

Fighting for Kurdistan

Turkey and the lost rights of its Kurds

● *By Jessica Mann*



Aaron Groh

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the gaze of “western Europe” and others in the international community has shifted farther and farther east.

Recently, with the EU beginning to consider Turkey a candidate state for

membership, the university has followed suit.

“The U has devoted more and more resources to this part of the world,” says Eric Weitz, director of the Center for German and European Studies, adding that the university has begun teaching Turkish as a foreign language.

However, with this newfound examination of Turkey come unpleasant revelations of human rights violations in the country’s treatment of its largest ethnic minority group—the Kurds.

Most Kurds, a primarily Sunni Muslim people with a unique language and culture, mainly live in the bordering areas of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Armenia and Syria. This mountainous region of southwest Asia is generally known as Kurdistan (“Land of the

Ads by
Goooooogle
[Kurdish
Music from
Turkey](#)
Music cds
and videos in
Kurdish or by
Kurdish
artists from

Kurds").

Kurds were traditionally sheep and goat herders who lived nomadic lives throughout the Mesopotamian plains and highlands of Turkey and Iran. However, after World War I, the breakup of the Ottoman Empire created a number of new nation-states—but no Kurdistan, forcing Kurds to abandon their seasonal migrations and traditional ways.

The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which created the modern states of Iraq, Syria and Kuwait, was to have included the possibility of a Kurdish state in the region, but this was never implemented. After Kemal Ataturk's overthrow of the Turkish monarchy, Turkey, Iran and Iraq each agreed not to recognize an independent Kurdish state, leaving a nation of people divided by imposed borders.

As a large minority group in several different states, the Kurds “have suffered tremendous human rights violations since the 1950s,” says Barbara Frey, director of the Human Rights Program in the Department for Global Studies. According to a 1999 report by the Washington Post, Kurds received especially harsh treatment in Turkey. The Turkish government tried to deprive them of Kurdish identity by designating them “Mountain Turks,” and outlawed their language. They were also forbidden to wear traditional Kurdish costumes in the cities. Turkey “continues its policy of not recognizing the Kurds as a minority group.”

In Iraq, Kurds have faced violent repression. After the Kurds supported Iran in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein's regime retaliated against them—razing villages and attacking peasants with chemical weapons. After the first Gulf War, the Kurds rebelled again, only to be crushed by Iraqi troops.

As a result of their harsh treatment under Hussein, the Kurds could be seen as the “accidental beneficiaries” of the current Iraq war, says Kani Xulam, founder and director of the American Kurdish Information Network (AKIN) and a well-known Kurdish human rights activist. In an impassioned speech entitled “U.S.-EU Public Policy and Kurdish Social, Economic and Cultural Self-Determination: Implications for Turkey’s

Integration into the European Union” at the Nolte Center on Feb. 9, Xulam spoke about his hopes that Turkish Kurds will one day receive the benefits of freedom and called upon his audience to support their plight.

“Will this Kurd ever see a liberated Kurdistan?” he asked, referring to himself, and adding that 15-20 million Kurds live in what he considers “Turkish-occupied Kurdistan” or the “open-air prison of Turkey.” He alluded to “American ideals” of freedom and made reference to the words of many important American and European political figures, citing their calls for the cultural and linguistic freedom of different ethnic groups.

“Why do I speak better Turkish than Kurdish?” Xulam asked. He called the treatment of the Kurds by the Turkish government “racist” and compared the Kurdish campaign for human rights to the American civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Xulam also stressed the importance of maintaining and preserving Kurdish culture, for fear that it may someday disappear if it continues to be repressed.

“What is at stake is the culture of a nation that has survived thousands of years and has now been relegated to the dustbin of history,” he said. “What I tell you is not a figment of my imagination—it is my reality.”

At the event, Frey said she considered Xulam's speech the "most articulate expression of raw anger that I have heard in a while." In response, she posed several questions to the audience, analyzing the struggles of the Kurds within the functioning of the international state system, with its emphasis on state sovereignty. "How should the international community handle claims of self-determination of large ethnic minorities in sovereign states?" she asked. "The Kurds have also been very active in armed conflict in trying to establish a Kurdish separatist state, giving Turkey some legitimacy [for response]," said Frey.

"These are complex situations. There's not necessarily a right or wrong here but we have to agree on standards for human rights. Instead of self-determination, the international community usually looks at minority rights within existing states," she said.



Human rights are one of the main issues the EU will consider as it examines the possibility of Turkey's accession. According to the EU website, high on the list of requirements are "the continuation of political reforms ... including the respect for democracy and the rule of law, the protection of human rights and guaranteeing the rights of minorities."

The EU has adopted a framework for accession negotiations with Turkey (which the United States supports) as well as a revised Accession Partnership, the purpose of which is "to assist the Turkish authorities in their efforts to meet the accession criteria" for Turkey in 2005. The next meetings of the Turkey-EC Association Council and a Parliamentary Committee consisting of representatives of the Turkish Grand National Assembly and the European Parliament are

scheduled for May 2006.

As EU-Turkey negotiations progress, Xulam continues to ask questions of Turkey's deservedness: "Is cultural genocide what Europe wants on its résumé?"

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