

The CIA, Kurdistan and Kurdish Population

Fred Aprim

March 1, 2026

The rise of the Kurdish movement for autonomy and independence in northwestern Iran, and later the emergence of the Mahabad Republic in January 1946, was primarily connected to the August 1941 occupation of Iran by United Kingdom and the Soviet Union during World War II. It was a strategy by the two powers to prevent German influence in Iran. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was appointed Shah in September 1941.

Archibald Bulloch Roosevelt Jr., grandson of former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, wrote in 1947 in his article *The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad* that a major problem facing the People's Republic of Mahabad was its reliance on assistance from the Red Army of the USSR. The Kurds believed this was their only opportunity for autonomy. However, this close relationship with the Soviet Union alienated the republic from most Western powers.¹ The 1942 Tripartite Treaty between Iran, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union provided for troop withdrawal from Iran within six months of the end of World War II. Later, the USSR joined the UK and the US in the 1943 Tehran Conference declaration affirming Iran's independence. However, as the war ended in 1945, the Soviets delayed withdrawal and supported separatist movements in two regions: the northern province of Azerbaijan, where the Tudeh Communist Party was influential, and Kurdish nationalists in Mahabad.² An autonomous Azerbaijan People's Government was established in December 1945, and the Kurdish republic in Mahabad was declared on January 22, 1946.

If Kurdistan was so central to Kurdish nationalist aspirations, why was the Mahabad Republic not officially named the Kurdistan Republic? Kurdish nationalists argue that Kurdistan functioned as its second name, but the official title remained the Republic of Mahabad. The reality is that there never existed a politically recognized country under the name of Kurdistan at any time in history. This region of Kurdistan was always virtual, imaginary, superimposed on the Middle East maps for different reasons by foreign politicians, travelers, Kurdish nationalist. With the Kurdish nationalists they needed to show some justification for their continuous and illegal expansion. For travelers and western politicians, they simply needed to show where people known as Kurds were found regardless to their population. But genuine historians and archeologists attest to the fact that this virtual Kurdistan that is encompassing northern Mesopotamia was historically Assyria.³

The Iranian Army crushed both republics. On December 15, 1946, the Mahabad Republic ceased to exist after less than one year. This occurred as the Iranian Majlis reconvened and reasserted central authority. The army captured and imprisoned many leaders of the Mahabad Republic. In 1947, Qazi Muhammad, head of the republic, was executed by hanging.⁴ The Majlis also outlawed the Tudeh Party.

¹ Republic of Mahabad explained. Accessed 2/25/2026.

https://everything.explained.today/Republic_of_Mahabad/

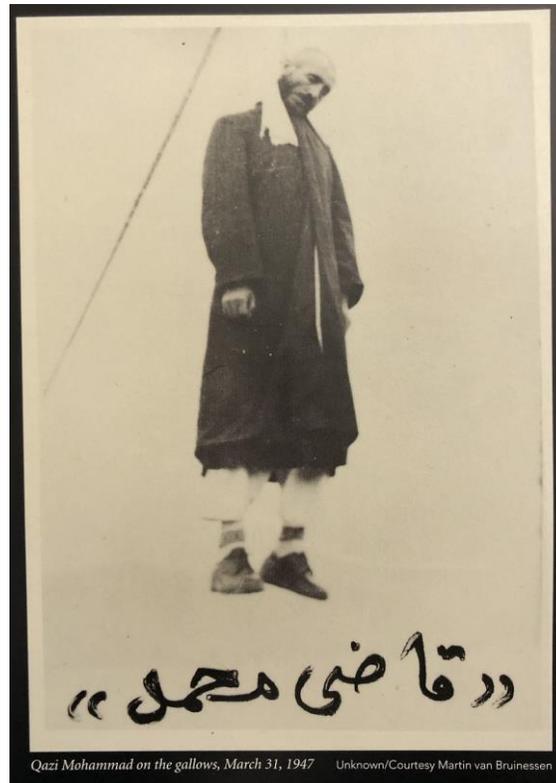
² Cascon Case SOI: Soviet-Iran 1945-46. Accessed 2/25/2026. https://web.mit.edu/cascon/cases/case_soi.html

³ Aprim, Fred. "The Forgery that is the Virtual Map of Kurdistan". August 2023. Accessed 2/24/2026.

<https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2023/Mesopotamia%20and%20Kurdistan%20different.pdf>

⁴ Meiselas, Susan. "Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History". Random House, New York. 1997.

Another Kurdish leader, Mustafa Barzani, escaped to the Soviet Union. He later returned to northern Iraq in 1958 following Abdul Karim Qasim's revolution, and in time resumed Kurdish armed rebellion there.



Courtesy Susan Meiselas, "Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History"

The failed Mahabad Republic was significant for the future politics of the Middle East. Although short lived, it became a symbolic precedent for later Kurdish movements, particularly in Iraq, where foreign involvement played a role during the Cold War. Russia's support for the Kurdish cause in Iran diminished after World War II, partly due to the severe economic devastation suffered by the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it is true that the U.S. interest in Middle Eastern oil predated World War II as American oil companies began major operations in the 1930s, particularly in Saudi Arabia through what became ARAMCO. However, it was after World War II that Middle Eastern oil production expanded dramatically, as global demand surged and Gulf states became central suppliers to Western economies.⁵

The US had emerged from WWII as the new world super power and its strategic interest in both containing Soviet influence and maintaining regional oil access increased. Following the 1946 collapse of the Iranian Azerbaijan and Mahabad Republics, the US's interest in the Kurds was reshaped. In this context, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) issued a report on the Kurds and Kurdistan in 1948.

⁵ The Middle East since the Beginning of the 20th Century. "Oil in the Middle East". 2018. Accessed 2/26/2026. <https://www.the-map-as-history.com/History-of-Middle-East-20th-century/oil-in-the-middle-east>

In its Appendix C under Kurdistan, the CIA report described Kurdistan as **a nebulous term**. It stated: *The boundaries of Kurdistan cannot be defined closely on historical grounds because the area has never been a definite political entity. Precise determination of the ethnic limits of Kurdistan is made difficult by the nomadic habits of many Kurdish tribes and by the overlapping of Kurdish and non-Kurdish population groups in many areas.*⁶

The report acknowledged that Kurdistan lacked clearly defined political boundaries and had never existed as a unified sovereign state in modern political terms. Another important point addressed in the CIA report was Kurdish population. The 1948 estimate placed the Kurdish population at approximately 2,850,000, while emphasizing that the figure **should be treated with caution**.

APPENDIX C

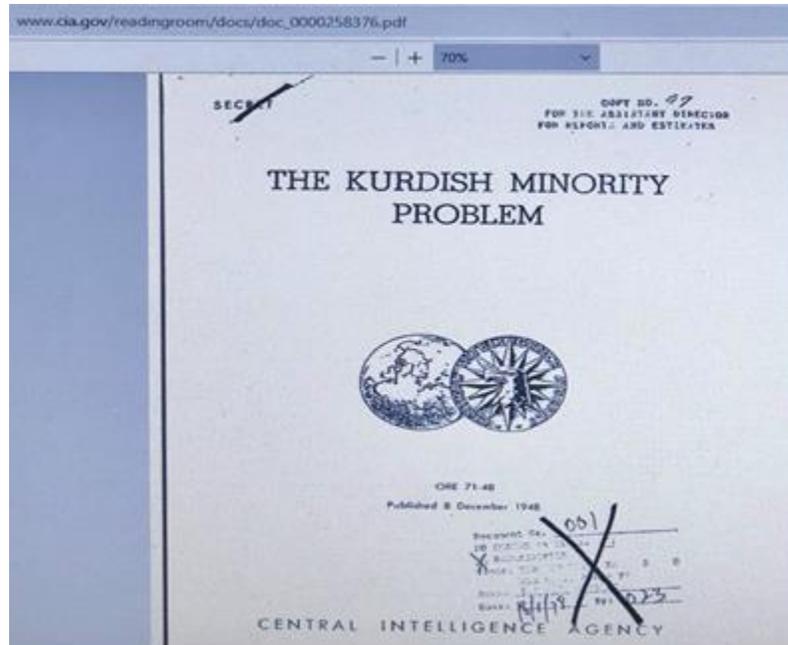
"KURDISTAN"

1. GENERAL.

The name "Kurdistan," meaning "country of the Kurds," is used to designate a large area of southeastern Turkey, northwest Iran, northern Iraq, and northern Syria, in which the Kurds form the preponderant element in the population. The term is a nebulous one. The boundaries of "Kurdistan" cannot be defined closely on historical grounds because the area has never been a definite political entity. Precise determination of the ethnic limits of "Kurdistan" is made difficult by the nomadic habits of many Kurdish tribes and by the overlapping of Kurdish and non-Kurdish population groups in many areas. Although the great majority of the Kurdish people live within "Kurdistan," giving the term some ethnic meaning, numerous individuals, groups, and colonies of Kurds live outside its boundaries.

The geographical distribution of Kurds, both within and without what is generally regarded as "Kurdistan," is listed below by country. No reliable basis exists for estimating the numerical strength of the Kurdish population, and the figures used in this study, totalling 2,850,000, must be accepted with great reserve.

⁶ Accessed 2/24/2026. "The Kurdish Minority Problem". Central Intelligence Agency. ORE 71-48. Published December 8, 1948. https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/doc_0000258376.pdf



From a mathematical perspective, the question arises: how did a population estimated at 2,850,000 in 1948 grow to approximately 35 to 40 million, as some Kurdish sources claim today? Let us examine the arithmetic.

If a population of 2.85 million grows at an average annual rate of 2.5 percent over 78 years, it would multiply by approximately 6.7 times.

$2.85 \text{ million} \times 6.7 = 19.1 \text{ million.}$

At a sustained 3 percent annual growth rate over 78 years, the multiplier would be about 10.

$2.85 \text{ million} \times 10 = 28.5 \text{ million.}$

To reach 40 million from 2.85 million over 78 years would require an average annual growth rate of roughly 3.6 to 3.8 percent sustained continuously for nearly eight decades, which is historically very high for long term demographic growth across multiple states and most critically within conflict zones.

Modern demographic estimates from independent academic and governmental sources typically place the global Kurdish population between 30 and 35 million, though precise numbers remain disputed due to census limitations and political sensitivities.

A parallel question may also be raised regarding the indigenous Assyrian population. If it was approximately 500,000 around 1950, then Assyrian population in the Middle East today should have been around 5 million. Why is the Assyrian population in the Middle East today estimated in many studies at between 250,000 and 400,000? The demographic decline can be attributed to genocide, massacres, displacement, assimilation, and large scale emigration throughout the 20th and 21st centuries due to the aforementioned reasons.⁷

⁷ Aprim, Fred. "Iraq Must Recognize Assyrians as its Indigenous People". August 10, 2022. Accessed 2/27/2026. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/08/10/iraq-must-recognize-assyrians-as-its-indigenous-people/>