

# The Spread of the Kurds in the Middle East

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January 23, 2026

The term Kurd originates from the Middle Persian *Kwrt*, which means “tent-dweller nomad”. The Sassanid Persians (3<sup>rd</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century) applied this term around the latter parts of the 6<sup>th</sup> century on all the nomads of the Zagros Mountains, western Iran.<sup>1</sup> The term evolved in time to *Kort* (*Kurt*) and *Kurd*. This means that the term *Kwrt* did not refer to an ethnic people, rather a class in the larger society.

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Asatrian 2001: 47ff.), as well as “robber, highwayman, oppressor of the weak and treacherer” (Driver 1922b: 498ff).

The earliest occurrence of this term in written sources is attested in the form of *kurt* (*kwrt*-) in the Middle Persian treatise (*Kārnāmak ī Artaxšīr ī Pābakān*), compiled presumably in the second half of the 6th century A.D. It occurs four times in the text (Kn. I, 6; VIII, 1; IX 1, 2) in plural form, *kurtān*<sup>25</sup>—twice in conjunction with *šāh* “chieftain, ruler” (*kurtān šāh*), once with *šupānān* “shepherds” (*kurtān šupānān*), and only once in a bare form, without a supplement. The chieftain or ruler of these “Kurds” features as *Mādīk*, which means “Median” (MPers. *Mād*, or *Māh*/\**Māy* “Media”). It is clear that *kurt* in all the contexts has a distinct social sense, “nomad, tent-dweller”.<sup>26</sup> It could equally be an attribute for any Iranian ethnic group having similar characteristics. To look for a particular ethnic sense here would be a futile exercise. As far as the name of the chieftain, *Mādīk*, concerned, it can, to a certain extent, reflect the same narrative device as we observed above when discussing the “Medians” in the Armenian sources.

How did the *Kwrt* or Kurds of the Zagros Mountains spread into modern regions of the Middle East?

The spread of Kurds in Iraq, Turkiye and Syria happened in and during three major events in history:

1. The first event was during the 7<sup>th</sup> century as Islamic army from Arabia swept through modern southern Iraq and met the Sassanids, the last pre-Islamic Persian empire, which was ruling Mesopotamia at the time in the decisive Battle of al-Qādisiyyah, (636/637). The battle was

<sup>1</sup> Asatrian, Garnik. “Prolegomena to the Study of the Kurds”, *Iran and the Caucasus* Vol 13, No. 1. Yerevan State University. Brill, 2009.

fought near the city of Al-Hīrah. The Arab Islamic army was victorious. The Arabs moved forward into modern Iran. The Kwrt (Kurds) of the Zagros Mountains converted to Islam at this point. Here, many Kurds joined the Arab Islamic army as they became Muslims. They adopted the Arabic language of the Koran and continued with the Islamic conquest into the rest of modern Iraq and the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan). So yes, many Kurds spread in these regions, but the important point to stress here is that this was not some sort of a migration of a cluster or closely knitted homogenous ethnic group from one place to another, rather the presence of certain families or individuals who accompanied the Islamic army that was originally Arab in nature. This Islamic Arab army continued to add other groups from northern Arabia, southern Mesopotamia, etc. who converted to Islam and joined the Islamic conquest and became Muslims and the majority of them were Arabized due to the influence of the Koran.

2. The second event was the 1514 Battle of Chaldiran, between the Sunni Ottoman Turkish and the Shia Safavid Persian Empires. This battle is very crucial in history, because it changed the shape and essence of Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia. The Zagros Mountains and the region between these two empires were always lawless lands with robbers and bandits and various fighting tribes imposing their presence. The Sunni Kurds allied themselves with their fellow sectarian Sunni Ottomans against the Shia Safavid Persians under Shah Ismail. The Ottomans won the final battle of Chaldiran and pushed the Safavids back. The Battle of Chaldiran resulted in the Ottomans control of eastern Anatolia and the region of modern Iraq. In time, the boundaries between the two empires were also established in favor of the Ottomans. This boundary was formalized by the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 and has persisted into modern times.

To reward the fellow Sunni Kurds, Ottoman Sultan Selim I, granted the Kurds the permission to settle in the eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire (Eastern Anatolia). The Sultan wanted the Kurds to become a buffer zone between the two empires, because there was always that fear from the expansion of Shiism into the Sunni world.

However, fearing retaliation from Shah Ismail because the Kurds betrayed the Persian Empire during the war, many Kurds escaped and settled not only in eastern Anatolia as they had the permission, but also to northern Iraq.

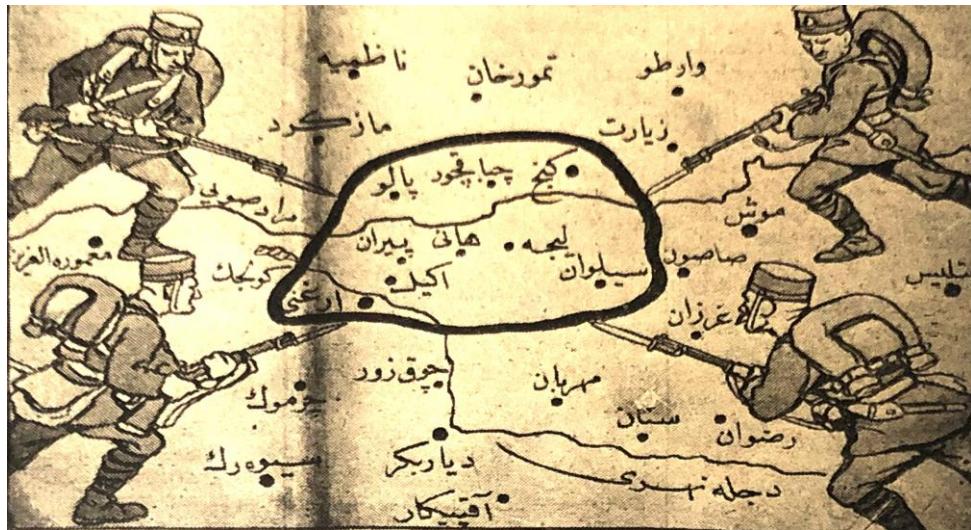
3. The third event was in 1925 when Sheikh Sa'id Piran began his armed rebellion in southern Turkiye against the Turkish government. The Turkish army crushed the rebellion and captured Sheikh Said. Only hours after his condemnation for his rebellion against the newborn Turkish Republic, Sheikh Said was executed,<sup>2</sup> but thousands of Kurds escaped by crossing the borders into the French mandated region of Syria. These Kurds were those same people who were granted permission by Sultan Selim I to settle in eastern Anatolia. They have settled down, increased in numbers and have moved around, massacred Armenians and Assyrian Christians, Yezidis and other smaller groups, seized more lands in the region and moved further west.

The French authorities welcomed these Kurds and protected them. The French needed these armed people to use them against the insurrection and rebellion of the Arab tribes against the

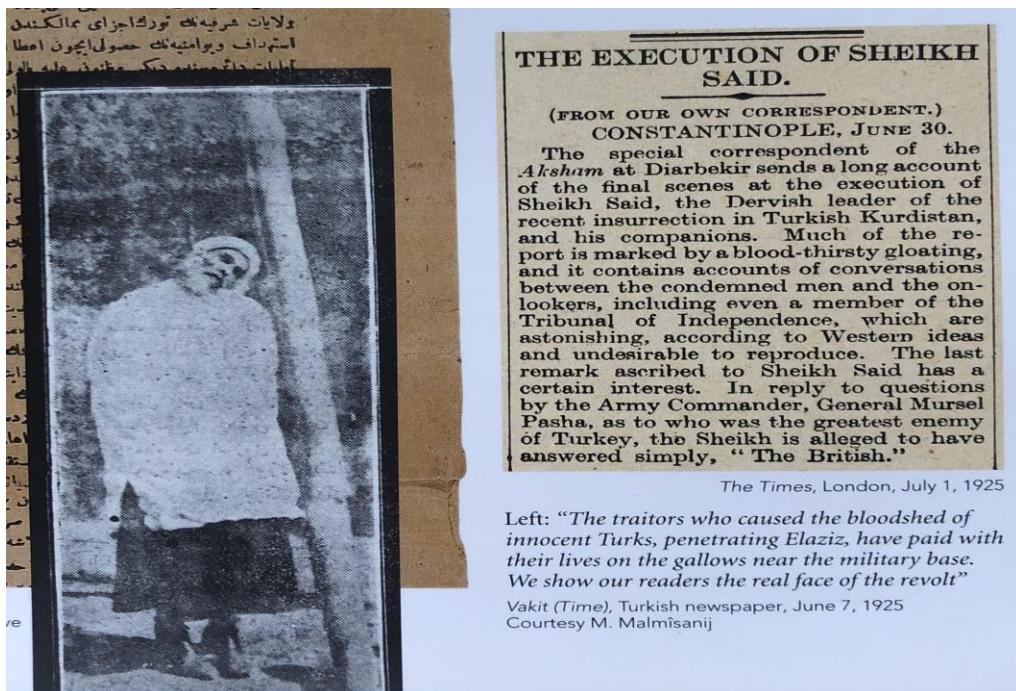
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<sup>2</sup> Reported in Vakit (Time), a Turkish Newspaper on June 7, 1925 and later in The Times, London, on July 1, 1925.

French that was happening at the time. More Kurds infiltrated into Syria with time. Here begins the real presence of Kurds in Syria.



The capture of Sheikh Said. Courtesy of Turkish Cumhuriyet, March 30, 1925



**Final Note:** Many Kurdish nationalists and historians claim that Kurds spread in Syria from the days of Saladin in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. However, there is no proof whatsoever that Saladin was a Kurd, because the Ayyubid Dynasty was an Islamic Dynasty and never Kurdish. Also, Saladin never claimed to be a Kurd, never known that he spoke Kurdish, never fought for a Kurdish cause, but for Islam, and his full name, Salah al-Din Yusuf Ibn Najim al-Din Ayyub is not Kurdish, rather Arabic.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Aprim, Fred, "Was Saladin a Kurd?". <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2025/Saladin.pdf>