Iraq (Kurds) (1961 - 1996)

The Kurds are an ethnic group in northern Iraq and neighboring Turkey and Iran. There are longstanding conflicts between the Kurds and the governments of all three countries (see also Turkey-Kurds conflict profile). Sustained warfare between the Iraqi government and Kurdish fighters dates from 1961. In the first phase of the war, the Iraqi government controlled the cities and major towns, while Kurdish peshmerga fighters controlled the mountains. Iraq used aerial bombardment while the Kurds relied mainly on guerrilla tactics.

An agreement that would have granted autonomy to the Kurds in was almost signed in 1970, but the two parties could not agree to the division of oil rights and the fighting resumed. With increased support from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the Iranian government, the Kurds escalated the war. In 1975, when the CIA and Iran cut off their support, the Kurdish forces were significantly weakened. This phase of the war was characterized by mass displacements, summary executions, and other gross human rights violations.

In 1979, when Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq, he intensified the repression against the Kurds. Though Kurds resisted, large-scale fighting did not resume until the mid-1980s when Iran, now fighting its own war with Iraq, renewed support for the peshmerga. In 1987, Saddam Hussein appointed his cousin, General Ali Hassan al-Majid, to subdue the Kurds. “Chemical Ali,” as he came to be known because of his use of chemical weapons, launched the Anfal campaign that resulted in the deaths of approximately 100,000 Kurds, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of others, and the destruction of more than 2,000 Kurdish villages. Independent observers, including Human Rights Watch, characterized the campaign as “genocidal.”

In March 1991, shortly after the end of the Gulf War, Kurds in Iraq rebelled. Although Saddam Hussein launched a massive retaliation, Kurds attained a measure of autonomy as a result of the imposition of an Iraqi no-fly zone in the north, monitored by the United States, Britain, and France. With the fall of Saddam Hussein’s government in 2003, the Kurds have gained a voice in the new U.S.-backed Iraqi administration.

Print Resources


Online Resources

Human Rights Watch. *Iraq*.

Genocider Watch. *The Anfal Campaign*.

Kurdish Media


Timeline

1943 - Kurds attempt to form independent country in northern Iraq
1946 - Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) forms
1958 - new Iraqi Constitution recognizes Kurdish national rights
1961 - Kurds rebel; KDP declared illegal; fighting begins
1970 - Peace Accords agreed upon, granting regional autonomy
1971 - agreement breaks down, fighting renewed
1975 - Iraq and Iran sign Algiers Accord; Iran stops funding Kurds, rebellion collapses; Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) forms
1978 - PUK and KDP clash with each other
1979 - Saddam Hussein becomes Iraqi president
1980 - Iran-Iraq War begins
1983 - Iranian and KDP fighters attack Iraq from north; Iraq massacres 8,000 Kurds; PUK agrees to ceasefire with Iraq
1985 - PUK ceasefire breaks down
1986 - PUK and KDP jointly fight Iraq with Iranian support
1988 - Anfal campaign; gas attack on town of Halabjah kills thousands; Iran-Iraq War ends
1991 - Gulf war; Kurds rebel and are put down by Saddam Hussein; “safe haven” created
1992 - PUK and KDP form Kurdish government, sharing power
1994 - PUK and KDP clash militarily
1996 - KDP seeks aid from Iraqi government against PUK
1998 - PUK and KDP sign peace agreement in Washington
2003 - PUK and KDP form joint leadership; U.S. attacks Iraq; Kurds participate in Iraqi Governing Council
2005 - PUK leader Jalal Talabani becomes interim president of Iraq