Fact-Checking Historical "Kurdistan" Maps Circulating Online

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Maps that feature the virtual label "Kurdistan" superimposed across parts of the Middle East generally and rightfully represent a geo-cultural rather than a sovereign country. This area is home to Kurdish populations, often alongside other ethnic and religious groups, many of whom are indigenous to those regions. Those regions include both areas long associated with Kurds (a term scholars link to Middle Persian kwrt and nomadic or pastoral groups in Sasanian-era usage) and areas where Kurdish communities settled or migrated to over time. The name "Kurdistan" has never denoted an internationally recognized sovereign state.

The region traditionally associated with Kurdistan spans parts of southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western and northwestern Iran, and since WWI northern Syria. Because it does not align with a single sovereign border, placing the label on a map naturally overlaps multiple modern states as well as historical empires. Unlike internationally recognized countries, Kurdistan has no universally agreed-upon sovereign boundaries. Different maps draw its edges differently depending on whether they rely on demographic estimates, topography, administrative divisions, political claims, or personal interpretation.

Every now and then, Kurdish activists post a map on social media claiming it was officially recognized during a particular historical period—sometimes a very early one. Recently, a post circulated featuring a map dated to the 18th century and claiming it had been recognized by French authorities. The post stated that the map came from an old book titled *History of Timur-Bec, known as the Great Tamerlane, Emperor of the Moguls and Tartars*.

Here are important facts about the issue:

1. It is important to note that *Histoire de Timur-Bec* was originally a Persian work titled *Zafarnama*, written by Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi. The original Persian text was completed around 1425 and subsequently copied by hand and bound into various manuscripts over the following decades. Centuries later, French orientalist and translator François Pétis de la Croix produced the French translation in 1722, with an English translation following in 1723.
2. Because the original work was composed in the 15th century, it falls well within a period when Kurdish presence in the region is widely recognized and not disputed. Moreover, the term Kurdistan was already in use by the 12th century under the Seljuks.
3. An important detail is that the original 15th-century Persian manuscript did not include a map. When François Pétis de la Croix translated and published the Zafarnama in Europe in the early 1700s, he commissioned contemporary mapmakers to produce a map to accompany the edition—a routine publishing practice at the time.

4. Notably, the mapmaker places Curdistan (Kurdistan) carefully between the Tigris and Euphrates. To modern historians, archaeologists, and students of history, the basin between the Tigris and Euphrates—stretching from the Persian Gulf to the foothills of Anatolia—is Mesopotamia, not a territory historically known as Kurdistan. However, 18th-century European cartographers routinely stretched the traditional Zagros Mountains area associated with Kurdistan across neighboring zones and upper river basins in ways that appear topographically blurred or imprecise by modern standards.



5. It is also telling how closely Lake Van and the surrounding area appear tied to Armenia rather than Kurdistan. That alignment reflects the reality of the 1700s, when the French edition was published, given Van's deep-rooted Armenian ecclesiastical, cultural, and demographic presence prior to the major demographic shifts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Associating Van with traditional Armenian geography on the map reflects the older Persian and Armenian geographic sources that de la Croix and European engravers relied upon.

6. Finally, neither Kurds nor Kurdistan appears as a standard framework in the original text for clear historical reasons: in the 1400s, Kurdistan was not a standardized geopolitical or cartographic entity. In Timurid administrative geography, lands covering parts of modern-day western Iran and eastern Anatolia were described through classical regional names such as Azerbaijan, Diyar Bakr, Iraq al-Arabi, or Jibal (the mountain region). When local rulers or frontier groups interacted with Timur, Yazdi's chronicle typically identified them by specific local dynasties, clans, or frontier tribes rather than grouping them under a unified modern ethno-national concept of Kurds and Kurdistan.

In conclusion, Kurdish activists tend to get overly excited whenever old maps showing “Kurdistan” surface, often going out on a limb to overstate their historical weight. Historical cartography featuring "Kurdistan" superimposed across parts of the Middle East represent a geo-cultural region spanning parts of the modern Middle East rather than an internationally recognized sovereign state or empire, which has never existed under that name. Because the region lacks universally agreed-upon sovereign borders, mapmakers draw its boundaries differently. When social media posts cite older maps—such as the 18th-century French map in this case—those maps reflect the European cartographic conventions and source traditions of the time rather than a recognized sovereign state, which helps explain why the original 1425 Persian manuscript contained no map.