



WAR IS OVER



STUDY GUIDE

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War Is Over

Iraqi Kurdistan. What happens to war zones after the spotlights go off? One year after the harsh conflict against ISIS, the scars of war remain. Yet, life persists, gradually returning to a semblance of normality. This reality serves as a vivid and painful reminder while also representing a collective act of liberation. WAR IS OVER stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

About Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraqi Kurdistan is an autonomous region located in northern Iraq. It borders Iran to the east, Syria to the west, and Turkey to the north. To the south is the rest of Iraq. Most of Iraqi Kurdistan is mountainous, with hot, dry summers. This region is governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Its capital is Erbil, which is known as Hewlêr in Kurdish. It has a population of more than 6 million people.¹ According to the Kurdistan Regional Government website, the major ethnic groups living in Iraqi Kurdistan are the Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmen, Arabs, Armenians, Shabaks, and Mandeans.² The Kurds make up the majority of the population.

In addition to living in Iraqi Kurdistan, millions of Kurds live in Turkey, Syria, Azerbaijan, Iran, and the rest of Iraq. The Minority Rights Group estimates that there are about 16 million Kurds in total.³ In Iraq, Kurds comprise 15 to 20 percent of the total population, according to the Minority Rights Group. The organization reports that they are the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in the country. The Kurds have been fighting for an independent state for many years. The Council on Foreign Relations notes, "The Kurds are one of the world's largest peoples without a state, making up sizable minorities in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey."⁴ The Kurds are not the only ethnic group in this area that have fought for autonomy. The Kurdish Project explains that the region in which the Kurds live has been home to a number of different ethnic groups throughout history, many of whom have also been involved in struggles for independence. It says, "The contiguous Kurdish regions of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria sit in the north central area of the Middle East. Over the millennia, numerous ethnicities have migrated, settled or natively inhabited the area including Turks, Persians, Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Chechens, Azeris and others." It explains, "From the beginning of recorded history until the present day, all of these ethnic groups have strived politically and violently both offensively and defensively for a secure homeland. As one of the crossroads of the Middle East, Kurdistan has been home to both ethnic battlegrounds, as well as peaceful ethnic coexistence."⁵

In Northern Iraq, the Kurdish people have been successful in establishing a government of their own. After fighting for many years, the area of Iraqi Kurdistan was finally given autonomy in 1970.

¹ <https://krso.gov.krd/en/indicator/population-and-labor-force/population>

² <https://gov.krd/boi-en/why-kurdistan/region/facts-figures/region-kurdistan-fact-sheet/>

³ <https://krso.gov.krd/en/indicator/population-and-labor-force/population>

⁴ <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/kurds-long-struggle-statelessness>

⁵ <https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-history/>

Much of that autonomy was quickly taken away under the regime of Saddam Hussein, when many Kurds were killed or deported, however, in 2005, after the Persian Gulf War, Iraq created a new constitution, and in that constitution, it officially recognized the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan. This was a victory for the Kurds, but the area continues to strive to achieve full independence from Iraq.

ISIS

The Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is an Islamic militant group. Its followers belong to the Sunni branch of Islam and often utilize extreme violence and terrorism. According to the Wilson Center, this group was an offshoot of the terrorist group, al Qaeda, and was founded in 2004. The Center says, “It faded into obscurity for several years after the surge of U.S. troops to Iraq in 2007. But it began to reemerge in 2011. Over the next few years, it took advantage of growing instability in Iraq and Syria to carry out attacks and bolster its ranks.”⁶

With its reemergence in 2011, ISIS successfully recruited a large number of followers, and it quickly gained both strength and territory. In 2014, it took over a number of Iraqi cities, including Fallujah and Al-Ramadi. It then captured Mosul, which is Iraq’s second largest city. The group’s leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, declared the formation of a caliphate which stretched from the city of Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq. ISIS imposed Shari’ah over the area, which is a strict version of Islamic law. According to the Wilson Center, “At its height, the Islamic State—also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh—held about a third of Syria and 40 percent of Iraq.”⁷

People living under ISIS rule had to comply with strict rules for behavior and dress, with harsh punishments for disobedience. In an article by the International Rescue Committee, Iraqis describe some of their experiences. One woman says, “They executed anyone accused of being ‘traitors’ and connected to the [Iraqi] government. They would leave their bodies hanging on poles for a week. Women who don’t wear the veil will be executed.” A man says, “I left because of ISIS. They were very cruel. You had to obey their rules. If they even saw a finger of a woman showing, they would threaten violence. If you resisted in any way, you would be killed. Two of my brothers were beaten for many hours after being accused of working with the Iraqi army. Anyone with a cell phone would be executed as a traitor.”⁸

Defeat of ISIS

Troops from Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, and Iraq fought back against ISIS. They were joined by an international coalition of more than 80 countries, including the United States, who carried out airstrikes against the group. Ramadi was taken back in December 2015, Fallujah in June 2016, and Mosul in July 2017. By 2017, ISIS had lost most of its territory, and Iraq declared that its war against the group was over.

⁶ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>

⁷ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>

⁸ <https://www.rescue.org/article/what-life-under-isis>

However, according to the National Counterterrorism Center, while ISIS has been weakened, it remains a threat. It explains, “In 2019, an international coalition ejected ISIS from its last stronghold in Syria, although the group continues to operate clandestinely there and in Iraq. Despite losing many of its leaders and its territory, ISIS remains capable of conducting insurgent operations in Iraq and Syria while overseeing at least 19 branches and networks in Africa, Asia, and Europe.”⁹

Effects of the War

The war against ISIS caused extensive damage across Iraq, with homes, schools, businesses, healthcare facilities, and communication and transportation networks destroyed. A World Bank report estimated \$45.7 billion in damages. The authors find that the education and health sectors were some of the most damaged.¹⁰ In addition, tens of thousands of people died, and hundreds of thousands were displaced from their homes.

As a result of displacement, many people have become refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to the Kurdistan Regional Government, “Since the Syrian crisis and the emergence of ISIS war in Iraq and Syria, the Kurdistan Region has offered sanctuary to many internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.” It reports some statistics related to refugees and displaced people, saying, “According to the latest data attained by KRG Ministry of Interior’s Bureau of Migration and Displacement, about 665 thousand of IDPs and more than 248 thousand of refugees settled in Kurdistan in 2022, making a total number of more than 913 thousand of IDPs and asylum seekers.”¹¹

Additional Resources

Books

- Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds: A Divided Nation in Search of a State*. Princetown, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2019.
- Brendan January, *ISIS: The Global Face of Terrorism*. Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2018.
- Ricardo García Vilanova, *Fade to Black: Rise and Fall of the Caliphate of Isis 2011-2019: Syria, Iraq and Libya*. Independent Publishing Group, 2020.

⁹ https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/isis_fto.html

¹⁰ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/600181520000498420/pdf/123631-REVISED-Iraq-Reconstruction-and-Investment-Part-2-Damage-and-Needs-Assessment-of-Affected-Governorates.pdf>

¹¹ <https://gov.krd/dmi-en/activities/news-and-press-releases/2023/january/kurdistan-region-a-shelter-for-about-one-million-refugees-and-idps/>

Online Sources

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<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28147263>
- Council on Foreign Relations, "The Kurds' Long Struggle with Statelessness," 2022.
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- The Kurdish Project, "Kurdish History," no date.
<https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-history/>
- Kurdistan Regional Government, "Facts & Figures," no date.
<https://gov.krd/boi-en/why-kurdistan/region/facts-figures/>
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<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>

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