



**The Forgotten Kurds of Iran:  
A Primer on Rojhelat**

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### Executive Summary:

Iranian Kurds have historically faced institutionalized discrimination that has marginalized them and inhibits the progression of living and social conditions as well as the expansion of human rights. East of Greater Kurdistan (Rojhelat) is underdeveloped and does not receive equal access to state benefits. Unemployment and poverty rates are among the highest in Iranian Kurdistan, while pursuing other economic activities, such as smuggling goods to and from Iraq, endangers their lives. Rojhelat has several political parties, but activists are routinely targeted and detained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps for accusations of undermining the central government. Rojhelat has fought for Kurdish rights in Iran for decades with no avail.

### History:

In 1514, the Ottomans defeated the Safavid Empire in the Battle of Chaldiran. Iran lost western Kurdistan, known today as Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan, and they were never able to reclaim it. The Battle of Chaldiran established the modern contours of the Middle East by setting boundaries of demographic concentrations, both ethnic and religious affiliation. The spread of Shia Islam was contained to the Safavid Empire and followers of the sect are primarily concentrated in contemporary Iran.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman after World War I, several tribal revolts occurred in Greater Kurdistan in response to power vacuums and weakened security forces. In Iran, Ismail Agha Simko, chief of the Shakak tribe, attempted the first endeavor to establish an independent nation state concentrated in the West Azerbaijan province in Iranian Kurdistan throughout the early 1920s. However, the Azeris and Reza Pahlavi's forces, the Commander in Chief of the Iranian army, fought and defeated Simko.

Allied forces entered Iran in 1941 during World War II, forcing Reza Shah into exile and changing the geopolitical power structure of the country. Reza Shah's son, Mohammed Reza Shah, became the Emperor of Iran, but it is widely believed he had little power and Iran was unofficially controlled by the Allied forces. The Soviet Union controlled a sphere of influence in northern Iran, including Kurdistan, and the British and Americans controlled a sphere of influence in the south. This allowed Kurds to attempt to control an independent state based on nationalistic ideals through the support of the Soviets. In 1946, Rojhelati Kurds led by PDKI established the Republic of Mahabad headed by Muhammad Qasi. The Republic of Mahabad was the first and only independent Kurdish nation in history but collapsed after just 11-months and PDKI was outlawed by Mohammad Reza Shah. The British and Americans backed a regime in Tehran to overthrow the Republic of Mahabad to weaken Soviet influence in Iran and remove political division in the country to secure stable oil rents.

The rise of Mohammad Mossadegh's nationalist, self-determination, and anti-imperial views in the early 1950s was widely supported by the Kurds. In 1952, PDKI participated in provincial elections and received a high proportion of votes. Mohammad Reza Shah invalidated the election and led his army into Mahabad to re-establish pro-royalist representatives. Mossadegh, who had been appointed the premiership in 1951, opposed the action of the Shah, but had no power to reverse the action. Mohammad Reza Shah was angered by Kurdish support of Mossadegh, and in 1953 Mossadegh was overthrown by a CIA-led coup. This, again, left the Kurds with no political

allies. Occasional rebellion attempts were made by the Kurds in subsequent years, but they were unable to compete with the Iranian army.

When the 1979 Revolution occurred, a majority of Iranian Kurds supported the revolutionary government as it promised to award rights for ethnic minorities, and they saw it as an opportunity to achieve higher levels of autonomy than under the monarchy. At this time, PDKI were much more organized compared to 1946 and they were able to establish headquarters in Mahabad and control the region, which became an important base for revolutionary activities against the Shah. However, Ayatollah Khomeini saw the Kurdish aspiration of autonomy as a threat to the creation of the Islamic republic and rejected the plan, accusing the Kurds of seeking independence. In the spring of 1979, a large Kurdish uprising began. The government responded with a brutal crackdown on the Iranian Kurdish population, marked with massacres, arrests, and executions.

Throughout the Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988), Iranian Kurds increasingly became isolated from the outside world as well as Kurds in neighboring countries. The Iraqi government engaged in chemical weapon attacks against military targets and villages near the border, most of which were Kurdish. The war was disastrous for the Iranian Kurdish population. Internally, PDKI and Komala disagreed on their visions for Rojhelat, and Kurds were politically fractured. In 1989, the leader of PDKI, Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, was assassinated in Vienna during negotiations with Iran by agents of the Islamic Republic. Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi was voted to lead PDKI following the death of Dr. Ghassemlou but was assassinated in 1992 by Iranian agents when he was in Berlin. The death of both leaders froze Kurdish activity in Iran and has led to a decade's long stagnation of political effort in Rojhelat.

### *Geography and Demographics:*

Iranian Kurds largely reside in the western and northwestern region of Iran. Rojhelat includes the provinces West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Ilam, and parts of Hamadan. There is also a concentration of Kurds in Khorasan province along the border of Turkmenistan, who were displaced there by the Persian Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The major cities in Rojhelat are Kermanshah, Mahabad, Urmia, and Sanandaj.

Kurds are the second largest ethnic minority in Iran numbering an estimated 8 to 10 million or roughly 10% of the total population. Iran is a vast majority Shia country, where most Kurds are Sunni Muslims facing intersectional discrimination based on both ethnicity and sect. The combined population of ethnic minorities in Iran are larger than the proportion of the Persian Iranians. There are several prominent Kurdish dialects spoken in Iran including Kermanji, Sorani, and Kelhorri.

### *Political Structure:*

Politically, Iranian Kurds are organized in several major entities: The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala), the Kurdistan Democratic Party – Iran (KDP-I), and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK).

PDKI was founded in 1945 as a democratic socialist party. It is the first modern Kurdish political party and founded the Republic of Mahabad. They aim to establish a federal and democratic Iran and pursue self-determination for Iranian Kurds. Since its establishment, PDKI has held 16 Congresses. In 2017, PDKI shifted to a more decentralized system with multi-level governance.

Currently, the political party is led by Mustafa Hijri. PDKI has peshmerga forces directly attached to their party.

Komala is a left-wing party founded in the 1970s by university students. They are a socialist party and first and foremost defend the rights of downtrodden Kurds and the suppressed population of Iranian Kurds. Komala aims to democratize social and political life in Iran by separating state and religion and granting equal rights for women, ethnic groups, and religious affiliation. They seek a democratic, secular, pluralist, and federal political structure in Iran. The current leader of Komala is Abdullah Mohtadi. Komala also has a military component attached to their political party.

KDP-I split from PDKI in 2006. KDP-I ideologically aligns with PDKI, but they splintered during the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress over who the next leader of the political party would be. KDP-I is currently led by Khalid Azizi.

PJAK is a far-left party founded in 2004 by PKK militants. They are a designated terrorist organization by the US, Iran, and Turkey. Although their headquarters is in Iraqi Kurdistan, they are said to be clandestinely active throughout Rojhelat.

#### Economics and Social Conditions:

Iranian Kurdistan is heavily underdeveloped and impoverished. The living conditions in Kurdish majority regions are poor and neglected by the central government. Kurds have faced a history of forced settlement, land confiscation, and a lack of reconstruction post Iran-Iraq war. Many neighborhoods have open-air sewage and uncollected garbage paired with some of the highest pollution levels in the world. The overall underdevelopment of Kurdish provinces also means they do not have adequate accessible healthcare to treat illness nor the exacerbated health changes caused by the poor environment they reside in.

For decades, Kurds have faced discriminatory practices from the Iranian government that have inhibited economic growth. The practice of gozinesh has been used to marginalize Kurds and other ethnic minorities by barring them from employment in the state sector and parts of the private sector. Gozinesh assesses prospective employees' loyalty to the Islamic Republic and adherence to the regime's interpretation of Islam. It has led to unproportionally high rates of unemployment, where in the top 20 Iranian cities with the highest unemployment, 18 are Arab, Kurdish, or Baluchi.

Iran is one of six countries in the United Nations to not have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, all Iranian women have faced a severe lack of human and civil rights. Although advancements in primary education have increased literacy rates, women are discriminated against in higher education and are barred from pursuing certain degrees. Iranian women have much higher rates of unemployment compared to men because of discriminatory practices preferring to hire men and excluding the recruitment of women altogether for certain jobs. Kurdish women are discriminated against for both their ethnicity and gender. Forced marriage among young Kurdish girls is still commonplace and the women who speak out against the vast inequalities in rights are targeted by the regime. The various forms of violence and social deprivation Rojhelati women face have led to unproportionally high rates of suicide, notably self-immolation.

Underdevelopment of Kurdish areas increase the challenge to access education. Similar to other infrastructure issues in Rojhelat, schoolhouses are often rundown, and many students drop out to pursue work to bolster their family income. Persian is compulsory in all official offices and textbooks. Iran's constitution awards the right to use minority languages in mass media and to teach regional literature in addition to Persian, but in practice, no serious measures have taken place to implement programs. Institutions teaching in Kurdish are viewed at suspiciously and are often shut down and the instructors are detained. Gozinesh is also used to bar ethnic minorities' activists from pursuing higher education. University applicants go through the same series of screenings that those pursuing employment do and can be rejected if deemed "disloyal" to Iran or Islam.

The provision of humanitarian aid is not equally awarded to Iranian Kurds. In November 2017, a powerful earthquake struck Iran and Iraq with most of the damage being dealt to Rojhelat. Despite promises from the regime to conduct rescue and relief operations, the response was far from adequate and Iranians in the affected areas were left homeless. When natural disasters affect minority dominated regions of Iran, proper resources are not allocated to relieve the people and rebuild the damage done.

The Iranian regime has set up mines and industrial plants to extract natural resources from Rojhelat. However, much of the detailed information on this is kept within the regime and is not publicly available. The two major gold mines in Rojhelat are Zarshooran in Western Azerbaijan province and Dashkasan in Kurdistan province. Despite being the first and second richest gold mines in Iran, Rojhelat remains underdeveloped as the wealth is extracted and kept in Persian dominated areas of the country. The landscape of Rojhelat is much more mountainous compared to Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan. The Zagros mountains are largely located in Rojhelat and provide a large amount of fresh water to Iranian Kurdistan.

#### *Rule of Law and Security:*

The 1979 Islamic Republic Constitution recognizes and protects religious and ethnic minorities, guaranteeing non-discrimination. However, the rights are not comprehensive within the Constitution and violations of civil and political rights are common practice by the Iranian Regime. The simplest acts of ethnic activism are construed as a national security threat or an accusation of separatism movements. Kurds are often detained for merely being a member of a Kurdish political party and as of January 2018, 45% of recorded political prisoners were Kurds.

Kurdish human rights defenders, community activists, and journalists are often subdued to arbitrary arrests and prosecution. Detained minorities are typically not informed of their charges for an extended period. In 2013, the Penal Code was amended to remove the presumption of innocence and broaden the scope of 'moharebeh' and 'efsad-e-fel-arz', which can both result in the death penalty. Throughout the pre-sentencing detention period, detainees are often tortured to extract confessions and in accusations of national security threats or 'moharebeh', defendants are either denied the right of a lawyer or only able to meet with one shortly before the trial begins. During the court proceedings, accused persons are faced with vague and broad charges during a typically speedy trial conducted in Persian. Many Iranian Kurds do not speak Persian as their first language and are disadvantaged to defend themselves in court.

Following sentencing, those who go to prison live in poor conditions. Physical and psychological torture, overcrowded cells, and lack of medical care are a major concern. Iran has the second

highest rate of execution in the world. The Penal Code permits the death penalty for more than 80 offenses, and ethnic minorities share a disproportionate rate in Iran, particularly the Kurds. Like trials, executions are arbitrary. Many are carried out without notifying the prisoners, their lawyers, nor their families.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has an estimated 1,000 battalions made of 800 – 1,000 Corps members that are dedicated to monitoring the use of the internet. The regime has purposely decreased the quality of the internet connection to slow the spread of criticisms of the government. The IRGC targets activists and those critical of the regime by monitoring activity on social media. Following raids and arrests, the IRGC will confiscate phones and computers of those accused of undermining the interests of the government and challenging its rule.

Indiscriminate killings by Iranian security forces are also disproportionately shared by ethnic minorities. The kolbars are border couriers who carry goods into Iran. Smuggling commodities from Iraqi Kurdistan has been a practice in Kurdish regions by the youth and farmers for decades due to rates of unemployment and land contamination from landmines and other remnants of war. Regime efforts to tighten border security have resulted in hundreds of deaths or injuries to Kurdish kolbars in anti-smuggling operations. Significant number of kolbars are arrested and their goods are confiscated by the authorities. The kolbars, some operating with a license, are rarely found to have been carrying illegal goods, but rather commodities to bolster their income and support their families.

Iran is littered with active landmines leftover from the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. An estimated 20 million mines were planted during the war, and Iran is one of the countries with the most unexploded landmines in the world, maiming and killing dozens each year. A high concentration of the mines is in Rojhelat due to the proximity to the Iraqi border. Kolbars are especially vulnerable to death and injury from stepping on mines from their border-crossing activity as described above. Since 1988, roughly 10,000 Iranians have been victims of landmine incidents, including a significant number of children. A majority of the victims are ethnic minorities, particularly the Kurds. The regime is doing little to extract landmines and increase the safety of civilians living near them. Lastly, government rehabilitation and treatment of landmine victims is insufficient. Decisions to compensate victims are decided unilaterally by the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation and the investigations of cases are prolonged leading to increased suffering.

#### *International and Domestic Relations:*

Currently, Iranian Kurds have a strong, working relationships among the different political parties in Rojhelat. In 2018, the Cooperation Center was established to increase dialogue and unity between Kurdish parties in Iran. Additionally, the Kurdish parties are members to the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran. This body is comprised of ethnic minorities who face similar repression from the Iranian regime and encourages cooperation between the diverse set of ethnicities living in Iran. Lastly, Kurdish parties are members of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization that brings together ethnic groups from around the globe who are repressed and underrepresented in their respective country. These three organizations allow the Kurds to organize, cooperate, and strategize in ways that have not been achieved historically. Despite political differences in the past, namely between PDKI and Komala, Rojhelatis have built strong relationships that has begun the construction of a strong political front.

For the most part, ethnic minorities have a strong relationship in Iran as they share grievances of Persian superiority in the country and face different levels of institutionalized discrimination from the regime. Azeri nationalists have started a movement to pursue their own nation, but it is not mature. They mostly do not show interest in working with the Kurds, and there is no significant working relationship between the groups. Similarly, the Baluchis do not have a strong relationship with the Kurds as they aim to pursue governance alone. The Kurdish political movement is the most organized and mature among Iranian ethnic minorities. Iranian minorities realize that they are better off working with one another to topple the regime. They will never have social and political rights in the current governance structure.

*Kurdish goals in the future Iran: Federal Republic of Iran*

With 50% of its population speaking non-Persian languages, Iran is a multi-ethnic country comprised of Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Balouchis, and Turkmen besides Persians. It goes without saying that decentralization of power-- as opposed to the centuries of failed power concentration by one ethnic group-- is the only way for Iran to become democratized. Major Kurdish political parties and Kurdish discourse in Rojhelat all agree that their rights could be protected only if a democratic, federalist government replace the current authoritarian one. Kurds support equality for all ethnic groups in Iran and aim to develop a system of governance that encompasses human and political rights for all Iranians.

*Why Rojhelat important to the west:*

Like their fellow Kurds in Iraq and Syria, and having gone through 41 years of theocratic dictatorship, Iranian Kurds appreciate western values and norms. Secularism alongside power decentralization is the common denominator for all Kurdish activists and political parties of Rojhelat. Having a landmass relatively bigger than that of Iraqi Kurdistan bordering from Nakchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey all the way to the majority-Arab areas of southwest Iran would give the west and the United States a unique strategic depth. In addition, the Kurds in Rojhelat are as friendly as Iraqi and Syrian Kurds are toward the west, especially the United States, which makes it a welcoming environment for future partnership.

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