

Who are the Kurds?

by [Besheer Mohamed](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

In the continuing conflict in Iraq, Kurds frequently are mentioned alongside Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a Muslim populations as one of the key groups involved in power struggles for which sharp religious divides have played a major part. But while the Kurds are a crucial part of Iraq's political makeup, they are an ethnic group, not a distinct religious sect within Islam.

Kurds are more appropriately compared to Arabs, the largest ethnic group in Iraq, or other regional ethnic groups such as Assyrians or Turkmen.

Much has been reported about the desire of many Kurds for greater autonomy or even independence from Baghdad. However, when it comes to religion, Kurds share a good deal in common with the Arab majority, especially Sunni Muslims.

Overall, Arabs represent 78 percent of Iraq's population, while Kurds are 16 percent and other, smaller ethnic groups constitute the remainder, according to a 2011 Pew Research survey. In terms of religious sect, Iraqi Arabs are somewhat split: the survey found that most said they were Shi'a Muslims (62 percent), but about three in ten identified themselves as Sunnis (30 percent) and 6 percent said they were "just Muslim."

Nearly all Iraqi Kurds consider themselves Sunni Muslims. In our survey, 98 percent of Kurds in Iraq identified themselves as Sunnis and only two percent identified as Shi'a. (A small minority of Iraqi Kurds, including Yazidis, are not Muslims.) But being a Kurd does not necessarily mean alignment with a particular religious sect. In neighboring Iran, according to our data, Kurds were split about evenly between Sunni and Shi'a.

Although recent conflicts in the region may have resulted in population shifts, our survey found that overall, Shi'a Arabs made up about half of Iraq's population (49 percent), Sunni Arabs comprised about a quarter (24 percent) and Sunni Kurds were a somewhat smaller share (15 percent). Other Muslims account for about 8 percent of Iraq's population. Five percent of Iraq's population does not identify as Muslim.

These three major religious and ethnic groupings in Iraq—Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Sunni Kurds—share certain core religious beliefs. For example, each group professes near universal belief in God (Allah) and the Prophet Muhammad, and more than nine in ten members of each group say that they fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Though there are some important distinctions in belief and practice between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, the religious differences between Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds are comparatively small. For example, Shi'a Arabs are united in their belief that visiting the shrines of Muslim saints is acceptable (98 percent). Fewer Sunni Arabs (71 percent) and Sunni Kurds (59 percent) support this practice.

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