

Jonathan Fox (106), 7/14/94

## **Update**

Kathie Young, June 1999

## **Kurds in Iran (Islamic Republic of)**

Total **Area** of Iran: 1,648,000 sq. km.

**Capital:** Tehran

**Country Population:** 68,960,000. (1998 estimate, UN Census Bureau)

**Group Population:** 4,827,000. This represents 7% of the total Iranian population of

**Religion:** Sunni Islam with a minority of Shi'i Muslims.

The Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979.

## **Overview**

Historical references to the **Kurds** in Iran go back as far as 2400 BC. They now live in the Iranian provinces of Ilam, Kermanshah, Kurdistan and Western Azerbaijan which are along Iran's borders with Iraq and Turkey. The **Kurds** of Iran are part of a larger group of **Kurds** who live in parts of Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria and call the area as a whole Kurdistan. Because of this, all four of these states tend to take an interest in the situation of the other states' Kurdish minorities, thus complicating the situation of the **Kurds** in each of these states. Also, Kurdish separatists, mostly in Iraq, Iran and Turkey, have used each of these states as bases for attacks upon the others.

Most **Kurds** are Sunni Muslims but there is a minority of Shi'i Muslim **Kurds** in Iran, primarily in the province of Kermanshah. While the **Kurds** in Iran traditionally had a nomadic component to their society, most have been settled due to government policy. The **Kurds** speak several dialects of the Kurdish language and are divided into many tribes. These tribal divisions and rivalries have often been an impediment to their struggle for autonomy.

The **Kurds** have a history of valuing their independence and have, whenever possible, resisted domination by outside powers and have occasionally managed to maintain autonomy in parts of the region in which they live. The last time they were able to maintain regional autonomy in Iran for any considerable period of time ended in the mid-19th century due to centralization policies by the Qajar Shahs. However, local tribal leaders continued to maintain armies. They had brief periods of independence from 1918-1922 and in 1946 and engaged in several other uprisings during times when the Iranian government was weak. They still hold grievances over their being denied the right of self determination when the imperialist powers were drawing the map of their region.

In 1979, most **Kurds** initially supported the Iranian revolution, with the primary exception of these tribal chiefs that were benefitting from the Shah's regime, in hope of gaining democracy and autonomy. However, when it became clear that the new government had no intention of giving the **Kurds** either democracy or autonomy, the **Kurds** rebelled against the government. This rebellion has been met with repression by the Iranian government. The Iran-Iraq war was used as an excuse by both sides to repress their own **Kurds** and support insurrection by their enemy's **Kurds**. Since this time, Iranian Kurdish rebels have been using Iraq, and later the Kurdish autonomous zone in Iraq as a base for their attacks.

There are two major Kurdish parties in Iran as well as many smaller ones, including Kurdish branches of other Iranian political parties. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) was first formed in 1945. It has maintained a constant policy of demanding democracy for Iran and autonomy for the **Kurds**. It has not demanded a separate state, perhaps because of the close historical and cultural ties between Iran and its **Kurds**. Most of its support comes from the urban middle class, intellectuals, merchants and government employees. Since 1981, it has formally been part of the Iranian National Resistance Council (a coalition of Iranian opposition groups based in Paris) and has militarily opposed the Iranian government. The Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Kurdistan (Komala) is the other major Kurdish party. While there are claims that it has existed as an underground organization since 1969, it first appeared publicly in 1983 as the Kurdish branch of the Communist Party of Iran. While it has often violently disagreed with the KDPI, the Komalah has supported the KDPI's stance for democracy and autonomy. No political party, other than Iran's ruling party, which itself was disbanded in 1987, is legal in Iran.

The basic issue over which the **Kurds** and the Iranian government are fighting is autonomy and most of the Iranian government's repression of the **Kurds** (that is above and beyond the Iran's normal level of repression) can be traced to this issue. However, there is less support for this demand of autonomy among Shi'i **Kurds**. No sources used for this report have indicated any restriction of Kurdish culture or language other than some problems due to the **Kurds** being Sunni rather than Shi'i Muslims.

### Chronology

**February 1990:** Thousands of **Kurds** demonstrate in seven Iranian towns and more than 500 are arrested. These protests are said to be due to the execution of 17 Kurdish activists.

**April-August 1990:** Iranian Kurdish rebels mount numerous attacks against government forces. Over 300 Iranian soldiers are killed and over 150 are captured.

**April 24 1990:** A prominent Iranian Kurdish nationalist is assassinated near Geneva by what is believed to be Iranian security forces.

**July 28 1990:** The Kurdish opposition frees 152 POWs as a humanitarian gesture.

**November 20 1990:** Iranian security arrests a Kurdish guerilla accused of killing two revolutionary guards last summer.

**1991:** The KDPI accuses Iran of numerous human rights violations.

**January 14 1991:** Iran executes seven Kurdish guerrillas, all members of the KDPI, for spying, murder and armed activities.

**March 1991:** Iranian forces cross over into Iraq and attack Iranian rebel forces, including Kurdish forces.

**March-April 1991:** 1.3 million Iraqi refugees, most of them **Kurds**, arrive in Iran in the aftermath of the Gulf War and Iraq's attacks upon its Kurdish population. Most of them return to Iraq by the end of the year.

**June-July 1991:** Iranian Kurdish guerrillas mount attacks against the Iranian Army.

**August 12 1991:** Iranian Kurdish rebels kill five Iranian surveyors near the Turkish border. KDPI guerrillas also set fire to an exhibition of industrial machinery and briefly take policemen hostage in the town of Mahabad.

**September 30 1991:** Iran begins to repatriate some of the 30,000 Iranian Kurdish refugees in Iraq who moved away during the Iran-Iraq war.

**December 2 1991:** Iran executes a Kurdish cleric convicted of spying for Iraq.

**January 1 1992:** more than 200 Iranian Kurdish refugees are allowed to return from Iraq.

**January 17-18 1992:** There are several reports of violent demonstrations in several Kurdish towns in western Iran. In the town of Bowkan 17 are killed or wounded.

**September 13 1992:** Iran and Turkey agree to boost border security and clamp down on each other's Kurdish opposition. Each state's opposition uses the other state as a base for its operations.

**September 17 1992:** Two gunmen, believed to be working for the Iranian government, shoot at eight KDPI officials in Bonn, Germany. Four KDPI politicians and their driver are killed.

**March 1992:** there are several reports of Iranian **Kurds** attacking Iran from across the Iraqi border.

**March-December 1993:** Iranian forces shell Iranian Kurdish opposition forces in Iraq with both artillery and airplanes.

**April-May 1993:** Iranian forces cross over into Iraq and attack Kurdish rebel forces. They eventually occupy a "security zone" of over 100 sq km.

**May 20 1993:** Iran accuses Iraq of training Iranian Kurdish rebels.

**June 7 1993:** Iran, Syria and Turkey meet to discuss the Kurdish problem in northern Iraq which they all feel is a threat to their security.

**July-October 1993:** About 5000 Iraqi **Kurds** flee to Iran. 55,00 Iraqi **Kurds** now live in Iran.

**August 9 1993:** Iranian forces cross the border into Iraq and attack Kurdish rebel forces.

**September-November 1993:** Iranian Kurdish rebels continuously attack Iranian revolutionary guards and government buildings in the Kurdish areas of Iran along the Iraqi and Turkish borders.

**November 15 1993:** Iran blows up a car in Iraqi Kurdistan killing six including 5 KDPI members.

**November-December 1993:** Both the UN and Amnesty International accuse the Iranian government of the political assassination of members of its Kurdish opposition.

**December 1993:** Iran and Turkey reach an agreement to coordinate their efforts against each other's Kurdish opposition.

**January 7 1994:** A prominent member of the KDPI is assassinated by gunmen believed to be affiliated with Iranian security forces.

**February 20 1994:** An Iranian Kurdish NCO flies his helicopter to Iraqi Kurdistan and asks for political asylum.

**April 27 1994:** A home made bomb explodes near a government building in the Iranian Kurdish town of Oshnoviyeh. No one is killed.

**August 4 1995:** The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan says that Iranian government agents assassinated its representative in Baghdad. Tehran denies the charges and says the killings are the result of political infighting among rebels.

**August 17 1994:** The democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan claims to have killed 15 Iranian Revolutionary Guards in a clash in western Iran.

**September 1 1994:** Iran's IRNA news agency says that Kurdish rebels have blocked a highway in western Iran, set 2 military vehicles ablaze and wounded one person. The rebels also went to the village of Nahrab and delivered speeches to the residents.

**September 25 1994:** Turkey and Iran agree to stop opposition groups from operating in each other's territory.

**October 5 1994:** The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran charges that Tehran intends to level 17 Kurdish villages in western Iran.

**October 11 1994:** The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran announces that 4 Kurdish villages have been demolished by Iran and that authorities have told the residents of 5 more villages to leave.

**November 6-9 1994:** Iran bombs several Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in Iraq.

**April 1995:** A total of 6 Iranian **Kurds** were killed in attacks

in Iraqi Kurdistan, allegedly by Iranian government agents. (Foundation for Democracy in Iran)

**June 5, 1995:** Two members of an Iranian Kurdish group were gunned down in Iraqi Kurdistan by Iranian

government agents, according to the State Department's yearly report on terrorism. (Foundation for Democracy in Iran)

**July 13 1995:** The UN High Commissioner for Refugees says that some 12,000 out of 23,000 Iranian Kurd refugees in a camp in western Iraq have registered their names for voluntary repatriation.

**September thru October 1995:** An Iranian Kurdish opposition group accused Iranian officials of torturing and executing ten Kurdish political prisoners who allegedly supported a banned political group, Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI). Another 345 people were also arrested at this time for the same infraction. (Reuters, October 3; Foundation for Democracy in Iran, October 20. 1995)

**December 4, 1995:** The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan kills 15 members of the Iranian security force in clashes in western Iran. (Reuters)

## 1996

**April 21, 1996:** Iranian agents driving a Red Crescent Society ambulance attacked an Iranian Kurdish refugee camp in northern Iraq. (Foundation for Democracy in Iran)

**June 22, 1996:** Turkish troops inside Iran allegedly killed 7 members of KDPI in Iran. (Reuters)

**July 10, 1996:** Iranian agents exploded a car-bomb near a housing complex amidst the main concentration of KDPI refugee camps in northern Iraq. (Foundation for Democracy in Iran)

**July 28, 1996:** Rahman Radjabi Hamvand, a member of KDPI, was executed. The charges against him stemmed from a complaint by a private individual that was later withdrawn. (US State Department, February 1997)

**July 29, 1996:** 3,000 Iranian troops entered Kurdish territory in northern Iraq in search of KDPI guerillas, reportedly killing 20 members of KDPI, while displacing over 2,000 Iranian Kurd refugees. Iranian officials claimed that the attack was justified on the basis of self-defense (Reuters)

**August 4, 1996:** KDPI members announce that they will stop crossborder attacks from Iraq into Iran. (Agence France Presse)

**August 23, 1996:** Former president of Iran Abolhassan Banisadr stated that during the last 15 years, the Iranian government ordered the killings of over 60 dissidents, including 4 KDPI leaders in Germany in 1992. (Reuters)

**August 24, 1996:** KDPI members in Iraq claim that Iran is planning to launch another offensive into northern Iraq and called upon the world community to condemn Iranian aggression. (Reuters)

**September 19, 1996:** During a review of Iran's military forces, the Ayotollah Khamenei stated his belief that the **Kurds**, like other big tribes in the Islamic Iran, are the indivisible part of this great Iranian nation. (BBC, September 21, 1996)

## 1997

**April 1997:** Improved relations between Tehran and Ankara led to the deportation from Turkey to northern Iraq over 70 KDPI members. (The Daily Telegraph, April 19, 1997)

**April 13, 1997:** Iranian **Kurds** accused Iranian officials of trying to poison KDPI members after 85 Iranian **Kurds** were treated for food poisoning with a highly toxic substance. (Reuters)

**April 10, 1997:** A German court implicated the Iranian government in the deaths of 4 Kurdish dissidents in Germany in 1992. All EU countries except Greece recalled temporarily their ambassadors from Iran following the finding of the court, imposing limited diplomatic sanctions on Iran. (Reuters, Agence France Presse)

**May 25, 1997:** A moderate candidate, Mohammad Khatami, is elected president of Iran.

**June 20, 1997:** An Iranian Kurdish writer was sentenced to 24 months in prison, according to the Human Rights Alliance, a US-based non-profit group. Tawahudi was charged with "propagating non-Islamic lies. (Foundation for Democracy in Iran, June 30, 1997)

## 1998

**December 2, 1998:** Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi denied any Kurdish problem in Iran, noting that Iranian **Kurds** can enjoy their full cultural identity, 'unlike Turkish **Kurds**. (BBC)

## 1999

**February 16, 1999:** The arrest of Turkish Kurd leader Abdullah Ocalan leads to riots by **Kurds** in Iran, especially in western Iran, and throughout Europe. (Deutsche Presse-Agentur)

## Risk Assessment

The status of the **Kurds** in Iran remains basically unchanged since 1989. They are still engaged in a military campaign in an effort to gain regional autonomy, mostly using bases in the part of Iraq which is now the Kurdish autonomous zone. Most reports of human rights violations against the **Kurds** do not single out the **Kurds** as victims of such violations. Rather they seem to be suffering, more or less, the same level of violations as the rest of the Iranian populace. Also, the Iranian government continues to engage in the assassination of Kurdish opposition leaders. The situation is further complicated by the involvement of Iraq, Turkey and to a lesser extent Syria in the situation due to their own Kurdish minorities.

The implication of Iranian leaders by Germany for their involvement in dissident assassinations and the subsequent election of a more moderate, left-wing leader for the country should lead to a reduction in state-sanctioned, violent repression of all people in Iran, including Kurdish rebels. These changes, however, do not appear to have made Kurdish autonomy any more likely.

The plight of **Kurds** throughout the region will likely be significantly affected by the verdict in the trial of Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey, and the aftermath to that verdict. Kurdish groups have warned of a violent, aggressive response if Ocalan is sentenced to death. Such a reaction could lead to heightened marginalization

of the Kurdish community and reduced chances of political autonomy.

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