

Briefing Paper

Committee: SPECPOL

Topic: The Question of Political Autonomy for the Kurds

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Summary

The Kurds, are an ethnic group with roughly 30-40 million people, they primarily inhabit regions across modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The Kurds have a distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical identity, yet the Kurds remain the largest stateless ethnic group in the world. Calls for autonomy, federalism, or full independence have persisted for over a century, often met with resistance from central governments concerned about territorial integrity and regional stability.

In recent decades, developments such as the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the emergence of Kurdish self-administration in northern Syria have reignited international debate surrounding Kurdish self-determination. However, these developments have also heightened tensions, particularly with neighbouring states. This committee must examine whether political autonomy for the Kurds can be reconciled with the principles of state sovereignty, regional security, and international law, while also addressing human rights concerns and the aspirations of the Kurdish population.

Definition of Key Terms

Political Autonomy – A system of self-governance in which a region or group exercises legislative, administrative, or cultural control while remaining under the sovereignty of a central state.

Self-Determination – A principle of international law that allows peoples to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

Stateless Nation – An ethnic or cultural group that does not possess a sovereign state of its own.

Federalism – A system of governance in which power is divided between a central authority and constituent political units.

Territorial Integrity – The principle that states should maintain their existing borders and resist secessionist movements.

Background Information

The Kurdish people trace their history back thousands of years in the mountainous regions of the Middle East. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres proposed the possibility of a Kurdish state. However, this was never realised, and

subsequent agreements, most notably the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, divided Kurdish-inhabited lands among newly formed states.

Throughout the 20th century, Kurdish populations faced varying degrees of repression, cultural assimilation, and political exclusion. Armed uprisings and political movements emerged in response, often leading to cycles of violence and instability. The issue gained renewed international attention following the 1991 Gulf War, which led to the creation of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq and eventually the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

More recently, the Syrian Civil War enabled Kurdish groups to establish autonomous administrations in northern Syria. While some international actors viewed Kurdish forces as key partners against extremist groups, others perceived these developments as threats to national unity. As a result, Kurdish autonomy remains highly uneven across the region and deeply contested.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Turkey – Strongly opposes Kurdish autonomy, viewing it as a threat to national unity.

Iraq – Hosts the Kurdistan Regional Government, recognising limited Kurdish autonomy within a federal framework.

Iran – Resists Kurdish political movements and restricts regional autonomy.

Syria – Faces de facto Kurdish self-administration amid ongoing conflict.

United Nations – Addresses Kurdish issues through human rights mechanisms and peacekeeping efforts.

Kurdistan Regional Government – Represents the most developed form of Kurdish self-rule to date.

Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

1920 - Treaty of Sèvres: Proposed the possibility of an independent Kurdish state following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Although it included provisions for a referendum on Kurdish independence, these were never implemented.

1923 - Treaty of Lausanne: Replaced the Treaty of Sèvres and omitted any reference to Kurdish self-determination, effectively dividing Kurdish populations across the newly established states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. This remains a foundational grievance in Kurdish political discourse.

1991 - Gulf War and UN-backed No-Fly Zone: Following uprisings against Saddam Hussein, UN Security Council Resolution 688 led to the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq. This created the conditions for the emergence of a de facto autonomous Kurdish region under international protection.

2005 – Iraqi Constitution: Formally recognised the Kurdistan Regional Government as a federal entity within Iraq. The Constitution acknowledged Kurdish as an official language and granted significant regional powers, though disputes over territory and oil revenues persisted.

2011 – Syrian Civil War: The weakening of central authority enabled Kurdish groups to establish autonomous administrations in northern Syria. These administrations later consolidated under broader self-governance frameworks, though without international legal recognition.

2017 – Kurdish Independence Referendum (Iraq): The Kurdistan Regional Government held a referendum in which a large majority voted in favour of independence. However, the vote was not recognised by Baghdad or the international community, leading to political backlash and a reassertion of federal control over disputed territories such as Kirkuk.

Sept 2017 – KRG Independence Referendum (Iraq): The Kurdistan Region votes overwhelmingly for independence, but Baghdad and most international actors reject the outcome, triggering a sharp rollback of Kurdish negotiating leverage.

Oct 2017 – بغداد reasserts control over disputed areas (incl. Kirkuk): Iraqi federal forces and aligned units retake Kirkuk and other disputed territories, reversing key gains made by the KRG since 2003 and intensifying disputes over territory and energy resources.

Jan–Mar 2018 – Turkey’s “Operation Olive Branch” (Afrin, Syria): Turkey and allied forces seize Afrin from Kurdish-led forces, demonstrating Ankara’s willingness to use direct force to prevent a contiguous Kurdish-controlled belt along its border.

Oct 2019 – Turkey’s “Operation Peace Spring” (NE Syria): Turkey launches a major incursion into northeastern Syria, creating new “buffer” realities, displacing civilians, and fragmenting Kurdish-held territory.

Feb 2022 – Iraq Federal Supreme Court ruling on KRG oil framework: Iraq’s federal court deems the KRG’s 2007 oil and gas law unconstitutional and orders Kurdish authorities to hand over crude supplies, escalating Baghdad–Erbil disputes over legality, contracts, and sovereignty in the energy sector.

Mar 2023 – Iraq halts northern/KRG oil exports via Turkey after arbitration win: Following an international arbitration ruling, Iraq halts exports through the Iraq-Turkey pipeline, freezing a critical revenue stream and intensifying the fiscal and political crisis around Kurdish autonomy and resource control.

Dec 2024 – Fall of Damascus / HTS-led forces capture the capital: UK parliamentary analysis describes HTS as one of the opposition forces that captured Damascus in December 2024; Assad flees, and Syria enters an interim/transitional phase under new authorities.

Jan–Mar 2025 – Consolidation of a transitional state framework under Ahmed al-Sharaa (HTS leadership): Ahmed al-Sharaa becomes interim president and signs a temporary constitutional framework establishing a multi-year transition; this reshapes the “endgame” calculus for Kurdish

governance by re-centring negotiations around reintegration, sovereignty, and the design of the new Syrian state.

Sep 2025 – Baghdad–Erbil deal signals resumption path for Kurdish oil exports: Reuters reports an agreement to resume Kurdish-region exports through the Iraq-Turkey pipeline under SOMO marketing arrangements, showing Baghdad's effort to reassert federal control while offering Erbil a route back to revenue.

Feb 2026 – Major setback for Syrian Kurdish self-rule amid rapid Damascus offensive: Chatham House reports that a rapid offensive by the Damascus government seized northeast Syria from the Kurdish-led SDF, ending the autonomy Kurds had forged during the civil war marking a decisive turning point in Kurdish bargaining power under the post-HTS state consolidation phase.

Since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) emerged as a dominant force in the northwest and ultimately seized state power in late 2024, the trajectory of Kurdish self-rule in Syria has shifted from a relatively stable de-facto autonomy to a highly contested political struggle with profound implications for Kurdish governance, security, and aspirations for recognition. In the immediate post-Assad period, following the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 and subsequent rebel offensive led by HTS that brought it to the forefront of the transitional government, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) found themselves negotiating a very different power landscape. HTS's rapid territorial expansion - which saw it capture major cities such as Aleppo en route to Damascus - consolidated Islamist-led authority over broad swathes of Syria, prompting a recalibration of alliances and governance arrangements across the country.

Under HTS's transitional rule, Kurdish areas that had enjoyed substantial autonomy under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) now face intense diplomatic and military pressure to integrate into the new central state apparatus. A series of negotiations between the transitional government and Kurdish representatives - including integration discussions over the SDF's future role in national security structures - reflect this shift, but outcomes remain deeply contested. Kurdish leaders have publicly rejected elements of the proposed interim constitution on the grounds that it enforces centralised authority and undermines decentralised governance, the core principle of Kurdish political demands.

Simultaneously, government offensives in northeastern Syria have rolled back significant portions of territory once controlled by the SDF. Recent reporting details a rapid military campaign by Syrian government forces to retake Kurdish-held regions, effectively ending the autonomous status that Kurdish political and military structures had developed since the civil war's outbreak. Although a truce has periodically been extended to facilitate prisoner exchanges and coordinate counter-Islamic State operations, Kurdish fears over the erosion of self-rule remain acute.

HTS's ascendance has also complicated external diplomatic dynamics. Historically, Kurdish forces were backed by the United States as key partners against extremist groups, but shifting Western policy toward engaging with the HTS-led transitional authority has weakened that support, leaving the Kurds more diplomatically isolated. Furthermore, Ankara's persistent hostility toward any Kurdish autonomy - rooted in fears of PKK-linked militancy - adds another layer of military and political constraint, pressuring Kurdish actors to concede significant elements of self-administration.

In humanitarian and civil society terms, the situation for Kurds under HTS influence is ambiguous: while broad state-level persecution is not currently documented, the ongoing reintegration process, contested security arrangements, and the retention of Kurdish armed groups outside formal national structures create a climate of legal and political uncertainty.

Overall, since HTS took power, the plight of Syrian Kurds has shifted from relatively protected autonomy within a fragmented civil war to a tenuous and potentially diminishing political position. Kurdish leaders must now navigate negotiations with a central government that prioritises national integration and security, negotiate with external powers that balance counter-extremism goals against territorial sovereignty, and manage internal pressures to preserve elements of self-governance in a context where autonomous governance networks are being dismantled or reconfigured. Delegates should recognise that the Kurdish issue in post-HTS Syria is now defined by integration pressures, contested constitutional visions, and fragile security guarantees rather than the largely uncontested self-administration that existed prior to late 2024.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Efforts to address Kurdish political autonomy have taken multiple forms, with varying degrees of success and failure. In Iraq, the most significant development occurred following the 1991 Gulf War, when international protection measures enabled the emergence of a de facto autonomous Kurdish region. This was later formalised in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which recognised the Kurdistan Regional Government as a federal entity. While this arrangement has granted substantial self-governance, it has failed to resolve disputes over the status of territories such as Kirkuk and the control of natural resources, particularly oil revenues.

In Turkey, successive governments have pursued a combination of military operations and limited cultural reforms. Between 2013 and 2015, peace negotiations between the Turkish state and representatives linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party sought to end decades of conflict. However, the collapse of these talks led to renewed violence and a reversal of earlier reforms, reinforcing Ankara's opposition to any form of territorial autonomy.

In Syria, the outbreak of civil war in 2011 allowed Kurdish groups to establish autonomous administrations in the north of the country. Despite achieving relative stability and international military cooperation against extremist groups, these structures lack formal legal recognition and face opposition from both the Syrian government and neighbouring states.

Possible Solutions

Any workable solution in 2026 must recognise that the Kurdish question now sits within re-consolidating states, not collapsing ones. After the 2017 referendum in Iraq, Baghdad demonstrated that unilateral moves toward independence would be reversed. After the 2024 fall of Damascus and the emergence of a transitional authority under structures previously led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Syrian Kurdish autonomy shifted from de facto wartime self-rule to negotiations over reintegration into a centralised state. The environment is therefore less permissive for separatism and more focused on sovereignty restoration. Solutions must reduce state fears of territorial fragmentation while providing durable guarantees for Kurdish political, cultural, and economic rights.

1. Iraq

In Iraq, the core problem is not recognition of Kurdish identity - it is constitutional ambiguity over oil, territory, and budget authority. Since 2017, the federal government has sought to reassert control over exports and disputed areas such as Kirkuk. The repeated shutdown of Kurdish oil exports has demonstrated that economic leverage is Baghdad's primary tool.

A concrete solution would require three linked reforms:

First, a comprehensive federal hydrocarbons law that clearly defines ownership, export authority, and revenue distribution. Oil produced in the Kurdistan region could continue to be extracted locally but exported through Iraq's national marketing system. In return, a fixed percentage of net revenue would be automatically transferred to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) through a constitutionally protected mechanism. This transfer should not depend on annual political negotiations. Independent auditing bodies could monitor compliance for a defined transition period.

Second, disputed territories should be addressed through joint governance rather than referenda. A shared administrative authority in places such as Kirkuk, composed proportionally of Kurdish, Arab and Turkmen representatives, could prevent demographic manipulation claims. Security patrols in these areas should be jointly staffed by federal and regional forces under unified operational command to prevent parallel armed structures.

Third, the integration of Kurdish security forces into Iraq's broader defence framework must be clarified. Rather than full absorption, a hybrid model could preserve regional internal security units while placing heavy weaponry and external defence under federal authority. This would reassure Baghdad while maintaining Kurdish capacity to manage local stability.

These measures directly address Baghdad's grievance: loss of territorial and fiscal control. At the same time, they preserve meaningful autonomy within Iraq's existing constitutional order.

2. Syria

The Syrian case has changed most dramatically. During the civil war, Kurdish-led administrations governed northeast Syria with limited interference from Damascus. However, since the fall of the Assad government and the consolidation of authority under transitional leadership structures previously associated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the political direction has shifted toward restoring central sovereignty across the country.

A sustainable solution will likely involve decentralisation but not federalisation. The new Syrian constitutional framework could formally recognise Kurdish as a national language and permit elected regional councils with authority over education, healthcare, local taxation and municipal policing. However, defence, foreign policy and border control would remain exclusively central powers.

Security integration is the most sensitive issue. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) cannot realistically remain an independent parallel army. A phased integration model could work as follows: first, a nationwide ceasefire agreement; second, a constitutional settlement guaranteeing administrative rights; third, gradual integration of SDF units into a restructured national army with unified command. During a transitional period, locally recruited internal security forces could continue operating under regional authority but within a national legal framework.

This structure addresses Damascus' core grievance: fragmentation of sovereignty and the existence of armed actors outside central control. It also provides Kurdish communities with formal guarantees against returning to pre-2011 central repression.

3. Turkey

No solution will hold if Turkey perceives Kurdish autonomy in Syria as a direct security threat. Ankara's consistent priority has been preventing PKK-linked militancy along its southern border.

Therefore, any settlement in Syria must include explicit counterterrorism commitments. These could include formal declarations renouncing cross-border militancy, monitored demilitarised buffer zones along sensitive border sections, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms between Ankara and Damascus regarding armed non-state actors. Kurdish forces integrated into Syria's national army would no longer operate as independent border militias, which could significantly reduce Turkish objections.

Without security reassurance for Turkey, even well-designed decentralisation frameworks risk destabilisation through cross-border operations.

4. Iran

In Iran, decentralisation is unlikely to be politically acceptable. Tehran's priority is regime stability and prevention of separatist contagion. However, socioeconomic inequality in Kurdish-majority provinces remains a source of periodic unrest.

A pragmatic approach would focus on economic inclusion: infrastructure investment, cross-border trade facilitation, employment programmes and expanded cultural rights within Iran's existing constitutional framework. International development partnerships could support these initiatives without framing them as autonomy projects.

This reduces grievances without triggering central fears of fragmentation.

5. Regional Coordination Mechanisms

Because Kurdish populations span multiple states, unilateral reforms often create ripple effects. A structured regional dialogue mechanism under UN facilitation could allow Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran to coordinate on border security, refugee flows and minority protection standards. The purpose would not be to impose solutions but to prevent policy miscalculation.

Annual reporting to the General Assembly could promote transparency without infringing on sovereignty. Even limited communication channels can reduce escalation risks.

6. Economic Governance and Resource Transparency

Oil and gas disputes have repeatedly intensified tensions. In both Iraq and Syria, resource-producing regions require clear revenue frameworks. Joint resource management authorities, transparent publication of production data, and earmarked local development funds can prevent economic marginalisation from fuelling political mobilisation.

In Syria's reconstruction phase, international financial support could be linked to inclusive governance benchmarks. This creates incentives for cooperation between central and regional authorities.

Useful Links

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