the former Ottoman territories lost in the wars of the 19th and early 20th century, Turkey has resented the loss of Mosul even more than all others. Officially, Turkey has renounced on all claims to its former territories, but in practice politicians, bureaucrats and military officers have retained a special interest in Mosul. This increased in importance as the Iraqi Kurdish movement took the form of a guerrilla war in the 1960s, and even more when there emerged a self-governing Kurdish entity independent of Baghdad in the 1990s.



2. The current Republic of Turkey was, until the First World War (1914-18), the central part of the Ottoman Empire, which spread over three continents. As a result of colonial conquests by the French, British and Russian Empires, and the emergence of nationalism among the Christian subject populations, the Empire lost most of its European and African territories in the course of the 19th century. In the First World War, many of the Empire's Arab subjects turned against the Empire and allied themselves with the British or the French. The rise of Arab nationalism was not the only factor in this development, but certainly played a part. Ottoman appeals to Islamic solidarity or a joint Ottoman imperial identity lost their effectiveness among Arabs, as earlier among Greek and Slavic Christian peoples.

Kurds and Kurdistan

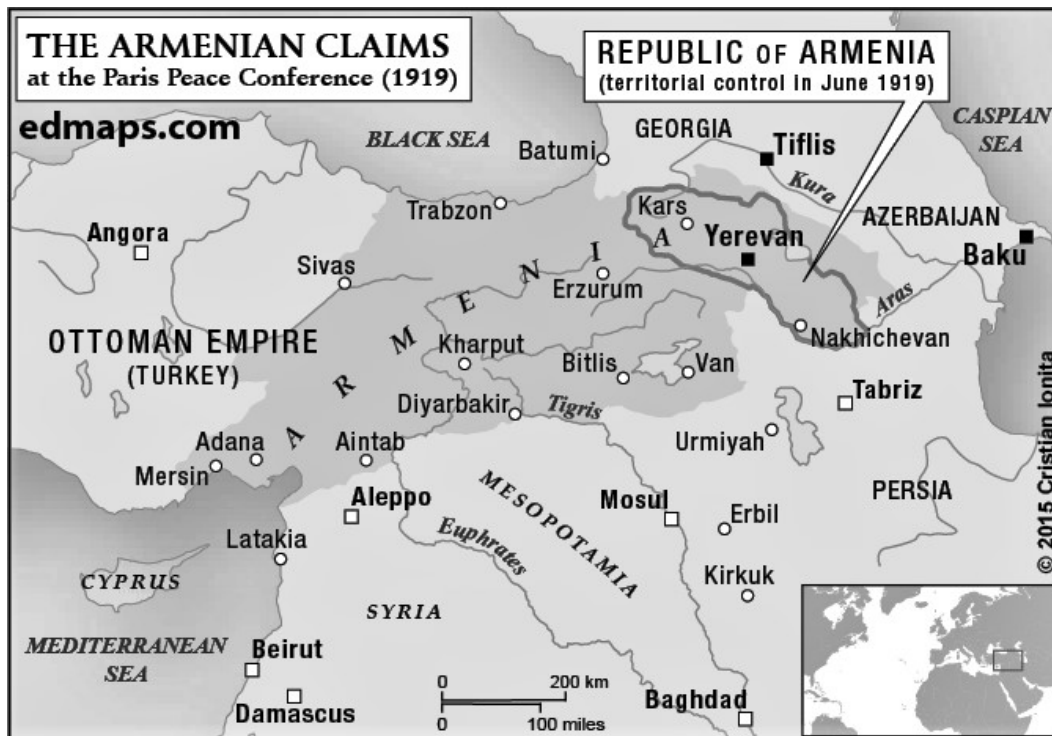
3. Nationalism developed much later among the Kurds, but there had long been a broad awareness of Kurdish ethnic identity. In the 19th century, there were several major Kurdish uprisings, but these were mainly acts of resistance against the modernisation and centralisation of the Empire's administration. (Later Kurdish nationalists, however, have claimed these uprisings as the beginnings of the Kurdish national movement.)

The Kurds inhabited a vast region in the eastern part of the Ottoman Empire and western Iran, where they constituted the majority of the population. This region has long been known as Kurdistan (or in Arabic as Diyar al-Akrad), but never was politically united in a single state. Both in the Ottoman Empire and in Iran, there were provinces named Kurdistan, but these covered only minor parts of the entire geographical Kurdistan.



Areas with Kurdish majority population

4. The Kurds were not the only inhabitants of that region; they always lived together with peoples speaking other languages and adhering to other religions. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the most significant of these peoples were the (Christian) Armenians, among whom nationalism was developing by the turn of the century. The territory claimed by Armenian nationalists as their ancestral homeland and a dreamed-of future Independent Armenia showed a major overlap with Kurdistan.



In the First World War, Turkish mistrust of the Armenians led to massive deportations and mass murder of Armenians, arguably constituting genocide. Many Kurds took active part in massacres of their Armenian neighbours and took their property. Other Kurds helped Armenians by hiding and protecting them. Most survivors of the massacres fled Turkey and settled abroad; many of those remaining behind adopted Muslim Kurdish or Turkish identity. Other Christian minorities – the Syriac or Aramaean Christians of Mardin province and the Assyrians of Hakkari – also suffered massacres and displacement during the war. Jewish communities survived the First World War relatively unscathed but most left the region soon after the establishment of Israel in 1948.

Most of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims but there are considerable non-Sunni minorities among them: Alevis, Yezidis, and Ahl-i Haqq or Kaka'i, together making up at least 20 per cent of the Kurds.

The Mosul plain, which is not part of Kurdistan proper, is perhaps the ethnically and religiously most complex region of the entire Middle East. The city of Mosul is inhabited by Sunni Arabs and Christians of various denominations, with a smaller number of Sunni Kurds and Turcomans. In the plain live Christians, Yezidis, Shabak and Sarli (varieties of Alevi and Kaka'i) and other small tribal groups. Turcomans, some of whom are Sunni and others Shi'i Muslims, are a largely urban population concentrated in a string of towns from Tal Afar and Mosul in the northwest via Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu to Khaniqin and Mandali in the southeast.

Carving up the Ottoman Empire

5. In the First World War, the Ottoman Empire took the unfortunate decision to take part on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary (the Hapsburg Empire) against Russia, Great Britain and France. In the course of the war and in its aftermath, these enemy powers, later joined by the United States of America, concluded a number of remarkable agreements on cutting up the Ottoman Empire and dividing the spoils among them.

* In 1916, the British and French Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Mark Sykes and François Georges Picot, agreed on the division of the eastern part of the empire into 'spheres of influence' after the War.

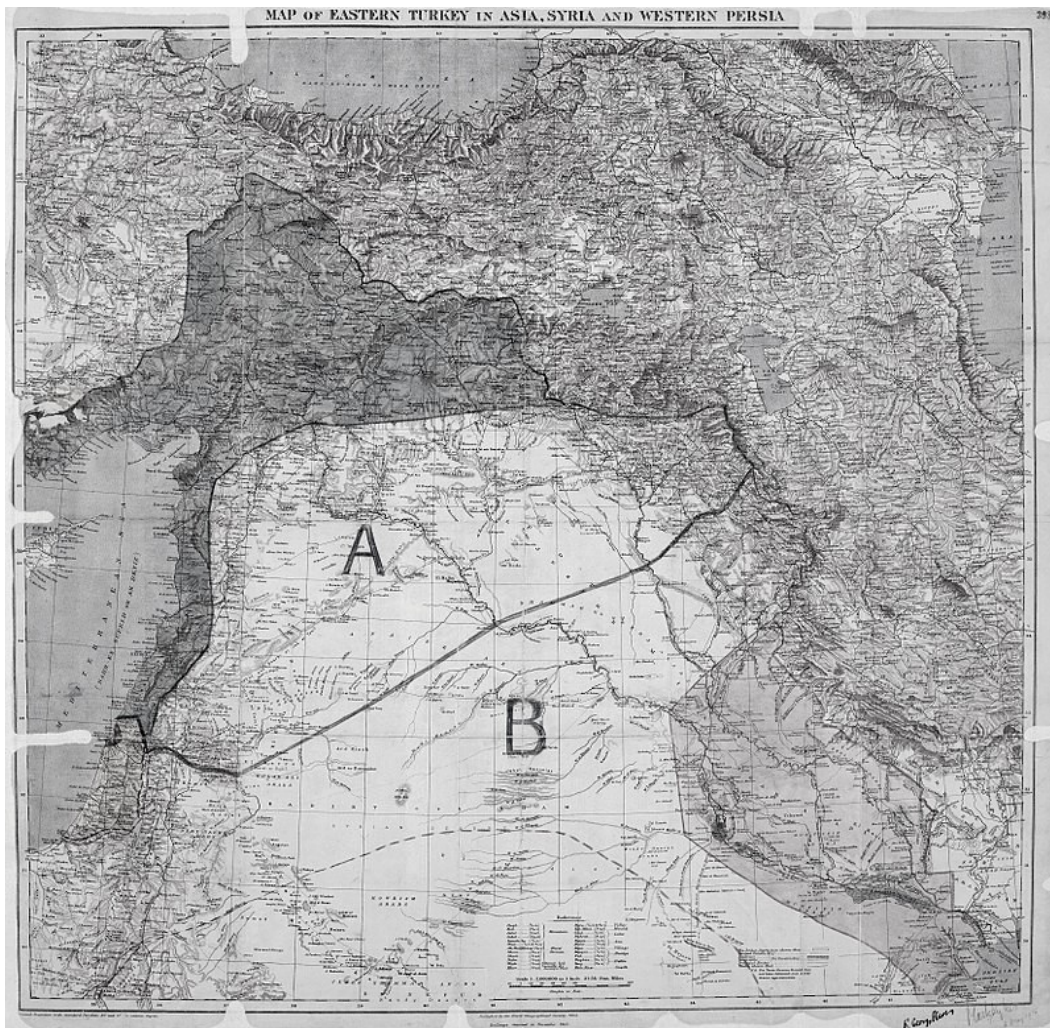
* Briefly after the war, US President Woodrow Wilson formulated "14 Points" that were to serve as main principles for the peace negotiations. Point 12 spoke of "undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development" for the non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman Empire. This was generally understood as endorsing the idea of an independent Armenia.

* The peace negotiations resulted in the Treaty of Sevres (1920), which divided up large chunks of Asia Minor (Anatolia) among the victors of the war, and allowed for only a small Turkish rump state.

This state of affairs led to armed resistance by Turks and Kurds, co-ordinated by former Ottoman generals (Kazim Karabekir, Mustafa Kemal, Ismet). Resistance groups expelled Greek forces from the West and most remaining Armenians from the East. A new Turkish government renegotiated the terms of peace, resulting in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and international recognition of a much larger Turkey, more or less within its current borders – with one or two exceptions. The one region whose status remained contested for several more years was the Vilayet of Mosul, which was claimed by Turkey as well as Britain, whereas parts of the population had started demanding independence.

Sykes-Picot

6. Let us take a closer look at the Sykes-Picot agreement, which has in retrospect become perhaps the most iconic case of imperialist intervention in the Middle East. The two statesmen marked their desired spheres of control and influence on an existing map.



The original map with Sykes' and Picot's claims

France laid claims to the eastern Mediterranean coastal region and a large chunk of Asia Minor to its north and east, where there were many Christian communities with which France long had cultivated relations (marked in blue on the map). Britain foresaw offensives by its Indian army up from the Persian Gulf up into southern Mesopotamia as far as Baghdad (marked in red). In the region in between, mostly inhabited by Arabs, was divided into two “zones of influence” marked A for France and B for Britain, where “independent” Arab states were to be established.

Note that most of the Vilayet of Mosul was allotted to the French zone of influence in the original agreement. (French missionaries had long been present in the city of Mosul, which may have been a reason for France’s interest.) The lines that were ultimately drawn in the Middle Eastern sand to delineate the newly created states of Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq did not coincide with the lines of Sykes and Picot’s map, but that is a minor detail.¹

¹ France gave up its claim on Mosul within weeks after the end of the war. It has often been claimed that this was in exchange for a 25% share in the future oil production in the province, but that may be incorrect. For an overview of the issues involved, see Edward Peter Fitzgerald, 'France's Middle Eastern Ambitions, the Sykes-Picot Negotiations, and the Oil Fields of Mosul, 1915-1918', *The Journal of Modern History* 66(4), 1994, 697-725.

What “Sykes-Picot” stands for in the memories of the people in the region is not the exact boundaries that were drawn on this map, but the very fact of two imperial powers cutting up and dividing the world among themselves. Arab nationalists have felt deprived of a united Arab state as a result of imperialist meddling, and even Kurdish political leaders have blamed the division of Kurdistan and their failure to achieve independence on “Sykes-Picot.”

7. The Treaty of Sèvres yielded another exercise in map-making that bore clear echoes of Sykes-Picot – although the map in this case did not concern Arab lands but Anatolia (Asia Minor). It shows the unrealistic ambitions of the victorious Allies.



Britain was to maintain control of the strategic Straits region which it at that time occupied (the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, connecting the Black Sea and Mediterranean). France was to receive the region in the southeast it had claimed under Sykes Picot. Italy, which had joined the Allies late in the war, was to receive a large slice of south Anatolia. Izmir and its hinterland in west Anatolia were granted to Greece, and a large zone in the east was reserved for an Armenian state, as imagined by Wilson. To the south of Armenia, the possibility of a small Kurdish state was left open.² The carving up of Anatolia notably took no account at all of the wishes of the population. Only the territories granted to Greeks and Armenians had populations that might be willing to fight for their independence – but both

² The Treaty of Sèvres, in Articles 62-64, explicitly mentioned the possibility of an independent Kurdish state but made this conditional on the public expression of the desire for independence by the majority of the population. The text of these articles is reproduced in David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd rev.ed., London: I.B.Tauris, 2004, 464-5.

were probably minorities in those territories. The large French zone also had a significant Armenian population (besides other Christian groups), but the majority of the population were Muslims.

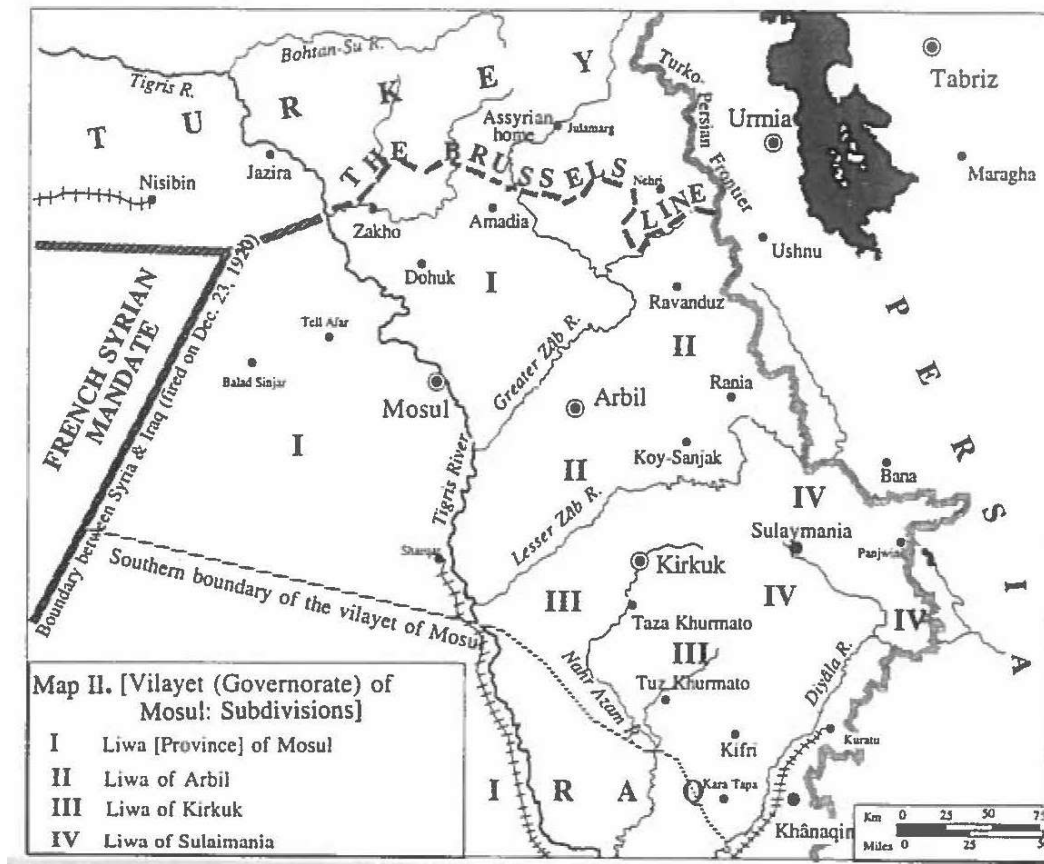
The Treaty of Sèvres was obsolete even before it was signed. All over the country Muslim groups were mobilised to oppose the division of their land by Christian nations. The movement that became known as Turkey's "National Struggle" (Milli Mücadele) or "Liberation Struggle" (Kurtuluş Mücadelesi) was the struggle of Turks and Kurds to retain control of all of Asia Minor and the cleanse it of Greeks and Armenians.

There were by that time small Kurdish nationalist associations, based in Istanbul, which looked hopefully at the possibility of a Kurdish state that the Treaty appeared to promise. But the joint struggle of Kurds and Turks for the liberation of all of Anatolia had a much stronger appeal among the Kurds of East Anatolia. Until 1923, Kurds and Turks remained politically united. The territorial gains of the National Struggle were recognised in that year in the Treaty of Lausanne.

The Mosul Question

8. The Mosul Vilayet, inhabited by Kurds, Turcomans, Arabs and numerous smaller religious and ethnic minorities, did not play much of a role in Turkey's "National Struggle." Some Kurdish chieftains were in communication with Turkish commanders based further north, just like other chieftains cultivated relations with British officers, but that was an aspect of local power rivalries rather than an indication of commitment to the Kemalist cause. One of the Kemalist commanders, Özdemiş, briefly established a base at Rowanduz, from where he attempted to mobilise support for the effort to liberate and unite all regions with a non-Arab Muslim population, but he was not very successful. By the time of the Lausanne conference, the Kurdish-inhabited regions of East and Southeast Anatolia were firmly controlled by the "National Struggle" movement (and most Armenians were expelled), but there was not a clear single power in control of the Mosul Vilayet.

At Lausanne it was therefore decided that the future status of Mosul – inclusion in Turkey, merger with Arab Mesopotamia, or independence – was to be decided in further negotiations between Britain and Turkey or arbitration by the League of Nations. A conference in Brussels led to a provisional northern boundary of Mosul, the "Brussels line" – although Britain wanted a boundary further north, to accommodate the Assyrian Christians, who were originally from districts north of the Brussels line; and Turkey wanted a line further south. Besides the British, the Kingdom of Iraq, established in 1920 and consisting of the Arab parts of Mesopotamia (Baghdad and Basra), also became a major claimant. It wanted to gain complete control of Mosul. Without the fertile, grain-producing regions of Mosul, it was believed that Iraq might not be viable.



The Vilayet of Mosul and the Brussels Line (from Minorsky, 'The Mosul Question')

Turkey adduced various arguments for its claims to Mosul, most importantly the presence of a large Turkic (Turcoman) population in the zone between Kurdistan proper and the Arab-populated part of Mesopotamia.

A League of Nations commission visited the region and found that most of the Kurds would prefer self-rule, but would be rather under Turkish than Arab domination. In 1926 the League of Nations decided to cede Mosul to Iraq, on condition that Kurds were to take part in the administration and the Kurdish language would be officially recognized.³ Neither Turkey nor the Kurds were content with this outcome, and there were several attempts to re-open the Mosul Vilayet file and contest the 1926 decision.

9. The Turkish, British and Iraqi governments propped up their claims to Mosul statistics of the population by ethnicity. The differences between their statistics are remarkable. In the table below, column A gives the statistics presented by the government of Turkey to the

³ Useful overviews of the ethnic, political and legal aspects of the Mosul question are given in: Vladimir F. Minorsky, 'The Mosul question', *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 7, 1994, 21-70 (originally published in 1926); Joachim von Elbe, 'The English-Turkish Conflict of Mosul', *Kurdish Studies* 6(2), 2018, 217-241 (originally published in German in 1929); Mim Kemal Öke, *Musul meselesi kronolojisi (1918-1926)*, İstanbul: Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı, 1987.

League of Nations, apparently based on Ottoman population counts. Column B contains the estimates made by British officers in 1921, and column C the figures presented by the government of Iraq on the basis of its first census. It is perhaps not surprising that Turkey's estimate of the Turkish population is considerably higher than that of the British or Iraqis. More remarkable is the fact that the Iraqi government counted more Kurds and fewer Arabs in Mosul than the British had done.

Mosul Vilayet Population by Ethnicity, According to Turkish, British and Iraqi Sources (c.1923)⁴

| | A | B | C |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Kurds | 263,830 (39.2 %) | 427,720 (54.5 %) | 520,007 (64.9 %) |
| Arabs | 43,210 (6.4 %) | 185,763 (23.7 %) | 166,941 (20.8 %) |
| Turks | 146,960 (21.8 %) | 65,895 (8.4 %) | 38,652 (4.8 %) |
| Christians and Jews | 31,000 (4.6 %) | 62,225 (7.9 %) | 61,336 (7.7 %) |
| Yezidis | 18,000 (2.7 %) | 16,865 (2.1 %) | 11,897 (1.5 %) |
| | | 30,000 (3.8 %) | 26,257 (3.3 %) |
| Total settled population | 503,000 (74.7 %) | ----- | ----- |
| Nomads | 170,000 (25.3 %) | ----- | ----- |
| Total population | 673,000 | 785,468 | 801,000 |

The discrepancies between the Turkish figures on the one hand and the British and Iraqi statistics on the other can in part be explained by two factors. Various tribal groups in the plain of Mosul and around Kirkuk differed in religion and language from the major ethnic groups of the region, and could identify themselves as one or the other depending on circumstances and expediency. And more importantly, considerable numbers of people – probably entire tribes – who were considered as Kurds by the British and the Iraqi government were classified as Turks by Turkey, even before Turkey began denying Kurdish ethnicity altogether.

The perception of the presence of a huge Turcoman population has remained an important factor in the special interest that Turkey has continued to show in the former Mosul Vilayet, as we shall see below.

10. One important economic factor behind the negotiations on the future of Mosul that was rarely publicly mentioned at that time was the presence of huge oil reserves, especially the “super giant oil field” in the district of Kirkuk. The presence of oil in Kirkuk was known well before the First World War, although commercial exploration only began later. Historians disagree about how important the oil of Kirkuk was in Great Britain's Mesopotamian policies and the decision to merge Mosul with Arab Mesopotamia.⁵

⁴ Adapted from Öke, *Musul meselesi kronolojisi*, 157.

⁵ In his *Imperial quest for oil: Iraq 1910-1928*, London: Ithaca Press, 1976, the German historian Helmut Meijcher makes oil the central concern of British policies, but his work has been severely criticised for its selective use of

The Turkish Petroleum Company, which was established in 1912, held a concession for oil exploration in Kirkuk. Shares in this company were owned by the German Bank (25%), Royal Dutch Shell (25%), and the Turkish National Bank (50%). After the war, the Turkish Bank shares were taken over by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and Britain allowed France to acquire the German shares. The Turkish Petroleum Company was renamed Iraqi Petroleum Company, and it remained completely foreign-controlled until 1973, when the Iraqi government nationalised it.

Besides losing in Mosul a large region inhabited by non-Arab Muslims, which it considered as rightfully part of itself, in losing Kirkuk Turkey was deprived of oil. It has some minor oil deposits at Batman, but those are insufficient to meet its energy needs. Not only the Turcoman of Kirkuk but also Kirkuk oil has remained very present in the mind of Turkey's politicians, bureaucrats and policy-makers.

11. By 1926, after the settlement of the Mosul question, an entirely new Middle East was taking shape, with new states and new borders. The new state borders had little to do with social and ethnic realities on the ground, and cut through many tribal territories. Nonetheless, they remained remarkably constant throughout the 20th century, with the sole exceptions of Palestine, where borders were redrawn in 1948 and 1967, a region of northwest Syria (the Sanjak of Alexandrette), which switched to Turkish control in 1938, and Lebanon, which was detached from Syria in 1943 and gained full independence in 1945. During the inter-war years, Britain and France remained in control of the new "Arab" states under a mandate by the League of Nations: Syria, which then still included Lebanon, was under a French mandate, and Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq under a British mandate. Arab and Kurdish nationalists have, especially in retrospect, perceived this settlement as a colonial policy of divide and rule, and have seen the Sykes-Picot agreement as the iconic moment of this divisive policy. The way the former Ottoman lands were carved up certainly lay at the roots of many of the conflicts in the Middle East of the following century. As the title of David Fromkin's book about the period has it, the Allies brought "a peace to end all peace."⁶ It was only with the rise of ISIS in 2014 that one of these borders made by the French and British, the line separating Iraq from Syria, was briefly erased.

sources. In his *Modern History of the Kurds*, David McDowall, who is otherwise sympathetic to Kurdish claims, argues that oil only relatively late became an important consideration. See also Fitzgerald, 'France's Middle Eastern Ambitions, the Sykes-Picot Negotiations, and the Oil Fields of Mosul'.

⁶ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace. The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, New York: Avon Books, 1990.



Kurdistan and the new state boundaries

The new state boundaries divided Kurdistan, separating many people from their relatives. For centuries, there had been Persian and Ottoman parts of Kurdistan, but since the 1920s there were four major parts of Kurdistan, separated by state borders that were increasingly strictly enforced. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria embarked upon nation-building programs, with education in the “national” languages, Turkish, Persian and Arabic (only in Iraq was a certain amount of Kurdish teaching allowed, as one of the conditions for the incorporation of the Mosul Vilayet into Iraq). Turkish Kurds, Iranian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds and Syrian Kurds lived different historical trajectories for most of the 20th century, and each part of Kurdistan gave rise to its own distinctive national movements. The Kurdish nationalist dream of a united and independent Kurdistan, which was first expressed by a handful of intellectuals in the early 20th century and briefly gained a mass following in the 1960s, was never realized.

Flashpoint Kirkuk: oil and ethnic strife

12. The most conflict-prone part of the former Vilayet of Mosul was Kirkuk. The ethnic composition of the population has remained a matter of fierce disagreement among the concerned parties until this day. Turcomans, Arabs and Kurds have considered the city of Kirkuk as rightfully theirs – claims that were no doubt in part inspired by the presence here of the richest oil deposits of the region.

In the early 20th century, the vast majority of the city population consisted of Turcomans,

but there were also a number of Kurdish notable families, and considerable Christian and Jewish minorities. The surrounding countryside was inhabited by Kurdish and Arab tribes as well as various religious and linguistic minority groups.⁷

Development of the oil industry led to rapid urbanisation of Kirkuk; many Kurds as well as Arabs settled in the city as workers in the oil wells or the burgeoning service sector. As result, the demographic balance shifted and ethnic tensions increased. In 1957, only a year before the events that were to dramatically change all of Iraq, the government carried out a census, which yielded the only reliable demographic data that were ever compiled. In the absence of a later census, these figures remained important, even though the demographic balance was soon to be upset even more dramatically by deportations of Kurds and Turcomans and forced migration to Kirkuk of Arabs.⁸

The Population of the city and *liva* (district) of Kirkuk, according to the 1957 census⁹

| | City of Kirkuk | Remainder of the <i>liva</i> | Total <i>liva</i> of Kirkuk | Percentage of total <i>liva</i> population |
|-------------------|----------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Mother tongue | | | | |
| Arabic | 27,127 | 82,493 | 109,620 | 28.2 % |
| Kurdish | 40,047 | 147,546 | 187,593 | 48.2 % |
| Turkish | 45,306 | 38,065 | 83,371 | 21.4 % |
| Chaldaeian/Syrian | 1,509 | 96 | 1,605 | 0.4 % |
| Hebrew (sic!) | 101 | 22 | 123 | 0.03 % |
| Total | 120,402 | 268,437 | 388,829 | |

In 1958, left-leaning young officers carried out a military coup d'état and overthrew the Iraqi monarchy. The new strongman, Abdulkarim Qassem, encouraged the Iraqi Communist Party to organise workers and peasant, and made friendly gestures to the (until then clandestine) Kurdish nationalist movement. The Kurds' legendary warlord, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who had lived in exile in the Soviet Union since 1946, was invited back to Iraq. These developments caused great concern in Turkey, whose government and armed forces were firmly anti-communist and wary of the danger of Kurdish separatism.

⁷ Two British Political Officers have left interesting notes of their observations of conditions in Kirkuk in the 1920s: C. J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs. Politics, travel and research in North-Eastern Iraq, 1919-1925*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957; D.K. Fieldhouse (ed.), *Kurds, Arabs & Britons: the memoirs of Wallace Lyon in Iraq 1918-44*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.

⁸ Discussed at greater length in Martin van Bruinessen, 'Iraq: Kurdish challenges' in Walter Posch (ed.), *Looking into Iraq*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2005, pp. 45-72. Available online at: https://www.academia.edu/2521973/Iraq_Kurdish_challenges.

⁹ Reproduced after Nouri Talabany, *Arabization of the Kirkuk region*, Uppsala: Editions Kurdish Studies Journal, 2001. The census did not ask for ethnicity but mother tongue. Note however that the Christians are not identified by language but by religious denomination. Moreover, the language of the Jews is incorrectly given as "Hebrew" although they spoke an Aramaic dialect. This shows that "mother tongue" was a poorly disguised euphemism for ethnicity. The total included some small groups that were not listed in the rows above, such as speakers of English, Hindi and Persian.

In July 1959, violent clashes broke out in Kirkuk, pitting communist activists and Kurds against conservative Turcomans and Arabs, and leaving more than a hundred dead. Some prominent Turcomans fled to Turkey, where they were warmly received. These events caused a strong nationalist reaction in Turkey, which for many decades was to influence Turkish perceptions of the Iraqi Kurdish movement. Kirkuk, as a threatened Turkish city, and the communist and Kurdish threats remained for decades the most iconic themes of Turkish ultranationalist propaganda.¹⁰

13. The relations between Qassem and the Kurds soon deteriorated. Armed clashes that broke out in 1961 were the onset of a protracted guerrilla war that politicised and polarised the Kurds and destabilised the central government. Qassem was brought down by other officers; military coup was followed by military coup. Alternately fighting and negotiating, the Kurdish movement gained in strength and in March 1970 reached a negotiated settlement with the then ruling Baath government, which promised the Kurds autonomy for the regions with a majority Kurdish population – which by then in the mind of the Kurds should include Kirkuk. The autonomy was to take effect in 1974, by which time the boundaries of the autonomous region should have been established. A census was never carried out, but nonetheless the government embarked on a series of mass deportations in order to change realities on the ground.

In 1972, the Baath regime nationalised the Iraq Petroleum Company (which was then a consortium of British, Dutch, French and American companies). The following year, Iraq signed an agreement with Turkey for the construction of a pipeline that would transport Kirkuk oil, through Southeastern Turkey, to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. This gave Turkey a major stake in the oil of Kirkuk.

The increasing importance of oil as a strategic commodity, soon followed by a dramatic rise in oil prices, was an important factor in the Iraqi regime's determination to maintain full control of Kirkuk and the oil that it declared to be "Arab oil." Tens of thousands of Kurds and smaller numbers of Turcomans were deported from Kirkuk as well as Khaniqin (another oil-rich district near the Iranian border) and Sinjar (strategically located to the west of Mosul, close to the Syrian border). They were replaced by Arab tribesmen brought in mostly from southern Iraq. The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline followed a trajectory bypassing the Kurdish region of Iraq, in an obvious move to prevent Kurdish attempts to gain a degree of control of Kirkuk oil.

¹⁰ When I visited Turkey in 1971, a few months after the right-wing military coup that ushered in an intensified persecution of the Left and the Kurds, I found that the Nationalist Students' Association MTTB posted huge photographs of victims of the 1959 killings in Kirkuk on the streets, with texts denouncing Barzani and the Communists as murderers of Turks.



The Kirkuk Ceyhan pipeline, completed in 1976

The Kurdish insurgency and the emergence of a Kurdish quasi-state in northern Iraq

14. The forced Arabisation of Kirkuk (which had been renamed Ta'mim, "Nationalisation") was one major reason why the Kurdish armed insurgency resumed in 1974. (Another important reason was that Barzani had meanwhile been offered very substantial covert American support via the Shah of Iran.)¹¹ For a brief period, Barzani and his Kurds held control of the most mountainous part of Kurdistan as "liberated areas," but they were highly dependent on logistic support from Iran and military assistance from Israel and the USA.¹² When the Shah reached an agreement with Iraq's Saddam Hussein on a long-standing issue concerning the common border, he withdrew his support from the Kurds, allowing Saddam to regain control of the entire territory of Iraq and impose a very limited form of autonomy.

A low level of guerrilla activity was soon resumed and continued through the late 1970s and 1980s, carried out by two rival parties. In the north, along the Turkish border, the KDP, now led by Mullah Mustafa's sons Idris and Masud Barzani, was active, and in the east, near the Iranian border, the PUK under the leadership of Jalal Talabani. The former party found its strongest support in the northern region of Iraqi Kurdistan known as Badinan, and the latter in the districts of Sulaimani and Kirkuk. In an effort to deny these parties a popular base, the regime evacuated broad zones along the borders and resettled their inhabitants in under close surveillance in "collective towns."

¹¹ The story of the American secret involvement in the 1974-75 uprising, as revealed in an investigation by the US Congress, is told in Otis Pike, *CIA: The Pike Report*, Nottingham: Spokesman Books for the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, 1977.

¹² On the Israeli-Kurdish military co-operation during 1968-75, see Ofra Bengio, 'Surprising ties between Israel and the Kurds', *Middle East Quarterly* 21(3), 2014, Online at: <https://www.meforum.org/3838/israel-kurds>.

15. In the course of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88), the two Kurdish parties nonetheless came to control some limited territories again, in part because the state, in focusing on frontal warfare, delegated control of most of the Kurdish region to tribal militias. From the early 1960s on, much of the struggle against the Kurdish nationalist insurgents had been carried on by such militias, recruited among tribes that were hostile to tribes that took part in the uprising, and armed and paid by the state. In the war years, Kurds could join these militias as an alternative for military service at the front and their number swelled. They were supposed to fight against the nationalist insurgents, but most just kept control of their own tribal territories.¹³

Towards the end of the war, in the spring and summer of 1988, Iraq carried out a series of major operations with chemical weapons against areas that had been under insurgent control, destroyed thousands of villages, and carried off more than 50,000 Kurdish men to be summarily executed and buried in mass graves.¹⁴ Those who managed to escape fled towards the Turkish or Iranian border. Turkey allowed over 60,000 of these refugees to enter its territory – which made a great impact on the public perception of Iraq's Kurdish question.

Two and a half years later, in the spring of 1991, Turkey faced a more massive refugee crisis. In the wake of Saddam Hussein's failed occupation of Kuwait the Kurds had risen up in a massive rebellion, in which the militias took part along with the nationalists and most of the urban population, including that of Kirkuk. The regime proved to be less weakened by the Kuwaiti misadventure than had been believed. Elite troops first brutally suppressed a Shi'i rebellion in the south and then marched towards Kirkuk and Kurdistan. In panic, fearing another chemical attack, almost the entire population fled. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million, converged on the Turkish border. This time Turkey only allowed Turcomans in; the Kurds had to remain in makeshift camps on the border. At Turkey's request, the USA and major European countries intervened to create a "Safe Haven" in northern Iraq to which the refugees could return. The international coalition imposed a no-fly zone that remained in place for the next decade and offered protection from the central government.¹⁵

16. The Kurds established their own, independent administration and parliament, with an uneasy power-sharing arrangement between the two leading parties KDP and PUK. A large part of the Kurdish-inhabited region remained de facto beyond the control of the Iraqi government, and economic and cultural developments rapidly separated it from the rest of Iraq. Although the Turkish political elite found the idea of an independent Kurdish state

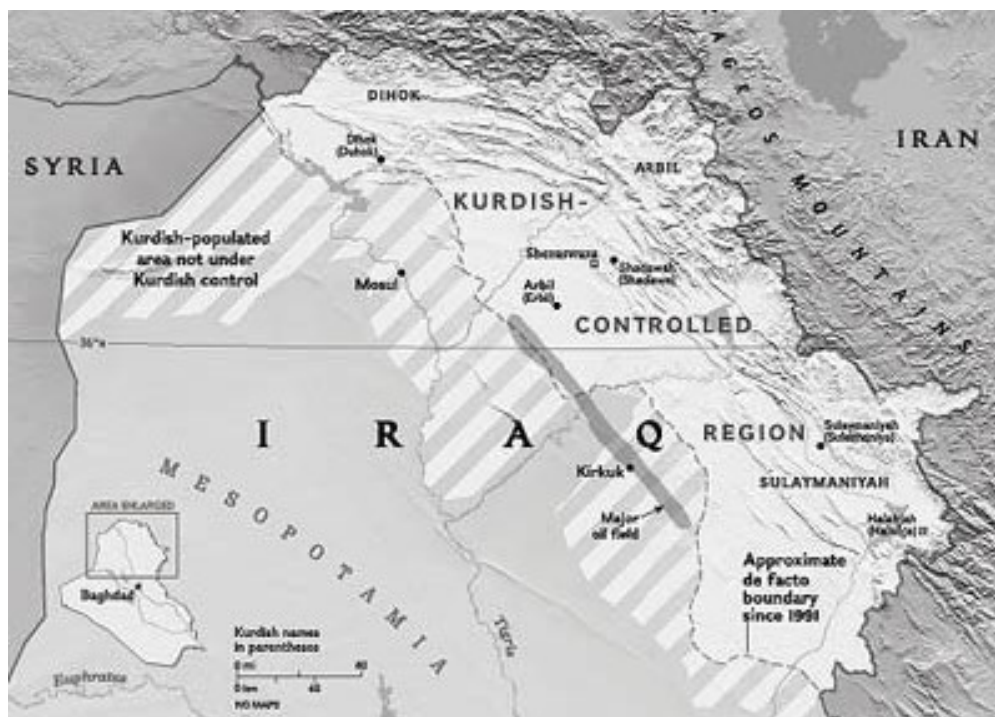
¹³ More on these tribal militias in Martin van Bruinessen, 'Tribes and ethnic identity' in Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour (eds), *The Kurds in a Changing Middle East: History, Politics and Representation*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2019.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch / Middle East, *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. The number of 50,000 men killed is the lowest estimate; the Kurdish authorities insist on much higher numbers, ranging from 100,000 to 180,000.

¹⁵ Helena Cook, *The Safe Haven in Northern Iraq: International Responsibility for Iraqi Kurdistan*, London: Kurdistan Human Rights Project, 1995; Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds of Iraq: Tragedy and Hope*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

absolutely unacceptable, Turkey was the state with which the Kurdish region of Iraq established the closest diplomatic relations and economic ties. Turkish companies invested heavily in the region, trade between the region and eastern Turkey gave a boost to the economy of both, Turkish companies had a virtual monopoly of road building and construction – all of which was paid for by oil that passed through the Kurdish region in a fleet of tankers. The Turkish army repeatedly invaded the region in operations targeting the PKK and established a number permanent bases and control posts. In many respects, the semi-independent Kurdish region was a Kurdish protectorate or semi-colony.

17. Not all of the Kurdish-inhabited districts were included in the Kurdish-controlled region. Notably, and unsurprisingly, Kirkuk remained under central government control. Most of the Kurdish population had fled Kirkuk in 1991 and was only to return there after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. West of Kirkuk was the region of Makhmur, which had a large Kurdish population, including many villagers from Turkish Kurdistan, who fled Turkey in the early 1990s. Further west yet, the plain of Mosul with its ethnically mixed population and the region of Sinjar. To the southeast of Kirkuk, the districts of Kalar, Khaniqin and Mandali remained under government control. These were the regions that after 2003 would become known as the “disputed territories” that the Kurdish parties hoped to include in an autonomous or independent Iraqi Kurdistan.



The Kurdish-controlled region, in the 1990s.

Return of the Mosul Question and renewed obsession with Sykes-Picot

18. Soon after the establishment of the Safe Haven, with its limited degree of international recognition, the search for a stronger basis in international law began. Claiming that the League of Nations had failed to complete its mission in the Mosul Vilayet, when it simply allowed Britain to decide the fate of the region in 1926, a group of Kurdish notables called for reopening the case. Styling themselves the Mosul Vilayet Council and claiming to represent the 75 Kurdish tribes of the Mosul Vilayet, they appealed to the United Nations, as the successor of the League of Nations, to enable an act of self-determination. The members of the council were prominent tribal chieftains and religious leaders, most of them former militia leaders, who now had reached a form of accommodation with the KDP and PUK but who continued to act as rival spokespersons for Kurdish interests. For several years, they lobbied various UN commission, presenting documentation in support of their claim that they had a strong case in international law for self-determination.¹⁶

The Kurds were not the only ones who thought of undoing the decisions taken in 1926. Turkey had always felt that the decision to make the Mosul Vilayet part of Iraq was unfair and violated its vital interests. The developments of 1991 made Turkey again a significant force in the Kurdish region of Iraq, even though its influence was mostly indirect, via the economy, and via regular contacts of Turkish intelligence and Kurdish political leaders. It was only in 2003, in the period leading up to the American invasion of Iraq, that Turkey's Foreign Minister, Yaşar Yakış, publicly stated that he had ordered his staff to study the old Mosul Vilayet documents and investigate whether Turkey could under international law stake a claim to the oil of Kirkuk.¹⁷ There was no follow-up in international legal action, but Turkey remained deeply interested and to some extent involved in the developments following the American invasion.

19. The Turkish parliament decided not to take part in the American attack on Iraq of March 2003, and not to allow the Americans the use of Turkish airspace for their bombing raids. This prevented Turkey from playing a decisive role in Kirkuk and allowed the Iraqi Kurds, the Americans' only local allies, to extend their military presence into the "disputed territories" during the offensive. Small numbers of Turkish intelligence officers and special forces personnel were covertly present in northern Iraq, mainly to carry out Turkey's own war against the PKK. In one instance a group of them were arrested by American and Kurdish military and treated as suspected terrorists, causing a further chill in Turkish-US relations.

20. Kurdish representatives and their political advisers were remarkably successful in influencing the drafting of Iraq's new Constitution, which made Iraq a federal state. The Kurdish Region, more or less within the boundaries of 1991-2003, became a self-governing

¹⁶ See Bruinessen, 'Tribes and ethnic identity'. A large collection of Mosul Vilayet Council documents was long available on the website of their legal representative, www.solami.com, but that is no longer active. For one typical statement by a representative in the UN Human Rights Commission, see 'On the right against displacement', online at <http://cwis.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/mosul.txt>.

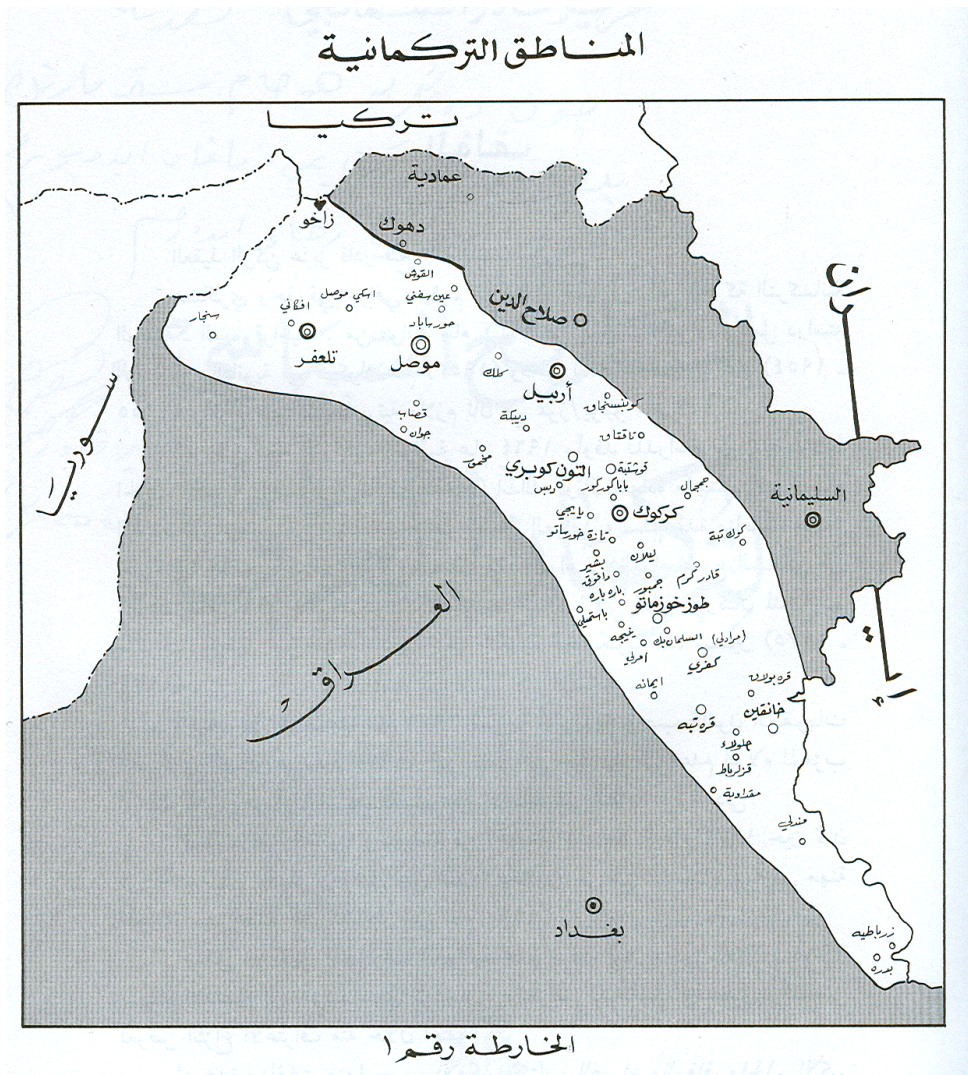
¹⁷ Amberin Zaman, 'Turkey prepares to stake claim in Iraq's oil fields', *Telegraph*, 7 January 2003. Online at <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/185/40511.html>.

entity within the federation, with its own armed forces and control of education, and entitled to a proportional share of the state's oil revenues in addition to the right to exploit "new" oil deposits. The Kurds were also represented in the central government: Jalal Talabani was the first President of post-2003 Iraq, and Masud Barzani's cousin Hoshiyar Zibari the first Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The status of Kirkuk and the other "disputed territories" was to be decided – in what looked like a repetition of the Mosul question – after a census and a referendum among the population. The families who had been deported or forced to flee during the previous decades were allowed to return, and Arabs who had been resettled in Kirkuk under the previous regime would receive compensation for leaving and returning to their place of origin. The KDP and PUK were encouraging Kurdish deportees and displaced persons to return to Kirkuk and were exercising gentle pressure on Arabs to leave.

The Kurdish claims on Kirkuk were not acceptable to the Turcomans, who considered themselves as the only original inhabitants of the city and of a broad zone separating Kurdistan proper from the Arab-inhabited centre and south of Iraq. Especially the Iraqi Turcoman Front, a political movement that had close links with nationalist and military circles in Turkey, made highly exaggerated claims of the numbers of Turcomans. Their imagined homeland of the Turcomans, Turkmen-Eli, shows a large overlap with the Kurds' imagined Kurdistan. They claimed the various tribal minority groups in this zone (Shabak, Sarli, Kaka'i, etc.) to be Turcomans, just like the Kurds claimed them to be Kurdish.

For more than a decade, the situation in Kirkuk remained volatile, with both Kurdish peshmerga and Iraqi army units manning checkpoints and competing for control. This changed with the rise of ISIS in 2014.



Map of the region claimed by Turkoman nationalists (after al-Samanji).¹⁸ Note how little is left for the Kurds. Even the Kurdish capital Erbil is claimed for Turkmen-Eli.

ISIS and after

21. The rise of ISIS, which conquered Mosul in June 2014, changed the map in important respects. ISIS appealed to Sunni Arabs, who were the losers in Post-Saddam Iraq (but it also attracted smaller numbers of Kurds and Turcomans to its ranks). Operating simultaneously in Syria and Iraq, it was the first political movement that successfully, though only briefly wiped out part of the “Sykes-Picot” borders that had defined the Middle East for almost a century. The territory it controlled on both sides of the border covered much of the Sunni Arab territories of Syria as well as Iraq.

¹⁸ Aziz Qadir al-Samanji, *Al-ta'rikh al-siyasi li-Turkman al-'Iraq*. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1999.

In the following months, ISIS conquered Sinjar to the west of Mosul and carried out an offensive towards Kirkuk and Erbil. The Iraqi armed forces in the region fled. Kurdish peshmerga forces, with American air support, succeeded in stopping the assault and gradually pushing ISIS back. By 2015, the Kurds controlled a large part of the “disputed territories” and began to believe that they might be the victors in the dispute over this region, due to the desertion of Iraqi troops.¹⁹

Turkey, which continued to hold a strong interest in Kirkuk, was not in a position to influence the developments significantly. It did play a minor role in the fight against ISIS in Mosul by sending in some troops and strengthening its existing bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. The aim of this military presence was probably not so much to defeat ISIS as to contain the Kurds. Turkey also failed to play the peace-making intermediary role that it could conceivably have played: between Iraq’s central government and the Kurdish regional government, and between Sunni activists and other regional actors. Turkey was widely suspected of harbouring sympathies with, or even colluding with the various jihadist groups active in Syria, including ISIS.

22. Encouraged by these military successes and the apparent weakness of the central government, as well as by the international goodwill the Kurds had gained because of their successful fight against ISIS, the Kurdistan Region Government decided to hold a referendum on independence – not only in the Kurdish region itself but also in Kirkuk and elsewhere in the “disputed territories” (25 September 2017). Iraq’s central government as well as Turkey and Iran made it clear in no uncertain terms that they would not tolerate talk of independence and were firmly opposed to the referendum. Most of the Kurds’ allies had also advised strongly against a referendum, but the Kurds were convinced that their American friends would respect the outcome nonetheless. This appeared to be a grave mistake.²⁰

The referendum asked a simple question: “Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the Region to become an independent state?” The turnout of voters was 72 %, and of all votes cast, 86 % favoured independence, 7 % was against, and another 7 % was blank or invalid. This result confirmed that most Kurds wanted to separate completely from Iraq, but it persuaded none of their friends and allies to give moral support to this demand. Iraq’s central government responded to the referendum by sending its army, reinforced with Shi’ite militias, to the north to re-occupy Kirkuk and re-establish control of the disputed territories. Due to internal divisions among the Kurdish leadership,

¹⁹ Liam Anderson, ‘The disputed territories of Northern Iraq: ISIS and beyond’, in Michael M. Gunter (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 318-328.

²⁰ The Wikipedia article on the referendum gives a detailed account of the preparations for the referendum and the districts outside the KRG that took part, as well as the positions adopted by all relevant political actors, and the responses after the referendum: ‘2017 Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum’, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Iraqi_Kurdistan_independence_referendum.

this offensive was remarkably successful, and the Kurds lost in one stroke all their gains of the past years.

The relations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government, which had long been cordial, also became strained due to the referendum. Both the idea of independence and the attempt to incorporate Kirkuk into the Kurdistan Region were red lines for Turkey. Only four years earlier, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan had warmly welcomed Masud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, to a festive meeting in eastern Turkey and had hinted that Barzani might play a mediating role in the peace process between Turkey's Kurds and the state. By 2015, the peace process was dead, due to internal political reasons but also due to the growing strength of the Kurdish movement in Syria. After the referendum, it appears that Turkey now looks not only upon the Syrian Kurds but also on the Iraqi Kurds and their Kurdistan Region Government as a threat to Turkey's security.

Conclusion

Sykes-Picot and the Mosul Question continue to loom large over political developments in northern Iraq. 2016 was the centenary of the Sykes-Picot agreement, as many Arab and Kurdish politicians and intellectuals noted. It could be believed that ISIS' erasure of the Syrian-Iraqi border presaged the end of the Sykes-Picot division of the Middle East. Barzani also spoke of Sykes-Picot as a state of affairs that needed to be abolished. He appeared not to mean the separation of Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, however, or the separation of both from the larger part of Kurdistan in Turkey, but the incorporation of South Kurdistan into Iraq – in other words, the unsatisfactory conclusion of the Mosul Question.

The disputes over the status of Kirkuk and other contested districts after 2003 were, in fact, quite similar to those during the years of the Mosul question. The multi-ethnic composition of the population was a major source of contention, due to the different political loyalties and aspirations of the major groups, Turcomans, Kurds and Arabs. All three pressed their incompatible claims and divergent estimates of the demographic balance between them. Turkey was an interested party sympathetic to the Turcoman claims and hostile to the idea of Kurdish independence, but its military involvement was limited. The Baghdad government, in spite of its apparent weakness, ended up as the provisional victor. It was supported by the US, which had replaced Britain as the major imperial power and patron of the Baghdad government. Many American officers were sympathetic to the Kurds, as British officers had been in the 1920s, but strategic interests dictated the maintenance of a united Iraq. The conclusion of the dispute, as in 1926, was provisional; the conflicts of interest within the population and between the Baghdad and Erbil governments will remain.

ISIS was defeated militarily, in Mosul first (July 2017) and then in its Syrian capital Raqqa (October 2017). The governments in Baghdad and Damascus appear to be regaining control

of their state territory, and the border between them appears to be restored. The states that owe their origin to the Sykes-Picot agreement will not easily be dissolved.