

Kurdish Cultural Resource

Within the UK, law enforcement agencies investigating Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking deal with a high proportion of victims who are foreign nationals. There is a demand therefore, for cultural competency. Police officers and staff who are equipped with tailored cultural resources that acknowledge and appreciate specific cultural needs are better positioned to gain the necessary trust of modern slavery victims and support them appropriately.

This resource, accompanied by the webinar launch aims to provide an insight into the Kurdish culture and has been collated using the expertise of many individuals credited below.

It is important to note that people within a single country can have a range of experiences, attitudes and cultural practices and, as such, individuals may not conform to every generalisation about their culture. The Kurdish culture includes influences from various backgrounds, across 4 main regions and it is not possible to include all the many intricacies within this guide.

Within the 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report by the U.S. Department of State, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been recognized for its significant strides in combating human trafficking within the Kurdistan Region, with more cases being prosecuted and specialist police units being established, but more is needed, such as improving victim support and linking in with NGOs. This guide is aimed at providing support to front line officers to engage effectively with members of the Kurdish community.



Introduction and historical background:

Today there are estimates of over 35-40 million Kurds across the world, but they exist with no country to call their own.

Kurds straddle borders and are based across 4 main states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, as the map below indicates.

Many different groups exist such as **Zaza and Alevi Kurds in Turkey** and the **Gorans and Khorasani Kurds in Iran** and the **Yazidis (Êzîdî)** predominantly in Kurdistan Region of Iraq and a smaller population in Syria.

To understand the Kurdish culture, that has influences from all 4 states, an understanding of their history in these 4 states is vital. Kurdish history is dominated by political struggle, persecution, regional rivalries and battles such as the **Ottoman and Persian wars** and **Iraqi and Syrian wars** more recently. Islamic rule over the Kurdish homeland by the Ottoman Empire ended after **WWI**, but the Kurds were segmented into different countries that split the Middle East into British and French “influence zones”. They would continue to seek sovereignty with numerous revolts, including those against the British after WWI, and during the First Iraqi-Kurdish War in the 1960’s.

The autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq was finally established in 1970, however the agreement fell apart by 1974. Over the next decade much violence ensued with the Iraqi government using chemical weapons to kill thousands of Kurds.

During the early 1990’s, the Iraqi government withdrew their armed forces from the region but continued to oppress the Kurdish people. After the Ba’athist government was overthrown in 2003, elections were held and the **Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI)** began to be governed by the **Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)**, who still govern today, however formal independence is not recognised by the Iraqi federal government.

There are estimates of over 1 billion barrels of Kurdistan oil reserves in Iraqi-Kurdistan which is almost a third of all of Iraq’s reserves. If the KRG autonomous region were a nation-state, they would rank 10th in the world for largest petrol reserves, which is the cause of increased conflict in the region.

In Iran, after the **1979 revolution**, the new Islamic regime viewed the Kurds, with their different language and traditions as dangerous to the new government, resulting in considerable violence and tension that remains today. The **Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK)** is a political and militant organization, that is pushing for Kurdish autonomy in the Iranian provinces of **Kordestan, Kermanshah and West Azerbaijan**.

The early 20th century saw a growing sentiment of Kurdish nationalism and political activism. A Kurdish state was created with support from the Soviet Union in the city of **Mahabad** after **WWII**. However, the so-called Kurdish Republic of Mahabad collapsed after the Soviets pulled out of Iran. Iran has repeatedly bombed targets in Iraq linked to Iranian Kurds, from the **Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)**, who have sought refuge across the border. There was a resurgence of attacks, indirectly following the outbreak of the **Israel/Gaza war**, with Iran again directly targeting sites in Kurdish settlements.



Map showing areas of majority Kurdish settlement

Turkey – “Northern Kurdistan / Bakur” Eastern and Southeastern Turkey is home to around half of the global Kurdish population.

Iraq – “Southern Kurdistan / Başûr” Northern Iraq contains the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a constitutionally recognised autonomous region with its own government (KRG).

Iran – “Eastern Kurdistan / Rojhilat”
Syria – “Western Kurdistan / Rojava”. Smaller Kurdish populations also exist in Armenia & Azerbaijan, Lebanon, former Soviet states, and across Europe.

Introduction and historical background continued:

Turkey is home to the largest Kurdish population in the world with estimates between 10 and 25 million (Source: CIA World Factbook). As the Ottoman Empire declined in the early 19th century, Kurdish aims for autonomy arose. Turkish Kurds continue to live in very poor economic conditions and were traditionally nomadic livestock farmers. The Turkish Kurd political group; the **Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)** is labelled a terrorist group, with their leader, **Abdullah Öcalan**, being held in Turkish prison since 1999.

In Turkey, Kurds were displaced to Turkish cities over the decades when many villages were destroyed or evacuated during the conflict between Kurdish movements and the Turkish state that began in the 1980s. Among Kurdish communities, Alevi Kurds have at times faced additional discrimination and marginalization due to both their ethnic and religious identity. The Kurdish language was banned in Turkey for at least 6 decades in both in education and public use, suppressing their culture, with some academics claiming a case of linguicide. The younger generation may not be able to speak Kurdish as a result.

Syrian Kurds occupy the northeastern region of Syria, also known as **Rojava**, constituting the largest ethnic minority in Syria. The **Democratic Union Party (PYD)** is the largest political group in Kurdish Syria and is fighting against the Syrian Government and against the Islamic State. The military angle of the PYD consists of the **People's Protection Units (YPG)** and the **Women's Protection Units (YPJ)**, famous for its all-female special unit that handles crimes of domestic violence and rape.

In Syria, many Kurds suffered following the outbreak of the **Syrian war in 2011**. Kurds found to be critical of Islamic ideology were persecuted and many lost their lives fighting against ISIS. Ongoing tensions remain. In 2015, Syrian government troops pulled out of Kurdish Syria and left Kurdish forces in control. The future of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria that was formed remains uncertain, with the new Syrian government negotiating the integration of the autonomous region into a unified Syria and the sharing of key assets like oil fields and border crossings.

A number of other Kurdish political parties exist: the **Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI)**, the **Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala-PIK)**, the **Komala Communist Party of Iran (Komala-CPI)** and the **Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK)** this list is not exhaustive.

There is a common belief that many of the struggles in the Middle East over the past century relate back to the **Sykes Picot Agreement**, drafted towards the end of **WWI** by the British and French authorities that changed the map of the Middle East. The **1920 Treaty of Sèvres** included provisions that opened the possibility of Kurdish autonomy and a potential referendum on independence; however, it was never implemented. It was superseded by the **1923 Treaty of Lausanne**, which recognized the borders of modern Turkey and did not provide for a Kurdish state. Kurdish populations continued to face marginalization, contributing to enduring grievances over political recognition, cultural rights, and autonomy. Today 10s of millions of stateless ethnicities, including the Kurds, straddle makeshift borders created by 100-year-old agreements.

In February 2026, 5 Iranian Kurdish political parties signed a coalition framework, aimed at the creation of a unified political front, but with 2 of the major parties in the region absent in the process, long-term viability remains uncertain. Many believe that the missing piece to establishing independence for Kurdistan is the support of a superpower such as that with the US for Israel and the former Soviet Union for Georgia. Kurdistan, as a land-locked region, depends on its neighbours for supplies and oil exports; the main economic resource. As a crossroads of the Middle East, continued conflict looks likely.

Qalat Erbil City, Kurdistan



TIP!: Trauma informed practice is vital, triggers may be linked to war, persecution, arduous journeys, being in exile as well as exploitation experienced.



Greetings:

The Kurdish language is a West Iranian Indo-European language, from the same family as the Persian language but not a direct derivative. The main varieties of Kurdish are **Kurmanji and Sorani**, some other lesser-known dialects are **Southern Kurdish or Kalhori, Zazaki and Hewrami /Gorani**.

Most Kurds speak Kurmanji, but this is important to check prior to booking an interpreter. Most Kurds from Kurdistan Region of Iran are bilingual in Kurdish and Persian. Most Kurds from the Kurdistan Region of Turkey will speak Kurmanji and use Turkish Latin version or Hawar alphabet. Central Kurds in Iran and Iraq mainly speak Sorani and use a modified Arabic alphabet. An interpreter in their 2nd or 3rd language may be preferred due to mistrust or fear or interpreters reporting back to their communities.

Introductory greetings prior to any further discussion is expected as per the Kurdish custom. A few key phrases have been provided below in both the Kurmanji and Sorani dialects:

English	Kurmanji	Sorani
Hello	Silav	Slaw
Welcome	Bi xêr bê	Be xêr bête
How are you	Çawa yî?	Chonî?
Are you okay/are you well?	Tu Baş î?	Tu Baş î?
Good morning	Roj Baş	Roj Bash
Thank you	Spas	Supas/sipas
Where are you from?	Tu ji ku derê yî?	Khalke kwei?
Do you understand?	Tu têdigihijî?	Haly bwee/tegishte?

The importance of physical space differs for males and females within the Kurdish culture. Males may be seen shaking hands, placing a hand on another's shoulder, or embracing as a welcome. Shaking hands is often considered appropriate for male-to-male contact, but this is not common for males to females amongst the Kurds from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It is recommended to ask what is preferred at a first meeting. Generally physical contact should be avoided towards women wearing a Hijab. The majority of Kurds living in the UK are Alevi Kurds, and many women do not wear the hijab although practices vary by individual and family background.



TIPS: Some Kurdish people may downplay language barriers due to pride, embarrassment or feeling uncomfortable, leading to misunderstandings.

Use eye contact to assist with engagement, but do not over stare and keep to a warmer tone of voice.

Gender appropriate officers and interpreters should be considered wherever possible. Ask what dialect is preferred. Clearly explain your role and confidentiality.

Key Cultural Elements



There is not a single Kurdish culture but rather a **merger of backgrounds** from 4 main states: Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Other factors such as **religion and educational background** are also important influencing factors on Kurdish cultural identity. Each part of Kurdistan has its own **music, food, dance and clothes**; Lara Dizeyer is a famous Kurdish fashion designer. This bringing together of different cultures means the Kurdish people can be described as being very tolerant of other cultures.

Despite the different backgrounds, a key element of their culture that unites Kurdish people is the idea of **collectiveness versus individuality**. They can be open to influences from across the world and can be liberal in their thinking.

The collective focus of **family and kinship** are essential social mechanisms, especially in rural areas that tend to be more restrictive and conservative. The symbol of family is seen as sacred, Kurds are extremely **loyal** to their relatives, with the elderly particularly being well respected. More traditional tribal and clan structures can still be found to be present, especially in rural areas but also in urban areas. Kurdish males may feel under pressure to appear strong, calm, self-sufficient and to protect family reputation by avoiding shame or dishonour, they may well be expected to uphold the family's honour through control or protection of women. It is crucial to note that not all Kurdish men think or act this way, but these traits may impact on the level of engagement; they may deny exploitation, mask fear with anger, or avoid disclosure, seeing this as a very private and family matter.

Kurdish pride is very important. If Kurdish people feel humiliated, threatened or belittled then reactions can be significant. This may stem from how they were treated in the past and the continued struggles they face. There is a strong desire to be socially accepted. To not have a recognised state taps into their need for a recognised national identity.

TIP!: There is an argument that because Kurdistan is not recognised as an independent state, Kurdish migrants are often recorded under the nationality of the countries in which they hold citizenship such as Iranian, Turkish, Syrian, or Iraqi. As UK census categories do not consistently provide a distinct option for Kurdish ethnicity, many Kurds are registered under broader national identities, resulting in limited reliable data on their population and contributing to their relative invisibility in official statistics. Ask for country of birth as opposed to nationality to avoid causing offence.

Religion plays a key role in Kurdish culture, more of which will be described later. Kurdish people are a very hospitable and socially active, they tend to enjoy sharing time and lives with friends and family. Food is a big part of their culture too along with music, poetry, literacy and dancing at celebrations and for preserving culture in times of oppression. Laments can be sung at funerals, particularly within the Alevi culture.

The continued political struggle should not be underestimated in terms of its importance in the Kurdish culture; they strive to have a recognised state. It can be said that Kurds are very resilient as a result of their past and continuing fight for autonomy. Kurds retreated into the mountains for sanctuary over the years, embracing their traditional nomadic lifestyle, a Kurdish proverb states that Kurds have no friends but the mountains. They can also be said to have reinvented themselves from Muslims, to political activists, to nationalists and freedom fighters but they continue to be very oppressed.



TIP!: Avoid misinterpreting fear or trauma as aggression. Recognise the honour and masculinity pressures.

Migration:



Reasons that Kurdish people have migrated vary from political persecution especially those Kurds in Iran and Turkey through to widespread instability and displacement as a result of the Syrian War.

Persecution means Kurds have been criminalised in Iran especially, for every possible expression of Kurdish culture. They have had to choose between exile or remaining in a system that attempts to eradicate their people. There is no opportunity for political expression, there will be risk of long-term imprisonment or even death if attempted. Even though Kurds constitute 10-15% of the population in Iran they represent more than 50% of political prisoners in the State. (Source: Iran Human Rights Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran 2024). Some Kurds have migrated from persecution of sexuality.

In Turkey the state has refused to accept the Kurds, instead they argue that they have just one nation, one language and one people. Kurds were called the '**Mountain Turks**', and were accused of needing discipline and civilization, their language was banned and they were at times, treated as terrorists and faced genocide. There has been forced displacement in Turkey of the Kurds throughout history.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a constitutionally recognised autonomous federal region; however, several areas outside its official boundaries, commonly referred to as the "Kurdish disputed territories," including **Khanaqin and Kirkuk** remain contested. Here the Kurds face discrimination in employment opportunities and will often leave, due to on-going persecution.



Picture source/credit: The Kurdish Project: <https://thekurdishproject.org/>
Some estimates state the Kurdish population is now over 40 million.

Some Kurds moved abroad to the USA during the **Iraq War** and settled in Nashville, Texas and California. Kurds used to come over to the States from Mexico, prior to President Trump's strict immigration rules.

UK Diaspora is widespread, with division still visible between the 4 Kurdish regions, but many have settled in London from Enfield to Haringey, to Stoke Newington and Hackney, to Acton and Lambeth. Other communities exist in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Leicester, Brighton, Bristol and other larger cities. Supermarkets, barbershops, and restaurants owned and operated by Kurds from the Kurdistan region of Turkey are common in many UK cities. Diaspora communities provide safety and belonging for migrants but at times can also facilitate exploitation and concealment of abuse.

For those Kurds that arrived here illegally, they may not know or consider that they have committed a crime in this respect. They may see it as doing something good for their family, seeking a better life. Once they encounter the authorities, their dream may be shattered, only to be replaced with fear and frustration. There may well be pressure on those that have migrated to send money back home and take care of family members as opportunities are so limited, this can be seen as a moral obligation. Victims may prioritise income for family overseas over personal safety. A pension scheme does not exist in Iran and other states, migrants may feel obligated to care for elderly relatives similarly, to invest in the education of extended family members or finance the building of a house.

!TIP Kurds based in Turkey, may often say they are Turkish as opposed to Kurdish or Alevi for fear of persecution.

Migration continued:

Economic hardship has been a reason for migration with very high inflation in Turkey and other states, and Kurds have very little opportunities for income generation. High levels of unemployment have forced many Kurds to undertake smuggling work between Iran and Iraq. Kurdish regions are sidelined by the Islamic Republic. Political and economic factors push Kurds to leave their regions. Due to the lack of work in Kurdish areas, Kurds tend to migrate to **Tehran, Karaj or Tabriz**. Many Kurds in these cities do not belong to any privileged group, authorities often screen Kurds to see what class or ethnic group they belong to.

Many are aware of the risks of migrating and the long arduous journeys, but they are desperate to escape persecution, the goal is more important than the risks. Circumstances they expect to find in the UK are frequently not what they experience on arrival, and many will have spent all their savings on travelling. Many fear dishonour and shame for their family if they fail to make a success. The voices of smugglers are louder than those of law enforcement warnings, with social media and meme advertising opportunities for **'get rich quick schemes'**. Kurds that have newly arrived in the UK will often seek out existing Kurdish communities for support to find employment and accommodation; potentially calling for a sense of solidarity with their migrant counterparts.



Kurdish OCGs based in **Calais and Dunkirk** are often facilitators of small boat crossings to the UK, principally for the **Horn of Africa migrants**, with their longstanding presence in the area, using social media and communication platforms to engage with migrants once in Europe. Please see tip in Key Cultural Elements relating to nationalities of migrants.

!TIPS: Up to 300,000 Kurds from Western Iran driven by high prices of food items, poverty and high unemployment live as **kolbars**, Kurdish couriers, (also referred to as **'kulbars' 'koolbars', kolbers' or 'kolbaran'**) smuggling items across the Iran-Iraq border, mainly household items but on rare occasions alcohol, weapons and narcotics. In Kurdish **'Kol'** or **'Kul'** means a person's back and **'Bar'** means **'carry'** or **'delivery'**.

Most kolbars are men but increasingly, women and children are being used. Kurdish women kolbars, may dress in less conspicuous or traditionally masculine clothing to reduce the risk of harassment or assault during border crossings.

Iran does not generally criminalise kolbars, some were issued a **'kolbari card'**, allowing them to carry legal goods across borders, others have been prosecuted and face harsh treatment by border guards.

Smuggling activity goes up during Winter months as employment opportunities are even more limited. Kolbars usually only receive a tiny amount for the transaction, with those higher up the chain reaping the profits. Kolbars will often lack legal protection, leaving them vulnerable to violence or wage theft and many can ill afford medical fees.

Taboo subjects/prejudices:

In many Kurdish communities, particularly those in traditional, rural areas, open discussion of sexual matters is strongly discouraged. This applies to both consensual sexual behaviour and importantly to experiences of sexual harm and crime. A reluctance to discuss sexual matters like sexual harm is often culturally rooted and should not be interpreted as evasiveness or lack of credibility.

Attitudes varies significantly amongst the Kurdish communities towards the LGBTQ+ community but LGBTQ+ members can be disowned, or even killed, especially in rural areas and is seen as a sin in Iran, for instance. Non-heteronormative identities and relationships may challenge traditional expectations around gender roles, marriage and family structure. **Extra marital affairs** tend to be strongly criticised, especially for females as are pregnancies out of wedlock, punishment can again lead to death. Divorce is usually discouraged especially for females; who are often blamed, if they are not in employment, they will be dependent on parents or brothers for financial support and children can be taken from the female.

To be involved in **crime** would also be considered shameful, although fighting for the cause for a Kurdish nation state is honoured by the struggle, not dishonoured. Women who have faced **sexual exploitation** are often blamed and held responsible, she will often be seen as a willing participant and will not be safe. Families may attempt to cover up for fear of stigma and social persecution; they may feel the issue of honour belongs to the whole community. Women will tend not to come forward and disclose, unless specifically asked and feel trusted, they may well fear they will be judged as a perpetrator. Sexual violence may lead to **honour-based abuse/killings, FGM and forced marriage**, so this needs to be raised extremely sensitively. **Islamist fundamentalists** and other traditionalists may justify violence against women, in the name of religion, especially within the family.

Seniority as previously described is important, so disrespecting elders or leaders with the family or community would be severely disapproved of.

Mental health and **physical disabilities** can often be stigmatised, Kurdish people may hide issues being experienced and tend not to seek help. Families may not fully understand their children's condition and benefits of administering medication to children with known issues, they may not know how to deal with symptoms presented and feel embarrassment, they may opt to care for relatives privately.

Criticisms of **faith**, religious leaders and minority groups should be avoided at all costs. Although a secularly tolerant culture, religious tensions remain, particularly with more traditional Sunni Muslims and other groups. Early discussions focused on religious views should be circumvented, likewise with political affiliations.

!TIPS:

Take off shoes prior to entering someone's house, as a mark of respect, Kurdish people will often pray on the floor.

To prevent the risk of family dishonour and shame, consider not contacting a victim's family directly for risk of humiliation and further trauma. Likewise, for those in the community, an option would be to use NGO representatives and interpreters from a different part of the Kurdish community where possible, for example Iraqi Kurd background if the victim is Turkish Kurd, or an interpreter that speaks Kurdish but does not identify as Kurdish.



Family Structure / gender dynamics:

Kurdish culture called for large families in the past, with strong kinship ties. Farming required larger families, now with the pull of migration to cities, **nuclear families** are more common to promote affordability. Sons used to bring wives to live in their father's households but again, this is declining due to migration and economic reasons. Children may however still stay with the family until marriage, even if divorced, they may well return to live with relatives, rather than live alone. There is often a shock for younger generation Kurds that come to live in the UK and learning how to become independent. The younger generations may adapt but their families may feel stuck between Western and Eastern cultures, this can lead to conflict and forced marriages for instance.

A **tribal nomad structure** existed up to the 20th century. Some tribal context still continues with leadership often given to the elders in the tribes to resolve conflicts and make decisions, especially in rural areas. Family and **kinship** remain very important in terms of organisation, the respect for the **elderly** and seniority remains. Family decisions may outweigh individual welfare.

Although **traditional roles** still exist, women occupy a stronger position and are now in education and employment. They have been at the centre of political struggles, with the **women's liberation cause** equating to national liberation in terms of importance. The gender equality movement has been particularly prominent within **Northern Syria**, with women now present in the military. Every position must be shared by men and women in a co-chair system, likewise in education and other sectors. There is some resistance from men, but women have political and ideological backing. Kurds have gone through a transformation in the fight against **ISIS**. Kurdish women are recognized for their bravery defending their homeland, with many women fighting ISIS and the **Kurdish Regional Government** has more women in post than in either the UK or US Governments.

Despite this liberation movement, there is still a **patriarchal structure**, but this has progressed to a certain extent due to political and economic transformations. There may be more of shared responsibility of household chores in a more modern household but females overall, tend to have more of a role in household and childcare duties. Household finances may still tend to be controlled by males, with the females dependent on the males as the traditional earners and the overall head of the household.

Arranged marriages as opposed to **forced marriages**, used to be common 30-40 years ago but are less so now. Inequality still exists with females if divorced or widowed facing some stigma, conversely males are often free to remarry. Child marriages can still take place in some areas. International Women's Day previously saw Kurdish Women in Iran that wished to participate, facing imprisonment should they do so.



Religion, beliefs and festivals:

There is a diversity of religions, but the majority claim to be **Sunni Muslim**, but not all are practicing, there are also a significant number of **Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians** (ancient pre-Islamic religion of Iran) and other minority religious groups such as the **Yazidis** in Iraq, the Yarsans in western regions of Iran and northern Iraq and the **Alevi** in Turkey. Kurds are amongst the most secular in the Middle East. Faith as opposed to religion, is at times given greater emphasis, with a need to believe in a higher power to survive the struggles. The national ethnic cause is often stronger still than faith.

These minorities have often not been recognised; they may lack access to education and face much persecution. The Yazidis faced persecution particularly by ISIS, many sought refuge in Western countries. In **2014 Yazidi genocide** took place by Islamic State, resulting in over 5,000 Yazidis killed and many Yazidi women and girls forced into **sexual slavery**.

The government in Turkey have made attempts to convert Kurds to Islam, building a mosque for them to pray in but Alevi reject the 5 pillars of Islam, having their own belief system instead. They do not pray and call the mosque a community house. They also suffered genocide, most notably the **1937-38 Dersim massacres** of Alevi Kurds by the Turkish military, known as **Tertelê Dersimê** or the 'day when the world ended'. Remembrance days take place in the UK at community centres such as Wood Green, London. There are now about **300,000 Alevi living in the UK**.

Important dates and festivals within Kurdish culture include:

- **21st March** – **Newroz**, this means new day, Spring Equinox
- **Ramadan, Eid Al Fitr** – important for Sunni Kurds. Ramadan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar, involves a period of fasting (including no water or cigarettes) and reflection. Eid Al Fitr breaks the fast.
- **British Alevi Festival** – end of June each year.
- **Alevi Aşure (Ashura) festival** – late Summer to Autumn, Aşure soup or Noah's Pudding is eaten.



Peacocks are sacred to Yazidis.

!TIP: Some Kurdish people from Iran may claim to be Muslim to avoid the risk of persecution, do not assume they are of a particular faith.

Food:

Food is of great importance in the Kurdish culture. Kurdish migrants will actively seek out Kurdish food stores and restaurants. The Kurdish UK diaspora may often opt to enter the labour market via the food industry, working for relatives that have previously migrated to the UK that now own a café or restaurant. Kurdish Muslims like other Muslims, will not eat pork, but are meat focused, often **Halal, grilled meats** such as lamb. They will often also **avoid alcohol**, especially strict Muslims, although Alevi do not generally have restrictions on food or alcohol.

Rice is enjoyed as a staple food item sometimes with pomegranates, along with **stews, soups** and **bean dishes**. Rice is often replaced by bulgur in Turkey, such as with **Tabouleh**.

Koftas made from ground meat with almonds and herbs, may come cooked in a soup.

Gipa and **patcha** are traditional offal dishes, whilst **dolma** are stuffed vegetables or vine leaves with a filling of rice, minced meat, offal, seafood, fruit etc.

The **Yazidis** will not eat **lettuce**, as they associate this with a divine power and as such is considered inappropriate to eat.

Kurds tend to be **tea** rather than coffee drinkers mainly. Tea is much more than a beverage; it's a cultural ritual, a symbol of hospitality, and a cherished part of daily life.



!TIP: Ask for dietary needs and restrictions and whether they may be fasting.

Education/career prospects:



Education is seen as a tool for **social mobility** within the Kurdish community. the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) reportedly spent 16% of its budget on education (Source: World Data Bank 2011-2013)

Both male and female Kurds will attempt to gain access into higher education, but females in the past were not encouraged to go into employment, this was seen more of a path for males; to strive to be doctors, lawyers etc. Now there are more opportunities for women; more have university degrees. Women strive to become doctors, lawyers, judges and work in a wide range of professional roles.

Opportunities for Kurds in employment however still tend to be limited for both men and women in general. Many barriers exist to enter prominent positions in government especially.

In **rural areas**, there may be a need to look after the land, with education being seen as less important than taking care of the family business. Children may also tend to marry earlier.

Education used to be free but after years of war a tier-type system has evolved, where those with money can afford private education and access to the top university places. Under the rule of the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, security forces exert full control over educational, cultural, and judicial policies. The teaching of the Kurdish language is forbidden in public schools in Turkey, risking the preservation of Kurdish language and culture and depriving young Kurds of the opportunity to be educated in their native language.

Most of the migrant Kurds in the UK need to establish their lives, they may a high level of education but need to feed their families and build up their lives. They will often work in industries such as **retail**, **construction** and **hospitality** as well as in academia and professional roles. Subsequently, much of the **UK diaspora** live in urban areas.

Educational initiatives exist to teach Kurdish in London at **Sunday schools**, organised by volunteers, to support the safeguarding of the Kurdish dialect.



Interaction with authority:

Due to decades of persecution, suppression, control and tensions in their home regions, much mistrust in authority exists within the Kurdish community. There will likely be considerable fear and anxiety in the presence of authorities, however, their culture remains one that is respectful of **rules and hierarchy** that can be stemmed back to image and family honour.

Crucial to any initial engagement with a Kurd would be **reassurance, continuity of personnel** to support relationship building, along with **friendly** behaviour and approach. They will place emphasis on any **safety** guarantees that can be provided prior to any engagement. The deep mistrust of the state and the police, the emphasis placed on upholding family honour, can mean initial non-disclosure is normal.

! TIPS: Clear, consistent messaging and safe reporting mechanisms are crucial. Hurried interviews, transactional questioning or enforcement first approaches, risk complete shutdown. Plain black clothing was the uniform of the intelligence police in Iran, considering wearing alternative clothing if possible. Black is also worn at Kurdish funerals and can be a bad omen in Kurdish culture. However, having a uniform can at least identify who you are; your role, so this will need to be explained clearly if plain clothes are opted for.

If a victim of a crime, a Kurdish family may support the victim depending upon their beliefs and feelings towards whether shame and dishonour has been brought to the family. **Victims** may be deterred from reporting to authorities for fear of bringing **shame**, instead revenge may be sought, even killing of the victim for damaging the reputation. They will often not **trust** that the authorities will effectively handle the issue or believe it will take too long to resolve. They may feel that they are already **victimised** and will not want to make the situation worse. They may feel they would be **ostracised** if police visited their house and may view this as an **intrusion**. There is a need for change of belief that the Police are not coming to threaten but rather to protect them, which may well be different to their home country. Victims may not recognise themselves as victims and present as compliant workers within ethnic businesses; they may perceive exploiters as helping them, especially when they provided work, shelter, or smuggling routes to the UK. They may then feel they owe them loyalty and that there is a need to pay them back. **Covert disruption tactics** may be useful to reduce risk of community reputational harm.

! TIPS: There is a need to be open, smiling, friendly, eye contact but no over-staring, provide greetings as customary at the start, prior to any questioning, explain your role. Showing empathy, sensitivity, listening and a comfortable environment can also be a game changer. Allow time to explore family obligations, debt and honour as these can strongly influence behaviour. Consider the use of trusted intermediaries/NGO independent advocates to assist with trust building. Repeat information about their rights for empowerment with non criminalisation messaging.

Be aware that the victim may look to withdraw any allegation of abuse to protect themselves and their family's honour, they may face **reprisals, threats and intimidation** from the abuser or their families, aimed at pressuring them to drop the charges. They may attempt to say that they lied but may well regret this later and feel that they are unable to return to the Police, for fear of not being believed.

!TIPS:

Reassurance with phrases for female victims in particular can be useful, such as 'I am here to protect you', 'please do not feel shame or embarrassment', 'please be as open and honest as you can as that will help me to protect you', 'we are not the same as the authorities you may have been used to, we are not here to judge you'.

Explain that you will not share what the victim has disclosed with their family, they will be fearful of bringing shame to them and the consequences. They may fear deportation and subsequent treatment by home communities.

Provide reassurances that our laws are there to safeguard, along with information about their rights. Ensure victims are given the time to disclose and are aware of what will happen throughout the Criminal Justice Process in a simplified way, as they will often not be familiar with the processes, this will assist with empowerment and trust building.

Interaction with authority continued:

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, judges tend to prioritize preserving the "family unity" over protecting victims of **domestic violence** and other crimes, and impunity for "honour killings" remains the norm in the region, likewise for those accused of **rape** if they marry their victim. This reinforces **patriarchal attitudes** and traps women and girls in **abusive marriages**. Women may well wonder what the point of seeking assistance is, fearing the disclosure will not lead to justice and in fact they may be punished more by their perpetrators.



In each governmental office in Iran, there is a security office, known as the **herasat** that is tasked to carry out interviews, asking questions such as those on Kurdish independence, armed groups and political affiliation. This questioning process is known as '**gozinesh**' (**screening**). For activities that are considered harmful to the national security of Iran, then Kurds are discriminately targeted by the state, with members or sympathisers of opposition groups such as the **Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)** often being automatically detained or even assassinated.

The length of the prison sentence can depend on various factors including the personal opinion of the judge towards Kurds and whether they are to be made an example of. An affiliation with the **Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK)** could mean a charge in Iran of '**waging war against God**.' As a result of overcrowding in prisons in Kurdistan Province in Iran, **non-official detention facilities** have been used by the authorities, where there have been reported allegations of **torture** and **sexual abuse** being carried out by prison guards. March 2025, the UNHRC published a 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights' which stated that the death penalty for detainees disproportionately affected Kurds. Out of the 154 executions reported for affiliation with banned political groups between 2010-2023, Kurds made up 49%.

The Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran- 2023 included reports of a Kurdish political prisoner who was arrested while working as a **kolbar (smuggler)** and was executed in March 2023 after he was tortured to accept false charges of firearms possession and membership in political groups. Unfortunately **torture-tainted "confessions"** are not rare, with close relatives of the accused often being brought in for questioning and facing **intimidation, interrogation** or worse.

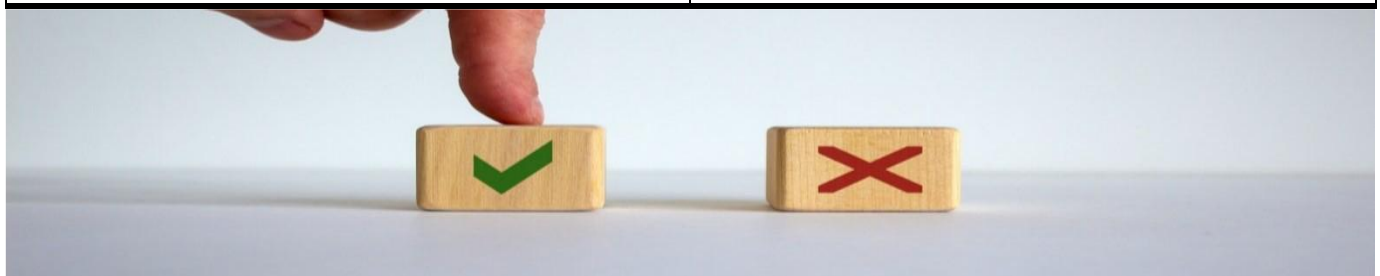
Kurds living abroad will often believe they are still being monitored by the Iranian Intelligence Authorities as a potential security risk, especially as they have 'chosen' to leave, increasing suspicion upon them.

!TIPS:

Kurdish people can sometimes use emotional expression to communicate such as anger, becoming defensive, but this can be a means of expressing deep frustration as a reaction to the on-going struggles. A trauma-informed approach and consideration of these difficulties is vital, provide time for them to collect thoughts.

Consider deploying an officer from a non-Kurdish background, as there may be an element of mistrust within their own community, take views of subject onboard.

Do's	Don'ts
Be polite, smile and be friendly. Show a measure of hospitality such as a cup of tea, asking if they are comfortable.	Be judgmental, they will tend to close off.
Provide reassurance where possible, to create more openness and cooperation. Be trauma informed.	Neglect gender issues – females would likely prefer female officers, interpreters and advocates.
Wear alternative clothing to plain black uniform where possible. Remove epilates, if unable to wear plain clothes.	Assume political or religious views, for example that all Kurdish people are Muslim
Clearly state your role is to protect them from harm and how the UK authorities are under different regulations to those in home countries.	Assume that family members are supportive of victim's circumstances. Do not send the victim back with the family, unless you are completely confident that they are not complicit. You may be risking the victim's well-being.
Use Kurdish greetings to break the ice, check which dialect.	Do not mediate with family members or religious/community leaders as they may not be empathetic to the victim and attempt to discredit them.
Be aware that male family members may try to discredit female victims	Use emotive language such as honour killings, keep your terminology neutral where possible or describe situations instead.



Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the following for their contributions and insight into this resource along with Lived Experience Consultants for their valued feedback:

Dr Farangis Ghaderi, Lecturer in Gender and Kurdish Studies, University of Exeter and Director, Centre for Kurdish Studies

Feryal Clark MP - Member of Parliament for Enfield North

Dr Hemn Merany, Director General of Diwan, Ministry of Interior, Kurdistan Regional Government

Huseyin Eroglu, Border Force Officer, Border Force

Prof Janroj Yilmaz Keles, Associate Professor in Politics, Law School, Middlesex University and Visiting Professor in International Relations at the Centre for Peacebuilding and Dialogue, University of Kurdistan Hewlêr

Kharman Adhim, Senior Specialist IDVA & Adviser, IKWRO - Women's Rights Organisation

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Dr Mashuq Kurt, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Royal Holloway, University of London

The Kurdish Project website: <https://thekurdishproject.org/>

Home Office Country Policy and Information Note Kurds and Kurdish Political Groups: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/iran-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-kurds-and-kurdish-political-groups-iran-october-2025-accessible>