

World Focus

A Premier Indo-Centric Foreign Affairs Monthly Journal Since 1980
PEER REVIEWED/REFEREED JOURNAL

43rd
Year of
PUBLICATION

Digital Copy at worldfocus.in

ISSN 2230-8458

E-ISSN 2581-5083

U.S. Library of Congress No: 80910345

October 2024

Conflict Peace and Global Politics

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Edited, Owned, Published and Printed by

G. Kishore Babu from B-49 (Ground Floor), Joshi Colony, I.P. Extension, Delhi-110092 at SRB Printo Pack, A-8/1, Jhimil Industrial Area, Delhi-110095

Total number of Pages including Covers 132**Copy Right : World Focus****Our Address:****World Focus Publishing House OPC Pvt. Ltd.****B-49, (Ground Floor) Joshi Colony,****I P Extension, Delhi - 110092, India**

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EDITORIAL

Conflict continues to be the stark reality of international politics ever since the state system emerged on the globe. Rather it was even before as communities interacted and began exchange of goods and services. Contemporary global order is no exception to this rule and is ridden with conflict of different hues. It varies from low intensity conflicts to extremely high intensity ones and to long drawn out ones like between Russia and Ukraine on the one hand, and Israel , Hamas on the other and the India- China border conflict an inherited British Boundary Undefined that was passed on to India. This made scholars with realist approach to international relations to brand the global order as a 'self-help' system and nation-states would continue to amass military strength to secure themselves against each-other.

With advent of technology and the scale of revolution that it has experienced the nature of conflict has also undergone change and the instrumentality of administering conflicts have also witnessed tremendous change. It is the widely prevalent conflict on the globe that led to the evolution of peace science and peace research. Global leadership has developed institutional mechanism to ensure peace-making and peace-building through conflict-management, conflict-mitigation and conflict-transformation. Though the path from conflict to peace is tortuous, complex and long-drawn one. Nevertheless, it is humanitarian and is in the larger interest of men's dignified life.

States as important actors in international system are branded as super power, major power, middle power, emerging power, soft power, smart power and now sharp power. State's role towards conflict management and peace-making are important indicators that characterizes them as one such power. Hence, comprehending the global order amidst prevailing conflicts and continued endeavors for peace has continued to dominate foreign policy choices of nation-states. It is in this backdrop that the present issue of World Focus is being presented to the readers with analytical coverage of some of the major conflicts, endeavors for peace and the understanding of global order.

**New Delhi
October 2024****G. Kishore Babu
Editor**

Conflict, Peace and Global Politics

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The Kurdish Question in 21st Century: A Protracted Armed Conflict in Middle East

Asif Haseen and Monalisa Dash

Kurdish Question: A Brief Overview

In conflict and peace studies, armed conflicts are commonly categorized into two primary types. The first is inter-state conflict, which involves hostilities between two or more sovereign states over specific issues. The second is intra-state conflict, characterized by violence between a legitimate government and a group that opposes the state's authority or ideology, or between rival factions within a single state. The Kurdish conflict exemplifies a hybrid case, manifesting features of both inter-state and intra-state conflict in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

The Kurdish question, one of the most intractable and deeply rooted ethno-political conflicts in the Middle East, is marked by a history of promises broken, autonomy

suppressed, and aspirations for statehood consistently thwarted by the dominant powers. The Kurds, an indigenous ethnic group native to the mountainous regions spanning modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria have long been

caught in the geopolitical machinations of empires and nation-states, often to their detriment.

In the pre-modern period, Kurdish society was largely organized into tribal confederations with varying degrees of autonomy under the suzerainty of the Ottoman and Persian Empires. While the Kurds were recognized as a distinct ethnic group with their own language, culture, and social structures, their autonomy was more nominal than real. The imperial governance

systems employed maintained control through a delicate balance of local autonomy and central

The Kurdish question remains one of the most protracted and complex ethno-political conflicts in the Middle East, involving multiple states—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—and extending beyond national borders. This article explores the multi-faceted nature of the Kurdish conflict, tracing its historical roots, the failed promises of Kurdish autonomy, and the impact of state policies aimed at repression and assimilation. The geopolitical importance of Kurdish regions, particularly their oil-rich areas and strategic locations, has drawn international actors like the United States and Russia into the conflict. Moreover, the involvement of external actors, combined with regional instability following the Arab Spring, has exacerbated Kurdish demands for autonomy and statehood.

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oversight, yet this autonomy was always contingent on the broader imperial interests.¹ The *millet system* of the late Ottoman period, often cited as evidence of Kurdish autonomy, allowed for religious and ethnic communities to govern their affairs to a certain extent but ultimately to reinforce the Ottoman state.¹

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I marked a watershed moment for the Kurds, but not in the way many had hoped. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, which promised the possibility of a Kurdish state, briefly ignited Kurdish aspirations for independence. However, this hope was short-lived. The subsequent Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which established the modern borders of Turkey, not only nullified the provisions for Kurdish autonomy but also set the stage of repression for decades to come.² The Imperial Western powers, focused on stabilizing their own geopolitical interests in the region, abandoned the Kurds to the mercy of the emerging nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—each of which pursued policies of centralization and forceful assimilation, often at the expense of Kurdish identity and political aspirations.

In Turkey, the newly established Republic in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk adopted a strict policy of secular nationalism, which sought to homogenize the population under a singular Turkish identity. This led to the suppression of Kurdish culture, language, and political movements. Several Kurdish uprisings during the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925 and the Dersim Rebellion in 1937-1938, were brutally suppressed by the Turkish state.² These rebellions were not only expressions of Kurdish discontent with the loss of autonomy but also responses to the aggressive Turkification policies imposed by the state. In recent decades, the Turkish-Kurdish long struggle has become more violent and bloody especially after the emergence of PKK or Kurdistan Workers Party which is a Marxist-

Kurdish organization claiming to represent Kurdish voices.

Similarly, in Iraq, the British mandate and subsequent Hashemite monarchy faced recurrent Kurdish insurrections. The most notable Kurdish leader, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, led several revolts against the central government, advocating for Kurdish autonomy. The Iraqi state responded with both military force and promises of limited autonomy, yet these promises were seldom fulfilled, leading to a protracted conflict that continued into the latter half of the 20th century.³ However, following the 2003 Gulf War and the subsequent overthrow of Saddam Hussein by a U.S.-led coalition, the Kurdish population in northern Iraq significantly expanded its autonomy and established a *de facto* Kurdish zone. With the backing of the United States, the Iraqi Kurds formed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a semi-independent entity that operates parallel to the central government in Baghdad. The KRG has developed its own governing structures, including a parliament and a national flag, symbolizing its quasi-state status. Crucially, the KRG exercises control over strategic oil fields, which are essential not only for its economic viability but also for bolstering its political autonomy from Baghdad.

Iran's Kurdish population, concentrated primarily in the northwest of the country, also sought greater autonomy during the early 20th century. However, the centralizing tendencies of the Pahlavi dynasty led to the suppression of Kurdish movements. Notably, the short-lived Republic of Mahabad, established in 1946 with Soviet support, was a rare instance of Kurdish self-rule, but it was swiftly dismantled by Iranian forces following the withdrawal of Soviet troops.⁴ Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Kurdish independent movement has been suppressed under the Shiite theocratic regime of Iran. The division of Kurdish lands and the subsequent policies of

repression by the nation-states in which they resided laid the groundwork for the contemporary Kurdish question. The Kurds, despite being the largest stateless ethnic group in the world, have remained fragmented and their aspirations for statehood unmet. The historical grievances, coupled with the strategic geopolitical significance of Kurdish regions, have made the Kurdish question a persistent source of conflict and instability in the Middle East in the 21st century.

Kurdish Conflict: Significance, Geopolitics and External Actors

The Kurdish conflict is emblematic of the broader geopolitical struggle in the Middle East, where ethnic, sectarian, and national identities intersect with the strategic interests of regional and global powers. The Kurdish regions, spanning across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, are strategically situated at the crossroads of several key geopolitical fault lines. These regions serve as buffers between rival powers and are often the sites of proxy conflicts that exacerbate regional tensions.

The geopolitical significance of Kurdish regions is underscored by their proximity to vital transportation corridors and trade routes. The Kurdish areas in northern Iraq, especially, are crucial for the transport of oil and goods between Iraq, Turkey, and other neighboring countries. Control over these regions provides not only military and strategic advantages but also economic leverage in regional power dynamics. Thus, far from being a mere internal issue, the Kurdish quest for autonomy and statehood has profound implications on the stability of the region and the global order.

The strategic location of Kurdish regions, coupled with the presence of valuable resources like oil, has made the Kurdish issue a persistent and complex challenge in international relations. For instance, in Iraq, the semi-independent KRG controls significant oil reserves in the Kirkuk and Erbil regions, making Kurdish territories economically vital.

The competition over these resources has exacerbated tensions, particularly between the KRG and the central Iraqi government. The control of oil resources has been a major factor in the Kurdish struggle for autonomy, as the revenue from oil exports provides the KRG with substantial economic leverage.⁵

Similarly, in Syria, Kurdish-controlled areas, particularly in the northeast, are strategically located along the Turkish-Syrian border. This region's control is critical for security and trade routes, influencing both local and international dynamics. The presence of oil and agricultural resources further enhances the strategic significance of these territories.⁶ Likewise, for Turkey, the Kurdish-populated southeastern region is not only a battleground for the conflict between the Turkish state and PKK militias, but also a critical area in Turkey's broader strategy to influence the Kurdish question in neighboring Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the involvement of international actors such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union (EU) have significantly influenced the Kurdish conflict, each pursuing its own strategic interests by using the Kurdish fighters as pawns. The U.S. engagement with Kurdish forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has been one of the most significant and contentious aspects of American involvement in the Middle East in recent years. The SDF, which is predominantly composed of Kurdish fighters from the People's Protection Units (YPG), became a crucial ally for the U.S. in the fight against ISIS. This partnership was born out of necessity, as the Kurdish forces proved to be among the most effective ground troops in the campaign to dismantle the territorial control of ISIS in Syria and recapture of ISIS strongholds.⁷

However, the U.S. support for Kurdish forces has been marked by inconsistency and fluctuating commitments, driven by broader geopolitical considerations. While the U.S. provided substantial military assistance to the SDF, including arms, training, and air support,

this backing has often been undercut by the complex web of alliances and interests that characterize the region. The most notable example of this came in October 2019, when President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria which encouraged the Erdogan regime launch a ground military offensive against the PKK in Turkey's southeastern region.⁸

Turkey, which views the Syrian Kurdish group YPG as an extension of the PKK— a designated terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S., and the EU—has long opposed U.S. support for Kurdish forces. The U.S. withdrawal of troops from northern Syria, not only abandoned the Kurds to Turkish aggression but also highlighted the precarious and transactional nature of U.S. alliances in the Middle East. The Kurdish forces, despite their critical role in the fight against ISIS, found themselves vulnerable to Turkish military operations, underscoring the limited and often conditional nature of U.S. support.⁹

Similarly, the Russian engagement with various Kurdish factions in conflict exemplifies its broader geopolitical strategy of exploiting regional conflicts to expand its influence and counter Western hegemony in the Middle East. On one hand, Moscow has supported its long ally the Assad regime, on the other it has also cultivated relationships with Kurdish groups, particularly the SDF. This has allowed Russia to maintain influence over both the Syrian government and Kurdish forces, positioning itself as a key power broker in the conflict. Moscow's engagement with the Kurds, however, is marked by pragmatism rather than ideological alignment. Russia's support for Kurdish autonomy is conditional and aimed to weaken the influence of NATO particularly Turkey, which views the SDF as a threat due to its links with the PKK.¹⁰ Thus, Moscow leveraged its relationship with Kurdish groups to exert pressure on Turkey, a NATO member, by threatening to support Kurdish autonomy if Ankara pursues policies counter to Russian

interests. This tactic underscores Russia's ability to play Kurdish aspirations against the interests of other regional actors, thereby creating a more favorable geopolitical environment for itself as well as the Kurds.¹¹

Russia's engagement with Kurdish factions has undoubtedly bolstered its influence in the region, yet this strategy presents significant challenges. The Kremlin's attempt to balance its support for the Assad regime with its engagement of Kurdish groups risks creating policy contradictions, especially if Kurdish aspirations for autonomy clash with the interests of the Syrian government. Moreover, the Kremlin's role in the Kurdish conflict has complicated its relations with Ankara, although Moscow and Ankara cooperate on various fronts, its support for Kurdish entities strains this partnership, particularly as Ankara views Kurdish movements as a direct threat to its national security. These complexities underscore the delicate and precarious nature of Russia's approach to the Kurdish question, as it navigates competing interests in a region marked by deep-rooted tensions.¹²

Another crucial external player is the EU which navigated the Kurdish conflict with its own broader strategy, geopolitical priorities and constraints. While the EU has offered significant humanitarian aid to Kurdish regions, particularly in Iraq and Syria, its involvement has been primarily confined to non-military support.¹³ This cautious approach is driven by the EU's need to balance its humanitarian commitments with the diplomatic and economic realities of its relationship with Turkey—a key NATO ally and a gatekeeper for migration into Europe.¹⁴ The EU's reluctance to engage more assertively in the Kurdish conflict highlights its strategic caution, particularly given Turkey's critical role in regional stability and its ability to influence EU interests in areas such as trade, security, and migration.¹⁵

Moreover, the EU's restrained approach also reflects its internal divisions and the complexities of forming a cohesive policy in a

region as volatile as the Middle East.¹⁶ While some member states have expressed support for Kurdish aspirations, the EU as a whole has been wary of taking steps that might provoke Turkey or complicate its broader diplomatic objectives.¹⁷ This has resulted in a policy that prioritizes stability and crisis management over deeper engagement, revealing the limitations of the EU's influence in a conflict such as the Kurdish Question where geopolitical stakes are high and alliances are fluid.¹⁸

Assessment of the Arab Spring on the Kurdish Question

The Arab Spring which erupted as a pro-democratic demonstration against dictatorial regimes, emerged as a transformative period in the Middle East in general and for the Kurds in particular as it united the Kurds of the Middle Eastern region. Taking the chaotic environment as an opportune moment, the Kurds in these regions revolted against the government in power. It had a mixed impact on Kurdish political aspirations.

In Syria, the collapse of state authority during the civil war allowed Kurdish groups, particularly the People's Protection Units (YPG), to carve out a degree of autonomy in the northern regions. This power vacuum enabled the YPG, under the Syrian Democratic Forces, to become a crucial ally for the U.S. in the fight against ISIS, thereby gaining international legitimacy. However, owing to the common alliance between the USA and Turkey in NATO, the USA's support for YPG which Turkey pursues as a branch of PKK terrorist organization, remained precarious and Kurds of Syria again lost support.¹⁹

In Iraq, the Arab Spring indirectly emboldened the Kurdish Regional Government by weakening the central government in Baghdad. The KRG took advantage of the turmoil to consolidate control over disputed areas, including oil-rich regions like Kirkuk and ISIS occupied areas of Mosul. The Kurdish push for independence culminated in the 2017

referendum, which, despite overwhelming support among Kurds, triggered a strong military and political response from Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. This episode demonstrated the limits of Kurdish autonomy and the powerful regional forces that oppose Kurdish independence efforts.²⁰

In Turkey, the Arab Spring initially sparked hope among Kurdish activists that regional upheavals could lead to greater rights and autonomy. However, the Turkish government's response was to intensify its crackdown on Kurdish political movements. The collapse of peace talks with the PKK and Ankara's military incursions into northern Syria were driven by fears that Kurdish gains in Syria could embolden similar demands in Turkey. This escalation in violence and repression not only reignited the Kurdish conflict within Turkey but also underscored the broader regional implications of Kurdish political advancements.²¹

In Iran, the Kurdish population watched the Arab Spring with cautious optimism. However, the Iranian government moved swiftly to suppress any signs of unrest in Kurdish regions, fearing that the wave of protests sweeping the Arab world could inspire similar movements among its Kurdish minority. The emergence of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and Iraq has kept the Kurdish issue alive in Iran, but Tehran's repressive measures have so far prevented significant Kurdish mobilization.²²

The Arab Spring, therefore, provided both opportunities and challenges for the Kurds. While it enabled the establishment of autonomous Kurdish regions in Syria and strengthened Kurdish claims in Iraq, it also led to harsher crackdowns in Turkey and Iran. The outcomes of the Arab Spring for the Kurds highlight the complex interplay of local, regional, and international forces that continue to shape the Kurdish question.

Kurdish Question: Human Cost and the Future Ahead

The Kurdish conflict has caused profound human rights violations across the Middle East. The human cost is evident in the widespread displacement, refugee crisis, civilian casualties, and systematic abuses committed by state and non-state actors. In Iraq, the Anfal campaign orchestrated by Saddam Hussein's regime in the late 1980s stands out as one of the most egregious examples, where chemical weapons were used, and tens of thousands of Kurds were killed or disappeared. This campaign has been widely recognized as an act of genocide, drawing condemnation from international human rights organizations.²³ Similar patterns of repression are observable in Turkey, where Kurdish civilians have frequently been caught in the crossfire between Turkish security forces and the PKK, leading to mass displacement and reports of extrajudicial killings.²⁴ In Syria, Kurdish regions have suffered under the dual pressures of ISIS attacks and Turkish military incursions, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.²⁵

International human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have consistently highlighted these abuses, calling for greater protection of Kurdish civilians and accountability for perpetrators. However, their impact has been limited, as geopolitical considerations often outweigh human rights concerns in the policies of powerful states. The complex nature of the Kurdish issue, intertwined with regional security dynamics and the interests of global powers, has made it challenging to address these violations effectively through international mechanisms.²⁶

Looking toward the future, the resolution of the Kurdish conflict presents several potential scenarios, each with distinct implications for regional stability and Kurdish rights. One possibility is the implementation of federalist structures that grant significant autonomy to Kurdish regions within existing

states, such as the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. This model could be expanded to other countries with significant Kurdish populations, providing a framework for self-governance while preserving the territorial integrity of the states involved.²⁷

Diplomacy, international law, and peace building efforts will be critical in shaping the future of the Kurdish question. Engaging in inclusive dialogue that respects Kurdish rights while addressing the legitimate security concerns of states could pave the way for sustainable solutions. International actors, including the United Nations and the European Union, could play a more active role in facilitating negotiations and supporting peace processes. Moreover, integrating Kurdish issues into broader regional diplomacy might help create a more favorable environment for conflict resolution.²⁹

Reconciliation between the Kurds and the central governments of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria remains a complex and challenging process. It will require substantial political will, concessions on both sides, and a commitment to address historical grievances and human rights abuses. Trust-building measures, such as the recognition of Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights, the decentralization of political power, and economic development in Kurdish regions, could help foster a more inclusive and peaceful future.

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