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A Kurdish woman writing, Women, Life, Freedom in Kurdish on a wall in the city of Shno.

Iran's Protest and intercommunal interaction; a Kurdish perspective

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Introduction

Iran is in turmoil. The Iranian government's use of violence in quashing protests in the country is excessive and escalating, and the death toll of protesters killed by Iranian police and the Basij militia forces is [rising day by day](#). However, the severity of the response and the deterioration of human rights in Iran differ between regions. For instance, the Iranian provinces of Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan are highly affected by the ongoing protests and the [regime's crackdown](#). This paper argues that Kurds in Iran have been the victims of particular forms of violations of their human and national rights, during the country's current uprisings, which began following protests against the Iranian morality police's brutal murder of the 22-year-old Kurdish woman Jina (Mahsa) Amini in September. This oppression inside Iran has been echoed in the diaspora, with the attempted silencing of Kurdish voices by some segments of the Persian diaspora.

The Kurdish role

The Kurdish region of Iran (Rojhelat/East Kurdistan) has been among the country's most [militarised and securitised](#) regions since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in 1979. During the modern history of Iran, Kurdish cities and provinces have been transformed into military zones. This is a product of a historically tense Kurdish-state relationship in Iran. Nevertheless, Kurdistan and Iran's current mass uprising has ushered in a new strained phase in the Kurdish-state relationship. This has also manifested a new era of [Kurdish politics in Iran](#), composed on the one hand of prospects for hope and improvement, and on the other of unprecedented unpredictability and challenges.

Kurdish cities and provinces are the main theatre of anti-regime protests, and have already paid a huge price in terms of loss of human life and other violations of human rights, and the economic costs of everyday protests and [general strikes of businesses](#) and markets in an already economically deprived region. Compounding this, protesters in Kurdistan and those who represent their voice outside Kurdistan and Iran, suffer attempts to be silenced, and are requested to not frame or express their demands as claims related to Kurdish national identity. As will be explored below, in the name of maintaining unity in the fight against the IRI, non-Persian communities are asked to cease their demands for equal citizenship and the right to exercise their cultural and national identity.

The Kurdish people, historically and today, have been denied their fundamental human rights. Kurds in Iran, like the country's other minority national groups such as Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis and Turkmens, have been the subject of systematic and multifaceted discriminatory and [exclusionary state policies](#). However, resistance to assimilation and hope for change has kept the fire of the Kurdish movement alight. In the enduring Kurdish movement and patterns of Kurdish politics in Iran, with over a century of struggle for democracy and the right of self-determination, preserving and exercising Kurdish national identity and language have been the major elements of the Kurdish struggle in Iran, as with other parts of greater Kurdistan. With such a long record of struggle and resistance to assimilation, Kurds can be considered as the most [politicised national minority](#) group in Iran.

Inside and outside Kurdistan, Kurdish commentators and activists are observing the development and spread of the protests in the central regions and provinces of Iran, populated mainly by Persian communities, with apprehension and suspicion. After eight weeks of the uprising, cities like Tehran, Isfahan and Mashhad have remained relatively quiet. Smaller cities in non-Persian regions, such

as [Sanandaj](#) and [Zahedan](#), are far ahead in terms of participation in the protests and challenging the regime's authority, compared to the metropolis of Tehran, with a population close to 10 million.

While the protests are continuing, they have shown signs of diminishing in attendance and frequency. If the protests lose momentum and the regime succeeds in suppressing them, not only will a historical moment for change have been wasted, but the collective punishment will be severe, particularly in Kurdistan as the epicentre of these protests. The regime has proven that when its survival is threatened, it is capable of horrifying cruelty: in the summer of 1988, several thousand political prisoners in the IRI were [secretly executed and buried in mass graves](#). Closely involved in this crime was the country's current [president Ibrahim Raisi](#), then deputy of the head of the judicial system. The regime's proven capability in exercising excessive brutality gives reason to fear a new level of state terrorisation of the population of the worse sort, if the burdens of resistance and revolt are not shared equally across the country.

The struggle over discourse

The rigid and perhaps unreformable structure and institutions of the IRI indicate that only regime change can enable a democratic and inclusive political system in Iran, providing equal rights to one and all, regardless of their gender, ethnonational, religious and ideological affiliations. However, the uprisings and debates around a post-IRI society, particularly in diasporic Iranian communities, have brought to the surface [non-democratic attitudes toward diversity and differences](#). An apparent feature of this debate is the prevalent and conscious use of the terms "us" and (internal) "others", revealing [weak or absent intercommunal ties](#) among Iran's different national communities. The privileged Persian segment of Iranian society, as the main beneficiary of the Iranian state, consider themselves the guardians of Iran's territorial integrity, and demonstrate a self-entitlement to determine and control the discourse over what a future Iran should look like. Anything outside this is deemed as treachery and a threat to Iran's "national" and territorial integrity.

The mutual distrust among Iran's [Persian and non-Persian national](#) communities is immense. The evolution and spread of the current protests across Iran testify to the reality that Iran's national communities differ not only in their cultures and languages, but also (sometimes sharply) in their socio-political outlook and demands for how a future Iran should look. This reveals the fragmented nature of Iranian society.

In Iran, a view of Kurds as a threat to Iran's territorial integrity has been institutionalised. Historically, every demand for rights and equality raised by Kurds has been branded as a threat to Iran's territorial and national integrity. This trend has become more evident during Iran's current uprising. Both the IRI and the diasporic Persian opposition use this claim for propaganda purposes. While a few prominent voices of Persian diaspora communities, such as the US-based activist [Masih Alinejad](#), have praised the Kurdish role in the protests and requested the solidarity of other parts of Iran, the conversation about the intention of the Kurdish protests has largely been toxic. Influential sections of the Persian diaspora have openly attacked the Kurds and spread rumours of the threat of Iran's territorial disintegration if the protests succeed in regime change. [Akbar Ganji](#), previously a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and currently a dissident living in self-imposed exile, released a strongly anti-Kurdish video, in which he warned people in the Persian-inhabited areas of Iran against joining the protests which he claimed were a manifestation of a "Kurdish agenda". In a video called "[Liberation from religious dictatorship or liberation from Iran and its integrity?](#)", shared by many diaspora Iranian academics on social media, Ganji asked protesters to reconsider their participation in the current protests. According to Ganji, "the spread and expansion

of these protests would endanger Iran's territorial integrity, which is an end and agenda of the uprisings in border [peripheral] regions such as Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchistan".

Conversations, both public and private, between Iranian and Kurdish scholars on the current uprising have included intimidation from Iranian scholars. Kurdish scholars are accused of narrowing the uprising in Kurdistan to identity politics, and are [demanded to stop](#). Such statements demonstrate arrogance and ignorance of the history and demands of the Kurdish movement in Iran and other parts of Kurdistan, the essence of which has always been the struggle for the equal right of national identity. I have personally received emails from Iranian scholars, attempting to dictate that I change my position on Kurdistan and Iran's current uprising. For instance, on 27 September 2022, a group of Iranian scholars employed by British universities sent an email requesting that I change the title and content of my article "[Iran's Transformative Moment: Kurdistan on the Frontline](#)", which they claimed eroded "a united effort towards freedom" in the protests against the IRI.

Conclusion

Inside Iran, peaceful Kurdish protests with the demand for freedom face state violence at multiple levels. The Kurdish region is militarised, and the Kurdish national identity is securitised. Iranian diasporic Kurds who escaped this state violence are currently experiencing censorship and [attempts at silencing](#) imposed on them by nationalist and pan-Iranist segments of diasporic Persian communities. These conditions have created a toxic atmosphere, including baseless accusations and dissemination of fake news and disinformation, in which scholars, activists and commentators focusing on the uprising in Kurdistan and Iran but reject the mainstream point of view are subject to intimidation. From a Kurdish point of view, because of the marginalization that Kurds face and their history of struggle, the recognition of Kurdish concerns by progressive forces is an important precondition for fundamental change in Iran. Any attempt at democracy in Iran which disregards the urgent and unconditional needs of subaltern groups and communities will not last long, and would equate only to another [failed revolution](#) similar to that of 1979, which failed to live up to popular expectation for democratic change.

[Allan Hassaniyan Jina Amini Rojhalat Protests.](#)



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