

# The Kurds

## An Encyclopedia of Life, Culture, and Society

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## Sherif Pasha's "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People" to the Conference of Peace in Paris on February 6, 1919

Sherif Pasha (Şerif Paşa), who was born in Istanbul in 1865 to a noble Kurdish family, went through a French-style education, first in the prestigious Galatasaray Mekteb-i Sultani in Istanbul, Turkey, and later at Saint-Cyr Military School in Paris, France. Since his father, Said Pasha, served as the minister of foreign affairs during Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), Sherif Pasha also chose to work in the bureaucracy, respectively, as an aide-de-camp in the palace, military attaché in Paris, and finally as the Ottoman ambassador to Stockholm. He secretly supported the Committee of Progress and Union (CUP), which deposed Abdulhamid II in 1909. A few months after the change of regime, Sherif decided not to participate in the CUP government because of the dominance of a certain group with authoritarian and Turkish nationalist leanings in the CUP and finally departed for Paris, which was going to be the permanent place for his exile. He established the Ottoman Liberal Party and financed the oppositional groups in Europe. As part of this opposition, he established a monthly journal named *Mècheroutiette* (*The Constitutional*) and had several political dissents write articles for it in French and Turkish. Once the Ottomans were defeated as part of the Central Powers in World War I, the Allied Powers organized a Peace Conference in Paris in 1919 in order to decide the fate of the post-Ottoman nations, such as Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and Arabs. Besides the representation of them by the European powers, several ethnic groups decided to have a delegate represent them. Led by Sayyid Abdulkadir of Nehri, the Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti (The Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan) chose Sherif Pasha as the head of their delegation. On August 10, 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed, and Turkey agreed to give independence to several minorities, including the Kurds.

Following is an extract of a letter written by Sherif Pasha to the Allied Powers, especially to the United Kingdom, and the conference committee. The letter was later elaborated with more supporting arguments and published with the title of *Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People*. The letter, which Sherif Pasha wrote in French and English, argues that a state for the Kurds will stabilize the region, secure the rights of the Kurds, and create a buffer zone against the threat of Bolshevik Russia. He suggests that the Kurds have the will and the majority in the region proposed in order to form a separate state.

Metin Atmaca

### Excerpt from Letter Written by Sherif Pasha to the Allied Powers

Seeing that the Armenian affairs are shortly to be discussed before the Peace Conference; and that the Kurdish interests have no other qualified defender at Paris

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than myself . . . I think it (is) my duty to bring forward before the High Interallied Assembly the national claims of my race. This race forms not only the greatest majority in the regions inhabited by the Armenians, but the homogeneity of which still more gives it the right of asking for a most minute examination with respect to it . . .

If in the course of the Peace Conference a political independence were accorded, the Armenians and Arabs of Turkey, it would be natural and just for the Allies to take into serious consideration the homogenous agglomeration constituting the principle of nationalities that is invoked in a feeling of justice, and which is incontestable the principle of nationalities that is invoked in a feeling of justice, and which proves a long foreseeing policy of President Wilson, gives the Kurds the hope of their national interest being safeguarded in the name of this same principle of that justice and peace which is to come. There can, therefore, be no doubt of there being question, during the Peace Conference, of political autonomy for Kurdistan any more at least than those for Armenia and Arabia.

If it be desired to be able to apply the principle of nationalities useful to bring out in relief the vital conditions which require the setting up of a Kurdish State which will be found to be a natural neighbor. A "luminaire" (preliminary) observation is necessary . . .

Were the Kurdish people deprived of its sources of wealth, it would, by fate, be forced to seek compensation in the border countries, giving itself up to "razzias" (raids) to the greatest detriment of the neighboring states.

Of all the peoples of Asia, the Kurds are the one that might form a buffer state of the first water to bar the path of the bolshevist current, for it should be noted that the Armenians are seriously contaminated by these dangerous ideas and that by reason of antagonism between their political parties and the rivalries among their revolutionary committees they will never be in a state to offer the same safeguards and guarantees to their neighbors . . .

So that a Kurdistan may be viable and consecrate itself to its economic development, adopt modern civilization and abandon nomadic life it should be formed out of the vilayets (provinces) of Darbékirè, Kharpout, Bitlis, Mossul, and of Sanjak of Ourfa.

Is there a frontier so natural as river or even a water course and mountains? It would be necessary, if the worst come to accord to Kurdistan a very definite frontier line, comprising all the mountains where the Kurds have their summer pasturages, and a borderline extending over a score of kilometers from Kochlikan, Kalé-Korant, on the river Zey, Back-Kalé, Vostan, Kindrants, Akhlad, rejoining the Murad Sou at Cop, and thence, following the Eastern Euphrates, the Mourad Tchai and the real Euphrates, taking in into Kurdistan the left bank of these rivers as far as Hana, and reaching in a straight line Tekrit where Saladin the glory of Turkistan was born, and the South of the Persian by following Djebahamerin and Adalia between Kifrim and Kanikin . . .

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In the valleys where they are grouped in compact tribes, notably in the basin of the great Zab, then the Kurds constitute a nationality powerful enough to have the ambition in the face of Turks and Persians of forming a distinct state . . .

Moreover, an international commission should be charged with the work of tracing out the demarcation of its frontier according to the principle of nationalities so as to include in Kurdistan all the lands where Kurds are in the majority.

To this end, one might proceed by means of a popular vote under control of this commission, which we are certain, would end up in the same conclusion as the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, who at the “Chambre des Députés”, Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1895 said “in the Turkish Provinces that alone, are under discussion at the present time, according to the statistics we have in hands the Armenian population represent certainly but a proportion of more than 13% of the inhabitants. In the vilayet of Asia, their distribution is besides very unevenly carried out, sometimes denser, sometimes more scattered. In a word, we do not discern in these provinces a point where this unhappy population is really in a majority and where it might form a center knot around which the constitution of a certain autonomy might be carried out.”

The official testimony as well as the principle of nationalities hold out to us the hope of the legitimate claims the Kurdish race being thoroughly and impartially examined and fair solution being arrived at with regard to them.

Paris, February 6, 1919  
General Cherif Pacha

**Source:** The British National Archives, Foreign Office (FO) 608/95. Reprinted in Destani, B. (2006). *Minorities in the Middle East 4 Volume Set: Kurdish Communities 1918–1974, Vol. 1* (pp. 34–38). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Archive Editions Limited.

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