Identities and Ethnic Hierarchy: The Kurdish Question in Iran since 1979

Olivier Grojean

Published in Stansfield, Gareth and Shareef, Mohammed (ed.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, Hurst, London, 2017, pp. 319-330.

A conference in London on 20 February 2005 brought together seven organisations representing different 'Iranian nationalities,' including Baluchis, Kurds, Azeris, and Arabs. The conference delegates were assembled to promote the idea of a federalist Iran, founded on increased respect for minorities and true democracy, and it culminated in the founding of the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran. Six months later, on 26 October, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) held a meeting in Washington on the topic 'The Unknown Iran: Another Case for Federalism?' to which Azeri, Turkmen, Kurdish, Baluchi, and Arab representatives were invited. The organiser, Michael Ledeen, pointedly observed during his opening remarks that the AEI's goal was not to 'dismember Iran,' but merely to inform the American public about the status of minorities in the country.

Other meetings could be cited to illustrate that - as a number of experts, and even the Iranian government itself, have argued—the West has played a key role in raising awareness about - or at least signaling the unprecedented development of - independence and separatist movements in Iran since the mid-2000s. The George W. Bush administration promoted the idea of a 'Greater Middle East' in an effort to reconfigure the region, and particularly to shape Iran in ways that were more consistent with American objectives. A 2007 presidential executive order commanded an increase in clandestine operations sponsored by the US among

separatist groups in Iran in order to destabilise the Islamic Republic.[1] These are just a few of many examples that can be cited to show that foreigners either fomented or exploited unrest among Iranian minority groups, particularly the Kurds, in the 2000s. However, all of these re-awakenings began well before the turn of the twenty-first century.

As an ancient, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith Empire with Persian as the mother tongue of less than half of its citizens, Iran is indeed unrivaled in terms of cultural diversity. The widespread idea that foreigners have used these groups, which represents a full-blown conspiracy theory in Iran, may very well be the proverbial tree that hides the forest, a number supported by recent scientific studies of minorities in Iran.[2] From 1925 to 1979, the Pahlavi dynasty systematically campaigned to transform the ethnic mosaic of the Persian Empire into a centralised nation-state that did not accommodate identity-based rights. This effort was so successful that it was only after Reza Shah had abdicated and the Soviet and British occupied Iran in 1941 that the ill-fated and short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad could be established in 1946. This separate Kurdish political entity was literally crushed only eleven months later,[3] and the Kurds would have to await the 1979 Revolution to again – temporarily - become empowered, while the new Iranian regime was not yet completely established. The Kurds were only able to affirm their political and cultural rights for three or four years before a brutal crackdown.[4] The Islamic Republic does appear more tolerant towards other cultures or regional languages (Article 15 of the Constitution authorises the use and teaching of 'local' languages, for example), but it has in fact continued and expanded the unification project initiated under the Pahlavi dynasty, although presently on a nationalistic (i.e., Persian) and

[1] Harrison, Selig S., 'The US Meddles Aggressively in Iran,' *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English edition), October 2007, pp. 1 and 7.
[2] For recent studies, see Elling, Rasmus C. *Minorities in Iran. Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Alam, Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
[3] Vali, Abbas, *Kurds and the State in Iran. The making of Kurdish Identity*, London: I.B. Thauris, 2011.
[4] Kutschera, Chris, *Le défi kurde ou le rêve fou de l'indépendance*, Paris: Bayard, 1997, pp. 157-221.

Islamic (i.e., Shi'a) basis. During the twentieth century, the large number of groups that comprise modern-day Iran became de facto minorities by becoming aware of their identities and voicing political and cultural demands, while also generally expressing genuine attachment to their Iranian national identity.

The Kurds offer a good example of these identity-centred 'awakenings.' Representing between ten and fifteen percent of the Iranian population and speaking Kurdish as their mother tongue, although not Farsi, they live primarily in the provinces along the nation's Northwestern periphery-West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Elam. The vast majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, which makes them ineligible for many administrative functions, and their territory tends to suffer from under-investment. The Kurds are not only one of the largest Iranian minorities, but also, for nearly a century, one of the most active in terms of cultural and political demands, social movements, and guerilla activities. Kurdish nationalism extends beyond Iranian borders, although Iranian Kurds generally reject secessionist ideas. Indeed, the Kurdish movement in Iran is closely tied to other movements that are demanding a redefinition of their relationships with the central government, more equitable resource distribution, some level of cultural independence (when coupled with demands of government investments) and political autonomy (decentralisation, indigenisation of the local administration, and changes in territorial borders).

In terms of the theories of nationalism, Kurdish activism arguably resembles a 'nationalism of reaction,' in the face of a 'modernising' State seeking to culturally homogenise the peoples that it controls and governs. Although probably valid, this argument does not enable a balanced understanding of the moments, situations, and specific configurations that can potentially allow an environment of cultural friction between groups to be transformed into

political claims to the centre, inter-individual conflicts into collective mobilisation, or from a peaceful movement into open, armed struggle. In fact, the system prioritises some ethnic and religious identities over others, assigning each minority a rank inside a hierarchy, in turn generating peaceable - and occasionally violent - conflict.[5] Further, as Gilles Dorronsoro and I have argued elsewhere, it is possible to distinguish the ideal-typical ways by which hierarchies are transformed (somewhat adapted here to the post-revolutionary Iranian situation), which can facilitate the action of mobilising actors. First, political transformation at the centre can redefine the core identity and incite challengers to promote an alternative hierarchy; second, changes in the immediate environment multiply the phenomena of competition, mimicry, or cooperation at the periphery that can restructure the marginalised identities; and finally, exceptional events - local, national, and international - that break with routine temporality can trigger 'moral shocks' or even completely redefine the ways in which individuals think and act. The present article explores these three pathways for interrogating identity-based hierarchies in order to analyse the Kurdish question in Iran since 1979, while envisioning the status of the Kurds within the broader perspective of the relationships between Iranian minorities and the state.

The Denaturalisation of Group Hierarchies by the Centre

The state is often at the heart of 'conflicts of differentiation.' Because of its power to categorise groups, redefine territorial boundaries, and create and implement public policy, governments have the power to recognise some groups while discriminating against others, in the process defining the relationships among various groups. As the guarantor of official history, governments similarly play a critical role in shaping the people's conceptual

[5] Dorronsoro, Gilles and Grojean, Olivier, 'Identity, Hierarchy and Mobilization,' in Dorronsoro, Gilles and Grojean, Olivier (Eds.), *Identity, Conflicts and Politics in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan*, London: Hurst, New York: Oxford University Press, in press, 2017.

framework,[6] although this power is continually challenged. To some extent, there are obvious parallels with how the Kurdish question is represented in official Turkish historical accounts, such as maps and school textbooks.[7] Rapid transformations of the hierarchy can therefore take place at the centre if the state or government seeks to transform the relative value of particular identities, whether this involves positive or negative consequences for the group in question. Indeed, a finding of the sociology of social movements is that both repression and official recognition have fundamentally uncertain effects on the processes of mobilisation.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 broke with the unifying, centralising policies enforced by the Shah's regime, allowing minorities to openly express their specific cultural, linguistic, or religious demands. More than 180 books about local Turkish cultures were published in Iran between 1979 and 1984, for example, compared to only a handful in the previous ten years.[8] This is how, during this universalist, liberal phase of the revolution, the KDPI (the *Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan - Iran*, Kurdistan Democratic Party – Iran[9]) grew to be one of the leading political forces in Iranian Kurdistan. Attempting to control and organise protests since the fall of 1978, Abd al-Rahman Qasimlu's party found itself, after the Shah's departure on 16 January, in the position of co-managing majority-Kurdish regions with Komala,[10] and an influential figure put forward by the KDPI (who later became independent) - Sheikh Ezaddin Hosseini. Committees were created in the cities along local ethno-political lines, including a

[6] Bourdieu, Pierre, *Sur l'Etat*, Paris: Seuil, 2011.
[7] Copeaux, Etienne, *Espaces et temps de la nation turque. Analyse d'une historiographie nationaliste, 1931-1993*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1997; Copeaux, Etienne, *Une vision turque du monde à travers les cartes*, *de 1931 à nos jours*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000.
[8] Gökdağ, Bilgehan A. and Heyet, Rıza, 'İran Türklerinde Kimlik Meselesi,' *Bilig*, n°30, p. 76-79 cité in Riaux, Gilles, 'The Origins of the Protest Movement against Ethnic Hierarchy. The Azerbaijani Cause in Iran,' in Dorronsoro, Gilles et Grojean, Olivier (Eds.), *Identity, Conflicts and Politics in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan*, London: Hurst, New York: Oxford University Press, to be published in 2017.
[9] The PDK in Iran was founded in September 1945 and proclaimed the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946. Since the 1960s, it has been torn between Barzani's Iraqi PDK and a brand of Soviet-influenced socialism.
[10] The *Komalaye Shoreshgeri Zahmat Keshane Kurdistane Iran* (The Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan) or, more simply, Komala, is a Maoist organization founded by Kurdish university students in 1969. It operated in secret until the Revolution.

Kurdish revolutionary committee in Mahabad, an Islamic group in Urumiyeh, and Kurdish and Sunni committees in Sanandaj, etc.[11] When negotiations with the Bazargan provisional government began on February 14, the Kurds openly - and hopefully - demanded an autonomous Kurdistan inside redefined borders. The KDPI was subsequently granted legal status and on March 1, between 100,000 and 150,000 people attended Abd al-Rahman Qasimlu's first political rally in Mahabad.

This trend towards political openness gradually subsided. The Kurds were unprepared for this and rapidly became caught up in a series of incidents, many of which they caused themselves, such as the seizure of Iranian military installations by local KDPI forces. These incidents fueled tensions and culminated in the failure of the negotiations.[12] The *Nawroz* (the Kurdish New Year) crackdown in Sanandaj, and additional confrontations in Naqadeh and Merivan, led to a boycott of the referendum on the 'Islamic' character of the Republic on 1 April. It became impossible for Qasimlu to participate in the Assembly of Experts that was created to draft a new constitution in August. On 17 August, Khomeini called for Jihad against the Kurds, initiating a three-year state of war between the Kurdish movement and Iranian authorities that was punctuated by sporadic attempts to negotiate. By the spring of 1984, the Iranian government had brought Kurdish territory under control, and Iranian peshmergas were forced to retreat into Iraq. Further attempts to negotiate gave way to confrontations, and the Iranian Kurds aligned themselves with Saddam Hussein against the Islamic Republic during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), while the Iraqi Kurds who sought refuge in Iran supported the Khomeini regime. Negotiations resumed only after the war ended, with the widely known conclusion - Qasimlu's assassination by Iranian special service agents in Vienna in July 1989, followed by the killing of his successor in Berlin in September 1992.

[11] Kutschera, Chris, *Le défi kurde ou le rêve fou de l'indépendance*, Paris: Bayard, 1997, p. 158.
[12] Ahmadzadeh, Hashem and Stansfield, Gareth, 'The Political, Military, and Cultural Reawakening of the Kurdish National Movement in Iran,' *Middle East Journal*, 64, 1, (2010), pp. 17-18.

Challenges to the ethnic hierarchy - caused by the government's withdrawal at the outset of the Revolution - and its subsequent reassertion with violence - by the new Iranian government - have directly contributed to the rise of mobilisations against the state. Some groups may also directly attack other groups when they feel threatened, however. The government unfailingly plays a key role in and exploits such inter-group conflicts. One example occurred during confrontations in Naqadeh in April 1979, where Azeri Shi'a held higher-ranking positions in the city than the local - Sunni - Kurds. On 7 April, violence broke out between Kurdish and Azeri committees preparing for Qasimlu's second rally on April 20 in the wake of the accidental death of an Azeri at the hands of a Kurd.[13] On the day of the rally, Azeris fired into the crowd inside the stadium, interrupting Qasimlu. Fighting later broke out in Naqadeh between Azeris and Kurds as a consequence, lasting for three days, with four further days of violence in the neighboring villages. Kurdish sources reported over 350 fatalities, but violence in the ensuing months caused several hundred more fatalities, providing an opportunity for the government to send a large number of *Pâsdârân* to Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces to impose a semblance of calm in the region.

The above examples are based on a true revolution, in the sense of a radical change, of regime and political institutions. But a 'simple' change of government can also provoke deep uncertainty (in terms of both hopes and fears) concerning the maintenance of the hierarchy, in turn inciting groups to mobilise. This was the case, for example, when Muhammad Khatami came to power in May 1997 and the conservatives lost the legislative elections in February 2000. Indeed, Khatami claimed to base his candidacy and presidency on inclusivity and on

[13] Mohséni, Chirine, 'The Instrumentalization of Ethnic Conflict by the State: the Azeri-Kurdish Conflict in Iran,' in Dorronsoro, Gilles and Grojean, Olivier (Eds.), *Identity, Conflicts and Politics in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan*, London: Hurst, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, in press. The information contained here was taken from this chapter.

recognition of the many identities that contribute to Iranian-ness, under the slogan 'Iran for all Iranians.'[14] Kurds and other groups were suddenly allowed to express themselves in unprecedented ways, including newspapers and magazines, cultural and literary organisations, and the creation of a Kurdish faction in the Iranian Parliament.[15] From the perspective of more traditional political organisations, it was also during this period that the KDPI abandoned armed conflict in favor of political struggle (in August 1996, but this change in policy was confirmed in the ensuing months), followed by the Komala in the early 2000s, although repression continues in Kurdistan to this day.[16] On the other hand, the return of the conservatives to power in 2005 with Mahmud Ahmadinejad, after an electoral debate marked by the nationality question, coincided with the creation of the Kurdish United Front in Tehran in January 2006 (which united the Kurds in Parliament), and facilitated the increase in armed conflict involving the PJAK (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistan*, Free Life Party of Kurdistan), a party close to the Turkish PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Workers' Party of Kurdistan) that was officially founded in April 2004.

Important political changes at the centre can thus help to challenge the hierarchy of identities and offer windows of opportunity for minority movements. Or not. This explains why, following Ahmadinejad's highly contested reelection in 2009, the cities of the Iranian plateau such as Isfahan and Shiraz supported the Green Movement, while peripheral regions remained only minimally mobilised: there was no sign of a possible redefinition of the core identity.

---

[14] Entessar, Nader, 'Between a Rock and an Hard Place: The Kurdish Dilemma in Iran,' in Romano David and Gurses, Mehmet (Eds.) *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 215.

[15] Stansfield, Gareth, 'Kurds, Persian Nationalism, and Shi'i Rule: Surviving Persian Dominant Nationhood in Iran,' in Romano David and Gurses, Mehmet (Eds.) *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 76.

[16] Khatami did not in fact have the support of the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, of the Council of the Revolutionary Guards and of the judiciary power. See Ansari, Ali, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, London: Chatham House, 2006.

Based on the hypothesised emergence of 'political sub-fields'[17] in the peripheral provinces of Iran (in other words, a fragmentation of the national political field), Gilles Riaux argues that minorities develop nowadays 'an impressive distanciation from the national political arena, from which nothing further is expected.'[18]

Changes in the Peripheral Environment, and the Redefinition of Minorities

Challenges to the identity hierarchy can also be explained by social, economic, and political changes that are increasingly independent of the centre. It is this border that becomes, as it were, the 'central issue,' because it generates singular resources and constraints that can increase of decrease the status of certain identities.

Such boundaries can lie inside the country's borders, for example when administrative or territorial redistricting provokes uprisings or 'localist' riots, as took place when a new province[19] was created in Ardebil in 1993, and more recently in Sabzevar in 2003 in response to plans to partition Khorasan province. Those plans included naming the neighboring city, Bojnurd, the capital of the new province.[20] These borders can also be external, and complications can arise when interactions with neighboring peoples become more frequent and intense. After the fall of the USSR, for example, Turcophone groups that occupied peripheral locations in the north of the country suddenly found that they were sharing borders with independent states like Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, which triggered the much earlier, celebrated 'awakening' of minority identities in the mid-2000s. In another case, the return of autonomist movements to Pakistani Baluchistan (which was more autonomous with respect to

[17] Gilles Dorronsoro and Watts, Nicole, 'Toward Kurdish Distinctiveness in Electoral Politics. The 1977 Local Elections in Diyarbakir, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41, 3, 2009, pp. 457-478.
[18] Riaux, Gilles, 'Téhéran et ses provinces. L'hypothèse de l'émergence de sous-champs politiques dans les regions périphériques de la République islamique,' *Outre-Terre*, 28 (2011), pp. 319-328.
[19] Chehabi, H E, 'Ardabil becomes a Province: Center-Periphery relations in Iran,' *International Journal of Middle-East Studies*, 29 (1997), pp. 235-253.
[20] Bromberger, Christian, 'Ethnic And Regional Ferment In Iran: The Gilan Example,' in Dorronsoro, Gilles and Grojean, Olivier (Eds.), *Identity, Conflicts and Politics in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan*, London: Hurst, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, in press.

the central government, however) in the early 2000s had repercussions for Iranian Baluchis as well, some of whom founded Jundullah (Soldiers of Allah) and fought openly with government forces in 2005. Saddam Hussein's efforts to rally the Arabs of Khuzestan during the Iran-Iraq War, by contrast, failed dismally because the cross-border ethnic solidarity that he hoped to mobilise was secondary to Iranian national feelings.

Precisely because they involve internal or external border crossings, migrations can unleash period during which identities become redefined. Internally, rural exodus transforms the relative value attributed to different identities, particularly when a local majority group suddenly finds itself a minority after moving to an urban setting. This occurred to Sunnis who migrated to Tehran - where there is not a single Sunni mosque (and whereas numerous Sunni mosques were destroyed in other Iranian cities). The Sunnis residing in the capital can only pray or assemble at the mosque at the Pakistani embassy or in vacant lots. With respect to Kurds, as Farideh Koohi-Kamali has attempted to show internal Kurdish migrations, particularly those in Kurdish regions in the 1960s and 1970s, increased solidarity among Kurds and contributed to the rise of a specific brand of Kurdish nationalism.[21] However, Martin van Bruinessen has argued that Iranian Kurdistan was far better integrated into other Iranian regions than Koohi-Kamali contends,[22] largely because of internal migration towards other regions in Kurdistan and particularly towards Tehran, where large numbers of seasonal Kurdish migrants work in construction, but also to the oil-producing areas along the Gulf. As a result, as in Turkey, Kurdish migrants became by default an urban working class linked to their ethnic origins, particularly after mass displacements during the Iran-Iraq War.

[21] Koohi-Kamali, Farideh, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran. Pastoral Nationalism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
[22] Bruinessen, Martin van, 'Book Review of *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism*, Farideh Koohi-Kamali,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, 41, 1 (2005), pp. 153-155.

Significant circulation and migration traversed external borders, in addition to Baluchistan, as mentioned earlier. The border between Iranian Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan was particularly porous during the Iran-Iraq War, when refugees flowed in both directions - Iraqi Kurds towards Iran, and Iranian Kurds towards Iraq. The creation of an autonomous Kurdish entity in Iraq in 1991 did not immediately pave the way for a significant increase in political interaction between the two zones, however. Under pressure from both the KDP (*Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (or the YNK, *Yekîtîya Niştimanîya Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Patriotic Union) who did not tolerate armed actions against Iran from their autonomous zone in Iraq, and under pressure from Iran itself, which stepped up incursions into Iraqi territory to destroy its Kurdish opposition (especially in 1993 and 1996), the KDPI and the Komala engaged in only a few small-scale raids between 1991 and 1996. The border remained open, however, and trade between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan continued to grow, to the point that when the border was closed in 1996, Jalal Talabani, the leader of the PUK, agreed to allow the Iranian forces to cross the border and crush the KDPI camps on July 28 and 29, contributing even more to the silencing of Iranian Kurdish organisations.[23]

The situation completely changed after the American intervention in Iraq in 2003, and especially since 2005, when the new Iraqi constitution granted Iraqi Kurdistan the status of a Federal State, thereby strengthening the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government).[24] The KRG's newly important role and the comparatively peaceful situation in Iraqi Kurdistan allowed family visits, worker and student migrations, legal trade, the smuggling of manufactured goods, and the trans-border circulation of numerous political opponents and

[23] Kutschera, Chris, *Le défi kurde ou le rêve fou de l'indépendance*, Paris: Bayard, 1997, pp. 219-221.
[24] Grojean, Olivier and Özdemirkiran, Merve, 'Ce que fait le Kurdistan d'Iraq au 'grand' Kurdistan. Enjeux et modalités de la constitution d'un espace transfrontalier,' *Les Dossiers du CERI*, 4 (2014), URL: http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/dossiersduceri/ce-que-le-kurdistan-d-irak-fait-au-grand-kurdistan-enjeux-et-modalites-de-la-constitution-d-

refugees (from Iran towards Iraq), while also making it possible for the two regions to attain an unprecedented level of integration.[25] This regional interdependence can be seen through the lens of 'the complementarity of two antagonistic but juxtaposed economic systems, between, on one side, a liberal Iraqi Kurdistan with no desire to end smuggling, and on the other side, Iran, which, thanks to illegal trade, is able to circumvent the embargo of which it is a victim.'[26] This has had particularly important implications for the political activities of the Iranian Kurdish opposition in Iraq.[27] Since 1993, KDPI peshmergas have descended from the mountains and established militarised camps in Koya, Djejnakan, and Degala. These peshmergas currently focus primarily on placing supporters seeking refuge inside Iraq in civilian camps that currently house more than 15,000 refugees.[28] KDPI activities are limited to more or less 'long distance' political activities, particularly via the Tishk TV television channel, which is headquartered in Paris and broadcasts into Iranian Kurdish zones. Komala continues to maintain a highly militarised camp that primarily receives activists and sympathisers fleeing the Tehran regime, while also creating programming for its television channel, Rohjelat TV, which is headquartered in Sweden.[29] This has prompted Leïla Porcher to claim that the term that best describes the present-day KDPI and Komala is 'waiting' - waiting for the eventual transformation of the Iranian regime's approach to activists and, for the refugees under their protection, waiting to migrate to Europe or elsewhere.[30]

---

[25] Even if the two regions already experienced very high levels of integration, during the Mahabad Republic in 1946 and the 1960s and 1970s.

[26] Roussel, Cyril, 'Circulations à la frontière entre Kurdes d'Iraq et Kurdes d'Iran. Clandestinité économique et politique au Moyen-Orient,' *EchoGéo*, 25 (2013), § 4, URL: https://echogeo.revues.org/13550?lang=en

[27] The two parties split numerous times during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. There are currently three tendencies within the KDPI, and no fewer than five currents of the Komala. See Ahmadzadeh, Hashem and Stansfield, Gareth, 'The Political, Military, and Cultural Reawakening of the Kurdish National Movement in Iran,' *Middle East Journal*, 64, 1, (2010), p. 23.

[28] *Ibid.* § 24-25.

[29] Observations of the Komala training camp led by Abdulla Mohtadi, near Suleymaniye, June 2014.

[30] Porcher, Leïla, 'How to oppose Islamic Republic of Iran? Everyday political practices of Kurdish Iranian militants in Iraq,' Unpublished presentation at the workshop *The Development of Relations between States and the Kurdish Areas: What Impact on Local Modes of Governance?* Erbil, Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO), June 2, 2014. Because they have no nationality, the Iranian Kurds cannot legally work or obtain a driver's license; they also lack the right to own land or leave Iraqi Kurdistan.

These upheavals surrounding external borders have deeply influenced the PJAK's activities. The PJAK took advantage of zones controlled by the PKK on Mount Qandil in Iraq after 2004 and the space opened by cooling relations between the PKK and Iran to launch military operations against Iranian security forces through 2011. On the other hand, this renewed alliance between the PKK and the Iranian authorities after the beginning of civil war in Syria unquestionably explains the ceasefire declared by the PJAK in August 2011.[31] In short, the border is a mobilising factor when it is more porous, but it can also precipitate the end of armed conflict when it is tightened.[32]

'Exceptional' Events that Rupture the Hierarchy's Established Timeframe

Identities can ultimately be reshaped by 'perturbing' events, which break the regulated temporality governing relationships between groups. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the biographical trajectories of many activists, who often report that triggering events determined their commitment to the cause. Although such 'foundational events' should clearly be viewed with a certain skepticism because they can easily reflect efforts to edit autobiographies retrospectively, it is impossible to disregard them completely, particularly when in view of the emotional aspect of such life-changing decisions.[33] The evidence suggests that the earliest activists of the future PJAK, annoyed by the lack of prospects offered by the KDPI and the Komala, were deeply influenced by the escape and subsequent

[31] According to Jordi Tejel and Eva Savelsberg, the Iraqi President and leader of the PUK, Jalal Talabani, encouraged the PJAK to initiate a unilateral cease-fire, and in exchange, Iran supposedly agreed to allow the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, Party of Democratic Union, the PKKs sister organization in Syria) to arm itself in Syria. See Savelsberg, Eva and Tejel, Jordi, 'The Syrian Kurds in 'Transition to Somewhere,'' in M.M.A. Ahmed and M. Gunter, Mickael (Eds.), *The Kurdish Spring. Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, Costa Mesa, Mazda, 2013, pp. 208-209. A large number of PJAK fighters reportedly went to Syria to join the PYD.

[32] Border security was ensured more by the mother organization - the PKK - more than by Iranian security forces.

[33] Bessin, Marc, 'Le trouble de l'événement: la place des émotions dans les bifurcations,' in Bessin, Marc, Bidart, Claire and Grosseti, Michel (Eds.), *Bifurcations. Les sciences sociales face aux ruptures et à l'événement*, Paris: La Découverte, pp. 306-328.

arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader, in 1998-1999.[34] In February 1999, tens of thousands of protesters gathered in Sanandaj, Mahabad, Bokan, Urmia, and Kermansha, as well as Kamiaran. A state of siege was announced in Sanandaj, Kamiaran, and Mahabad, which was followed by a crackdown that left 30 dead in Sanandaj. It was at this time that student groups began to become more organised, although informal student clubs had existed for ten years, following the massacre at Halabja and the assassination of the KDPI leaders. Although some of these groups were quickly disillusioned by the Öcalan trial and his 'betrayal' of the Kurdish movement,[35] others, who probably came under PKK influence earlier and had scrutinised Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, were driven into zones controlled by the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan as early as 1999.[36] Helped by the numerous PKK guerillas of Iranian origin, they gradually developed a real party that became a sister organisation of the Öcalan's organisation.

Indeed, after 1999, and then in 2001, the PKK lost government support due to Turko-Syrian and Turko-Iranian alliances, at a time of increasing talk of an American intervention in Iraq. In parallel, the early 2000s represented a crucial period in terms of redefined political objectives and methods for continuing the Öcalan party's struggle. The prospect of independence or autonomy for the Turkey's Kurdish regions had lost relevance, and after 2003, demands focused on idea of a 'Democratic Confederation of the Middle East' and later, on 'democratic confederalism.' It was within this context that the PÇDK (*Parti Çareseri Demokrati Kurdistan*, Party for a Democratic Solution for Kurdistan) was established in Iraq

[34] Interview with an Iranian Kurdish PKK official based in Iran in 1998 and 1999, Berlin, July 2004.
[35] Kutschera, Chris, 'Kurdistan d'Iran: Le Réveil des Kurdes,' *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 2085, 21-27 October 2004, URL: http://www.chris-kutschera.com/reveil.htm, published in an abbreviated version in English under the title 'Iran: a Kurdish Awakening,' *The Middle East Magazine*, January 2005, URL: http://www.chris-kutschera.com/A/Kurds-Iran.htm.
[36] Based on an interview with Akif Zagros and Gulistan Dugan, members of PJAK leadership council, James Brondon argues 'the group began in Iran around 1997 as an entirely peaceful student-based human rights movement.' See Brandon, James, 'Iran's Kurdish Threat: PJAK,' *Terrorism Monitor*, 4, 12, 2006.

in April 2002, the PYD in September 2003 in Syria, and the PJAK in April 2004 in Iran.[37] Although these parties were formed over a period of two years, it was clearly essentially for technical reasons, because as early September 2002, there was talk of establishing three sister PKK organisations: The PÇDK in Iraq, a certain 'Selahaddin Eyyubi Movement' in Syria, and finally, a provisional 'Kurdistan Movement for Freedom and Fraternity' in Iran. [38]

It is therefore clear that a group of autonomous individuals - not highly organised but deeply affected by foundational international and regional events - came under the wing of an experienced organisation, began to act collectively in an organised way, leading to armed struggle against Iran as early as 2004. More in-depth analysis will be required to establish, for example, whether the Kurdish students who initiated these mobilisations possessed local or 'peripheral' resources (which is likely), or whether they had strong cultural capital instead that might have enabled them to become part of more 'central,' established networks. [39] It is evident that joining a larger organisation cannot take place without conflict, as was the case with PYD in Syria. [40] In 2005, a group called the 'PJAK Reorganisation Committee' seceded and moved to Iraqi Kurdistan under the name Kurdistan Democratic Union. In the same year, a group of members of this group in turn seceded to create an ephemeral organisation called the 'Kurdish alliance.' [41] Most PJAK members nevertheless remained within the sister organisation of the PKK, enabling a sustained armed struggle that ended only in 2011.

---

[37] Grojean, Olivier, 'Un champ d'action régionalisé? Le PKK et ses organisations sœurs au Moyen-Orient,' *Les Dossiers du CERI*, 4 (2014), URL: http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/dossiersduceri/un-champ-d-action-regionalise-le-pkk-et-ses-organisations-soeurs-au-moyen-orient?d05

[38] Unlu, Murat, 'New PKK organizations in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria to unify Kurds,' *Turkish Daily News*, September 3, 2002.

[39] Cf. Dorronsoro, Gilles and Grojean, Olivier, 'Engagement militant et phénomènes de radicalisation chez les Kurdes de Turquie,' *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2004, § 8-9, URL: https://ejts.revues.org/198

[40] Tejel, Jordi, *Syria's Kurds. History, Politics and Society,* Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 79.

[41] Ahmadzadeh, Hashem and Stansfield, Gareth, 'The Political, Military, and Cultural Reawakening of the Kurdish National Movement in Iran,' *Middle East Journal*, 64, 1, (2010), p. 25.

Without actually giving rise to a full-fledged political party or a guerrilla fighting force, various other events, often violent, contributed to the emergence of relatively spontaneous movements in Iranian Kurdistan in the 1990s and 2000s that proved to be more or less long lasting. These 'riots' reveal unequal power struggles between two groups, or rather between a group and the state, which is the guarantor of the established hierarchy. These violent riots are usually reactive, and they can be unleashed when an incident challenges the hierarchy or, on the contrary, when it makes the hierarchy more visible, increasing its presence in daily life. This sometimes occurs during 'forbidden' inter-group marriages, when 'privileged' access to certain sites is called into question (which occurred at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, in the case of the Palestinians). Riots can also be triggered, as described earlier, when the land of reference of a group becomes subject to territorial redefinition. Finally, violence can break out when domination becomes so intolerable that a group is overwhelmed by a collective feeling of indignation, such as the riots in July-August 2005 in Mahabad, Baneh, Bukan, Divandareh, Oshnaviyeh, Piranshahr, Sanandaj, Saqqez, and Sardasht, after the death of the young Kurdish man in Mahabad whose body was dragged behind a security forces Jeep.

This type of riot again occurred in early May 2015, when news began to circulate that a member of the Iranian intelligence services had attempted to rape a young woman named Farinaz Khosrawani, who then allegedly jumped from the fourth floor of the hotel where she worked and died on impact. Protests were held on 7 May in Mahabad, where the events had taken place, but also in Sardasht, Sanandaj, Marivan, Oshnaviyeh, and Saghez, as well as in Kurdistan in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. The hotel in Mahabad was sacked and burned by the protesters, and hundreds of arrests and interrogation summons followed. The subsequent crackdown left dozens of additional wounded. A few days later, the deputy governor of Western Azerbaijan province offered a rival version of the facts according to which the young

woman apparently had a tryst with the suspect and attempted to flee after the hotel manager had told her mother about it. She then fell and was killed after attempting to escape through the window. Muhtadi's Komala contradicted this version of events by reasserting the accusation of attempted rape shortly afterwards, supported by his own arguments. On May 14, a general strike was announced in Mahabad, Sanandaj, Sardasht, Bokan, Shino, Piranshar, Ashnaviyeh, and Urmiye, and the strikers demanded that the individuals responsible for Khosrawani's death be brought to justice and that the protesters currently under arrest be freed. Protests were held in various European capitals as well, and on the same day, the KODAR (*Komalgay Demokratîk û Azadiya Rojhilatê Kurdistanê*, Free and Democratic Society of Eastern Kurdistan, a political organisation created by the PJAK in 2014) called for the democratisation of the Iranian regime, asserting that if no action was taken, it would fight for the unilateral creation of a self-governed Rojhelat, on the model of Syrian cantons. On May 15th, under circumstances that remain unclear, violent confrontations with government security forces erupted, leaving at least one fatality. Tensions rapidly fell, however, and were followed by more ordinary forms of repression including routine intimidation, summons, arrests, and regular executions of individuals convicted of pro-Kurdish activities.

Clearly, without necessarily challenging the government in the medium or long term or serving as an instrument for preserving the status quo (which is profoundly inegalitarian) the many riots among nearly every minority over the past thirty-five years, provide irrefutable that certain outrageous events are simply unacceptable to the groups concerned. For the protesters, not reacting would be tantamount to accepting renewed devaluation of their identity. Stigmatised by the regime, each violent episode could potentially have engendered broader and longer-lasting mobilisation if it had received stronger support and backup from political organisations, as the inevitable crackdowns after each riot provoked attempts by

armed groups to avenge the population.[42] But this Clauswitzian logic is not automatic, and it is simultaneously dependent on the political configurations at work and on the conjunction of diverse specific factors.

Conclusion

As this essay has argued, the movements to protest the prevailing ethnic and religious hierarchy in Iran typically pursue a range of processes that sometimes overlap. Extraordinary events that accentuate or, on the contrary, weaken the hierarchy among ethnic or religious groups - such as publicly avowed human rights violations, for example - can initially be perceived as 'turning points,' constituting moments in which actors' identities become reconfigured, both by and through mobilisation. Economic, social, and political changes on the periphery can also often engender the reconfiguration of identity-based systems and can easily help facilitate the rise of protest movements. This can ultimately give rise to hope when the government appears to become open to redefining the hierarchy, as occurred during the Iranian Revolution, but also again with the rise to power of the reformers in 1997.

From this perspective, Hassan Rouhani's election in 2013 clearly failed to generate the same expectations and hopes as Khatami's election, as though the earlier failure of the reformers had led minorities to become somewhat disillusioned about the prospects for regime change from within. The peripheral regions also appear to no longer feel as concerned by the policies of the centre as they once were. In late July 2015, after the signature of the historic Iranian nuclear agreement, and two months after the riots in Mahabad, Hassan Rouhani traveled to Sanandaj for the first time to promote ethnic and religious equality in Iran. He promised new investments in Kurdistan province, especially dams and roads, and he announced the creation of university programs in Kurdish literature and Kurdish-language news programming in the

[42] The first of the PJAK's armed actions allegedly took place in 2004 in the region of Meriwan after security forces killed 10 protesters. See Brandon, James, 'Iran's Kurdish Threat: PJAK,' *Terrorism Monitor*, 4, 12, 2006.

official press agency, IRNA. He also confirmed that Iran supported its own Kurds in the same way that it defended Iraqi Kurds by fighting the Islamic State alongside the peshmergas. This was followed in September with the appointment of the first-ever Sunni (and Kurdish) ambassador to represent Iran abroad.

These various indications of a new opening are to some extent consistent with the 2013 electoral campaign, but it nevertheless elicited only muted enthusiasm among the Kurds. At the same time, the KDPI was reoccupying areas along the Iranian border, amid increasingly frequent clashes between Revolutionary Guards and PJAK guerilla fighters. To certain observers, President Rouhani is merely copying a strategy adopted by Turkey between the late 2000s and the June 2015 legislative elections - promoting minimal cultural reforms as a means of depoliticising the Kurd's demands, while simultaneously circumventing the various Kurdish Iranian political organisations by relying on the Iraqi KDP and especially the PUK. Given the Iranian institutional context, it would be probably unrealistic to expect major reforms regarding Kurdish demands or, more broadly, the demands of the country's other ethnic and religious minorities. At the same time, it will be difficult for Tehran to avoid addressing crucial questions that undermine its internal stability and that have extensive regional and international ramifications.