

The Kurdish Struggle and Identity in Iran



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After almost one hundred years of our nation's identity struggle against the occupiers of Kurdistan, the Kurds have won this struggle and it is the occupiers of Kurdistan who have failed in their strategy against the Kurdish people.

The origin of Iranian nationalism

Iranian nationalism emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and more precisely with the conditional movement, a phenomenon that did not previously exist in the history of this country. The fruit of Iranian nationalism was the term "Iranian nation," which was officially mentioned in the first constitution of this country in the year 1906. "Nation of Iran" is a combination of a fantasy and artificial term that was integrated for political purposes, because it

was formed on the basis of Persian language and culture and Shiite sector. It did not consider the identity of other nations living in this geographical body called Iran, like the Kurds.

Twenty years after the birth of Iranian nationalism and the emergence of its product, called the "Iranian nation," Iranian nationalism entered another stage of its life with the accession of Reza Khan Pahlavi to the throne of the modern "nation-state" of Iran. The Iranian nation, which until then had only been written on a piece of paper, entered a practical phase and had to be created in practice, and thus the process of nation-building in Iran began.

This process of nation-building was based on one state, one nation, and one language. But in order to promote it, other nations' languages and cultures "must be dissolved and assimilated" into the Persian language and culture. This process began by attacking the cultures and languages of other nations, using the tools of government such as the army, government institutions, and bureaucracy. Thus, the process of nationalization in Iran took place in a non-democratic manner and through the use of military force, repression, and suffocation and beyond the will of the Iranian people.

This was the starting point of national oppression in a modern and systematic way in Iran, which began with the formation of the Reza Shah nation-state. Kurdish nationalism was also formed in response to and as defiance against Iranian nationalism, which was an aggressive nationalism, confronting and challenging it. Thus, began a long struggle that is now one century old. The Republic of Kurdistan of 1946 uprising, as a 40-year-old movement, was the most brilliant achievement of this struggle.

What was the content and nature of this struggle?

The following will discuss the nature and content of the Kurdish People's struggle in East Kurdistan (Rojhelat), also known as Iranian Kurdistan.

During the 20th century, this was an identity-seeking struggle. The Kurdish community in Kurdistan had shown its feelings, thoughts, and position in various ways to prove its national identity and achieve a political goal.

The ways in which national identity is expressed can be categorized into several areas: armed struggle, civil disobedience, the creation of national art and literature, and civic activities.

Armed struggle: Hard, exhausting, and uninterrupted struggles as well as the armed struggle of recent years known as Rasan.

Civil Disobedience: The manner of public demonstrations, general strikes, and the closing of shops and markets in different cities of Kurdistan in condemning the assassination of Dr. Ghassemlou and Dr. Sharafkandi. This method of protesting continues today. For example, the people of Rojhelat protested the murder of "Shawaneh Seyed Qader" and the execution of Farzad Kamangar and his comrades. The people of Rojhelat express their feelings in various ways, such as demonstrations, gatherings, and celebrations on various occasions, including mourning and rejoicing in other parts of Kurdistan.

Creation of national works of art and literature: In the fields of poetry, storytelling, film, theater, sculpture, visual arts, press, music, and singing. For example, the poems of Aso, Salah Ashti, Ali Al-Fati, Gardigliani, Maroof Aghaei, Rezaei, Tabak, Nasser Aghabra, Shawaneh, and many others are influential. In films, we have Bahman Ghobadi and Jamil Rostami films. In addition, there are Hadi Zia al-Dini's sculptural works, which he adapted from the faces and mysteries of celebrities and adapted the nature of Kurdistan. In music, contributions range from the full harmonic group Kaveh Faqihzadeh to regional artists and folk singers. Publications include dozens of magazines, newspapers, and translations of works into Kurdish.

Civic activities: A movement began with the establishment of literary associations and memorials like for the chemical bombing of Halabja in Tehran and other cities. Further, national ceremonies are held, like Newroz celebrations and the Marivan city movements in the civil struggle and environmental martyrs in recent years.

The struggle and activity of the Kurds in this century, especially in the past four decades, have challenged Iranian nationalism. The Kurdish community revealed its identity and foundations against Iranian nationalism more clearly and started to see it as an occupier force. This is why the national discourse has been the dominant discourse in the political space of Kurdistan in the recent 30 to 40 years, in contrast to the previous era.

The stance and the reaction of the Iranian nationalism toward the situation of the Kurds and their national issue in the past century is currently a complete security perspective and is not seen as a political issue and the reality of Iranian society. Therefore, not only has Iran never taken any serious steps to resolve it through negotiation and dialogue, but it has also sought to remove this problem from the forefront through military aggression, the militarization of Kurdistan, assassination, execution, imprisonment, and exile. In fact, it aims to end the problem through these methods.

In the past century, the vision and the policy of Iranian nationalism have been implemented by the three central governments: Reza Shah, Mohammad Reza Shah, and, in the past 42 years, by the regime of the Islamic Republic. Reza Shah tricked and ambushed the Kurdish figure Ismail Agha Shekak and killed him. Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah, hanged Ghazi Mohammad and his companions, and the Islamic Republic assassinated two Kurdish leaders, Ghassemloo and Sharafkandi, in the heart of the "civilized" Europe. We can compare that Mohammad Reza Shah executed 11 Kurdish figures in the Faizullah al-Beigi on charges of collaborating with the Republic of Kurdistan, but the Islamic Republic shot dead 59 young Kurds from a small city like Mehabad in one day!

On the day that the Allies ousted Reza Shah from power and deported him to South Africa, several Kurdish tribal leaders who did not adhere to the centralized system of Iran were in prison. Up to the moment when Mohammad Reza Shah left Iran forever with tears in his eyes at Tehran airport, he had imprisoned Kurdish figures like Aziz Yousefi, Ghani Blourian, Reza Shaltouki, and Ali Amoui, all with prison sentences of six years each. Today, the oldest political prisoners in Iran are Kurdish men and women. For example, Zeinab Jalali has been in prison for

six years and has been sentenced to life imprisonment. Osman Mostafa Pourpour, Mohammad Nazari, and Kamal Sharifi have each been imprisoned for 27, 25, and 10 years, respectively.

I pointed out that the occupier never took any serious steps to resolve the issue through dialogue, but imposed armed defense on us through military aggression and the use of violent means. Some believe that from the very beginning, taking up arms as a method of struggle in Rojhelat was wrong and we should not have chosen this method of struggle to defend the rights and freedoms of our nation.

We view war as the most hated and disgusting phenomenon in human history, which is why we have never wanted to take up arms and fight. What could be more bitter and unpleasant than for a child to be orphaned, for a mother to mourn her child, and for a young woman to become a widow? It does not matter if the victims are Arabs, Persians, Turkish, or Kurdish; these disasters are all caused by war. At the ceremony of a book launch of the martyred commanders of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, I told the participants, "You who are present at this ceremony today knew these commanders closely; I boldly say that none of them wanted to be killed and no one wanted to kill."

We have never attacked any nation and we have never occupied the land of any nation. What do we want? To live freely in our ancestral land and have the right to determine our political destiny is our only crime!

What alternatives did the proponents of the anti-armed defense and struggle view propose in the struggle for the rights and freedoms of the Kurdish people? Didn't we see Ghani Blourian and his associates split from the Democratic Party to resolve the Kurdish issue, as they say, "peacefully"? Didn't they lay down their arms and even support the Islamic Republic on the grounds of "Khomeini's line being anti-imperialist"? Were they able to secure the rights and freedoms of the Kurdish people in this way? As we have seen, they are also at the feet of the Islamic Republic and were later ousted and banned from political activity and faced persecution, imprisonment, and execution.

Did "Ahmad Muftizadeh" and "Nasser Sobhani" take up arms? They were neither secular nor left-leaning, nor defined in the context of the "subversive" parties; but rather they were Islamists, religious, and even defended the Islamic Republic at one point. Their fate was imprisonment and death. We have always believed that the solution to the problem must be through dialogue and at the negotiating table. We always believed that "if a knot can be opened through hands why use teeth?" [old Kurdish saying]. We have never rejected dialogue as a principle of struggle, but what does dialogue mean if the other side is not willing to negotiate or is not in good faith?

In the last 40 years, the Islamic Republic has talked to the Kurdish movements and parties three times.

The first time: Talks, which were transparent, were held in the fall of 1979 with a delegation representing the Kurds. However, after several months, the negotiations ended with a deadlock.

The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) then continued to negotiate unilaterally with the Islamic Republic, which was known as “Compromiser,” and eventually the talks came to a standstill. In fact, it was the Islamic Republic that had no faith in the negotiation process, and the purpose of the negotiations was to gain time to strengthen the foundations of the system because until then, the Islamic Republic had not yet been able to fully strengthen its foothold. To prove the claim that the Islamic Republic did not have good intentions, one can refer to Hashemi Rafsanjani’s words. In the minutes or schedule of the Revolutionary Council on December 3, 1979, Rafsanjani was quoted as saying, “they [the Kurds] were not satisfied with anything but an independent and non-Islamic country. Do not think that the Kurdish issue will be resolved through negotiations and we will undoubtedly have a war with them.” The source is Massoud Razavi, Hamshahri newspaper in 1993.

The second time: Negotiations were held in Vienna, the capital of Austria, and of course this time the negotiations were held in secret, and the result was the assassination of Dr. Ghassemlou.

Third time: This time too, the talks were held in secret, and the result was, in a word, “nothing.”

The Minister of Intelligence at the Revolutionary Council had said in this regard: “Some time ago, we had talks with ‘dissident groups’ to update our information about them.” Now the question is, are these examples not enough to remove the suspicion of the faith of the Islamic Republic in the talks? In conclusion, “it’s wrong to test what has been tested” [old Persian saying].

Almost 100 years have passed now since the beginning of Iranian nationalism by the quasi-modern government of Reza Shah Pahlavi to create the “Iranian nation” and assimilate the Kurdish nation in the heart of the Persian nation. Let’s examine if the occupier has achieved his goal.

As you know, in continuation of the same approach and strategy of Iranian nationalism– that is, using the unbridled repression against the people– in September 2018 the Islamic Republic executed three political prisoners and fired missiles and rockets at the KDPI headquarters, which resulted in the death of six members of the KDPI.

What was the response of the masses of the Kurdish people to this criminal attack and executions? The answer was the nationwide strike in the cities of Kurdistan on September 26, a strike that was unprecedented in the past four decades, as the largest civil disobedience at this level of widespread and popular presence.

These millions of progressive civilians participating in the general strike in Kurdistan had many achievements:

First, it was a message to the occupiers that after a century, especially in the past four decades, despite having resorted to all means of repression, they have no place in Kurdistan. The message was that they are foreigners in this country and their reliance and existence is only due to the military force and militarization of Kurdistan.

Second, the general strike was a test that showed that Iranian nationalism had failed after a century of the uninterrupted pursuit of its goal of forming an “Iranian nation” and giving the Iranian identity to the Kurds. In the country, the Kurds in eastern Kurdistan, Rojhelat, had proved otherwise as. It insists on its national identity.

Obstacles and bottlenecks facing the identity-seeking struggle in Rojhelat in the short term:

- The unity and solidarity of the political forces of Kurdistan are less than it should have been, especially amid the crucial situation of Iran and the region. In the meantime, there is no justification for not reuniting the organizational ranks of the two Democratic parties (KDPI-KDP Iran). The two parties are the two main forces in Rojhelat with a common legacy of 60 years of identity struggle. The two parts have played a major role in this regard. Delaying and ignoring the will of the people of Kurdistan and underestimating the signature-collection campaigns for the reunification of the Democratic Party are refusing to perform national and patriotic duty.
- Special attention should be paid to this cultural nationalism that has emerged in the southern regions of Kurdistan (Kermashan and Ilam provinces) in recent years and efforts should be made to add a political aspect to it. Additionally, the phenomenon of imbalance in the struggle for identity in the Kurdistan region must end.
- The composition and context of the political sociology of Kurdistan have changed and as a result, a new generation has emerged. This class has its own culture and cannot be dealt with by language, literature, and methodology.

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