

Eoin Sullivan

Brad Clarke

AP Comparative Government

May 26, 2026

Exploited and Abandoned: U.S. and Turkish Policy Toward the Kurds, the Obstacles to Independent Kurdistan, and a Framework for a Free Nation

In October 2019, the United States military withdrew its forces from northeastern Syria with little warning, clearing the path for a Turkish military offensive against the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, the same soldiers the United States had spent five years arming and training to defeat the Islamic State. The Kurds who had lost over ten thousand fighters in that campaign suddenly found themselves abandoned by the ally whose strategic goals they had served. This moment does not stand alone. It was the latest chapter in a long history of the United States and Turkey using the Kurdish military as a tool, then withdrawing support when geopolitical winds shifted. It is a pattern that has repeated itself across decades and across administrations of both parties, and it has left one of the world's most significant stateless populations without the legal protections or political recognition their numbers and their sacrifices would seem to demand. The Kurdish people are among the largest ethnic groups in the world without a sovereign state of their own. Spread across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, their population is estimated around forty million people, making them the world's largest stateless ethnic group (Shamim, Al Jazeera, 2026). The United States, as the dominant outside power in the Middle East for the past eighty years, bears particular responsibility for this outcome, not because it created the Kurdish condition, but because it has possessed the tools to change it and has consistently chosen not to do so. Turkey's relationship with its Kurdish population is equally contradictory and arguably

more consequential, given that Turkey is home to more Kurds than any other country. For decades, the State Department and Pentagon have been slow to recognize partner policy pivots, and Turkey itself has transformed from a force of regional stability and active NATO cooperator into something far more ambiguous. They are a state whose relationship with its own Kurdish minority has bounced between suppression, and failed peace negotiations. That transformation demands a rethinking of American assumptions about what Turkey is, what the Kurds represent, and what a coherent joint policy might actually look like. The United States and Turkey have each exploited Kurdish military and political utility while denying Kurds the legal protections, political representation, and international recognition of a united nation. This paper argues that a jointly-negotiated independent nation, based on the founding of the Israeli state in 1948, offers the most viable path toward Kurdish political autonomy, while dealing with the complications of NATO alliances, geography, and the fragmented multi-state nature of Kurdish identity that have historically made independent statehood unachievable. To make that argument, this paper proceeds in five parts: a historical account of how Kurdish statelessness came to be and how the United States became entangled in it; an assessment of the current landscape across the four regions of Kurdish population; an analysis of the obstacles that have blocked independent statehood; a policy framework for what a more coherent U.S.-Turkish approach would look like; and a response to the most significant counterarguments that framework will face.

To understand the Kurdish political condition today, one must begin in the aftermath of World War One, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the great powers of Europe gathered to redraw the map of the region. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, negotiated between the Allied powers and the Ottoman government, included provisions for a Kurdish autonomous zone in what is now southeastern Turkey, with the possibility of independence if the Kurdish population

demonstrated its desire for it and if the League of Nations deemed it capable of self-governance. For the first time in modern history, the Kurdish people had an internationally recognized path toward political self-determination. That path was closed three years later. The rise of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Turkish nationalist movement produced a new treaty at Lausanne in 1923 that replaced Sèvres entirely. The Treaty of Lausanne defined the borders of the modern Turkish state and established the legal framework for its minorities, but it was entirely silent on the subject of Kurdish rights. Unlike Israel, which was eventually established as a recognized state after years of broken promises, the Kurdish people have not seen the political determination to make this possible. The consequences of Lausanne were not merely legal but generational and physical. Turkey has established a statelessness determination procedure, but data on stateless populations in the country remains incomplete, and there has not been a mapping study on statelessness in Turkey. The legal invisibility that began with Lausanne persists in Turkish administrative practice today, a century later. The Turkish state has never formally recognized the Kurds as a distinct ethnic minority with collective rights. The state treats the Kurds as a threat to be managed, rather than a population to accommodate. Discrimination against minorities in Turkey has been persistent, rooted in Turkish nationalism, with minorities facing marginalization not only on account of ethnicity, religion, or language but also through political exclusion and the suppression of cultural expression

The contradiction in American policy became especially visible during the Syrian Civil War. Following the rise of the Islamic State, the United States partnered closely with the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led military coalition in northeastern Syria. American military support, weapons, and training allowed Kurdish fighters to become one of the most effective anti-ISIS forces in the region. Kurdish forces suffered enormous casualties during the campaign

against ISIS, losing more than ten thousand fighters while helping the United States achieve one of its primary strategic objectives in Syria. However, in October 2019, the United States abruptly withdrew troops from parts of northern Syria, effectively allowing Turkey to launch military operations against Kurdish-controlled territory. The withdrawal reinforced long-standing Kurdish fears that American support is temporary and conditional rather than based on lasting political commitment.

In Iraq, Kurdish political development has been more successful but still incomplete. Following the Gulf War in 1991 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan gained substantial autonomy through the Kurdistan Regional Government. Compared to neighboring Kurdish regions, Iraqi Kurdistan developed relatively stable institutions, its own military forces, and significant economic influence through oil production. Yet even this autonomy revealed the limitations of Kurdish self-determination. In 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government organized an independence referendum in which an overwhelming majority voted in favor of independence. Despite the referendum being democratic, the United States opposed the move, fearing regional instability and damage to relations with Iraq and Turkey. Iraqi forces later reoccupied disputed territories such as Kirkuk, demonstrating that Kurdish political aspirations remained subordinate to other geopolitical concerns.

Across all three regions, Kurdish political progress has remained dependent on the interests of outside powers rather than on internationally recognized rights of self-determination. The United States has repeatedly supported Kurdish military efforts while avoiding meaningful commitments toward Kurdish sovereignty, while Turkey has alternated between negotiation and suppression depending on domestic political pressures and regional security concerns. Together,

these realities have left the Kurdish population broken up despite its shared ethnic and historical identity.

A negotiated Kurdish settlement would not necessarily require the immediate creation of a fully independent state. Instead, it could begin with guaranteed autonomy agreements, more political representation, and legal protections for Kurdish language and culture within the existing national borders. Over time, these arrangements could evolve into stronger forms of self-governance if regional governments and international organizations determined that peaceful coexistence remained possible. This gradual approach would reduce the likelihood of sudden military conflict while still acknowledging Kurdish political rights. The historical comparison to the creation of Israel in 1948 offers an important example of how stateless populations can eventually achieve international recognition through diplomacy and international negotiation. While the Kurdish and Israeli experiences are clearly different, both involve populations with strong identities, histories of displacement, and long periods of demands for political self-determination. The comparison demonstrates that borders and state systems are not permanent when international powers decide that political restructuring is necessary for long-term stability. In the Kurdish case, a negotiated settlement supported by the United States, Turkey, Iraq, and the UN could provide a way toward autonomy while minimizing regional conflict. Most importantly, a Kurdistan framework would address the more significant source of instability in the region. Kurdish political movements have persisted for generations not simply because of separatist ideology but because millions of Kurds continue to believe that existing governments do not represent or protect them enough. Military campaigns alone have repeatedly failed to eliminate Kurdish nationalism because the underlying political grievances remain

unresolved. A sustainable settlement would therefore require recognition that Kurdish identity is not temporary and cannot indefinitely remain excluded from regional political structures.

Critics of Kurdish independence argue that the creation of a Kurdish state would destabilize the Middle East, weaken NATO, and potentially encourage violent separatist movements across the region. Turkey in particular maintains that Kurdish nationalist organizations threaten national security because of their connections to armed militant groups such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). These concerns are significant, but the current approach has already produced decades of instability without resolving the issue. Repeated military crackdowns, political suppression, and temporary alliances have failed to eliminate Kurdish nationalism or create regional peace. International mediation and security guarantees could reduce the likelihood of regional conflict while providing Kurds with political recognition. In the long term, continued denial of Kurdish political rights may prove more destabilizing than the creation of a Kurdish state.

For more than a century, the Kurdish people have remained divided by borders created through international agreements that ignored their political aspirations and national identity. Throughout that period, the United States and Turkey have repeatedly treated Kurdish groups as strategic partners when convenient while refusing to support meaningful long-term political recognition. From the collapse of the Treaty of Sèvres to the American withdrawal from northern Syria in 2019, Kurdish history has been shaped by cycles of cooperation and betrayal. The continued absence of a political solution has not produced stability. Although the creation of an independent Kurdistan faces enormous geographic and diplomatic obstacles, the current system has consistently failed to address the underlying issue of Kurdish political exclusion.

Ultimately, the Kurdish question is not simply a regional issue but a test of whether international powers are willing to support political self-determination consistently rather than selectively. The United States cannot continue to rely on Kurdish military cooperation while denying Kurdish political legitimacy. A lasting peace in the region will require recognizing that the Kurdish population is not a temporary strategic tool, but a nation whose political future can no longer be ignored.

Works Cited

- “2026 CAMDEN CONFERENCE - Camden Conference.” Camden Conference, 10 Mar. 2026, www.camdenconference.org/conferences/2026-camden-conference/.
- Frisch, Hillel, et al. The Soleimani Killing: An Initial Assessment. Minute, Turkish. “Discrimination Embedded in State Policies toward Minorities Fueled by Nationalism in Turkey.” Turkish Minute, 30 Apr. 2024, www.turkishminute.com/2024/04/30/discrimination-embedded-in-state-policies-toward-minorities-fueled-by-nationalism-in-turkey/.
- Ottaway, Marina. “United States Policy and the Kurdistan Referendum: Compounding the Problem | Wilson Center.” www.wilsoncenter.org, www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/united-states-policy-and-the-kurdistan-referendum-compounding-the-problem.
- Shamim, Sarah. “What Do We Know about the Kurdish Groups in the Middle East?” Al Jazeera, 19 Jan. 2026, www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/19/who-are-the-kurds-2.
- Soltes, Alec. “Kurds: Dream of Independence, Settle for Autonomy.” Geopolitical Monitor, 3 Oct. 2025, www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/kurds-dream-of-independence-settle-for-autonomy/.
- “Statelessness - United States Department of State.” United States Department of State, 30 May 2024, 2021-2025.state.gov/other-policy-issues/statelessness/.
- “The next Administration Needs a Kurdistan Policy Review.” American Enterprise Institute - AEI, 4 Sept. 2024, www.aei.org/op-eds/the-next-administration-needs-a-kurdistan-policy-review/. Accessed 19 May 2026.
- “Türkiye.” Statelessness Index, 15 Mar. 2024, index.statelessness.eu/country/turkiye.

Yildirim, A.Kadir. "Turkey's Strategy in the Kurdish Peace Process." Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, 29 July 2025,
www.bakerinstitute.org/research/turkeys-strategy-kurdish-peace-process.