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MEET THE KURDS

When you think of the Middle East, you might imagine palm trees, camels, and deserts. This is not the Middle East of the Kurds. Kurdish country is a land of high mountains and great rivers.

The Kurds live in a region called Kurdistan, which appeared on maps prior to World War I. Much of the region consists of areas in the central and northern Zagros Mountains, the eastern two-thirds of the Taurus and Pontus Mountains, and the northern half of the Amanus Mountains. The 230,000 square miles that make up Kurdistan are stretched across the countries of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, but they have no modern nation of their own. Throughout this century and earlier, Kurds have fought to regain control over their ancestral territories. They want to be a respected nation among nations. The Kurdish independence fighters are called peshmerga (those who face death). As in every conflict the world over, the Kurdish civilians suffer most from the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. Until recently, Kurds in Turkey were not allowed to speak their own language in public or practice their customs.

About half of the world's 25 million to 30 million Kurds live in Turkey. Six million to 7 million live in Iran, 3.5 million to 4 million live in Iraq, and 1.5 million live in Syria. Others are distributed in such countries as Armenia, Germany, Sweden, France, and the United States. Kurdish communities also exist in countries of the former Soviet Union.

The Kurds are an ancient people who trace their history back several thousand years. Like the Highland Scots, who have a clan history, Kurds have a tribal history. Kurds, like Scots, are often fiercely loyal to other members of their tribe. There are almost 800 separate tribes in Kurdistan. One can often identify the tribe from which a Kurd comes by his or her last name.

Even today, the isolation of the mountains has enabled local dynasties and tribes to flourish. In the absence of a central government, many Kurds consider their clan leaders to be their highest source of authority. At times, this has been an obstacle to Kurdish independence, as Kurds have been loyal to local leaders rather than to a Kurdish nation.

The Kurds are an Indo-European people with their own history, language, and culture. They are lovers of music, poetry, and dance. Most Kurdish villages and regions have their own dances. Men and women often dance together. Kurdish musicians play a type of flute (zornah] and drum (dohol]. Kurds are fond of folk legends that tell of heroism, romance, and the love of country.

A love of flowers is reflected in the Kurdish native garb, which is as colorful as their mountain flowers in spring. Men wear fringed turbans, baggy pants, matching jackets, and cummerbunds tied around their waists, most in earth tones. Women wear long dresses of brightly colored fabric and coats often of brocade shot with silver or gold threads, baggy trousers, fancy vests, and headscarfs. To see a Kurdish woman in her home setting is to see a riot of colors.

The mountains have shaped Kurdish history and culture. Kurds are great walkers and mountain climbers. They have learned to survive in the often-harsh conditions of the region. The winters are cold (with heavy snows for up to six months of the year), and earthquakes are not uncommon. Compared with most areas in the Middle East, which are dry, Kurdistan receives a considerable amount of precipitation.

The rain and snow run down the rugged mountainsides spilling onto the lowlands, filling the great Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Some of the grandest gorges in the world are in Kurdish country. Many people think that Gall Ali Beg in central Kurdistan is the grandest of them all.

Most of the major rivers of the Middle East run entirely or nearly entirely in Kurdistan. However, non-Kurds control the flow of most of these rivers. They regulate the waters for agricultural and industrial use and to generate electricity. The area is also known for its natural lakes and exceptionally powerful springs.

Because of the amount of rainfall, the soil of Kurdistan is rich. The mountainsides are covered with blankets of flowers. The flowers make a delicious meal for grazing sheep. In ancient times, Vikings traveled to Kurdistan to buy Kurdish butter because Kurdish sheep ate flowers as they foraged, and the butter had a delightful scent.

Kurds have long used the land for agricultural purposes, and some scholars believe Kurds invented farming. About 28 percent of the region is arable (suitable for farming), and many Kurds use the land to grow wheat and other cereals.

Higher in the mountains, the land is unfit for farming. Here herders pasture their sheep. Some lands, especially those on steep slopes and hard-to-reach plateaus, would not be used if not for these herders. Kurds use sheep and goats for their meat and their wool.

Water and fertile soil are not the only natural resources in Kurdistan. The region has some of the largest oil reserves in the Middle East and in the world. In ancient times, the Zagros and Taurus mountains were known as a great source for many metal ores, including copper, chromium, and iron. Though they are no longer considered a plentiful source of such minerals, the mountains are still mined.

Though today Kurdistan may seem isolated from the rest of the Middle East, at one time it was a center of civilization. It was located along the Silk Road -- the trade route that linked Asia and Europe. Traders passing through would buy beautiful Kurdish rugs and other handicrafts. After the 1500s, however, traders began using sea routes and Kurdistan fell into a long period of decline. In this decade, Kurds are making themselves known once more.

Gorges (GORJ-es) are deep, narrow passages between hills and mountains.

PHOTO (COLOR): The mountains form an imposing background for this Kurdish village in Iraq.

PHOTO (COLOR): INSET: Like this woman, about 15 percent of the world's Kurds live in Iraq.

PHOTO (COLOR): Most of Kurdistan's precipitation falls in the form of snow in the higher elevations.

PHOTO (COLOR): BELOW: A man plays a Kurdish flute.

PHOTO (COLOR): Today, many Kurdish children and their families live in refugee camps.

PHOTO (COLOR): Sheep are the most important livestock in Kurdistan.

PHOTO (COLOR): Many of the Middle East's most important rivers run through Kurdistan.

PHOTO (COLOR): BELOW: A young girl balances a basket of ripe fruit on her head.

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By Vera Saeedpour

Dr. Vera Saeedpour is the director and founder of the Kurdish Library and Museum and is the consulting editor for this issue.

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