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The Iranian Kurdish Movement at Home and in Exile: From Decline to Revival

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Abstract

Kurdish politics and the Kurdish national movement in Iran provide a unique case study with many unexplored elements. A defining aspect of Kurdish identity politics in Iran in recent decades is the multiplication of the number of actors within this movement, which have established varying counter-hegemonic discourses and practices, challenging Iran's Islamic regime from different angles. Tehran has observed the growing Kurdish national sentiment with anxiety, and has implemented a wide range of excessive securitisation and militarisation measures in the Kurdish-inhabited region to mollify this development. This paper reflects on various aspects of the Kurdish-state conflict in Iran, with a focus on the current (twenty-first century) elements of this conflict.



Kurds in Twentieth-Century Iran

Iran is a culturally, linguistically and nationally diverse society. Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis, Kurds, Persians and Turkmen are among the main national communities contributing to this diversity.¹ Through successive regimes, the ruling Iranian elite have never viewed such diversity as a source of national and cultural wealth, but have rather considered it a threat to the country's territorial integrity. As a result, the homogenisation of culture and identity, defined by the Persian culture and language, was seen as essential to maintaining cohesion in such a diverse country. Since the early 1920s, contemporary to the establishment of the modern nation-state, under the self-declared *shah* (king) of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi, the imposition of Persian language and culture as the dominant elements of national identity, and a systematic and state-sponsored exclusion of the non-Persian national communities, have been implemented. This continued through the second Pahlavi era (1941-1979) and was inherited and implemented by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) after its establishment in 1979. Consequently, the exclusive elevation of one national community's (Persian) language, culture and identity over the other's, has resulted in exclusion and deprivation of rights.²

Non-Persian communities' resistance to the state-defined Iranian identity has resulted in cultural fragmentation. Reflection on a century of nation-state-building and cultural homogenisation reveals that what the changing regimes in Tehran have viewed as the guarantee of the country's national and territorial integrity, has in reality resulted in the alienation of non-Persian (and non-Shi'i) communities from the state-constructed Iranian identity. State and society in the IRI have competing attitudes to identical and religious diversity. While marginalised and disenfranchised non-Persian communities view cultural and linguistic diversity as a source of their wealth and demand equal treatment with Persians, the IRI's ruling elite and intelligentsia view such diversity as a threat to their country's territorial integrity and national borders,³ and therefore implement an authoritarian homogenisation policy inspired by Persian identity and Shi'ism. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the movements and activities of non-Persian communities reveal both a growing nationalist sentiment among the country's Arabs, Azeris Baluchis and Kurds, alongside their efforts to resist the government's imposition of *Iranijet* (being Iranian). These movements illustrate the condition identified by Seiler as 'peripheral nationalism'.⁴

Despite its fluctuating levels of activity, over the last century the Kurdish nationalist movement has proven the most politicised and proactive movement of the non-Persian national communities challenging the authority of successive Iranian governments. A peripheral and marginalised

1 Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

2 Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013).

3 Tendayi Achiume and Asli Bali, "Race and Empire: Legal Theory Within, Through, and Across National Borders," *UCLA Law Review* 67 (2021): 1386.

4 D.L. Seiler, "Peripheral Nationalism Between Pluralism and Monism," *International Political Science Review* 10, no. 3 (1989): 191 - 207.



nationality, the Kurdish people in Iranian Kurdistan (a region referred to by the Kurds as *Rojhelat* or Eastern Kurdistan)⁵ have been subject to systematic discriminatory and exclusionary state policies since the early twentieth century. Similar to the nationalism of other peoples in the Middle East, the awakening of Kurdish nationalism over a century ago reflected the rise of intellectualism, but has also been a product of reaction and resistance to the state-fabricated Iranian national identity.⁶ This was reflected in the uprising of Simko Shikak (1918-1930) and the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan (1946) with its capital in Mahabad.⁷

The popular Iranian Revolution of 1979 that ended the Pahlavi dynasty's authoritarian rule in Iran, provided optimism and hope for improvement in Kurdistan, where involvement in revolutionary activity had been high. However, well-aware that Kurdish demands would be unfulfilled under a Shi'i Islamist political system, Kurds boycotted the referendum held in March 1979 for an Islamic republic. Soon after, the establishment of the IRI and its de facto leader Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* of *jihad* proclaimed on 19 August 1979 against the Kurdish people and their movement for autonomy⁸ resulted in anger and disappointment and the commencement of another era of hardship, deprivation and conflict with the Iranian government for the Kurdish people. Under the leadership of their mainstream political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala), the Kurdish people began a multifaceted war with the regime, for their rights of practicing their culture and identity and for equal citizenship. Nevertheless, being positioned as a double minority – ethnically Kurdish rather than Persian, and predominantly Sunni rather than Shi'i Muslims – has made this task highly challenging.⁹

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Kurdish movement, particularly the armed resistance, was strong and could challenge the authority and the activities of the regime in Kurdistan. Since the early 1960s, when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's iron fist rule left no space for political and cultural activism in Iranian Kurdistan, exiled nationalism had become an important element of the Kurdish movement. Despite the complexity and limitations of this sort of mobilisation, its impact on the politicisation of Kurdish national sentiments should not be underestimated. The KDPI and Komala operated from the mountainous border areas dividing Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan and used Iraqi territory as their safe haven.¹⁰ They were based in close proximity to the Kurdish people in Iran, from whom they received grassroots support. This proximity was significant since it had a direct impact on the direction of Kurdish national sentiment. However, during these decades the Kurdish people lost some of their best fighters and leaders, and Kurdistan (particularly its rural areas) suffered from the destruction

5 Iranian Kurdistan is composed of the provinces of Loristan, Ilam, Kermashan, Kurdistan, and a large part of Western Azerbaijan. There is also a large Kurdish community in North Khorasan, transferred from Kurdistan to Khorasan during the Safavid period, mainly under the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reign of Shah Abbas Safavi.

6 Allan Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran: Crossborder Interactions and Mobilisation since 1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

7 Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

8 Nader Entessar, "The Kurds in Post-Revolutionary Iran and Iraq," *Third World Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1984): 920.

9 Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 45

10 Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 192.



associated with war. Many Iranian Kurdish prominent political activists and leaders, including Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou (1989) and Sadeq Sharefkandi (1992) were also assassinated, either in European capitals or in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), by agents of the regime.

Despite its vast human and natural resources, including forests, gold, oil, water, etc., prosperity has yet to come to Kurdistan. The Kurdish region, along with Khuzestan and Sistan and Baluchistan, is one of Iran's most economically underdeveloped regions. The constant state of militarisation in the region, particularly since 1979, has exacerbated this underdevelopment. The activities of the KDPI and Komala have been used as an excuse by the Iranian authorities to neglect all its responsibilities in ameliorating the conditions of the local people, while the authorities have effectively promised development in return for assimilation and surrendering to the regime's values. Repression and terrorisation of the Kurds have been the main practice of the state's institutions in Kurdistan.

Regional and Domestic Factors

The shift in the balance of power in the Middle East in the 1990s, following Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1991 and the ensuing Gulf War, marked the first major shift in Kurdish-state relations in Iran, with a drastic impact on the Kurdish movement. Iraq was no longer a regional power, capable of competing with neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Iran. With the 1992 establishment of the KRI, governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Baghdad lost direct control of vast swathes of territories. The weak Iraqi state proved unable to prevent Iran and Turkey from undermining its sovereignty, as those countries on various occasions violated Iraq's northern borders and established formal and informal military and intelligence bases in the KRI.¹¹

These regional changes left a significant impact on the activities of the KDPI and Komala. Iran's extensive military and intelligence presence in the KRI turned what was once a safe haven into an intensely dangerous area for Iranian Kurdish political activity. The Kurdish movement was targeted through Iranian-Iraqi transborder military and intelligence activities, including assassinations and kidnapping of activists, placing explosive mines along the border, and shelling Kurdish military and civilian complexes from long and short range. Under Iranian pressure, the KRG forced the relocation of KDPI and Komala military bases further from the border to vulnerable areas such as the Deshti Koye (Koye plain), making the parties easy targets of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). On one occasion in 1996, 3000 Iranian troops equipped with artillery, and under the protection of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the KRI's dominant political forces, shelled KPDI bases in Koy-sanjagh from the nearby Mount Haibat Sultan.¹² Many members and supporters of the Kurdish parties were killed and assassinated, and more simply disappeared; these severe defeats also resulted in an inter-organisational impasse, and the departure from the movement of many of its erstwhile members and fighters.¹³

¹¹ Michael Gunter, "Turkey and Iran Face off in Kurdistan," *Middle East Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1998): 33 - 40.

¹² David L. Phillips, *The Kurdish Spring: A New Map of the Middle East* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 99.

¹³ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 170.

Uprooted from their mountain bases, and within reach of the IRGC, the KDPI and Komala were forced to cease their military activities entirely for nearly two decades, from 1996 to 2015. In 2004, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) was formed as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), conducting military activity against Iranian forces. However, in 2011 PJAK, with intermediation but also pressure from the KRG, signed a ceasefire with the IRGC, an unprecedented step in the Kurdish movement.¹⁴ One recent development is the Iranian government's extensive deployment of high-tech military equipment, such as long-range missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (hereafter drones) in targeting and monitoring the bases and activities of the KDPI, Komala, PJAK and the KDP-I (a splinter group from the KDPI).

The cessation of the activity of the KDPI, Komala and PJAK did not result in improvements in the human rights and living conditions of the Kurdish people in Iranian Kurdistan, revealing that to the regime, the militant parties' activities were merely a pretext for brutalising the Kurds for their movement for national and cultural self-determination. The temporary defeat of the movement meant a combination of political, military and symbolic gains for the IRI, eroding the confidence of the population. The terrorisation of Kurdish society by Iranian military and intelligence services or/and local Kurdish collaborators (*jash*) intensified, and Kurds had (and still have) the highest rate among all Iranian communities of imprisonment and executions of activists for civil and cultural activities.¹⁵ The IRI could declare itself the absolute conqueror of the land and people of Iranian Kurdistan. The tense and unresolved Kurdish-state relations in Iran, and the overwhelming presence of the state's military, intelligence and ideological institutions in Kurdistan, reveal the IRI's over-securitised approach to every aspect of society in this region.

Observing Iranian politics in relation to the rights of minorities reveals a pattern of "one step forward, many steps back". Like other communities in Iran, Kurdish civil society could breathe slightly more freely from 1997 to 2005, the so-called reform era of Mohammad Khatami's presidency. One important hallmark of these years was the emergence of a relatively relaxed space for free speech and the growth of civic activism and NGOs. However, the eight years that followed of Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) saw a return to the daily reports of persecution, imprisonment and execution of Kurdish human rights activists, students and journalists.¹⁶ Despite President Hassan Rouhani's election pledge and promises of expanding the rights of minority religious groups and peoples, the conditions of Kurds, Arabs and Baluchis did not substantially improve under his premiership; in fact, records of human rights violations reveal worsening conditions for these communities in many respects.¹⁷

¹⁴ Gareth Stansfield and Allan Hassaniyan, "Kurdish Insurgency in Rojhelat: From *Rasan* to the Oslo Negotiations," *Middle Eastern Studies* (2021): 7.

¹⁵ "Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *OHCHR*, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/sp/countriesmandates/ir/pages/sriran.aspx>

¹⁶ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 190 - 191.

¹⁷ "Iranian President's broken promises to minorities," *World Watch Monitor*, March 12, 2015, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/03/iranian-presidents-broken-promises-to-minorities/>



The following subsections reflect on major aspects of Kurdish politics in Iran during the years 2014-2021, including the resumption of Kurdish armed activities, the parties' re-establishment of their mountain bases, the rise of Kurdish environmental and cultural activism, and the IRI's response to all these developments. Despite the high price Kurdish civil society has paid for its civic activism, it has proved capable of providing exemplary and innovative instances of activism, challenging the IRI's discourses on identity, citizenship, security and development. Kurdistan's environmental and ecological movement and its community-based movement for the teaching of the mother tongue, are unique civic-cultural innovations aimed at resisting authoritarian rule. Being a secular movement and fighting for federalism and a decentralised system of government in Iran, the Kurdish movement has been dealt with as a threat to state power and values and has suffered from the state's heavy use of coercive force. Understanding the state's securitised approach to diversity and otherness in Iran requires analysing the aspects of Kurdish politics in Iran as intertwined elements.

A Decade of Clashes and Escalation

Along with international isolation and sanctions, widespread internal turmoil and mass protests have been a defining aspect in recent Iranian politics. Events in Iran's geographical centre primarily inhabited by ethnic Persians, such as the Green Movement following the disputed presidential election of 2009, have caught the attention of most political analysts. The peripheral regions, despite being no less eventful and featuring just as many problems, have largely bypassed observers' attention. Non-Persian regions such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchistan have witnessed conflicts and protests related to environmental and ecological issues (e.g. water shortages), high unemployment rates, the killing of border workers (Kurdish *kolbers* and Baluchi *sokhtbers*) by security forces, etc. Armed clashes between the IRGC and armed opposition groups, which the Iranian government have accused of 'terrorist activity' and of being proxies of rival Arab countries, ISIS, Israel or the US, have become a common developments in these regions. On 22 September 2018, a small armed Arab group affiliated to the National Liberation Movement of Ahwaz attacked a military parade commemorating the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) in the city of Ahwaz in Khuzestan Province, resulting in 30 deaths and 70 wounded.¹⁸ Similar clashes are recorded in other peripheral regions of Iran. Sistan and Baluchistan are experiencing volatile security and human conditions, a by-product of historical and ongoing human rights violations of the people of this region. For instance, on 22 February 2021 in Saravan in Sistan and Baluchistan, Iranian security forces opened fire on *sokhtbers*, killing at least ten people and wounding dozens. The government's response to a potential reaction was 'further militarisation of the region and imposing a permanent state of emergency'.¹⁹ On 24 July 2021, four members of the IRGC were killed in Gonik district, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, by the Baluchi organisation

¹⁸ Richard Pérez-Peña, "Attack on Military Parade in Iran Kills at Least 25," *New York Times*, September 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/22/world/middleeast/iran-military-parade-attack.html>

¹⁹ Omid Montazari, "Unrest in Saravan: What is happening in Sistan and Baluchestan?," *BBC News Persian*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-56169139> [in Persian].



Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam). While the IRGC and Iranian media outlets described the group as ‘villains’,²⁰ the organisation claimed the attack was a response to the regime’s oppressive activities in the region, and its arbitrary killing of *sokhtbers* on the Iranian-Pakistani border.

While the state’s similarly repressive and violent behaviour toward Kurdish civil society, including cultural and environmental activists and NGOs, has been a growing long-term trend, the KDPI’s 2015 announcement of the resumption of its political and military activities is a more drastic development. The KDPI general-secretary Mostafa Hijri in March 2016, during his televised *Newroz* (Kurdish and Iranian New Year) speech, announced the campaign of Rasan-i Rojhelat (Revival of Rojhelat, hereafter Rasan). Hijri stated that the Kurdish people, civilians and Peshmerga guerrillas alike, had to resist the IRI and claim their rights. He defined this project as ‘bringing together *shar u shakh*’, mountain and city, symbolising the cooperation of the Peshmerga and civil society together. In line with this announcement, the KDPI re-established some of its mountain bases, bringing two decades of Kurdish political parties’ inactivity to an end. This shift, despite some scepticism, was widely welcomed by the grassroots and wider Kurdish society, and was also cautiously emulated by the KDP-I and Komala, which transferred some of their Peshmerga forces to the same geographical area as the KDPI.

During the more than four-decade Kurdish-state conflict in Iran under the IRI, changing governments’ policies have aimed to, if not succeeded to, inflict an outright defeat on Kurdish political parties, then at least keep them as remote as possible from their grassroots. In official IRI discourse, the KDPI and Komala are called *ahzab-i monhelle*, dissolved and insignificant parties. However, the government’s sweeping militarisation of Kurdistan and transborder attacks on these organisations reveals another reality, disclosing that the IRI does indeed consider them the representatives of the Kurdish movement that pose a real threat to it. This calculation led the Iranian government to seek to isolate these parties deep within the KRI by forcing them out from their mountain bases in the 1990s. Nevertheless, after two decades of inertia, the KDPI and Komala are once again present in the border areas. These evolving conditions have been closely monitored by the Iranian government and the IRGC, who view the Rasan and the associated new political and military activities not as mere provocation, but rather with genuine concern. The intimidating statements of Iranian officials and the aggressive reaction to the current development, including violations of the sovereignty of a neighbouring state with transborder military operations on Iraqi soil,²¹ reflect the steady growth of Kurdish national sentiment in Iran, and a new stage in the Kurdish movement.

Since the announcement of Rasan, armed clashes between the IRGC and the IRI’s military and the Kurdish Peshmerga have intensified within Iranian Kurdistan. The human rights organisation *Hengaw* has reported that ‘in 2018 alone around fifty significant armed clashes between the

²⁰ “Four IRGC servicemen martyred in southeast Iran,” *Tehran Times*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/463368/Four-IRGC-servicemen-martyred-in-southeast-Iran>

²¹ “Iran Guards Launch Drone, Missile Attacks against Kurdish Insurgents,” *Radio Farda*, August 4, 2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-guards-launch-drone-missile-attacks-against-kurdish-insurgents/30764547.html>



Peshmerga and IRGC were recorded. The estimated number of casualties from these clashes is 150, including 97 members of the IRGC, 46 Peshmerga and guerrilla fighters, and seven civilians.²² Similar patterns, with some variation, have characterised the following years. While these may seem like “tit for tat” clashes, these military confrontations are significant. They challenge the IRI’s claims of the non-existence of a Kurdish problem in Iran, and of its success in winning the hearts and minds of the Kurdish people. The IRGC’s Intelligence Organisation (IRGC-IO), relying particularly on local *jash* collaborators, has for decades terrorised the Kurdish civil society unchallenged, committing crimes such as blackmail, rape and drug dealing, with damaging ramifications for the sociocultural cohesion of the Kurdish society.²³ Since 2016, underground armed cells of the KDPI named the Eagles of Zagros,²⁴ and Komala, have conducted disciplinary activities, delivering warnings to those collaborating with the IRGC and terrorising society.

Consequently, the IRI has devoted its focus and resources to searching out the roots of the rising Kurdish nationalism and mass protests beyond Iranian borders. Iran’s transborder counter-Kurdish activities are no longer limited to the assassination of Kurdish political activities in the KRI, but today include the deployment of high-tech military hardware, including drones, fighter jets and long-range missiles. On 8 September 2018, an Iranian missile attack on the military and civilian bases and compounds of the KDP-I and KDPI in Koye resulted in heavy human casualties and material damage.²⁵ The Iranian government’s use of drones against its Kurdish opposition groups follows Turkey’s systematic deployment of high-tech military equipment in fighting the PKK in eastern Turkey. Throughout September 2021, Iran intensified its bombardment of the KDPI and Komala in the KRI, using a combination of “suicide” bomber drones and surveillance drones. According to KDPI reports, six of these drones were shot down by the Peshmerga; these sources reported no human casualties but noted significant environmental damage and destruction. Furthermore, on several occasions in 2021, the KRI’s capital Erbil, its airport and the Harir airbase housing US forces, have several times fallen under land and air attack, with Iranian proxy militias believed to be to blame.²⁶

The Kurdish Identity Struggle

Kurdish civil society in Iran, politicised by the actions of the Kurdish movement, has proven to be vibrant and self-conscious. Operating within the framework of the IRI’s authoritarian rule, Kurdish environmental and cultural activists and journalists have promoted Kurdish identity and denounced the state’s discriminatory policies. Imprisonment, torture, executions and extra-judicial killings of

²² Hengaw cited in Stansfield and Hassaniyan, “Kurdish insurgency in Rojhelat,” 4.

²³ N. H., *Jash Namey Hiwa Tab* [Kurdish] Hawler; Kurdipedi, 2010. <https://www.kurdipedia.org/files/books/2011/61735.PDF?ver=129816016546757999>

²⁴ Tishk TV News, “The Eagles of Zagros Have Attacked Iranian Bases,” YouTube video, January 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf17z3ct5IQ>

²⁵ “Iranian Regime’s Missile Attack on September 8th, 2018 to Kurdistan Democratic Party Headquarter Located in Kurdistan Region inside Iraq,” *Kurdistan Democratic Party*, 2018, <http://kdppress.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/KDP-8th-Septembre-Report.pdf>

²⁶ “Coalition says Iraq base housing US troops hit in drone attack,” *Aljazeera*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/24/iraq-base-housing-us-troops-attacked-by-drone-coalition>

these activists have been regular occurrences. However, activists have successfully challenged the state's discourses of identity, security and development, to the point that the growing peripheral nationalism among Kurds and other marginalised communities has prompted scholars such as Brenda Shaffer to note that 'Iran is more than Persia'.²⁷

One major element of civil society activism in Iranian Kurdistan has been mass protests and acts of civilian disobedience. In the last two decades, Iranian Kurdistan has witnessed several mass protests and strikes. The widespread protests in 2005 following the public torture and execution by security forces in Mahabad of Shwaneh Ghaderi, a Kurdish student activist, was the current century's first example of mass protest in Kurdistan, starting from Mahabad and spreading across Kurdistan. This lasted eight days, until the regime restored control following a harsh crackdown using helicopters and other military measures.²⁸ In September 2017, a general strike took place in Baneh, beginning as a protest against the security forces' killing of Kurdish *kolbers*; the strike lasted over three weeks and enjoyed widespread public support and participation.²⁹ Another general strike took place on 12 September 2018, after the Cooperation Centre of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties (CCIKPP) called upon Kurdish society to protest the missile strikes against the KDPI and KDP-I and the execution of three Kurdish political prisoners (Zaniar and Loqman Moradi and Ramin Hossein Panahi) in the early hours of 8 September 2018.³⁰ The city of Kermashan, Iranian Kurdistan's largest city, also held a general strike on 12 September. The symbolic success of the strikes was celebrated by Kurdish society and its political parties. The Komala leader Omar Ilkhanizadeh claimed that 'The overwhelming public participation and support for the strike provided a political and symbolic message, like a referendum saying "yes" to the political parties of Rojhelat [Eastern/Iranian Kurdistan], and "no" to the Islamic Republic of Iran'.³¹

Language is a central focus of Kurdish activist groups in Iran. The Constitution of the IRI states that

*The official and common language and script of the Iranian people is Persian. Documents, correspondence, official texts and textbooks must be in this language and script, but the use of local and ethnic languages in the press and mass media and the teaching of their literature in schools is free alongside Persian.*³²

But even the minor promise of the 'use of local and ethnic languages' has yet to be implemented. To Iran's non-Persian communities, the decades-long state campaign under the slogan *Farsi ra pas*

²⁷ Brenda Shaffer, *Iran Is More Than Persia: Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, D.C.: FDD Press, 2021).

²⁸ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 191.

²⁹ "Amnesty International Report 2017/18: The State of the World's Human Rights," *Amnesty International*, 2018, 200, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2018-02/annualreport2017.pdf>

³⁰ Kamran Metin, "Rojhelat Rises: Reflections on the General Strikes in Iranian Kurdistan," *The Region*, September 12, 2018, <https://theregion.org/article/13107-rojhelat-rises-reflections-on-general-strike-iranian-kurdistan>

³¹ Ilkhanizadeh cited in Stansfield and Hassaniyan, "Kurdish Insurgency in Rojhelat," 6.

³² Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 18, https://www.shora-gc.ir/files/fa/news/1398/9/21/4354_236.pdf



bedarim (“We must protect the Persian language”) has meant a discriminative policy against their culture, identity and language. For instance, the state-founded and -funded Academy of Persian Language and Literature received in 2020 an astronomical annual budget of 26 billion Toman (Iranian currency), while other languages were neglected. According to one online news outlet, the price of purifying/approving a word as Persian (*vaj-e gozini*) is over 11 million Toman.³³

Elevating Persian superiority at the cost of other languages in Iran has frequently been denounced by non-Persians. Abdol Sattar Doshoki, a Baluchi intellectual and political activist, has stated “such a government policy of discrimination against Iranian ethnic groups leads to the growth of hatred and alienation. This policy is dangerous, as it results in marginalisation and asymmetrical ethnic-cultural relation damaging the “unity” of Iranians.”³⁴ Similar reactions from the Kurdish cultural and intellectual environment can also be identified. Kurdish activists, keenly aware of the threats facing their culture, language and identity, have encouraged Kurdish society to guard and protect Kurdish (*Zeban-e Kordi ra pas bedarim*).³⁵

Like other non-Persian languages, the Kurdish language is yet to be allowed as a language of instruction in the IRI’s schools, universities and other educational institutions. However, after decades of arduous struggle, faculty at Kurdistan University in Kurdistan Province have established and offer some optional modules in Kurdish language and literature. In the absence of any other national institutions to preserve culture and identity, and with the nation-state violating the identity of its citizens, local communities and associations have proven to be the main vanguards of Kurdish language and culture. In recent decades, many hundreds of small and local cultural communities and associations offering the teaching of Kurdish mainly to children of school age have been established.

Such peaceful cultural activities are dealt with by the Iranian state’s security and judicial institutions as subversive activities which undermine Iran’s national and territorial security. The case of Zara Mohammadi, a volunteer Kurdish teacher and head of the Sociocultural Association of Nojin,³⁶ is a recent example of the IRI’s persecution and imprisonment of Kurdish cultural activists. In July 2020, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Court in Sanandaj sentenced Mohammadi to ten years imprisonment on charges of ‘forming a group against national security’.³⁷ The Provincial Court of Appeals reduced her sentence to five years, with Mohammadi notified of this decision in February 2021.

33 “What is the price for each word made by Ferhengestan?,” *Khabar Online*, December 26, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3am9Sia> [in Persian].

34 Abdol Sattar Doshoki, “International Mother Language Day: Let’s Guard and Protect the Persian Language, and Cast Aside the Other,” *Shahrvand*, February 26, 2015, <https://shahrvand.com/archives/58686> [in Persian].

35 Afrasiab Shokfteh, “We Must Guard and Protect the Language, Cultural and Civil Associations of the Khorasani Kurds,” *Cultural and Civil Society of Khorasani Kurds*, 2008, <http://www.kncsite.com/farsi/efrasiab.pdf> [in Persian]; “Guard our Kurdish language and identity,” *Havar*, 2010, <http://havar-kurd.blogfa.com/post/2> [in Persian].

36 “Zara Mohammadi’s 5 Year Sentence Upheld for Teaching Kurdish Language,” *Iran Human Rights*, February 15, 2021, <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4620/>

37 The Nojin Association is an active voluntary cultural and social association in Kurdistan Province. “Kurdish Language Teacher’s 5 Years Imprisonment Sentence Confirmed,” *Hengaw*, February 14, 2021, <https://hengaw.net/en/news/zahra-mohammadi-zara-kurdish-language-teachers-5-years-imprisonment-sentence-confirmed>

The arrest and imprisonment of Kurdish women activists have been alarming, but they are also a sign of the expanding appeal of the Kurdish movement. In early 2021 alone, more than 30 Kurdish women were arrested by Iranian security forces for their cultural, environmental or political activities, many from Ilam and Kermashan (see below).³⁸ In 2019 Mojgan Kavousi, a Kurdish writer and cultural activist, was arrested by IRGC-IO units from her home in Noshahr in Mazandaran Province, and was imprisoned in the notorious Avin and Karaj prisons for her criticisms of the IRI's policies toward the Kurds and the security forces' brutal crackdown on the widespread protests against the sudden rise of fuel prices in November 2019, resulting in the deaths of several hundred, including 23 children.³⁹ Kavousi was imprisoned on charges of 'encouraging people to disrupt the order and security of the country' and 'membership in opposition groups'.⁴⁰ Kavousi's loud critiques of the regime and her promotion of Kurdish identity had made her activism a symbol of the awakening of Kurdish national sentiment.

The festival of Newroz has also become a potent symbol of this awakening. Every year on 21 March, Kurds, Iranians, and many other people of Central Asia such as Tajiks and Afghans, celebrate Newroz, marking the arrival of a new solar year and nature's revival with the coming of spring. However, the Kurdish Newroz has become politicised as a platform for manifesting Kurdish resistance to discriminative and repressive state policies in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Despite Iranian security forces' intimidation and attempts to clamp down on Newroz in Kurdistan, since 2015 in particular Newroz in Iranian Kurdistan has been enthusiastically celebrated and has incorporated several political symbols and messages, such as *Newrozi jamanekan*.⁴¹ Inspired by the KDPI's promotion of this trend, images from social media platforms and Kurdish satellite TV show the collective gathering and dancing of thousands of men and women wearing the khaki Peshmerga uniform with the *jamane* around their necks. Waving the Kurdish flag, masked individuals carry images of Kurdish leaders such as Qazi Mohammad, Abdulrahman Ghassemlou, Saeed Sherfakandi and Foad Mostafa Sultani. The Kurdish national anthem *Ey Reqî* (O Enemy) is loudly sung.⁴² Consequently, every year during and after the Newroz celebrations, the security forces arrest and imprison large numbers of people, especially youth, who participate in the festival.⁴³ Altogether, these developments reveal a new politicisation of Kurdish national identity and the emergence of a conscious struggle for self-identification, challenging both the state's Persian/Shiite definition of Iranian-ness and the already fragile legitimacy of the IRI's authority in Kurdistan.

38 "Kurdistan Human Rights Network Report on International Women's Day: Detention, Torture, and Imprisonment for Dozens of Kurdish Women Activists," *Kurdistan Human Rights Network*, 2021, <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org/fa/?p=15527> [in Persian].

39 "Iran: At Least 23 Children Killed by Security Forces in November Protests – New Evidence," *Amnesty International*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/iran-at-least-23-children-killed-by-security-forces-in-november-protests-new-evidence/>

40 "Illegal Transfer of Mojgan Kavousi, Writer and Translator to Karaj Prison," *Iran Wire*, 2021, <https://iranwire.com/fa/jinac/51357> [in Persian].

41 The *jamaneh* is a traditional shawl worn by Kurds and other people in the Middle East, which has also become a popular symbol and element of the Peshmerga uniform. Kurdistan u Kurd, "Newrozi jamanekan le tengisar," YouTube video, March 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWAHfwEeGE> [in Kurdish].

42 Kurdistan24, "Newroz le sharedeyi ne," YouTube video, March 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW7kR3y0lkw> [in Kurdish].

43 "Nowroz in Iranian Kurdistan and the Arrest of Kurdish Citizens during the Nowroz Celebration," *Iran Human Rights Monitor*, March 27, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3lucmkM> [in Persian].



Cross-Provincial Kurdish Cooperation

Kurdistan Province and cities in Western Azerbaijan Province such as Mahabad, Bokoan, Urmia, Piranshar and Naqshade, are considered the hotbed of the Kurdish movement and Kurdish nationalism in Iran. The Kurdish movement in Iran has also historically had its own “periphery”, where the presence and impact of Kurdish political parties have been comparatively limited. Ilam and Kermashan are two major Kurdish-inhabited provinces that can be considered the periphery of the Kurdish movement. While the majority of Kurds in Iran are Sunni Muslims and are Kurdish Sorani-speaking,⁴⁴ the majority of the Kurds in Ilam and Kermashan are either Shia Muslim or Yarsanis by faith, and speak the Lori and Kalhori dialects of Kurdish. This diversity among Kurds has been exploited by changing Iranian governments, and intensified under the IRI as part of the divide and rule policy. During the early 1980s, the IRGC succeeded in recruiting among the Shia Kurds in Kermashan for its campaign against the Kurdish movement.

However, more recently this trend seems to have been reversed. Regarding the armed movement(s), while the KDPI and Komala have marked an intensification of their activities and recruitment in provinces like Kermashan and Ilam, the PJAK has been more successful in both recruitment and in disseminating its discourse and political programme. Turning to civil society, the teaching of Kurdish languages by small, private cultural associations, is today common in Kermashan. Cross-provincial activities and cooperation between Kurdish cultural and environmental NGOs and associations is another trend, awakening the suspicions of the Iranian security and intelligence services.⁴⁵ The growing politicisation of Kurdish national identity in Kermashan and Ilam demonstrates a spreading of the movement beyond its traditional heartland.⁴⁶

Specific events and related actions, such as the Kurdish public’s response to the 2017 earthquake in the Kermashan regions of Serpel Zehaw and Selasi-Bawji, and then the massive floods in Ilam in 2019, have resulted in considerable cross-provincial Kurdish solidarity. Following these catastrophes, Kurdish civil society, led by its cultural and environmental NGOs, mobilised large campaigns of aid collection and distribution in order to help the affected people and communities. These acts drew the anxiety of the regime, which saw them as strengthening Kurdish national sentiment and ‘posing threat to the state’.⁴⁷ The governors of Kermashan and Kurdistan provinces warned environmentalists to cease their involvement in aid collection, as it was ‘beyond their field’.⁴⁸ The activities of Kurdish cultural and environmental groups and individuals from the previously peripheral regions and

44 The Kurdish language has many dialects, the most commonly spoken being Kurmanji, Sorani, Hawrami, Zazaki and Kelhori.

45 Masoud Raad, “Kermanshah and its Entry into the Liberation Discourse of the Kurdish Nation,” *Rejaw*, March 17, 2010, <https://rejaw.blogsky.com/1389/03/17/post-1/> [in Persian].

46 “**Suppressing** ethnic identity discourse in Kermashan and Ilam,” *Iran International*, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3CACxwh>

47 Allan Hassaniyan, “Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: Causes and Conditions for its Securitisation,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no. 3 (2020): 355 - 378.

48 Farzad Sayfikan, “Increasing Detention of Environmental Activists in Kurdistan,” *Tribune Zamaneh*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.tribunezamaneh.com/archives/186392> [in Persian].

provinces of the Kurdish movement, and, on the other hand, the Iranian security forces' and judicial organisations' attempts to repress these efforts, together bear witness a strengthening of the Kurdish movement in its conflict with the IRI.

Iran's Priorities

The IRI, challenged by a spectrum of international, regional and domestic issues, views the proactive Kurdish movement and the growing politicisation of Kurdish national identity as a serious threat, not only its rule in Kurdistan, but also as a phenomenon with a spill-over, inspiring other oppressed people and communities to claim their political and cultural rights. Furthermore, the IRI identifies a connection between the evolving situation inside Iranian Kurdistan, and the acceleration of the military and political activities of the Kurdish political parties based in exile in the KRI. The IRI's aggressive demands to the Iraqi government and the KRG to expel the Kurdish opposition groups from the KRI reveal the calculations being made in Tehran.

The counter-Kurdish movement strategy and measures used by the IRI, particularly in dealing with its Kurdish opposition based in the KRI, have recently diversified, and are not limited to the assassination and kidnapping of these parties' leaders and members; however, these tactics are still frequently used. Mousa Babakhani, a member of the KDP-I's Central Committee from Kermashan, was found dead on 5 August 2021 in an Erbil hotel room.⁴⁹ Babakhani made a significant contribution to the KDP-I's underground activities in Kermashan; his assassination has been considered as the regime's blow against the Kurdish movement's activities in Kermashan. Consequently, Kurdish grassroots activists and the politicised civil society have criticised the KDP-I leadership for not taking the necessary security precautions to protect its leaders, meaning that the party has lost one of its most influential voices of the Kurdish national movement in Kermashan.

Another recent development, as mentioned above, has been the IRI's use of drones to strike at the exiled parties. As already noted, the use of drones is not a wholly new measure in the region: the Turkish army has for over a decade deployed drones in monitoring and bombing the PKK.⁵⁰ In Iran's case, however, the use of drones underwent a sudden surge in 2020 - 2021. Throughout September 2021, Iran has conducted a wave of shelling and bombardment of Iranian Kurdish political party bases in border areas between the KRI and Iranian Kurdistan. The KDPI has been the main target of these attacks, which have utilised so-called suicide drones.

The current intensification of Iranian attacks on Kurdish political parties based in the KRI aims to outright uproot and expel these parties from the region, a desire publicly stated by Iranian officials. This policy was previously applied to the People's Mujahedin Organisation of Iran (MEK), Iran's major

⁴⁹ Dana Taib Menmy, "Iranian Kurdish Party Accuses Tehran of Assassinating Senior Member in Iraq," *The National News*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2021/08/19/iranian-kurdish-party-accuses-tehran-of-assassinating-senior-member-in-iraq/>

⁵⁰ "Alleged PKK Warning to US Against Providing UAVs to Turkey," *The Washington Post*, 2007, https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fwp-srv%2fspecial%2fworld%2fwikileaks%2fturkey%2f10ankara239.html.



opposition group with a heavy presence in Iraq in the early 1980s. With the support of Saddam Hussain and before the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the MEK conducted a wide variety of military activities against the IRI. The IRI's policy of using its great influence in post-2003 Iraq to impose a gradual isolation of the MEK, starve it of weapons and supplies, and then massacre hundreds of its members, eventually resulted in the organisation's expulsion from Iraq and, following a UN/US intervention in 2015, the relocation of MEK bases to Albania, several thousand kilometres from Iranian borders.⁵¹ This was an immense achievement for the IRI, not least symbolically, sending a signal to opposition groups in the surrounding region that the regime does not tolerate any opposition and will not hesitate to use terror and unconventional measures to deprive them of a safe haven.

However, the parallels between the MEK and the Kurdish political parties in KRI are limited. In post-2003 Iraq, the MEK was already obsolete and immensely unpopular among the host society. The MEK quickly became an easy target of Iranian proxy Shi'i militia forces, the Iranian Quds Force, and even Iraqi security and police forces. Before the many massacres of MEK members, particularly the attacks in 2013 which resulted in several hundred deaths, the organisation was already disintegrated, entirely unarmed, and left with no means of self-defence.⁵² These conditions do not apply to the Iranian Kurdish opposition, since despite decades of quietism without conducting military activities, they maintained the training and recruitment of new members. They have remained close to their grassroots so that, in case of a drastic change of situation in Iran, they could mobilise their supporters and challenge the IRI's authority in Kurdistan. Familiar with the environment and surrounded by friendly local communities that share their Kurdish identity and have given shelter to Iranian Kurdish parties, these parties can better withstand pressure from Iran and even the KRG.

Tehran has been emboldened by the chaotic political situation in Iraq and is tempted to reimplement the strategy it used against the MEK, this time against the Kurdish movement. The first stage is the application of pressure and intimidation on the Iraqi government, to force the KRG to close the KDPI and Komala's mountain bases, and achieve their expulsion from the KRI. For instance, during a visit of the Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein on 10 August 2021, Ali Shamkhani of Iran's Supreme National Security Council told Baghdad to expel the Kurdish groups or expect Tehran to take 'preventative measures'. The Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi met the same Iranian request during his official visit to Tehran on 12 September 2021.⁵³ This Iranian desire can be traced back to 2015-2016, when the KDPI declared the Rasan, and the Iranian Kurdish parties also demonstrated their military effectiveness offered their military support to the KRG in its fight against the Islamic State terror group. These events underscored these parties' potential of (re)mobilising their forces and the grassroots, seen by the IRI as posing a pertinent threat.

⁵¹ "Iranian Influence in Iraq and the Case of Camp Liberty," Senate Hearing 114-301, (Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg20721/html/CHRG-114shrg20721.htm>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Maryam Sinaiee, "Is Tehran Ready for an Assault on Iranian Kurdish Groups in Iraq?," *Iran International*, September 10, 2021, <https://iranintl.com/en/iran/tehran-readying-assault-iranian-kurdish-groups-iraq>

The Iranian Kurdish movement has always played a pivotal role in determining how Iran treats the Kurds in Iraq. Aware of this, the KRG's ruling parties, the KDP and the PUK, have used the Iranian Kurdish movement as a bargaining chip, the loss of which would weaken their already asymmetric relationship with Iran. It is arguable that, based on such a rational calculation, these parties prefer the presence of a weak and manageable Iranian Kurdish movement on their soil, rather than expelling it altogether. Taking strong action against the Iranian Kurdish political parties would also provoke domestic anger from Iraqi Kurds. To a lesser extent, the KRG parties' own Kurdish nationalist sentiments make it unlikely for them to bow to Iranian pressure and ask the Iranian Kurdish parties to leave the KRI.

Due to the weakness of political structures and the sectarian nature of Iraqi politics beyond the KRI, Iran has been able to play the role of kingmaker in Iraq, and has leveraged this influence against the Iranian Kurds exiled in Iraq.⁵⁴ The IRI initially attempted to rely on its Shi'i proxy politicians in the Iraqi parliament; this failed due to the opposition of Kurdish members of the Iraqi parliament. Nonetheless, encouraged by Iraq's domestic turmoil, Iran has continued its attempts at disarming and expelling its Kurdish opposition parties in Iraq, through more aggressive measures. Iran's excessive influence on post-2003 Iraqi politics has made forming governments in Iraq a difficult process. While the long-term outcomes of the Iraqi general election on 10 October 2021 remain unclear at the time of writing, the election will almost certainly contribute to further uncertainty for the country's already unstable and fragile situation. Once again, Iran sees the situation in Iraq as an opportunity to impose policies serving its interest. The re-election of al-Kadhimi will require Iranian support, only granted if al-Kadhimi proves his capability to convince or intimidate the KRG to fulfil Iran's desire.

Conclusion

At present, the KRI is a battlefield for asymmetric clashes between the IRI's military and the non-state armed groups of the Iranian Kurdish movement. The chaotic regional conditions which have undermined the KRI's security have allowed Iran, and also Turkey, to not only continue their previous tactic of targeted assassination, but also to make use of the twenty-first century's unconventional military equipment, and test their high-tech arms industry against opposition groups. The KDPI and Komala have also been the subject of criticism from Iranian Kurdish civil society, grassroots activists in Iran, and the politically active diaspora, for the inter-organisational fragmentation from which they have long suffered. In addition to the asymmetric power relations facing the Kurdish movement and the lack of regional or power support, the lack of a unified strategy and the fragmented nature with many split parties add further complexity to the Kurdish movement in Iran.

⁵⁴ Haitham Numan, "Iraqi Elections: A Fragile Balance Set Up to Fail," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 30, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85470>