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## 6 Kurds and the Formation of the State of Iraq

1917–1932

*M. R. Izady*

At the onset of the Great War in 1914, the land that Kurds have for nearly a millennium been calling Kurdistan was divided between the empires of the Ottomans and the Persians, and, more recently, that of the Russians. By 1914, Kurds had been fighting the local empires for their independence or autonomy for nearly 65 consecutive years. By 1918 and the conclusion of the War, the prospect of Kurdish independence seemed likely — even taken for granted.

The failure of the Kurds to achieve their goal for independence and the forced inclusion of their mountainous homeland within the newly created states of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey (Iranian Kurds remained where they were before: in Iran/Persia) was to prove disastrous in the subsequent decades not only for the Kurds, but also for all states that willingly or unwillingly came to include portions of the Kurdish homeland. The quashing of the Kurds' aspiration for regaining their independence, which had ended only in 1848 with the absorption of independent Kurdish principalities by the Ottomans, was to emerge as a perennial stumbling block to the peace, stability, and in fact prosperity of the states which incorporate portions of the Kurds' ancient homeland. There has not been a single decade in which the Kurds have not staged a bloody and destructive uprising against the local states. Iraq has been just one of many of such states with a perennial Kurdish problem which has led to such atrocities as mass murder, ethnic cleansing, and gassing of the

civilian Kurds in their cities by various Iraqi governments, from the Mandate period to the present.

### Kurds at the Formation of Iraq

As late as 1923, the inclusion of a large Kurdish population and its homeland into the formative state of Iraq by the British was more an accident than a foregone conclusion. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the end of the Great War presented the Allied Powers with the opportunity to cut her old imperial dominions and paste new “nation-states” together in the western half of the Middle East — all to suit their own interests alone. The “secret” Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between Britain and France (to ultimately involve Italy and Russia as well), intended a division of the Asiatic sectors of the Ottoman Empire into various forms of European control, ranging from direct rule to “spheres of influence” and “economic zones.” No attention whatsoever was given in this agreement to the ethnic, religious, or cultural facts on the ground. The division of the land by Sykes-Picot looked comical indeed. An interweaving mesh of borders was to run from the western boundaries of Persia to the Mediterranean Sea to allow for Britain and France to put together bits and pieces of land that they thought they might need for strategic and economic reasons into single units ready for their possession. (Map 1) For a time after 1917, it even seemed this bonanza might well extend into the former Russian imperial territories in the Caucasus and Central Asia after the implosion of that empire into the communist revolution and chaos. However, by 1921 the newborn Soviet Russia had reasserted her old imperial jurisdiction over those areas.

Naturally, the question of who was going to get what piece was the top priority for the European victors. And this did not include just the big Entente Powers of the time: Britain, France and Italy (and ultimately, Russia). Small countries like Greece, the newly born (but soon to be vanquished) Armenia and Georgia also had grandiose designs on land now that an apparent free-for-all had been declared on Ottoman possession. The only consternation facing these all was one thrown in by Woodrow Wilson. Wilson had been hammering the European empires with his ideal of “self-determination.” The European powers had

not won the war with 10 million dead and over 20 million wounded and maimed to let the vanquished and the stateless to determine their own fates.

But the desires of the American president could not be ignored, particularly because the Entente's "victory" in November 1918 had been solely made possible by American economic, industrial, and military power.<sup>1</sup> Thus a compromise emerged which joined this American de-



MAP 6.1 Sykes-Picot Agreement

mand to another one of the Fourteen Points bulldozed into the Paris Peace Conference in 1919: the idea of creating a League of Nations.

The Entente Powers (shorn of Russia), therefore, would take the Ottoman lands. However, they would not have the deed to their pieces, but instead just a lease that would entail a League-sanctioned “mandate” over an area but for the period of their own choosing. Thus were created the modern boundaries of nearly all Middle East states west of Persia/Iran.

Prior to the direct involvement by the United States in the Great War, the European Entente Powers had other ideas about their booty when (and if) they win over the Central Powers. By 1915, the French, the Italians, and the British were already drawing boundaries on the map of the Middle East. The first of these projected divisions was the famed Sykes-Picot agreement referred to above. The two diplomats representing Britain and France respectively, came up with a plan to completely annihilate the Ottoman Empire (the fate that was to befall the Habsburg Empire as well), extending even into the Turkish-inhabited territories of Anatolia. No attention was to be given to the ethnic facts on the ground, but only to their own strategic and economic needs.

But, the Sykes-Picot agreement never had the chance of coming into reality. With the United States staying out of the war, it would have been the British, French, and Italian dominions that would have been apportioned by the victors—Germany, Austria and the Ottomans—not the other way around. And with the United States entering the war, its demands and priorities took on major importance in all aspects of the postwar settlements. This left the European Entente Powers with the necessity of adjusting the once pie-in-the-sky Sykes-Picot agreement to the demands of Wilson. Attention, therefore, was to be given to some degree to the ethnic facts on the ground. Sykes-Picot, nonetheless, emerged as the ground plan on which to build any future compromises.

### Kurds at the Paris Peace Conference

At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, a delegation of the Kurdish dignitaries appeared among all those stateless people aspiring to receive

the largesse of the victors at the Conference. The Kurdish delegation presented the Conference with a map and a list of claims that, in view of what others were asking, were quite modest. In fact, they had not included all Kurdish-majority areas inside their proposed independent and unified Kurdistan. This was due not so much to their ignorance of the ethnic facts as to their political apprehension vis-à-vis the neighboring states and ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> Their claims and those of their ethnic neighbors, however, would to some degree impact the subsequent awards of land to the Kurds, Armenians, and Georgians by the Peace Conference and the subsequent Treaty of Sèvres. This was due not to the largesse of the European powers, but the influence and demands of the president of the United States at the Paris Peace Conference, embodied in his Fourteen Points.

### Treaty of Sèvres

Following the conclusion of the Paris Peace Conference, various treaties were imposed upon the defeated empires of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottomans. The one of concern here was the Treaty of Sèvres.

Woodrow Wilson had vigorously promoted the idea of “self-determination” for all nationalities living within the boundaries of the defunct empires of the Germans, Austrians, Ottomans, and Russians. As such, he categorically and repeatedly demanded independent states for the “Arabs, Armenians, and the Kurds.” The Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920), which dismantled the defeated Ottoman Empire, clearly recognized this. Section III, Articles 62–64, provided for the creation of a Kurdish state on the Kurdish territories. Article 64 reads as follows:

If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 [comprising western Kurdistan] shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should

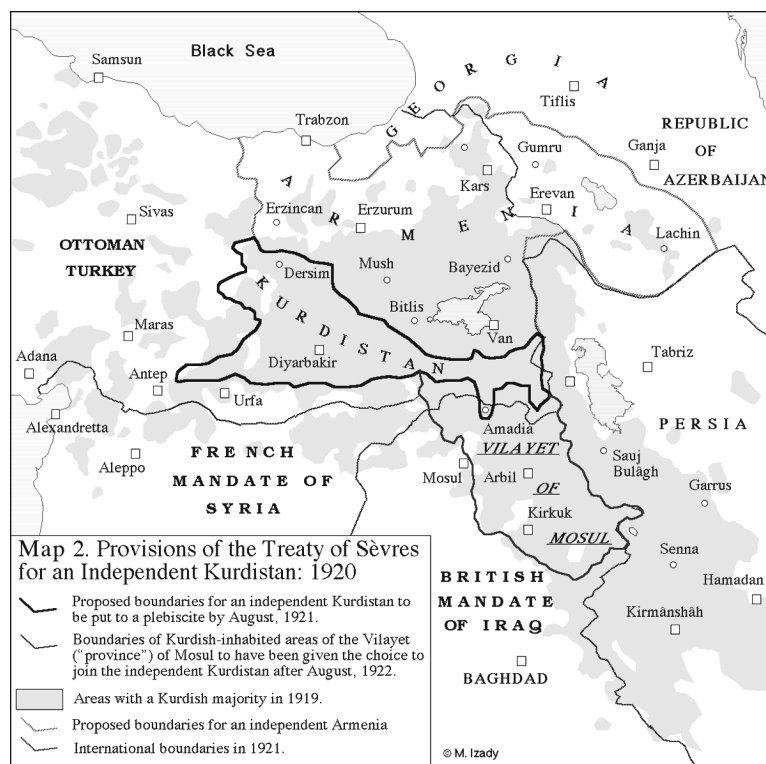
be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas. The detailed provisions for such renunciation will form the subject of a separate agreement between the principal Allied Powers and Turkey. If and when such renunciation takes place, no objection will be raised by the principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul Vilayet [comprising largely Iraqi Kurdistan].

This treaty was signed by the moribund Ottoman Sultanate in Istanbul, but the successor to the Ottomans, the newly founded Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Pasha (later named Atatürk, i.e., “Father Turk”) did not consider itself bound to observe it. But he could observe other trends in the offing that were rendering Sèvres obsolete. The primary factor in the annulment of the Treaty of Sèvres was the conclusion of the term of presidency of Woodrow Wilson, in which he spent the last year in bed, comatose. The U.S. Senate, meanwhile, neither ratified the adhesion of the United States to the League of Nations, nor to any of these peace treaties, particularly Sèvres, which would have involved United States in the mandate systems in the Middle East. With the effective withdrawal of the United States from the political scene of the Old World in 1921, the European allied powers were left to do as they wished and take what they could. And they did. The terms of the Treaty of Sèvres, therefore, were never enacted.

Having absorbed the richest non-Turkish parts of the Ottoman lands, the British and the French tried to bring in the United States, urging it to accept mandates over Constantinople, Armenia, and Kurdistan, the areas that originally were to go to Russia; but the United States eventually refused.

By 1921, however, there were few if any Armenians left in Anatolian Armenia, following their massacre and massive exodus. Except for Soviet Armenia, historic Armenia had become almost exclusively populated by the surviving Kurds, and such an “Armenian” state would inevitably have had a vast Kurdish ethnic majority (Map 2).

The U.S. Congress rejected the mandate because it would unnecessarily involve the now isolationist United States in the quagmire of world colonial infighting; both Armenia and Kurdistan were remote and hardly accessible by sea; and it would have been unprofitable, since Britain had decided to annex and keep central Kurdistan and its petroleum wealth.<sup>3</sup> The refusal of the United States to sponsor an independent Kurdistan prompted Britain, the only credible power left on the scene, to proceed with annexing as much of Kurdistan as she found attractive. She took only the ex-Ottoman vilayet (province) of Mosul (central or Iraqi Kurdistan), and with it the petroleum-bearing Kurdish



MAP 6.2 Provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres

district of Kirkuk.<sup>4</sup> The region was attached to the Arab-dominated British mandate of Iraq, with the League of Nations provision that the national and ethnic aspirations of the Kurdish people be respected by Baghdad.

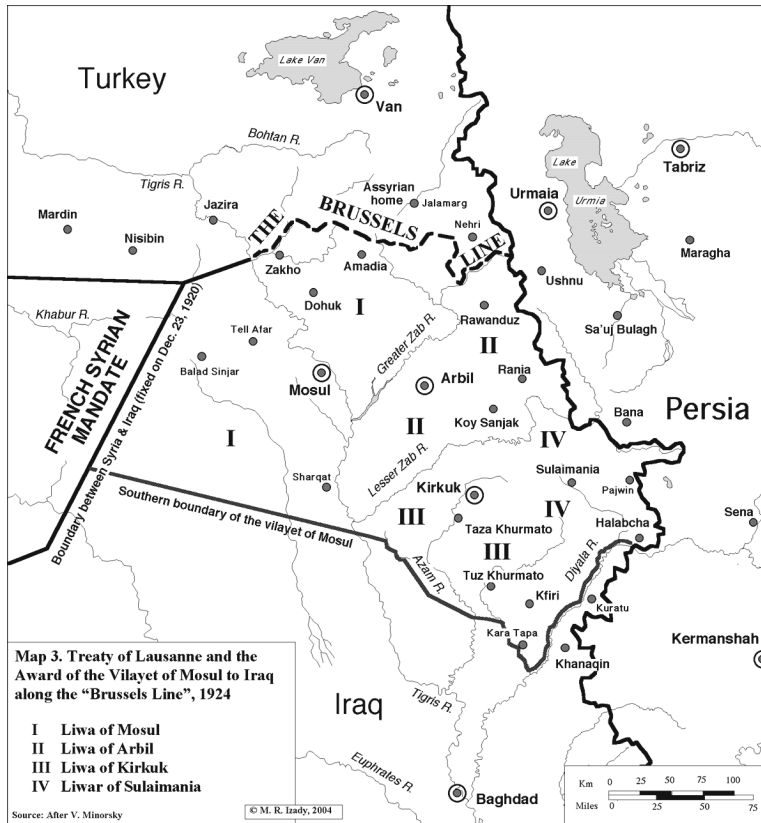
### Grand Alliance and the Lausanne Treaty

On June 24, 1923, a new treaty was signed in Lausanne, Switzerland, that ceded all of Anatolia, including northern and western Kurdistan, to the newly established Republic of Turkey. Iraq received all the Kurdish land to the crest of the Hakkari Heights. This was known at the time as the “Brussels Line,” a temporary border established by the League of Nations between the British Mandate of Iraq and the emerging power of the Republic of Turkey to the north (Map 3). An independent Kurdistan in Anatolia would almost certainly have destabilized the British hold on central Kurdistan and its vital oil deposits. Britain therefore willingly allowed the rest of ex-Ottoman Kurdistan to be occupied by the young Turkish Republic. As a face-saving measure, for the European powers to show that they had not completely abandoned Wilson’s idealist principle of self-determination for ethnic nationalities, certain guarantees of minority rights were included in Articles 37–44 of the Treaty. None of the ethnic minorities who were summarily handed over to Turkey were mentioned by name in the document.

While Article 38 guaranteed freedom of religion and religious practices for all, and additionally freedom of movement and emigration for non-Muslims, Article 39 guaranteed language rights for all ethnic groups. It reads

No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings. Notwithstanding the existence of the official language, adequate facilities shall be given to Turkish nationals of non-Turkish speech for the oral use of their own language before the Courts.





MAP 6.3 Treaty of Lausanne

To prevent any future state laws in Turkey to infringe upon these guarantees, Article 37 states that

Turkey undertakes that the stipulations contained in Articles 38 to 44 shall be recognized as fundamental laws, and that no law, no regulations, nor official action shall conflict or interfere with these stipulations, nor shall any law, regulation, nor officials action prevail over them.

As an international mechanism of checks and balances on the enforcement of these and other provisions of the Treaty, Article 44 added that

Turkey agrees that any Member of the Council of the League of Nations shall have the right to bring to the attention of the Council any infraction or danger of infraction of any of these obligations, and that the Council may thereupon take such action and give such directions as it may deem proper and effective in the circumstances.

However, realizing early the inclination of the Allied powers not to press for observation of Articles 38 and 39, a Turkish official decree on March 3, 1924, less than a year after the signing of the Treaty, banned all Kurdish schools, organizations, and publications, along with their religious fraternities and seminaries. A year later, in February 1925, the Anatolian Kurds staged the first of a series of bloody and calamitous general uprisings against the infant Turkish Republic.

### Mosul Province and the Mandate of Iraq

The young Iraq was not out of the woods yet. Its boundaries were still open to compromise, particularly if the forces demanding change could convince the British that holding onto such disputed territories was not worth the trouble. The Kurds did their best to do just that, while others, including Turkey and Persia (Iran), simply chose to force the issue with military encroachments and skirmishes on the Iraqi territories.<sup>5</sup>

The first to choose this course was a forerunner of the modern Barzani leadership, namely Sheikh Ahmed Barzani. He was soon to be joined in this endeavor by a far more energetic and charismatic leader, Sheikh Mahmoud Barzanji — the man who styled himself as the “King of Kurdistan.”

By the end of 1922, the British seem to have decided to allow the emergence of a small Kurdish state from their mandate of Iraq, comprising the town of Sulaymaniya and its dependencies on the Persian/

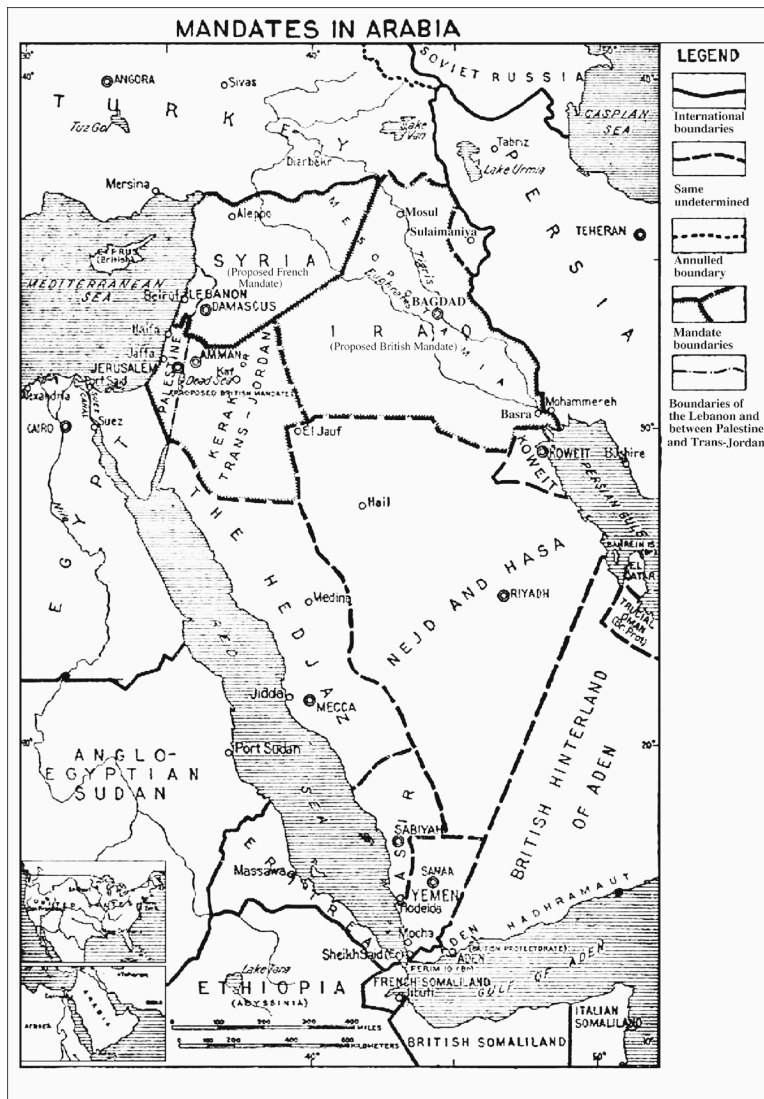
Iranian borders. This “Kurdistan” would have not included oil-rich Kirkuk, nor would it have had a common border with Turkey and its sizable Kurdish inhabited areas. It would have been fully dependent on Britain, and most importantly, it would have contained the unsinkable Sheikh Mahmoud and his troublesome ilk. A map by Colonel Lawrence Martin of the British Mandate forces in Iraq contains this idea, with the borders of this Kurdistan being designated as “International boundaries” with the qualifier, “undetermined” (Map 4). But this was no gesture of generosity on the part of the British. Instead, it has a desperate response to the Kurdish uprising in that area, as we shall see presently.

### Kurds in the Mandate Period

In Iraq, almost from the moment of its formation as a British mandate, the British had to deal with Kurdish unrest in the north. However, the Kurds there were never a match for the technologically and numerically superior British imperial troops and their extensive use of the war-hardened British Royal Air Force (RAF) which liberally and frequently bombed Kurdish villagers in northern Iraq.

In northern Iraq a Kurdish kingdom was announced in 1922 by Sheikh Mahmoud. Although he had no connection with the old Kurdish princely houses, Mahmoud sprang from an illustrious Qadiri Sufi religious house, that of Barzanja. He thus enjoyed supreme religious status when he sought political station as well. His power base was in the Sorani-speaking, less tribal and more urbane, southern portion of Iraqi Kurdistan (where he was a precursor of Jalal Talabani and his political party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan).

Mahmoud was originally chosen by the British authorities to subdue and supervise the Kurds for them in their newly acquired mandate of Iraq. He did subdue and supervise the local Kurds, but not for the British authorities. He was quickly arrested and sent to exile in India, only to be brought back a year later by the British, who hoped to co-opt him. Instead, in 1922 Mahmoud, under the banner of the “Free Kurdistan Movement,” declared the independence of Kurdistan, with himself as its king.



MAP 6.4 Mandates in Arabia

Throughout his twelve-year struggle (1920–December 1931), Mahmoud had to fight as much against Kurdish tribal chiefs as against the British forces, and could claim real authority only in his home district of Sulaymania. He was a representative of the old society, and aroused considerable animosity among the modernist Kurdish intellectuals, who blamed the Kurdish predicament on just those values that Mahmoud and traditionalists like him stood for and promoted. The local tribal chieftains did not see much difference between giving up their semi-independence to Mahmoud or to London, Baghdad, and Ankara. Mahmoud's strong and specific religious background could not have helped his cause among those Kurds who were not Sunni Muslim of the Qadiri Sufi order. Yet despite all these handicaps, "in Southern Kurdistan," reported Sir Arnold Wilson, the British Political Officer in Baghdad, "four out of five people support Sheikh Mahmoud's plans for independent Kurdistan."<sup>6</sup>

In 1926, the League of Nations Commission, citing the cruel treatment of both the Assyrian Christians and the Kurds in the contested territories at the hands of the Turks, awarded Mosul Province to Iraq and its British government. The League required Iraq to allow cultural and social autonomy in the Kurdish regions.

Naively hoping to receive central Kurdistan as his independent kingdom from the League of Nations, Mahmoud moved his headquarters across the border into Iran to begin anew. There he staged a revolt in the town of Marivan in eastern Kurdistan. Beaten back by the Persian forces, he moved once again to Sulaymaniya, where he was put down one more time by the British in the spring of 1930.

As early as 1927, the Kurmanji-speaking<sup>7</sup> northern section of Iraqi Kurdistan was the scene of another, rather peculiar uprising led by the charismatic religious leader of the Barzani clan, Sheikh Ahmed, the elder brother of the well-known Kurdish political leader, General Mustafa Barzani, and a leader of the influential Naqshbandi Sufi order. Ahmed took on the British, Turks, and Arabs, as well as fellow Kurds (the rival Baradost clan). As if that were not enough, Ahmed also challenged traditional Islam by instituting a new religion, which was to bring together Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in one. Possibly hoping to

unite the religiously fragmented Kurds, he also included elements of Yazdanism by declaring himself the new avatar of the Divine Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Ahmed's forces were put down by British and Iraqi troops after several years of fighting. The British and Iraqis were supported by the Royal Air Force bombers, whose appearance alone stunned the Kurdish villagers more than the destruction their bombs brought to their lives and property. Defeated, Sheikh Ahmed escaped to Turkey, but later was arrested and sent into exile in southern Iraq. His legacy within the Barzani clan was passed on to his brother Mustafa, who raised the specter of Kurdish home rule (as early as 1940, but mainly in the course of 1960s), which continues to this day.

A harsh result of Mahmoud's and Ahmed's fierce and long struggle against the British in central Kurdistan, however inadvertent, was that it weakened British resolve to grant local Kurdish autonomy, as expressed in the League of Nations' articles of incorporation of central Kurdistan into the state of Iraq. The new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, which provided for the independence of Iraq from the British by 1932, did not include any specific rights of autonomy, or in fact of any other kind, for the Kurds.

Protesting the terms of the treaty of Iraqi independence, the seemingly unsinkable Mahmoud rose one last time in 1931. Having finally scaled down his expectations following a dozen years of fruitless struggle, Mahmoud this time asked for only an autonomous Kurdistan. The British refused, and it took them a full year to achieve the final downfall of the war-seasoned Mahmoud and his forces. By December 1931, Mahmoud had been broken for good.

But in the end, after the final defeat of Mahmoud, British politicians included an eleventh-hour amendment to the Iraqi independence treaty of 1932, to provide for the teaching of Kurdish in the schools and for election of local Kurdish officials in Iraqi Kurdistan. Perhaps Mahmoud's tenacity in the face of all odds finally gained admiration and sympathy from his European adversary.

### Endnotes

1. After the Communist revolution of November 5, 1917 and the withdrawal of Russia from the war, the British and the French informed Washington that unless United States entered into the war on their side, they would have no recourse but seek peace within a year on German and Austrian terms.
2. European ethnic maps of the northern Middle East and including Kurdistan had taken on an impressive accuracy by the turn of the twentieth century. A large, multicolor sheet map by the British Royal Geographic Society, published in 1906, showed Kurdish majority areas with such accuracy that even today — nearly a century later — it remains virtually peerless. This map became one of the main working maps at the Paris Peace Conference for that region and was used by the Kurdish delegation as well.
3. Theodore Nash, “The Effect of International Oil Interests upon the Fate of Autonomous Kurdish Territory: A Perspective on the Conference at Sèvres, August 10, 1920,” *International Problems* 15, 1–2 (1976).
4. William Stivers, *Supremacy and Oil: Iraq, Turkey, and the Anglo-American World Order, 1918–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).
5. From 1921–1923, and after the League of Nations’ establishment of the “Brussels Line” to serve as borders between Iraq and Turkey, the Turkish forces would frequently cross the northern boundaries designated by Britain for Iraq and push as far south as the bend of the Greater Zab River. In fact, the Turkish maps and atlases of the period showed the area as a part of the Turkish territory up until the end of 1925. The Iranians, on the other hand, took over the Khusrawi, Sumar, and Dehloran regions of east-central sectors of Iraq: areas that were ultimately ceded to Iran.
6. Arnold Wilson, *Mesopotamia, 1917–1920: A Clash of Loyalties* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 137.
7. Kurmanji is one of the four main dialects of Kurdish; the others being Sorani, Gurani and Dimili/Zazaki.
8. Yazdanism was the pre-Islamic, native religion of most Kurds. It survives today mainly in its denominations of Alevism, Yezidism, and Yarisanism/Ahl-i Haqq.