2 Politics and Forced Migration in Kurdistan

In order to understand the experiences of refugees in the country of exile, an understanding of their background and reasons for flight is absolutely necessary. This chapter thus provides a short general introduction to the Kurdish question, and then continues with a brief description of recent political developments and forced migration in each of the three countries of origin.

The area traditionally inhabited by the Kurds, Kurdistan, is divided between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. There are also indigenous Kurdish populations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan (Kendal, 1993b). This chapter will deal mainly with the situation in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. These three countries account for at least 90 per cent of the Kurdish population, and all the refugees in this study originate in one of these countries. The Kurds, who are estimated to number almost 30 million,\(^1\) are often referred to as the world’s biggest nation without a state. The Kurds are commonly portrayed as persecuted minorities in all the states dividing Kurdistan. Although this can be said to be generally true, a more detailed picture is needed in order to understand the Kurdish tragedy.

Kurdish political history and the problems experienced by the Kurdish nationalist projects can only be understood if one takes into account that Kurdistan lies in an area where several empires and regional powers meet. However, the states in the area have always had problems controlling the mountainous Kurdish regions and the numerous Kurdish insurrections. It is only since the advent of modern warfare that the states, often with disastrous consequences, have attempted to gain full control over Kurdistan.

The Kurdish emirates under the Ottoman Empire had a degree of independence and the Mahabad republic declared independence in 1946. Still, these political units only comprised small parts of what today is commonly regarded as Kurdistan and the entire area has never formed a state. Instead, Kurdish society was for a long time a tribal society, where tribal allegiances had a considerable influence on the political and social structure. However, over time

\(^1\) Ö. Wahlbeck, *Kurdish Diasporas*  
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the tribal structure has given way to other loyalties, for example loyalties based on nationalist and socialist discourses (Bruinessen, 1992a). Nationalism arrived relatively late in Kurdistan, which is also a reason for the difficulties experienced by Kurdish nationalism. There are a number of recent authoritative publications outlining the history of Kurdistan and the Kurdish national struggle (Bulloch and Morris, 1993; Chaliand, 1993, 1994; Entessar, 1992; Gunter, 1990, 1992, 1997; Kreyenbroek and Sperl, 1992; Laizer, 1996a; McDowall, 1992, 1996; Olson, 1996). Instead of going into great historical detail I will refer my readers to these books.

The Kurdish language is an Indo-European language related to Farsi (Persian), but not related to Arabic or Turkish. The countries in the region today use different alphabets: the Arabic alphabet in Iraq, Syria and Iran, the Roman alphabet in Turkey and the Cyrillic alphabet in the CIS. The Kurdish dialects have developed in widely different directions because of the cultural persecution of the Kurds, the lack of a Kurdish cultural and political centre and the absence of a common written Kurdish language. Many of the dialects are today mutually unintelligible. The two most important dialects are Kurmanji, spoken in northern Kurdistan, and Sorani, spoken in southern Kurdistan (Entessar, 1992; Kreyenbroek, 1992; Nerweyi, 1991). The Kurdish dialects, despite their huge differences, do not have clear borders between each other; nor do the differences in dialects have anything to do with the actual political borders in the region. One also has to remember that many Kurds today use the main language in the state where they are living as their first language. This is especially true in Turkey where the assimilation policy, with its prohibition of the Kurdish language, has forced many Kurds to abandon Kurdish. In Iran the Kurdish language is often used only in private while Farsi is used in public.²

When it comes to religion, most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but there are also significant communities of Shia Muslim, Alevi, Yezidi and Jewish Kurds (Bruinessen, 1992a, 1992b). There are also Christian communities in Kurdistan, but persons belonging to these are not usually regarded as Kurds. Because of the religious diversity, religion cannot be used as an ethnic marker in the case of Kurds.

All the above-mentioned factors would suggest that it is hard to define who is a ‘Kurd’ and who is not. However, my own experience is that the Kurds themselves are very clear of their own identity and ethnic boundaries. Consequently, in this research the only definition of ‘Kurd’ that is used is one that is based on self-definition.