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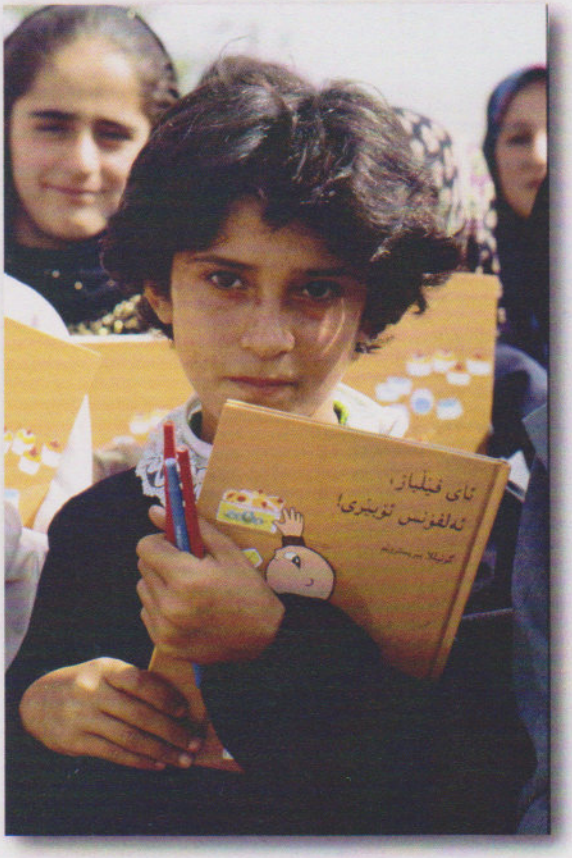

Justice linguistique et langue kurde

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table des matières

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Language as a Problem: Language Policy and Language Rights in Kurdistan-Iran[1]

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Background and statement of the problem

In Iran, there are about 10-12 million speakers of Kurdish varieties, residing mainly in the five provinces where Kurdish is the majority language: Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Ilam, and North Khorasan. In addition, there are substantial Kurdish-speaking communities in major urban centres such as Tehran, and also in the province of Qazvin. Iranian Kurds speak most of the main Kurdish varieties such as Central[2] (Sorani), Northern (Kurmanji), Southern (Kalhuri, Laki, etc.) and Hawrami (one of the archaic varieties of Gurani) (See Fig. 1).

Kurdish is the third largest linguistic group in Iran after

[1] This paper is based on an invited talk that I presented at the *Justice linguistique et langues minoritaires: Le cas du kurde* in Paris on 12 October 2018.

[2] Mainly due to its development in Iraqi Kurdistan and to some extent in Iran, Central Kurdish has become the most standardized Kurdish variety. In this paper, the term 'Kurdish' mainly refers to this variety unless otherwise stated.

Persian (Farsi) and Azeri Turkish (the second largest linguistic community in the country). There are also 77 other languages in Iran. Based on the expanded graded intergenerational disruption scale (EGIDS) developed by Lewis and Simons (2010), two of these are extinct, six are dying, 30 of them are in trouble, 31 remain vigorous but without a standard variety, and just 10 remain vigorous with standard literature. These 10 include: Persian (45-50% of the population of Iran), Azeri-Turkish (18-20%), Kurdish (10-12%), Gilaki and Mazandarani (6-8%), Arabic (3-5%), Baluchi (3-4%), and other (7-8%) (Simons & Fennig, 2017). Out of these languages, however, only Persian has official status, which means that it is the only language used as the medium of instruction in schools, the medium of communication in the public and private sectors, administration, and in most media outlets. This has been the case for over a century.

In 1906, the first Iranian Constitution declared Persian the only official and predominant language of the country (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010) without any mention of minoritized languages. From 1925-1941, under the rule of Reza Shah who aspired to establish a highly centralized nation-state, the government made every effort to promote the use of Persian among the Kurds and other minorities, especially in and through various public institutions including education, media, the military, and administration. Publications in Kurdish and other minoritized languages were forbidden (Hassanpour, 1992). In the aftermath of the Second World War and following the establishment of the Azerbaijan People's Government in Tabriz, an autonomous Kurdish Republic was established in Mahabad, which lasted for eleven months. During that brief period, and the years leading up to it (i.e., 1943-1946), publications in Kurdish flourished in Kurdistan. The first broadsheet newspaper *Kurdistan* was published in Central Kurdish, the first Kurdish radio

broadcast in Iran hit the airwaves, the first Kurdish play *Daikî Nîshtiman* (The Motherland) went on stage, and the first public schools using Kurdish as their medium of instruction were opened. The fall of the fragile republic put an end to the development of Kurdish in Iran.

As Kurdish nationalism in Iran and neighbouring states was consolidating and the Kurdish language was enjoying notable positive rights in Armenia and Iraq in the 1940s and 50s, the Iranian government showed some relaxation on its restricted language policy and adapted a language policy that has been termed "restricted and controlled tolerance" (Sheyholislami, 2012). It is considered controlled and restricted and at the same time *tolerated* because while the state used Kurdish in its propaganda and allowed the publication of limited periodicals and non-political books, people would occasionally be persecuted for possessing Kurdish publications or writing in the language (Hassanpour, 1992; Sheyholislami, 2012). The language was entirely absent in the education and public administration spheres. In other words, there were no positive rights granted to minorities, including the Kurds. The dominant discourse in the country perceived language diversity as a problem instead of a resource and right, while demands for language rights were viewed as ethno-nationalistic tendencies aimed at disunity and the disintegration of Iran. During this time, Persianization remained the official language policy of the state (Hassanpour, 1992).

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, there have been some changes to the state's language policy. For example, Article 15 of the constitution does acknowledge that there are other languages in the country besides Persian. However, whether that article guarantees any language rights for minorities or not has been the subject of a heated debate in recent years (for example, see Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010; Sheyholislami,

2012). I analyze this Article further down. In addition to this Article, over a few dozen periodicals and hundreds of books in Kurdish have been published. Since the mid-2000s, there have been intermittent course offerings in Kurdish language and literature in Iranian universities. In 2015, a BA program in Kurdish language and literature was established in the University of Kurdistan in Sanandaj. In recent years, more academics both inside and outside the country have advocated teaching Kurdish in public schools, but very few non-Kurdish commentators and researchers, if any, support mother-tongue education for minorities in the country. Thus, one can argue that the above-mentioned changes in the linguistic landscape of the country may not amount to anything more than paying lip service to Kurdish and other minorities' demands for language rights.

Many languages of Iran are endangered (Simons & Fennig, 2017; Anonby & Yousefian, 2011). One of the reasons for this may be the fact that these languages are not used in a variety of domains, especially education. Formal education in one dominant language, for example Persian, in a multilingual country like Iran has proven to be detrimental to the existence—let alone development—of minoritized languages (Fishman, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). As the language used in school permeates other essential domains of life such as workplace, market, arts, entertainment and modern communication, the minoritized language continues to lose currency and experience stigmatization and marginalization even within its own community. According to May (2006):

> If majority languages are consistently constructed as languages of 'wider communication' while minority languages are viewed as (merely) carriers of 'tradition' or 'historical identity', as was the case in early [language policy] it is not hard to see what might become of the latter. Minority languages will inevitably come to be viewed as delimited, perhaps even actively unhelpful languages – not only by others, but also often by the speakers of minority languages themselves. (p. 257)

Minority language shift in Iran is real. Weisi (2013) observes that about 50% of Kaluri Kurdish parents (in the province of Kermanshah) speak to their children in Persian rather than their mother tongue at home. This could have serious consequences not just for the future of this variety of Kurdish but also those children's performance in school. Weisi argues that children whose parents do not help them to maintain their mother tongue obtain lower scores on English tests compared to children who maintained their mother tongue in addition to learning Persian. This confirms what we know in bilingualism research: that bilingual children often perform better on foreign language tests in acquiring additional languages (Cenoz, 2003; Cummins, 2000; Keshavarz & Astaneh, 2004). In 2017, Daneshgar, a researcher with the Persian Academy of Language and Literature, reported that in bilingual, non-Persian-speaking provinces, students suffer from poor performances in most of their subjects and they have the highest high school dropout rate in the country. She believed that there is a connection between this and the fact that those children are not receiving bilingual education (as cited in *Chera manateqe dozabane*, 2017).

Despite these negative consequences of the lack of positive language rights in Iran, there is not much known about the vitality and status of minoritized languages in that country. This is rather surprising when we realize that, in contrast, the harsh treatment of Kurdish in Turkey prior to 1992 was frequently mentioned in sociolinguistics textbooks to exemplify how a language could be prohibited or proscribed by a state (see Romaine, 1994, p. 54; Wardhaugh, 1998, p. 349). A reason

for the lack of awareness of the Kurdish linguistic landscape in Iran might be that, except for a short period in the 1930s and the early 1940s (during the Reza Shah reign), Kurdish has never been banned outright in Iran as it was in Turkey for decades. Secondly, Kurdish is close to Persian and often non-Kurdish Iranian scholars (including Western philologists and researchers) have been quite indifferent about the linguistic plight of Iranian Kurds as opposed to Kurds from Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, whose claims to linguistic rights seem more legitimate since their language is drastically different from Arabic and Turkish—dominant languages in those three countries. Demands for language rights in Iran seem to be further silenced by authorities, and elites frequently claim that there are language rights for all people of Iran. In fact, Article 19 of the constitution states that no discrimination is made based on ethnicity or religion or language: "The people of Iran enjoy equal rights, regardless of the tribe or ethnic group to which they belong. Color, race, language, and other such considerations shall not be grounds for special privileges" ("The Constitution of IRI", n.d.). Even the Iranian society at large is quite ignorant about the plight of non-Persian linguistic groups possibly due to the fact that Iranians are not educated about these communities in a constructive way. Paivandi (2010) studied 95 Iranian compulsory school textbooks published in 2006-2007 and discovered that:

> The textbooks devote **little attention to minority cultures, traditions, languages**, or issues. While there is no direct hostility toward officially recognized religious and ethnic minorities, the textbooks constantly **refer to Iranian society as a Persian-Islamic identity** comprised of Muslim (Shi'a) people and thus fail to acknowledge Iranians of other religions or ethnic groups. (p. 2, emphasis added)

In this paper, I illustrate that the people of Iran do not "enjoy equal [language] rights". Indeed, whereas Persian as the language of about 50% of the population is declared official, other languages have been marginalized and excluded from some of the most important domains within which languages can thrive, develop, and be validated, e.g., education and public administration. Despite Article 15 of the same constitution, which acknowledges Iran as a multilingual society, and 'allows' for the use of minoritized languages in the teaching of their literature and 'ethnic media', Persianization of the country remains the official language policy. The dominant language ideology continues to be the modernist view that one nation-state must have one official language only. Minoritized languages such as Kurdish continue to be viewed as varieties of Persian that should not be official because that would threaten the integrity of the state. Languages such as Kurdish continue to be viewed as problems rather than resources and rights.

Theoretical underpinnings

There is often a reciprocal relationship between the dominant language ideologies of a society and the way languages are granted status or not in the country's constitution and other language policy venues. In other words, language ideologies determine language practices and subsequently language management (Spolsky, 2004). Language ideologies are a set of shared commonsense assumptions about the nature of languages with respect to their structures, use and status. Researchers have underlined the significance of studying language ideologies. According to Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), for instance:

> Ideologies of language are significant for social as well as linguistic analysis because they are not only about

> language. Rather, such ideologies envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology. Through such linkages, they often underpin fundamental social institutions. Inequality among groups of speakers, and colonial encounters par excellence, throw language ideology into high relief. (pp. 55-56).

One site for the investigation of language ideology is the study of minoritized or lesser-used languages. Lesser-used languages may enjoy or suffer from different kinds of status, according to Kloss (1968). A language could be *promoted*, e.g., French in Canada or, to a lesser degree, Kurdish in Iraq. However, the degree of promotion can vary from context to context. For example, whereas French is promoted in Canada in very practical and day-to-day ways, the promotion of Kurdish in Iraq, although enshrined in the country's 2005 constitution, is more symbolic than practical at the federal level. Nonetheless, language promotion is significant for the maintenance and development of a language. This is why promotion is also called 'positive language rights' (Wright, 2004).

A minoritized language may not be promoted but instead *accommodated*. For example, heritage languages in Canada (or what are also termed 'international' or 'new immigrant' languages) are not promoted in the sense of having official status, but they may be taught as subjects in schools or taught in Saturday classes, paid for by the province (Cummins, 2014). Another category that a minoritized language could be assigned is *tolerated*. In this case, the language is not outright prohibited or proscribed by the state, but neither is it promoted or accommodated. In other words, the language is left alone and at the mercy of a linguistic community's socioeconomic means or cultural will to use or maintain the

language. According to May (2006), however, for many communities, this may lead to the demise of the language, especially in a highly literate urbanized and modernized society where minoritized languages may have a hard time to survive. A situation whereby a language is only tolerated, that is, not proscribed or prohibited, is also called 'negative language rights' (Wright, 2004); negative language rights are insufficient for a linguistic community to maintain their language in a world that is more and more globalized and defined by a knowledge-based economy. Finally, a minoritized language may be *prohibited* or *proscribed*. For example, Kurdish was legally banned in Turkey from the 1930s to the early 1990s (Wardhaugh, 1998). Similarly, the Catalan and Basque languages were prohibited in the early 20th century during the reign of the Franco regime in Spain. Often, languages are prohibited or simply tolerated rather than accommodated or promoted because they are perceived to be problems, whereas they could be seen as resources and rights (Ruiz, 1984).

Ruiz (1984) identifies three orientations toward language: language as a *problem*, language as a *resource*, and language as a *right*. Language is viewed as a problem in multilingual societies where students' multilingualism is blamed for poor school performance and the society's poverty and underdevelopment. Persistent views of language as a problem can lead a society towards linguistic assimilation and effectively undermine multilingualism as a resource. 'Language as a resource' assumes that language is an instrument of building a pluralistic society and a more developed economy. Language is also valued for its representational and symbolic powers that strengthen people's self-esteem and contribute to identify construction at both individual and group levels. This is possible, however, only when language rights are respected and protected. According to Phillipson and

Skutnabb-Kangas (1995), linguistic rights (LRs) or linguistic human rights (LHRs) are basic human rights and may be conceptualized at two levels: at the *individual* and the *collective* level:

> Observing LHRs implies at an *individual* level that everyone can identify positively with their mother tongue(s), and have that identification respected by others ... It means the right to learn the mother tongue(s), including at **least basic education through the medium of the mother tongue**, and the right to **use it in many (official) contexts**...Observing LHRs implies at a *collective* level the right of minority groups to exist, i.e. the right to be 'different'... It implies the right of minorities to use, develop their language and to **establish and maintain schools** and other training and educational institutions, with **control over the curriculum**, and with **teaching through the medium of their own languages**... (pp. 488-489, emphasis added; also see De Varennes, 1996)

Preventing individuals or groups to enjoy these rights may be viewed as "linguistic wrongs, an infringement of linguistic human rights" (ibid.).

Methodology

In this paper, I explore the extent to which Kurdish speakers may or may not enjoy LR. For example, I ask whether they use Kurdish as the medium of instruction in schools and whether they can use their mother tongue in a variety of domains. This is helpful to find out whether language diversity continues to be viewed as a problem, a right, or a resource in Iran. An effective way of sorting these out is to see

if Kurdish, as an example of minoritized languages in Iran, is prohibited, tolerated or promoted, or whether its status amounts to a combination of these.

Language policy is not just a state's top-down dictation; rather, all documents, sayings, beliefs, practices that pertain to language use (promoting or hindering it), in all domains, is language policy (Spolsky, 2004). It is impossible in this paper to look at all these areas of language policy in their entirety. This paper does look at the official language policy of the state, documents about language (e.g., in schools or private domains) and the way that language rights in the country have been debated.

The data for this paper are drawn from a larger data set for a project investigating language ideologies in Iran. These data consist of policy documents of various kinds from both state and private institutions (e.g., the Academy of Persian Language and Literature, the Rahgosha Establishment for Driving), media opinion pieces, and other texts (e.g., an obituary). They have all been collected from online resources.

In order to see what language ideologies exist or are prevalent in a society, one needs to look at that society's discourses about language. For example, in recent years, mainly thanks to Kurdish, Azerbaijani, and Western media (e.g., BBC Persian, VOA Persian), there have been some rigorous debates on mother tongue based multilingual education (MTBME), which refers to an education system in which the students' mother tongue and other languages are used as mediums of instruction (Malone, 2005). More researchers, commentators, and politicians have ventured into these debates. I look at a few examples in this paper. It is also important to look at official treatment of language practices in the country, such as how speakers of minoritized lan-

guages have made efforts to use their language in the public sphere and the reaction of the state authorities toward that preference.

This is a qualitative study deploying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze and also interpret the data under investigation (Fairclough, 1992). CDA is a branch of discourse studies which assumes that discursive practices constitute social structures and relations, and vice versa. In the case of language policy planning (LPP), it means that the ways in which a society talks about language—be it in official documents, media outlets, or displayed signs—is influenced by and also influences the ways in which language is used on a daily basis in all sorts of domains (such as education, public administration, the private sector, media, and the linguistic landscape) (Johnson, 2013). The aim of CDA fits well with what Ricento (2000, p. 208) calls "essential LPP questions":

> why do individuals opt to use (or cease to use) particular languages and varieties for specific functions in different domains, and how do those choices influence—and how are they influenced by—institutional language policy decision-making (local to national and supranational)?

In the case of Iran, it is important to know what policies are in place with respect to the use of both Persian and minoritized languages such as Kurdish and how these policies—be they at the nation or regional level—impact Iranian Kurds' use of their language or the official language in various domains.

CDA is also appropriate here because the approach aspires to making ideologies and social relations transparent, with the aim of contributing to the betterment of society. For example, critical analysis of discourses about language in Iran could help us gain a better understanding of why linguistic human rights continue to be ignored in that country. It also helps us to appreciate the ways languages are valued or not; for example, whether a language is viewed as a resource or a problem. This is important because a society's orientation toward a language (such as Kurdish) could determine how that language is treated: promoted, tolerated, or banned. There can be little doubt that orientations toward any language at any given time have historical roots. These orientations are connected to other discourses that in one way or another connect to linguistic practices. Examples of these discourses are issues of identity, religion, economics, and of course politics. All aspects of language policy and planning to various degrees are connected to politics and other extra-linguistic factors (May, 2015; Sheyholislami, 2017). This also makes CDA an effective approach for this study, because this paper looks at extra-linguistic factors, particularly in the Kurdish region of Iran, in addition to ways of talking and writing about language. In other words, the paper not only examines texts about language, but also the ways those texts are connected to each other and the ways the broader sociopolitical context bear upon those texts.

Analysis

Language policy in the constitution

Language policies are valuable to the extent that they may legitimate language diversity and contest language stigmatization and marginalization. However, not all language policies are implemented, and their value may be nothing more than symbolic. In other words, language policies, when not implemented, could act as agents hiding linguistic discrimination and assimilation. I will show below that this has been

the case to a large extent with respect to Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution:

> The official language and script of Iran, the *lingua franca*[3] of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, **must** be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is **allowed** in addition to Persian. (Emphasis added)

Although this constitution is the first official document to acknowledge language diversity in Iran, it promotes negative rights only, i.e., people will not be persecuted for using their mother tongues. Article 15 says that the language of texts and correspondence 'must be' in Persian; however, the use of 'regional' and 'tribal' languages is 'allowed'. In other words, the state doesn't assume responsibility for the use of minoritized languages. Nowhere in this legal document is any minoritized language identified as a medium of instruction. Despite this, both the state authorities and some researchers have interpreted Article 15 as though minorities such as the Kurds have been granted positive language rights—that the use of their language in all domains shall be protected by the state. For example, Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) write, "The use of ethnic languages [is] permitted in mass media as well as in education, and the teaching of ethnic literature in schools was also permitted, together with Persian language instruction... use of other local languages is not officially discouraged" (p. 32). This statement, which could be seen as a representation of the linguistic culture in Iran (Schiffman, 2006), misrepresents Article 15. Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) state that minoritized languages are "permitted" in education. Upon closer examination, it turns out that Kurdish, like other minoritized languages, is not used as a subject of education in any significant way, let alone as the medium of instruction. Further down, I mention a few small developments in this respect. However, to return to Hayati and Mashhadi's (2010) interpretation, Article 15 is not about supporting, promoting, or even accommodating minoritized languages. It is rather about permitting the use of the languages and not being officially discouraged. In other words, Article 15 does not provide any positive language rights, but negative rights only.

[3] There seems to be a misunderstanding of the term *lingua franca* in this translation. The Persian text says *zabane moshtarak* which can be best translated as *shared language*.

Prohibiting the use of Kurdish in public

There have been instances in recent years where different departments and public institutions run by the state have prohibited the use of Kurdish signs. Figure 2, for example, shows a memorandum issued by the Ministry of Commerce (West Azerbaijan branch), which sanctions language use in the linguistic landscape of the country. A part of this memorandum reads "...In public places, signs must be in Persian... and only Persian language ('zabane Farsi') be used on billboards, signs, windows or doors of places and stores...". In the same vein, a letter issued by the Security Forces Office of Public Domains (Fars Province, Figure 3) to the Culture and Guidance Office declares that the name of a business cannot be a non-Persian word. The main part of this letter reads: "Please note that the person mentioned above intends to use the word 'Zhina/Jîna' for his/her business. Please advise". The reply to the query is provided at the bottom of the letter in handwriting, which says, "since this name is not Iranian but Kurdish it is not allowed". This statement, "not Iranian but Kurdish" is rather remarkable in that one of the common expressions in the discourse of Iranian nationalism is that the

Kurds are among the most original or indigenous Iranians (*Iranianeh asil*) when the aim is to discourage some Kurds from advocating separation from Iran.

Prohibiting the use of Kurdish in Private Training

The use of Kurdish is not only discouraged or even prohibited in the linguistic landscape of the country (e.g., names of businesses) but is also prohibited in the private education and training sector. For example, a memorandum issued by Rahgosha Establishment for Driving (Kurdistan Branch) to driving training centres of the province in 2007 states the following:

> we have been informed that a few instructors use the **local** language of Kurdish to teach. Since Iran is encompassing various ethnic groups with **local** [speech] varieties, according to the constitution the **official language** of Iran is **Farsi**, and teaching at all school levels must be conducted in the **official language** of the country. It is necessary to issue an order [*destoor*] to [inform] all instructors that they do not have the right to use the local language (*zabane mahalli*) in their teaching under any circumstances. (Emphasis added; see Figure 4)

One of the most common labels used for non-Persian languages in Iran is 'local varieties' and sometimes "local" or "tribal" varieties as is the case in the Iranian constitution, Article 15. In this short excerpt, 'local' is used three times and it stands in contrast to 'official language' (x2), which refers to Persian. Some of these languages may indeed be 'local' in reality; that is, they might be confined to a small geographical region. However, several of these languages, spoken by millions and whose communities demand mother-tongue

education, are not local but transnational, including Kurdish, Azeri Turkish, Baluchi, and Arabic. Kurdish is an official language in Iraq and it is used in all domains there, including higher education, where dissertations have been written in the language at least since the establishment of the autonomous Kurdistan region in 1992. Azeri Turkish is also an official language in the republic of north Azerbaijan, as is Baluchi in Pakistan, and of course Arabic in over twenty countries.

Prohibiting the use of Kurdish in schools

The use of Kurdish has been discouraged and even prohibited not only in the linguistic landscape and commercial and private sectors but also in public schools. For example, a memorandum sent from the Ministry of Education (Mariwan School Board) to the Kurdistan Province School Board, warns of the use of Kurdish in schools by some teachers in that district. The memorandum (Figure 5) reads in part "teaching local languages is the main obstacle to educational development...Included with this letter is a list of 29 teachers who have been identified as the main obstacles". This memorandum does not simply discourage teachers from the use of what they call 'local languages' in classrooms, but also identifies the local language as a problem—an obstacle to progress—instead of acknowledging its existence as a resource and right. The memorandum goes even further and actually names the teachers who have allegedly used Kurdish in their courses. Often in these cases, the reason behind this position is this: in a place like Mariwan, there might be only a few non-Kurdish students in class, whose parents are central government-appointment bureaucrats or military personnel, for example. Otherwise, the population of a city like the one in question is

entirely native Kurdish. In other words, the most important thing to the state is that a few non-Kurdish students have access to their preferred language at the expense of the rights of the vast majority of the students.

Mariwan is not the only place where the use of Kurdish is discouraged. Figure 6 shows another example of this. A memo from the Provincial Board of Education (Kermanshah Province) to the municipal Board of Education states in part:

> Please note that, with the aim of strengthening and promoting the common and official language, considering the rights of non-local students, and... issue a decree that all colleagues, during teaching and conversing in school settings, use Farsi language and avoid any use of local varieties/dialects...

Again, the exclusive use of the Farsi language, what is called the 'common' language of Iranians in this memorandum, is sanctioned at the expense of what is referred to as 'local varieties and dialects'. Several points should be highlighted here: first, the memo states that what is most important is the strengthening and promotion of Farsi. This could imply that the promotion and strengthening of other languages is not the concern of the state. After all, as van Dijk (1993) has noted, often what is absent in a text is more important than what is present. What is also absent in this text is any statement about the rights of minorities to their languages. Instead, we have the phrase "the rights of non-local students." Again, the Board of Education of that province is committed to protecting the language rights of a few students at the expense of the majority who happen to be native speakers of Kurdish or what the memo calls "the local variety". Given that the right of the majority is ignored, one cannot help but dismiss the apparent good intention of the

memorandum, to protect the right of a few. It is also significant to underline that Kurdish here is not just discouraged as the medium or subject of instruction, but it is also prohibited to converse in Kurdish anywhere in the school setting. Practices similar to this perpetuated by authorities against linguistic minorities in other contexts, e.g., Canada in the case of First Nations, have been termed 'cultural genocide' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2016).

Iranian Nationalists and elites stigmatizing Kurdish

In recent years, more and more Persian intellectuals, albeit still a very small number, have reluctantly supported the teaching and learning of minoritized languages, but only a handful have refrained from openly opposing the use of minoritized languages as the medium of instruction in schools. The vast majority of them believe that the desire for the latter is a conspiracy with the goal of the demise of Persian. For example, Shafi'i Kadkani, a colossal Persian literary figure, expressed his view on the matter in an audio file circulating on social media in 2018, apparently recorded in one of his lectures at an Iranian university:

> They were well aware that the Persian language owned Shahnameh (the book of King), Masnavi, Sa'di, Hafez, Nezami and could wrestle with Shakespeare while this one [Urdu] was not the case with Urdu. After a while, the Indian kid decides to get rid of the Urdu language. There is no point in reading these poor poems and literature while I can read Shakespeare. Thus I choose English as my language. (2018)

In other words, the preference of choosing indigenous languages over Persian by non-Persian peoples is a conspiracy of the Western powers who see Persian as a rival for English.

Thus, Kadkani believes that as long as people have Persian, with classical poets such as Ferdowsi, Hafez and Sa'di, they will not choose to read Shakespeare in English. But, as soon as Persian is taken away from people, they have to resort to English because other regional languages such as Urdu (in Pakistan) does not have much to offer. He continues:

> Those who insist on our indigenous languages stressing that we'd better compose poems in Kadkani's dialect, they know what they are doing. They know that Kadkani's dialect lacks *Shahnameh, Masnavi,* Nezami, and Sa'di. Even if this dialect achieves a high status, it can simply create a few short stories and romantic poems. Then the Indian kid would say farewell to this type of dialect and opt for reading Shakespeare [in English] and Pushkin [in Russian] instead. (ibid.)

Aside from Kadkani's non-sympathetic and quite ethno-centric view here, one cannot help but note that he reinforces a common presupposition in the anti-MTBME discourse which says: mother-tongue education for linguistic minorities means to ignore Persian, the official language of the country. This is a common discursive construct perpetuated by other Iranian nationalist elites such as the members of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature. In 2014, a news item (*"Tarhe amoozesh be zabanhaye "*, 2014) reported on the views of these members on mother tongue based multilingual education (MTBME) for non-Persian speakers. Muhammad Ali Movahed Tabrizi, a member of the Academy, is said to believe that, "The government must refrain from interfering with the teaching of local and indigenous languages. We have a standard language (*Zabane me'yar*) that is our official language. If the government wants to forget that and enter the local languages zone, we are doomed" (para. 2). Again, the idea of Persian vs. non-Persian languages, a discourse of 'Us vs. Them' (van Dijk, 1993), is reinforced. The truth of the matter is that most language activists and proponents of

language rights do not want language rights for non-Persian speakers to mean alienation from Persian, although there might be others who believe that non-Persian speakers should not have to study in Persian or learn the language unless they want to, as is the case in a multilingual nation-state like Switzerland. Yet, these views are often expressed in reaction to Iranian/Persian ultranationalist views, such as outright objection to any form or shape of mother-tongue education except for Persian. Speakers of non-Persian languages know that being educated in Persian as well as non-Persian languages is of paramount importance for success in education, especially higher education, and also for employment and access to upper social mobility in that country (see also Kalan, 2016, p. 67).

Another common discursive strategy to object to MTBME is to say that any demand of this kind is a conspiracy perpetuated by the enemies of Iran. For example, another member of the Academy, Salim N. Tabrizi, is reported as saying: "I have no doubt that this matter has been imported to Iran from the West (*Kharej*). Previously, this was practiced in India by England and today it is England and the countries to the north who want to import this issue to Iran" (ibid., para. 6). This rhetorical strategy is reinforced by the media as is evident in these headlines from online news media managed from inside the country:

1 *Amoozeshe zabanhaye madari dar ostanha booyeh towte'e midahad* / Teaching mother tongues in provinces savours of conspiracy ("Amoozeshe zabanhaye madari", 2014)
2 *Tarhe amoozesh be zabanhaye madari dar ostanha booyhe towte'e midahad* / Mother-tongue medium education project in the provinces savours of conspiracy ("Tarhe amoozesh be", 2014)
3 *Mokhalefate Farhangestane Zabane Farsi ba amoozesh be zabane madari* / The objection of Academy of Persian Language to mother-tongue medium education ("Mokhalefate Farhangestane Zabane", 2014)

4 *Mokhaterate pishe rooye amoozeshe zabane madari dar Iran chist?* / What are the dangers of teaching mother tongues [of minorities] in Iran? ("Mokhaterate pishe rooye", 2017)

Looking at the vocabulary of these headlines, one can identify a lexical chain that contributes to the portrayal of mother-tongue education as a threat and conspiracy against Persian: conspiracy (items 1 and 2), objection (item 3), and dangers (item 4). The vast majority of Persian media continue to marginalize non-Persian languages and reinforce the construct of a literary, standard, official, national, and prestige language (Persian) vs. spoken, non-standard, non-official, local/tribal, and backward minoritized languages.

Kurdish community's commitment to maintaining its language

Despite all these sanctions and negative treatment of Kurdish (and other minoritized languages in Iran) the desire and need to use Kurdish in Iran persists at both the individual and collective levels. For years, Kurdish language activists and cultural groups have welcomed opportunities to display their knowledge of Kurdish by: teaching Kurdish to young people in private courses and on a volunteer basis, organizing street theatre and poetry readings, and even publishing books and periodicals—almost entirely without any financial support from the state or private sector (for a list of periodicals, especially those published in the mid-2000s, see Sheyholislami, 2012). In 2017 in the city of Mariwan, the Vejîn Kurdish Cultural Centre, which had been teaching Kurdish on a voluntary basis for many years, was burnt to the ground, but the community rebuilt the centre in a very short period of time. This is by no means a financially well-off community,

yet they were willing to risk many things, including their capital and safety, to maintain their language.

As discussed earlier, there have been many instances where the state authorities discourage or prohibit the use of Kurdish in commercial and private domains (see, e.g., Sheyholislami, 2012). In contrast, in 2017, a medical clinic in Kermanshah displayed its sign in three languages: Persian, English, and Kurdish (see Figure 7).[4] This desire and need to use one's mother tongue in a variety of domains, such as the public sphere, is also evident once in a while in obituaries (Figure 8). In this obituary, the entire text is in Kurdish. It starts with a poem, and then provides information about the deceased and the date, time, and place of the funeral. What is interesting about this obituary is that it is not just an informational text about the deceased person and their funeral but is actually a very strong statement about the uniqueness of Kurdish as a language in its own right, distinct from Persian. It is not written in a local dialect but in the standard Central Kurdish language. In the description of the deceased woman, it says that she was the mother of two martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the sake of Kurdistan. In other words, the use of Kurdish—in a society where it is not only not promoted by the state but also prohibited (or at least discouraged) in most domains—becomes a political act rather than a purely cultural activity. In cases like this, the political angle of minoritized language usage is more overt and undeniable. It is stated right there.

Some recent developments

The state seems to have recognized that linguistic minorities in Iran—particularly the Kurds—are not willing to assimilate

[4] A few more hospitals (e.g. Bestun) in Kermanshah have started to use multilingual signs apparently to attract and serve patients from Iraqi Kurdistan because many of them can read and write in Kurdish only (W.H. Personal communication, July 5, 2019).

to the official language and culture and that Kurds want to maintain, develop, and protect their own language and culture. In recent years, there have been some positive developments. A debate over mother-tongue education and multilingual education has started to take place both inside and outside Iran. While most researchers and commentators support minority languages as school *subjects*, very few Persian researchers (in or outside of Iran) support BME for minorities (i.e., the use of Kurdish, or any other minoritized language as a medium of instruction). While in agreement with the latter the state has not taken any serious steps towards teaching non-Persian languages as school subjects.

Despite this (and previous evidence I presented earlier showing how Kurdish is prohibited in schools), the state seems to be generally more relaxed with respect to the use of minoritized languages. In 2015, for example, after years of campaigning and lobbying, a group of researchers at the University of Kurdistan, in Sanandaj, convinced the Ministry of Higher Education to establish a BA in Kurdish Language and Literature in that university. The first cohort had 40 students with the aim of training those students to become Kurdish language teachers. By 2017, there were 44 admitted applicants. This is significant in the sense that it has given some legitimacy to the language: that it can be not only a subject of study but also a medium of instruction. It is not clear, however, what these students can do with their degree once they graduate. The outcome of their education may have direct impact on the program's enrolment numbers in the future.

In 2016, a group of teachers in the town of Saqqez in the Kurdistan province were encouraged to take advantage of Article 15 of the Constitution and add one chapter about Kurdish language and literature to their grade nine Persian

literature textbook. Apparently, there has been no opposition to this initiative by the authorities. Similar initiatives have been taken in other towns and cities of both Kurdish- and Azari-speaking regions. Furthermore, in recent years, some universities have given students the option of taking elective courses in 'local languages' under certain conditions. If there are enough students, available teachers, materials, etc., students may take courses in their mother tongue, e.g., Turkish in major Turkish centres or Kurdish in Kurdish-speaking areas.

However, among the people who are genuinely pro-linguistic minority rights, be it for political, moral, or pedagogical and developmental reasons, there is a debate which goes something like this: should we be hopeful about the limited linguistic reforms in Iran, or should we consider these lip service? Radical pro-linguistic minority rights people are not alone in this debate. For example, Jim Cummins, one of the most prominent proponents of multilingual education, has said, "...The dominant group might provide some token support for teaching [minority] languages [in Iran], knowing that just this token support would probably not be effective". He uses the analogy of a frog in water: if you put a frog in hot water, it will immediately jump out; however, if you put the frog in cold water and heat it slowly, the frog tolerates the gradual increase and in its tolerance will die in the boiling water. That is to say, according to Cummins, "if the linguistic assimilation is slow then people will not realize that it's happening" (as cited in Kalan, 2016, p. 71). From this perspective, when there is an outright prohibition of a minoritized language, there is often resistance not only to the prohibition but also to assimilation. This resistance could be fertile ground for ideas of separation and political militancy. But if there are small tokens that might be perceived as the state's respect for language rights, the population may continue to assimilate, not quite realizing the magnitude of the language loss.

To many researchers, education at the elementary level is a fundamental factor in whether a language can be maintained, particularly in a modern, literate, urbanized society. In such contexts, with the exception of daily conversation, communication in so many domains takes place in the same language as the schools. And if the minoritized language is *not* the language of school, it will be absent from all these domains. Gradually, it will also be absent from the neighbourhood and even the family context (see Weisi, 2013). According to many scholars of the field—such as Jim Cummins and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (see Kalan, 2016)—and Kurdish language activists (see Sheyholislami, 2012), Kurdish in Iran is endangered as long as it is not a medium of instruction, especially in the early years of education. In contrast, there are those who realize the importance of MTBME, especially in elementary schools, who regret its absence in Iran and are hopeful that incremental positive changes in language policies of the country could culminate in more significant gains including the officialization of minoritized languages. One of the arguments that this group puts forward is that the vast majority of the Iranian society is against MTBME not because of being against languages per se but rather due to ignorance. Such ignorance may take the form of subscribing to what one may term 'folk linguistics'; for example, many people believe that when children learn more than one language, they become confused, that learning multiple languages is too challenging, and that children cannot distinguish between multiple codes. Furthermore, lay people tend to believe that if education is provided in more than one language, it will be more expensive. They do not realize as researchers have (e.g., Grin, 2006; Kalan, 2016, pp. 50-51) that the latter is not the case for various reasons. Whether the education is monolingual or multilingual, many factors do not change such as the number of students, teachers, building, facilities and so forth. Grin

(2006) has estimated the increased expenditure of multilingual education as only a few percent; further, this increase would be primarily at the beginning of the change, and then will pay off at the end:

> [T]he added expenditure entailed by moving from a monolingual to a bilingual education system is much smaller than commonly believed. Where evaluations have been made, they point in the direction of a 3–4 percent range, because even if the education system were to remain monolingual, children would have to be schooled anyway. Therefore, only comparatively modest additional financial outlays need to be factored in. (p. 88)

We also need to ask what could happen in the absence of a policy of multilingual education by taking into consideration "school participation, graduation, and drop-out rates among the majority and the minority population" (ibid., p. 89). Upon closer examination, it turns out that the cost of *not* engaging in a policy of multilingual education "can prove to be much higher than expected, thereby significantly heightening the attractiveness of the bilingual education policy" (ibid.)

That bilingual education is more expensive than monolingual education is not the only false belief that anti-MTBME ideology has been reproducing. Others include: that a unified and integrated nation-state cannot have more than one official language; for various historical, literary, and aesthetic reasons, only Persian can be the official language of Iran; and that MTBME is a conspiracy imported from outside of Iran and championed by separatists (Kalan, 2016). It is easy for Iranian society to subscribe to these false 'common sensical' beliefs (Fairclough, 1989) because it has lacked opportunities and the means to scrutinize and deconstruct such ideologies with a critical lens. One of the main reasons for this is that

multilingualism and cultural diversity have never been an important aspect of the Iranian educational system (Paivandi, 2010). Nonetheless, optimists hope that these recent debates on teaching non-Persian languages and MTBME will continue and engender more awareness about the importance of multilingual education, especially in a globalized world where such skills are increasingly valued and promoted (see, e.g., the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages). It is also hopeful that in recent years there has been an increasing interest in research on multilingual education (Kalan, 2016) and the sociolinguistics of minoritized languages in the context of Iran (Mirvahedi, 2019; Rezaee, Latifi & Nematzadeh, 2017).

Conclusion

Over the past several decades, a few factors have brought positive changes to the linguistic landscape of Kurdish-speaking regions. The change of regime in Iraq resulted in a more robust political autonomy for Kurds in that country. Since 1992, Kurdish has been the most prominent language in that region in almost every domain including all levels of education. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution even declared Kurdish another official language of the country, in addition to Arabic. In Turkey, where Kurdish was prohibited for about 70 years, the existence of Kurdish was acknowledged by the state in 1992. Since then, a few university programs in Kurdish language and literature have been established, and Kurdish may be taken in middle and high schools as an elective where there are available resources. In the early 2000s, a 24-hour television station in Kurdish was started by the Turkish state and still operates (TRT Kurdi, previously called TRT6). Since 2013, following the civil unrest in Syria, Kurdish along with other languages, such as Arabic and New

Aramaic, have been declared official in Rojava (Kurdish region in Syria). However, the situation in Rojava is extremely fluid and uncertain. It is only in Iraq that one can say with certainty that Kurdish is safe and developing.

Undoubtedly, these changes, especially in Iraq and Syria, have not only elevated the status of Kurdish but have also influenced Kurds in Iran to aspire to the same level of recognition. They have also been convinced that their language is not just a 'tribal' and 'spoken' variety but a language with at least two standard varieties. Furthermore, language activism among Iranian Kurds has continued despite all the challenges and obstacles.

Changes in politics and media have had their own benefits and drawbacks. Since the 2000s, during the country's elections, both hardliners and reformists typically promise mother-tongue education to non-Persian voters. However, those who come to power seldom act on this promise, and whenever they express an intention to act on it even in very small measures, several nationalist and ultra-nationalist groups protest, including some members of the Persian Academy of Language and Literature and supporters of the previous ousted king (Shah) of Iran. Finally, the rapid growth in digital communication and social media seems to be helpful in enabling the community to not only use their language, but also to be involved in language planning, e.g., by creating online resources for language learning and teaching, launching online dictionaries, and building corpora. However, in the absence of state support, these activities are often rudimentary and incomplete. Moreover, they cannot compete with the resources available in other languages (including Persian, Arabic, and Turkish) that do enjoy state support. Meanwhile, more and more young Kurds become urbanized and educated in the dominant, official language—Persian. This is why it is easy to see that the vast majority of Iranians, especially the younger generation, communicate on social media and other online platforms in Persian, or even English, rather than Kurdish.

In summary, the Iranian state continues to be reluctant to support even the teaching of minoritized languages in schools let alone MTBME where students would be educated in the student's mother tongue in addition to other languages (including Persian). Given this, Kurdish may continue to be weakened in Iran. The main reason is that the country lacks positive language rights in any meaningful way. The Kurds do not enjoy collective rights to manage their own education system as Canadian provinces or Swiss cantons do. Kurdish and other non-Persian languages (except for standard Arabic) are not promoted. As long as Kurdish in Iran is perceived as a problem rather than a resource and a right, its status can be best categorized as 'controlled and restricted tolerance', a recipe for linguistic assimilation in the long run. In this age of urbanization, intellectualization, globalization, and digitization, MTBME seems to be the only decisive way to preserve Kurdish in Iran. Until this system is in place, and as well as after its implementation, we need to actively challenge coercive ethnolinguistic ideologies (including the one-nation-one-language ideology) on the one hand, and celebrate linguistic diversity and multilingualism in every possible meaningful way, on the other.

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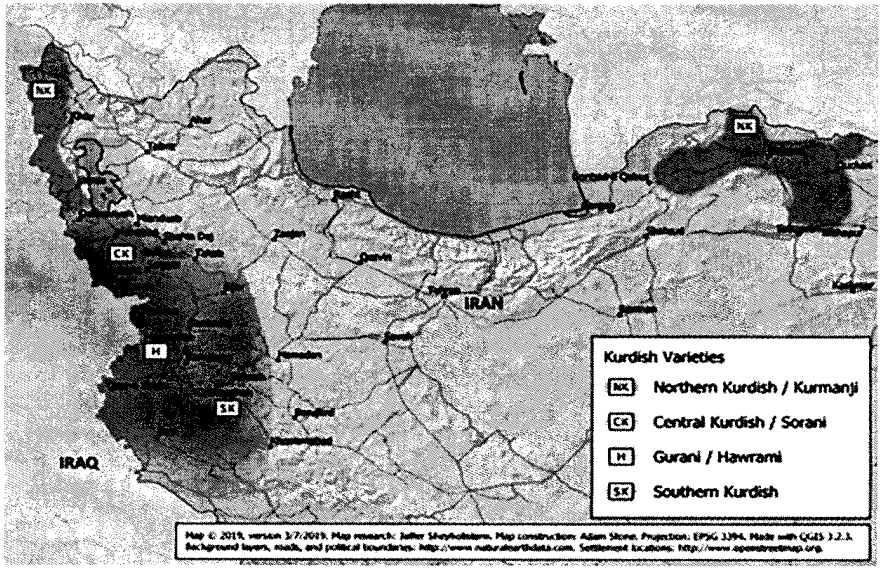

Figure 1 Kurdish-speaking regions in Iran

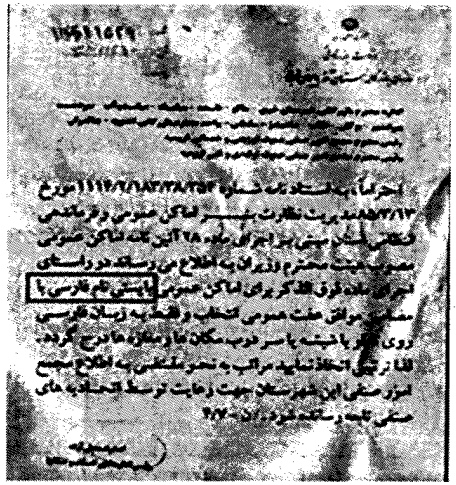

Figure 2: memorandum Ministry of Commerce (West Azerbaijan)

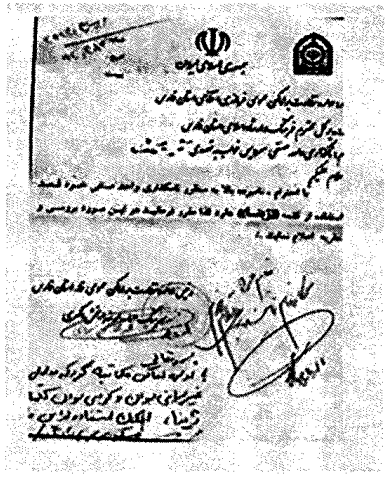

Figure 3: letter Security Forces Office of Public Domains (Fars)

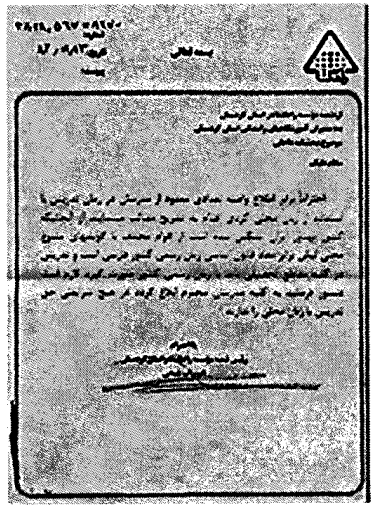

Figure 4: letter Rahgosha Establishment for Driving (Sanandaj, Kurdistan province)

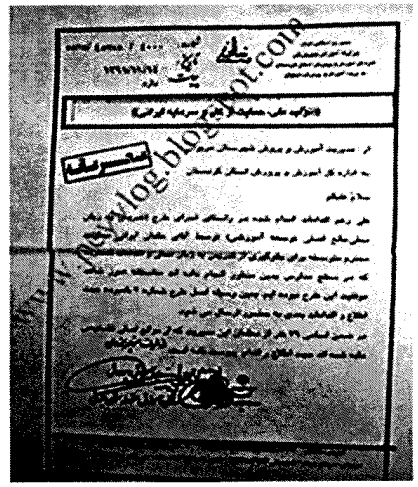

Figure 5: memorandum Ministry of Education (Mariwan, Kurdistan province)

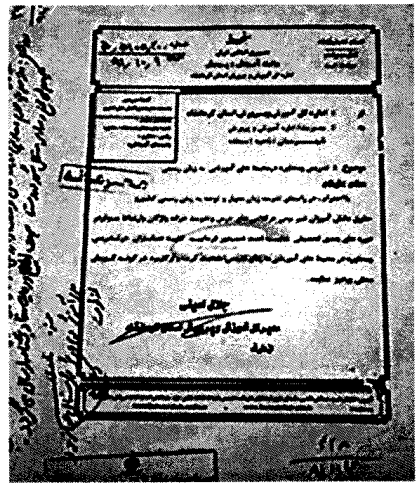

Figure 6: memorandum Board of Education (Kermanshah)

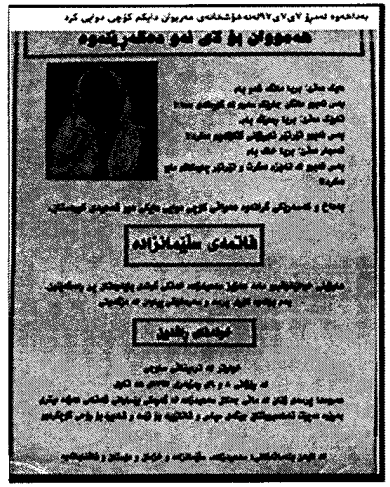

Figure 8: obituary (Mariwan, Kurdistan)

Figure 7: medical clinic sign in Kermanshah (2017)

Concluding remarks

Robert Phillipson

For foreign guests with a life-long commitment to human rights for the Kurds, it is impressive and reassuring that a colloquium of this kind and quality, hosted by the Institut Kurde, has the active support of two universities in France. There is a continuing, urgent need to address issues of linguistic justice, the human rights of minorities, and the appalling situation for Kurds in all the countries where they live.

It is not as though the challenges have not been analysed earlier. There is massive documentation of the way Kurds are deprived of their human rights, their rights as human beings and as minorities. The need for peaceful solutions has been identified time and time again. My wife, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, and I were in Diyarbakir/Amed for a Kurdish, Turkish and International PEN Seminar on Cultural Diversity, in March 2005. We were at a Building Peace