



The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

THE KURDISH TOPONYMY OF NORTHERN IRAQ

This paper concentrates on those specifically Kurdish issues in northern Iraq which are of interest to the toponymist: modern history, people, language, and geographical names. It is not otherwise a specialist text. The paper is drawn together from an assortment of material, from a wide variety of sources, all contained in relevant PCGN files.

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SECTION A: Population

- 1 The Kurds number in total some 25 million people living in eight contiguous Middle Eastern countries, principally Turkey (where some 50% of them live), Iraq, Iran and Syria. Small numbers also live in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The Kurds, of whom about 75% are *Sunni* Muslim in religion¹, are commonly acknowledged as being the largest ethnic group in the world not to be in possession of its own state, and their history must be seen to some extent as a reflection of their aspirations to achieve nationhood. However, it is only in relatively recent times, perhaps only since the early 20th century, that the Kurds have moved from being a people with shared characteristics into being more of a discrete and coherent community with nationhood potential.

- 2 Iraq contains about one-fifth of the total number of Kurds, almost 5 million, making up about 19% of Iraq's total population of 26.3 million. The area of significant Kurdish habitation within Iraq extends to some 83,000 square kilometres, about 19% of Iraq and about the size of Austria. At the western and southern peripheries of this area, the proportion of Kurds among the total population is more dilute than is found further north-east; most of Iraq's Kurds live in the north-easternmost three of the country's 18 first-order administrative divisions (governorates)²:
Muḥāfazat Dahūk, with an area of 6,550 square kilometres and a total population of 461,500. The governorate's administrative centre Dahūk (3651N 4259E) has a population of 48,800.
Muḥāfazat Arbīl, with an area of 14,470 square kilometres and a total population of 1,216,400. The governorate's administrative centre Arbīl (3611N 4400E) has a population of 864,900 and is Iraq's fourth largest city.
Muḥāfazat as Sulaymānīyah, with an area of 17,020 square kilometres and a total population of 1,502,600. The governorate's administrative centre As Sulaymānīyah (3533N 4526E) has a population of 662,600 and is Iraq's sixth largest city.

- 3 The combined area of these three governorates, some 38,000 square kilometres in extent and with a population of nearly 3.2 million³, constitutes the Kurdish Autonomous Region as denoted by the central authorities in Baghdad. It forms almost 9% of the total area of Iraq. But the area which has been under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) since the Iraqi authorities withdrew in October 1991 forms in excess of 40,000 square kilometres (nearer 10% of Iraq and about the size of Denmark) and has a total population of some 3.7 million. The differing areas covered by the Kurdish Autonomous Region and the Kurdish Regional Government are shown in the map at the end of this paper.

¹ Though note that religion is not usually considered a defining feature of the Kurdish character

² Governorate = *muḥāfazah* in Arabic (*muḥāfazat* when in construct form as part of a specific name)

³ Principally, but not exclusively, Kurdish

SECTION B: Recent History: 1963-1991

- 4 Relations between the Iraqi central authorities and the Kurdish minority began to rupture seriously in 1963, five years after the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy and the year in which the revolutionary *Ba‘th* party⁴ assumed power. The new authorities immediately began a programme of razing Kurdish urban quarters and rural communities, with the inhabitants forced to evacuate and Arabs moving in to occupy the vacated space. By 1978, Baghdad had created a sanitised security zone along the borders with Iran and Turkey; in places this zone was 20 kilometres in width. All inhabitants of this zone (virtually all of them Kurds) were uprooted, many to collective resettlement camps. In the period between 1963 and the end of the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war, 4000 Kurdish settlements were destroyed⁵, 25% of the Kurdish population was displaced to be forcibly resettled or become refugees, and more than 300,000 Kurds perished.

- 5 Surreally, the Baghdad authorities simultaneously made efforts at granting the Kurds an autonomous status within Iraq. The first such offer came in March 1970, with the signing by the Iraqi government and Kurdish representatives of an accord stating that the Iraqi people constituted two nationalities: Arab and Kurd. The accord stipulated that Kurdish was to be properly recognised as an official language alongside Arabic, and would be the language of instruction in Kurdish areas. Kurds would be resettled according to their wishes; and the Kurdish areas would be united into a self-governing unit. Yet in reality, Baghdad’s policy of Arabisation continued. Under the pretext of Kurdish resettlement, many Arabs filtered into Kurdish areas, and the proposed census to determine genuinely Kurdish areas was repeatedly postponed.

- 6 Kurdish resistance to the practical outcome of the 1970 accord resulted in a fresh autonomy law being passed, this time as a *fait accompli* by Baghdad, in March 1974. This law laid down that the area with a Kurdish majority according to the 1957 census, and with Arbīl as its administrative centre, would enjoy autonomy within the framework of the Republic of Iraq. Indeed, this 1974 law contained less autonomy than the 1970 accord, and did not offer either resettlement or a new census. And in any case both efforts were wholly cosmetic; they amounted only to a notional recognition of Kurdish national identity, still as part of an administrative structure controlled by Baghdad. True functional and self-governing autonomy was never on offer.

⁴ *Ba‘th* = Renaissance

⁵ The destruction did not only affect villages; the towns of Sangasār and Qaḷā Diza were also razed

- 7 Apart from the status of the Kurds as a people, two other related issues can be seen running through the recent history of Kurdish relations with Baghdad. One concerns the size of the Kurdish area; the other concerns the city of Kirkūk⁶. The central authorities were keen for any autonomous area to be limited to the three governorates listed in paragraph 2, acknowledged by Baghdad as being “Kurdish”. In the mid-1970s, governorate boundaries were redrawn so that several Kurdish towns within the governorate of Kirkūk (such as Chamchamāl) were moved into the autonomous area (into As Sulaymānīyah governorate). This action increased the autonomous area to its present 38,000 square kilometres, but territorially concentrated the Kurdish sphere of influence into fewer governorates. As a result, the Arab population in the now smaller governorate around Kirkūk was proportionally increased.
- 8 Meanwhile, rather than the 38,000 square kilometres of the autonomous area, some Kurds were claiming up to 83,000 square kilometres of Iraq as their entitlement, this being the area of all majority and significant minority Kurdish population. This extended area included the city of Kirkūk, a city not as wholly Kurdish as Arbīl but nevertheless claimed by many Kurds to be their proper administrative centre within Iraq⁷. But Kirkūk sits among some of Iraq’s greatest oilfields, and for that vital economic reason Baghdad has never countenanced the prospect of that city being part of any autonomous region. Unlike Chamchamāl, Kurdish towns located on or near Kirkūk’s oilfields, or strategically sited between Baghdad and those oilfields⁸, have not been transferred into the autonomous area. At the same time, the central government renamed the new smaller governorate centred on Kirkūk as Muḥāfazat at Ta’ mīm⁹; *ta’ mīm* being the Arabic word for “nationalisation”; a word chosen to emphasise the nationalisation of the oil industry and underline the determination of Baghdad not to cede its Arab control over Kirkūk.

⁶ Iraq’s fifth largest city, with a population of 755,700; centre of Muḥāfazat at Ta’ mīm

⁷ The city of Diyarbakır in Turkey is usually considered as the “capital” for the Kurds as a whole

⁸ Towns such as Tuz Khurmātū and Kifīrī. As it happens, Chamchamāl, which was transferred into the autonomous area, is also located on a small oilfield, but this is separate from and more remote than the Kirkūk fields

⁹ The former larger governorate had been known as Muḥāfazat Kirkūk

SECTION C: Recent History: 1991-Present

- 9 After Iraq was expelled from Kuwait in 1991, the Baghdad authorities continued to recognise the Kurdish Autonomous Region as before¹⁰. However, they unilaterally withdrew their administration from that area in October 1991. Protected to a degree by United Nations resolutions in favour of a more genuine Kurdish autonomy within Iraq, the Kurdish population held elections in 1992 which produced a legislative parliament known as the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA), and an administrative Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Both were centred in Arbīl. The elections showed almost equal support for the two main political parties contesting the elections. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) predominated in the north-western portion of the autonomous region, while the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) held sway in the south-eastern portion. The fragile partnership between the two parties broke down acrimoniously in 1994¹¹. The ensuing fighting was resolved by a cease-fire in 1996 which saw two separate administrations evolve either side of a cease-fire line which roughly divided Dahūk and Arbīl governorates (under KDP control) from As Sulaymānīyah governorate (under PUK control).
- 10 Despite these developments, the spectre of the current authorities in Baghdad has by no means disappeared. As recently as February 2003, continued ethnic cleansing of Kurds by the Baghdad authorities was reported, with the Kurdish population of the area around Kirkūk forced to flee to refugee camps within the KRG-controlled area, and Arabs encouraged to settle in their stead. Future developments remain very uncertain, especially given that Iraq's neighbours with their own Kurdish populations (especially Turkey) are reluctant to see unconstrained autonomy for Kurds within Iraq. The KRG itself is in broad agreement in favour of a federal future for Iraq, and the KDP element of that government has drafted a proposed constitution for a "Federal Republic of Iraq". In this scenario, Iraq would comprise an Arab Region and a Kurdish Region, the latter expanding to incorporate Kirkūk (which would act as the administrative centre) and all areas of majority Kurdish population, amounting to some 60,000 square kilometres, or 14% of Iraq's territory¹². Federal Iraq would incorporate two separate nationalities: Arab and Kurd. Arabic would be the official language of the federal state and of the Arab region; Kurdish would be the official language of the Kurdish region. While many of these proposals might be acceptable in a future scenario, the notion of Kirkūk within a Kurdish region (much less as capital of that region) is likely to be met with opposition both inside and outside Iraq.

¹⁰ See paragraphs 2 & 3, and map

¹¹ The partnership took some steps towards partial resumption in October 2002

¹² About the size of Latvia, and incorporating the governorates of Dahūk, Arbīl, and As Sulaymānīyah (as at present), plus the northernmost sliver of Nīnawá, most of At Ta'mīm, the north-eastern wedge of Šalāh ad Dīn, and a narrow eastern corridor of Diyālá along the border with Iran

SECTION D: Language

- 11 Kurdish belongs to the Persian group of languages, and is the third most widely-spoken language of that group after Persian itself and Pashto. There are two major versions of Kurdish within Iraq, both utilising modified Arabic script¹³ and each in turn representing the standardised amalgam of a multiplicity of local dialects. These two versions of Kurdish are:
Kurmanji: spoken by some 2.2 million people (8.4% of Iraq’s population);
Sorani: spoken by some 2.8 million people (10.6% of Iraq’s population).
The geographical division between these two versions of Kurdish within Iraq is a roughly straight line trending north-eastwards from the confluence of the Great Zab with the Tigris to the border tri-point where Iraq, Iran and Turkey meet. The south-western half of this line roughly follows the course of the Great Zab itself. Within Iraq, Kurmanji is found to the north of this line; Sorani to the south of it.
- 12 Although fairly similar in vocabulary¹⁴, these two versions of Kurdish differ markedly in other respects. For example, whereas Kurmanji possesses gender and case distinctions, Sorani has neither of these. Mutual intelligibility is impossible without practice. Whereas several sources regard Kurmanji and Sorani as dialects of Kurdish, the University of California (UCLA) regards the two as more than dialects; as “separate but closely related language variants”. Others claim Kurmanji and Sorani to be two separate, or virtually separate, languages¹⁵.
- 13 The Kurdish alphabet (see Annex) resembles that for Persian, additionally containing modified forms of the Persian letters romanized as “r”¹⁶, “w” and “y”. Further, the Sorani version contains a modified letter “l”¹⁷. These four modifications are identified in script by the addition of a small wedge-shaped symbol (resembling a “v”) written in association with the standard Persian letter. Both Kurmanji Kurdish and Sorani Kurdish use the isolated and final forms of the Persian letter “h” word-medially, to indicate a short “a” vowel¹⁸. The letters “w” and “y” are also sometimes so used to indicate short “u” and short “i” respectively. In Sorani Kurdish, the spoken distinction between “v” and “w” has largely been lost, in favour of “w”¹⁹. Sorani, as spoken in As Sulaymānīyah, has become recognised as the standard written version of Kurdish. However, the literary development of Kurdish remains in relative infancy; it has no written tradition from the era of the Ottoman Empire, and only began seriously in the early 20th century.

¹³ But see also paragraph 18

¹⁴ However Kurmanji has become susceptible to the penetration of Arabic and Turkish loan words, whereas Sorani remains closer to Persian.

¹⁵ BBC Monitoring notes broadcasts as being in (eg) “Sorani Kurdish”, rather than simply “Kurdish”

¹⁶ A rolled “r”; see paragraph 17 and Annex

¹⁷ A velar “l”: see paragraph 17 and Annex

¹⁸ This is sometimes an open “a”, akin to “ä” and may be seen written as “e”. Thus Ḥaḷabja, as spelt by Edmonds (see Section E), is sometimes seen spelt by others as Helebje

¹⁹ The word for “water”, derived from Persian “āb”, is “āv” in Kurmanji but “āw” in Sorani

SECTION E: Toponymic Developments

- 14 As noted above (in paragraph 13), written Kurdish is a relatively recent phenomenon. The scientific application of Kurdish geographical names on to cartographic products is even more recent, dating only from the 1950s. The first serious exercise involved the UK PCGN, in conjunction with a Mr C J Edmonds. Edmonds was an acknowledged expert on Kurdish affairs, having been involved in the Kurdish area of Iraq since 1919, first as a British government official and then (during the 1940s) as an adviser to the Iraqi interior ministry. In 1956, the United Kingdom embarked on an exercise to map the Iraqi Kurdish area at a scale of 1:25,000, and Edmonds, by then retired, agreed to act as an adviser on the spelling of Kurdish toponyms.
- 15 The United Kingdom would not in normal circumstances produce mapping of a country showing names in a language other than one which was official within that country. But even in 1956, when this project began, Kurdish was the *de facto* official language of the local administration side by side with the Arabic of the central government, and so it carried an official status within its relevant portion of Iraq²⁰. Furthermore, Iraq's own renderings of Kurdish names in terms of Arabic script were proving to be haphazard and inconsistent. If field-collected Kurdish names could be recorded and written in a scientific manner, reflecting their language of origin, then the resulting corpus of toponyms should prove to be much more stable. At the same time, however, it was also determined that the names of towns and cities which formed the administrative centres of governorates in the Kurdish region should primarily be rendered in their Arabic form, since such centres were clearly part of a national Iraqi infrastructure. Arguably, such a policy might usefully also apply to the names of more recent major hydroelectric features; reservoirs and dams.
- 16 In his time in northern Iraq, Edmonds had compiled travel diaries which contained some 20,000 Kurdish geographical names. He was certain of the accuracy of 10,000 of these names, and reasonably certain of a further 4,000. The planned map exercise involved the production of almost 400 sheets of a United Kingdom 1:25,000-scale map series, designated Series K842. In the event, fewer than 20 sheets were actually completed (in the Rāwāndiz area, published between 1958 and 1962). Nevertheless, most of the 8,000 Kurdish names applicable to the originally planned area of 400 sheets did subsequently become incorporated into a wider-ranging United States 1:50,000-scale map series, designated Series K743.

²⁰ In fact, Kurdish had been official for the purposes of administration and primary education in parts of this region since 1918

- 17 PCGN and Edmonds devised a system for the romanization of these names for this map exercise (see Annex). Its basis was a system for the romanization of Persian which has since become the United Nations recommended system for the romanization of that language. Edmonds rendered the additional Kurdish modified letter “l” and modified letter “r” by means of a sub-dot or sub-comma: modified (velar) “l” = ɭ
modified (rolled) “r” = ɽ .
Edmonds used the following vowels in Kurdish names:
short vowels: a i u²¹
long vowels: ā ē ī ō ū

- 18 More recent methods of writing Kurdish, those directly utilising Roman script, usually employ a Roman alphabet different from the one used in the romanization system devised by Edmonds. In particular, there is an alphabet found fairly widely in Kurdish dictionaries and internet websites, which displays the following differences from the alphabet used in the Edmonds romanization system:

| Romanization (Edmonds): | Kurdish Roman (eg www.kurdmedia.com): |
|--------------------------------|--|
| a | a / e [“e” on occasion: see footnote 18 on page 6] |
| ā | â |
| ch | ç |
| ē | ê |
| h / ħ | h |
| ī | î |
| j | c |
| kh | x |
| l / ɭ | l |
| ō | ô |
| r / ɽ | r |
| sh | ş [not universal: “sh” still frequently employed] |
| ū | û |

SECTION F: Examples of Kurdish Toponyms in Iraq

| | |
|--|---|
| Ākrē 3645N 4353E | Ṙawāndiz 3636N 4431E |
| Āmēdī 3705N 4329E | Shaqḷāwa 3623N 4420E |
| Chamchamāḷ 3532N 4449E | Slēmānī (<i>Arabic</i> =As Sulaymānīyah) 3533N 4526E |
| Chwārtā 3543N 4534E | Zākhō 3708N 4241E |
| Dihōk (<i>Arabic</i> =Dahūk) 3651N 4259E | Zē-i Bādīnān [<i>sometimes</i> Zē-i Gawra] |
| Ḥaḷabja 3510N 4559E | (<i>Arabic</i> =Nahr az Zāb al Kabīr; |
| Hawlēr (<i>Arabic</i> =Arbīl) 3611N 4400E | =Great Zab River) 3559N 4320E |
| Pēnjwīn 3537N 4556E | Zē-i Kōya [<i>sometimes</i> Zē-i Gichka] |
| Qaḷā Diza 3611N 4507E | (<i>Arabic</i> =Nahr az Zāb aṣ Ṣaghīr; |
| Ṙānya 3615N 4453E | =Little Zab River) 3514N 4325E |

²¹ Edmonds also allowed for the use of **ö** and **ü** in borrowed Turkish words, eg “köy”, “büyük”

SECTION G:**Glossary of Kurdish Toponymic Terms in Iraq**

| | |
|--------------|---|
| āv | river, stream; found mainly in the northern (Kurmanji) area |
| āw | river, stream; found mainly in the southern (Sorani) area |
| ban | plain; ridge |
| band | ridge |
| bāsk | spur, ridge(s) |
| cham | (intermittent) river, (intermittent) stream |
| chay | river, stream [from Turkish <i>çay</i>] |
| chiyā | mountain(s); found mainly in the northern (Kurmanji) area [cf shākh] |
| chōm | river, stream |
| dagh | mountain [from Turkish <i>dağ</i>] |
| dē | village |
| dōl | valley |
| galāl | stream |
| galī | gully, gorge, ravine |
| gird | mound |
| gōm | pool |
| gōr | cemetery, tomb |
| jabal | hills; specifically the foothills between Jabal Ḥamrīn (3430N 4430E) and Qara Dāgh (3518N 4518E) [as in Arabic] |
| kānī | spring |
| kēl | mountain |
| kēw | mountain; usually for features between the Great Zab and Little Zab |
| khīṛ | (intermittent) lesser watercourse |
| kuṛ | mountain, peak |
| mīla | pass |
| qaḷā | fort |
| ṛū | river, stream |
| ṛūbār | river, stream |
| sar | mountain, peak |
| shākh | mountain(s); found mainly in the southern (Sorani) area [cf chiyā] |
| shīv | ravine, lesser watercourse; found mainly in the northern (Kurmanji) area |
| shīw | ravine, lesser watercourse; found mainly in the southern (Sorani) area |
| su | stream [as in Turkish] |
| tepe | hill [as in Turkish] |
| zurg | broken foothills |

Romanization of Kurdish
(Edmonds/PCGN System 1956)

| | | | |
|-----|---|-------------------------|--|
| 1. | ء | ' | see note 1 |
| 2. | ب | b | |
| 3. | پ | p | |
| 4. | ت | t | see note 2 |
| 5. | ج | j | |
| 6. | چ | ch | |
| 7. | ح | ḥ / ħ | see note 3 |
| 8. | خ | kh | |
| 9. | د | d | |
| 10. | ر | r | |
| 11. | ړ | ṛ / ř | see note 3; also written ر ړ or رر according to type available |
| 12. | ز | z | see note 2 |
| 13. | ژ | zh | |
| 14. | س | s | see note 2 |
| 15. | ش | sh | |
| 16. | ع | ' (inverted apostrophe) | |
| 17. | غ | gh | |
| 18. | ف | f | |
| 19. | ڤ | v | see note 4 |
| 20. | ق | q | |
| 21. | ك | k | |
| 22. | گ | g | |
| 23. | ل | l | |
| 24. | ل | l / l̥ | see note 3; also written ل |
| 25. | م | m | |
| 26. | ن | n | |
| 27. | و | w (v) | see note 4 |
| 28. | ه | h | see note 5 |
| 29. | ی | y | |

Vowels:

30. ه a see note 5
31. ا ā
32. ع ī (i) see note 6
(no mark) i see note 6
33. ع ē
34. و u
35. وو ū (ü) pronounced ü in some northern dialects
36. و̣ ō
37. و̇ ö sometimes written و

!

Notes

1. In pure Kurdish words *hamza* is borne by *ya* (ﺀ) and occurs only before initial vowels; it is not romanized. Medial and final *hamza* in Arabic borrowings are represented by ' (apostrophe).
2. The letters ط ظ ص ض ط ط ت do not occur in pure Kurdish words. In Arabic borrowings some writers retain these letters, others substitute ز س ز ت ز respectively. The former may be distinguished in romanization, if necessary as: ﺽ , ﺿ , ﺺ , ﺗ and ﺯ .
3. The choice of a sub-dot or sub-comma is at the user's discretion.
4. و̇ is used to represent "v" in foreign words. Some south Kurdish writers use it to represent the "v" in conscious borrowings from northern Kurdish dialects. و is pronounced as a "v" in the north and as a "w" elsewhere.
5. ه as a vowel is used only in the separate and joined final forms.
6. In pure Kurdish words, the vowel ع is always long ī, except when it represents *izafa* and the pronominal suffix of the 2nd and 3rd person singular, where it is romanized "i". The neutral vowel, a very short "i", is not written in Kurdish but is represented in romanization by "i".
7. The Arabic sign *shaddah* (ّ) is not used in Kurdish; doubled consonants, which are rare, are written twice. *Shaddah* might be used in Arabic borrowings but, as in unpointed Arabic, would generally be omitted.

NORTHERN IRAQ

