

## Kurdish Identity in a Fragmented Iran: Politics of Belonging and Exclusion

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### Abstract

*The Kurdish identity in Iran exists at the intersection of cultural resilience, political marginalisation, and socio-economic exclusion. This paper examines how Kurdish communities in Iran navigate the politics of belonging and exclusion within a fragmented national framework. The Kurdish population, concentrated in the western provinces, has historically faced systemic marginalisation exacerbated by Iran's centralist policies and ethno-religious diversity. While Kurdish culture and language serve as crucial markers of identity, their suppression through state-imposed assimilation policies has deepened feelings of alienation.*

*This study explores the dual dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, focusing on state policies, regional geopolitics, and internal Kurdish socio-political fragmentation. The Iranian state's rhetoric of national unity often clashes with the lived experiences of Kurdish communities, who perceive exclusion in political representation, economic development, and cultural recognition. Moreover, Kurdish political movements, ranging from reformist to separatist, reflect divergent visions of self-determination and engagement with the state, further complicating the politics of belonging.*

*At the regional level, Iran's interactions with neighbouring countries hosting Kurdish populations, such as Iraq and Turkey, influence its internal Kurdish policies. The geopolitical interests of the state intersect with fears of transnational Kurdish solidarity, leading to the securitization of Kurdish areas. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this study highlights the evolving strategies of Kurdish communities to assert their identity while navigating exclusion.*

**Keywords:** *Kurdish Identity, Exclusion, Marginalisation, Regional geopolitics, Self-determination*

### 1. Introduction

In the diverse and complex tapestry of Iran's ethnic landscape, the Kurdish people occupy a unique and often contested position. As one of the largest ethnic minorities in the country,

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Kurds have long struggled to maintain their distinct cultural identity within the framework of a nation-state that prioritizes Persian-centric narratives of unity. This tension has given rise to a profound and ongoing struggle over the politics of belonging and exclusion, with Kurds continuously negotiating their place in a society that both marginalizes and commodifies their culture. The Kurdish population in Iran, known as Iranian Kurds, is an important ethnic group predominantly residing in the western provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, and parts of West Azerbaijan. Estimates suggest that Kurds make up around 10-15% of Iran's population, translating to approximately 8-10 million people. Their language, Kurdish, consists of several dialects, including Sorani and Kurmanji, and is spoken alongside Persian, the official language of Iran (McDowall, 2004).

The historical roots of Kurdish identity in Iran are deeply intertwined with their land, language, and traditions. For centuries, Kurdish communities have inhabited the rugged terrains of the northwest and western regions, maintaining their linguistic, cultural, and social distinctiveness. However, the centralization efforts of successive Iranian governments, particularly under the Pahlavi and Islamic Republic regimes, have sought to impose a singular national identity that often disregards the complex mosaic of ethnicities within Iran's borders. The Kurdish people's resistance to these pressures has not only been a battle for cultural survival but also a fight for political recognition and autonomy.

From the early 20th century, Kurdish political movements have been at the forefront of struggles for greater self-determination, including calls for federalism and autonomy. Yet, these movements have often been met with harsh repression, and Kurdish political actors have faced violent suppression, including forced displacement, military crackdowns, and imprisonment. Despite this, the Kurds of Iran have continued to assert their right to exist as a distinct political and cultural community, with grassroots mobilizations and youth-led protests increasingly making their voices heard.

In the contemporary era, Kurdish identity in Iran is further complicated by the intersection of regional dynamics. The Kurdish populations in neighboring Iraq, Syria, and Turkey have formed their own political entities, which have, at times, influenced the political aspirations of Iranian Kurds. The Iranian government's security concerns, fuelled by regional instability and the threat of separatism, often translate into harsher policies toward Kurdish activism, further entrenching the sense of exclusion that many Kurds feel.

This paper analyses the complex structure of Kurdish identity in Iran, emphasising its formation through historical marginalisation, the Iranian state's assimilation and repression

practices, and the development of Kurdish political forces. The ongoing struggle for recognition and inclusion reflects broader issues of governance, nationalism, and human rights within the Islamic Republic. By delving into the politics of belonging and exclusion, this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of Kurdish identity and its place in the fragmented political landscape of modern Iran.

## **2. Nationalism and Identity: Conceptual Framework**

Nation and nationalism are concepts long been associated with humankind. Scholars throughout the world argue about how states came to be. It has been widely debated whether the nations were perennial, imaginary, or ethnic in nature. Nationalism is one type of ambiguous ideology. Nationalism can be aggressive and expansionist within or outside the state boundary. And also, nationalism can be served as a peace-keeping and culturally integrating force in the nation. Nationalist ideas have historically played an essential role in many current nation states culturally, politically, and economically, integrating an ever-increasing number of people. Neither nationalism nor ethnicity is disappearing as part of a defunct traditional order. Both are part of a modern set of categorical identities asserted by elites and other political and social participants.

As a theoretical, social, and political phenomenon, nationalism is both attractive and complex: attractive because it encourages the production of historical accounts of the nation that emphasise issues of background, cultural connection, the need for ancestry, affiliation, self-actualization, personal identity, and culture; and complex because it is versatile, thus open to interpretation (Calhoun, 1997).

"Nationalism is thought of as an ideology or movement aimed at achieving and sustaining political autonomy, primarily in the form of state sovereignty, for a group of people known as a nation" (Podoksik, 2017). The concept of nationalism is crucial in determining why minority Nations strive for independence from their host Nations. Nationalism can be defined as "the attitude that citizens of a nation have when they are concerned about their national identity and activities that people of nation perform when striving to achieve (or sustain) self-determination" (Miscevic, 2008).

Nationalism depends on collective sentiments derived from identity, history, culture, language, or religious affiliations. Nationalism is an intrinsic component of the international system, serving as a fundamental aspect of statehood and a prerequisite for self-determination. The notion of a nation (or national identity), often characterised by shared

origin, ethnicity, or cultural connections, particularly examines whether an individual's affiliation with a nation is deemed voluntary or involuntary. Whether self-determination necessitates complete statehood with absolute control over internal and external matters, or if a lesser form is sufficient. "National awakening" and struggles for political independence are frequently both heroic and cruel; the formation of a clearly national state often responds to deep popular sentiment but can have inhuman consequences, ranging from violent expulsion and "cleansing" of non-nationals to organised mass murder. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2001).

Liberal theorists frequently regard nationalism as a universalist ideology, emphasising equality and human rights within its polity, but it can just as easily be seen as a kind of particularism denying non-citizens or culturally deviant citizens full human rights and, in extreme cases, even membership in the community of human beings. Depending on the social context, nationalism can have both integrating and disintegrating effects.: it can serve to identify a large number of people as outsiders, but it can also define an increasing number of people as insiders, encouraging social integration on a higher level than is currently possible. Extensive processes transpired across all European nations in the nineteenth century, with the modern state and nationalist ideology historically and logically connected to the proliferation of literacy, the quantification of time, and the growth of industrial capitalism. During the Twentieth century, the nation-state model emerged as the predominant political entity. Due to the increasing significance of international interactions (military, commerce, etc.), the nation-state has played a crucial role in defining the present landscape. (Eriksen, 1991)

Nationalism is a contemporary notion originating from the era of the French Revolution, with Jean Jacques Rousseau recognised as one of its early proponents. Nationalism reached its zenith in the 19th century, exemplified by the American nationalism advocated by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. The genesis of nationalism was founded on the necessity to fortify the cohesion of individuals residing in a certain geographical region in opposition to colonialism and imperialism, as well as to advocate for the sovereignty of nations ( Ibrahim, 2008)

This spirit transformed into a universal phenomenon as individuals endeavoured to unify their interest in each other's relationships. Consequently, nationalism provided the essential zeal to cultivate a spirit among the populace of a nation that had been absent since the Renaissance and Reformation. Moreover, whilst endorsing liberalism, capitalist forces acted

as proponents of nationalism to ensure governmental stability through effective population control. A nation embodies the social and economic structure characterised by collective identity, culture, and solidarity, whereas a state serves as a framework for internal and external security, financial interactions, and territorial boundaries. The notion of minority nations originated in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, which for the first time acknowledged the "territorial unity" and sovereignty of nation-states, as well as their right to select their own religion, particularly in relation to France and the Roman Empire. The modern notion of a nation-state is broad, albeit intrinsically complex, and has possibly revitalized nationalism in state-building theory. 'State-building' and 'nation-building' are often used interchangeably; however, nation-building contributes to creating a cultural identity, whereas state-building refers to establishing an autonomous, independent state system (Modini, 2018).

The desire of self-determination is supported by ethnonationalism, a kind of nationalism characterised by the definition of nations based on ethnicity. Ethno-nationalism can be studied through constructivist, instrumentalist, and primordialist perspectives. Constructivism perceives ethno-nationalism as a fabrication of contemporary elite society, subject to alteration according to power dynamics. Instrumentalism perceives ethnicity and nationalism as constructs advanced by elite society to promote political and economic power objectives. The Primordialist characterises ethnicity as an objective entity possessing intrinsic attributes, including race, geography, language, and kinship. A nation-state is a primary political entity in the global framework, and nationalism is a movement aimed at its establishment.

Nationalism can be broadly defined as a political ideology emphasizing the sovereignty, self-determination, and unity of a specific nation. According to Benedict Anderson, nations are "imagined communities" where members perceive a shared sense of belonging in spite of geographical and cultural differences (Anderson.B.R, 1991). Similarly, Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism emphasizes the importance of pre-existing cultural symbols, myths, and traditions in the construction of national identity. (Smith, 1991).

## **2.1. Identity and Self- Determination**

"Identity pertains, among other aspects, to the characteristics that differentiate an individual from others" (Parekh, 2009). Identity is an individual's perception of their self-concept, the nature of their character, and their interpersonal interactions (D. Abrams, 1988). It often

addresses the inquiry, "Who am I?" The term 'identity' originates from a concept of 'sameness,' which is inherently relational and contingent upon the delineation of distinct others, influenced by context and ideological preference. As Stuart Hall articulates, 'Only when there is another can you know who you are.' An individual's personal and social identities are interwoven dimensions of their identity. Personal identity denotes an individual's core views and commitments, which serve to navigate his existence and ascertain his position within the world (Hall, 1989).

An individual's social identity is their method of positioning and orienting themselves within the environment. A person's social identification or affiliation with a particular social group enhances prestige and self-esteem. The social identity hypothesis, formulated by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, delineates circumstances in which an individual's social identity supersedes their personal identity (Tajfel, 1978). It elucidates why individuals associate with a group, the effects of their affiliation and communication, and the influence of in-group and out-group distinctions on relationships. Social identity theory posits that individuals form their identities in relation to social groups, and these identifications function to safeguard and elevate self-identity. The formation of group identities entails categorising a "in-group" in contrast to a "out-group," accompanied by a propensity to perceive one's own group favourably while viewing the out-group unfavourably (C. Vinney, 2019).

The first use of ethnicity as a political concept is attributed to the American sociologist David Riesman in 1953. Notwithstanding the use of "ethnic" as a concept in 1953, it has a functional dominance in the terms of the nation-state formulation. After the formation of nation-state an effective 'ethnie' would be in control and in power (Yilmaz, 2016). Due to their indigenous legitimacy and emotive power, such groups are arguably more central to exploring cultural and political developments than either subaltern minorities or professional state elites (Kaufmann, n.d.). As the ethnie is culturally and socially dominant, it comes as the priority in the political formation of a nation. Because first of all a particular ethnic group is to be chosen, and then an appropriate national conceptualization and a political formulation is formed for this particular group. In this regard, the case of ethnic identity must take precedence. Because ethnic identity, particularly in times of disorder, rises to the forefront and plays a uniting role in society, but in modern times, a shared ethnic background is insufficient for the establishment of "national identity."

The majority of persons opt to identify themselves through their nationality, region, ethnicity, religion, race, caste, language, and similar categories. Nonetheless, nationality serves as a primary identification for most of the global population. Social identity theory posits that "national identity" constitutes a specific form of social identity, reflecting an individual's self-concept based on their awareness of belonging to a social category or group, together with the significance and emotional weight attributed to it (Tajfel, 1978). National identity is arguably the most fundamental and comprehensive of all collective identities shared by humans. Numerous and unique linguistic, religious, and ethnic identities exist, although they can only assert nationhood thanks to their inclusive and tolerant characteristics. Smith contends that, via the perspective of collective personality and its unique culture, a sense of national identity serves as an effective method for defining and situating individual selves within the world. National identity serves as a mechanism for fostering a feeling of individual and collective value, which is essential for societal functioning (Smith A. D., 1991).

In the era of nation-states, nationality is the most essential criterion for claiming rights, entitlements, and benefits. Identity provides us not only with a sense of belonging, but also with opportunities and limitations (F.L.Erni, 2013). As a result, the lack of effective official representation and protection causes refugees to experience anxiety. These groups have lived outside of their country of origin for many years, in a variety of social and cultural contexts. It could result in a serious identity crisis. Loss of family, friends, and communities impacts a person's psychological and physical development, as well as his or her sense of self and belonging in general.

Ethnicity is a core component of Kurdish identity. For the Kurds, ethnic identity is reinforced through language (primarily Kurdish, though dialects like Kurmanji, Sorani, and Zaza vary), cultural practices, and collective memory. However, the suppression of Kurdish culture and language by dominant nation-states—particularly Turkey, Iraq, and Iran—has created a sense of resilience and resistance among the Kurdish population. Kurdish identity, therefore, is not static but a dynamic construct shaped by both internal solidarity and external pressures.

To understand Kurdish nationalism, it is essential to examine its historical roots. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent redrawing of Middle Eastern borders by colonial powers left the Kurds divided across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The Treaty of Sevres in 1920 initially promised establishing a Kurdish state, but the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 negated this commitment, leaving the Kurds stateless. This statelessness has played a pivotal role in shaping Kurdish nationalism, fostering a collective memory of betrayal and a

yearning for sovereignty. The Kurds' fragmented existence across multiple nation-states has also necessitated the development of a transnational identity, further complicating their quest for self-determination (McDowall, 2004).

Kurdish nationalism exemplifies stateless nationalism, a form of nationalism where a distinct group aspires to statehood but operates within the borders of existing nation-states. Kurdish identity is not monolithic; it is shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, class, and religion. Cultural narratives and collective memory play a critical role in sustaining Kurdish nationalism. The oral tradition of *Dengbêj* (storytelling), Kurdish Newroz celebrations, and the commemoration of historical events such as the Halabja chemical attack are powerful tools for reinforcing Kurdish identity and solidarity.

Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities resonates strongly with the Kurdish experience. Despite geographical fragmentation, Kurds maintain a shared sense of belonging through cultural practices and historical narratives. This shared identity is further reinforced by diasporic communities, which act as bridges between Kurdish populations in the Middle East and the broader global context. Kurdish nationalism and identity are complex phenomena shaped by historical grievances, cultural resilience, and political aspirations. By situating the Kurdish struggle within broader theoretical frameworks of nationalism, ethnicity, and statelessness, this analysis highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Kurdish identity. As the Kurds continue to navigate their quest for self-determination in a challenging geopolitical landscape, their experiences offer valuable insights into the interplay between nationalism, identity, and power.

### **3. Historical Context**

The history of Kurdish identity in Iran is deeply intertwined with the region's complex political, cultural, and geographical realities. Kurds have lived in the mountainous regions of Iran for centuries, with their homeland, often referred to as Kurdistan, straddling the borders of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. This historical backdrop of overlapping territories has played a significant role in shaping Kurdish identity, both within Iran and across the broader Middle East.

#### **3.1. Pre-Modern Period**

The Kurdish people's presence in Iran dates back to ancient times. Historically, Kurdish tribes occupied the rugged highlands of Iran's northwest, including the provinces of

Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan. The Kurds in this region have traditionally been a mix of farmers, pastoralists, and tribal communities with distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious practices. Their language, Kurdish, belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family, with several dialects spoken across the Kurdish regions of Iran.

Throughout history, the Kurdish areas in Iran were often under the control of various empires. In pre-Islamic times, the region was part of the Parthian and Sassanian empires, and later, during the Islamic period, the Kurdish people became integrated into the larger Persianate societies. During the medieval period, Kurdish dynasties such as the Shaddadids and the Rawadids emerged, further demonstrating the Kurds' historical role in regional politics. However, the fragmented and decentralized nature of Kurdish tribal organization often meant that they were able to preserve a sense of distinctiveness, even in the face of shifting empires and rulers.

### **3.2. 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

In the 19th century, as the Qajar dynasty consolidated control over Iran, Kurdish lands became subject to the centralizing policies of the Iranian state. The Kurds were still largely self-governing, with tribal chiefs (known as Beys) wielding significant local power. However, the increasing influence of European powers in the region, combined with Iran's attempts to modernize, prompted the central government to assert greater control over its Kurdish territories.

During this period, the Kurdish regions of Iran were also affected by the broader geopolitical struggles of the time, particularly the competition between the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, and Persia. The Kurds, as a stateless and divided people, found themselves caught between these competing powers, with some Kurdish groups aligned with the Ottomans, while others sought to maintain their autonomy within Iran.

The early 20th century was a period of profound political change for Iran, and for the Kurds, it marked the beginning of a struggle for recognition and political autonomy. The 1921 coup led by Reza Shah Pahlavi and the subsequent establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty brought with it the centralization of power in Tehran. The Pahlavi regime pursued aggressive policies of state-led modernization, including the suppression of regional languages, cultural practices, and political autonomy. These policies, which aimed at creating a unified Persian nation-state, exacerbated ethnic tensions, particularly among the Kurds (McDowall, 2004).

### **3.3. The Pahlavi Era**

Under Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941) and later his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–1979), the Iranian state's efforts to impose a centralized, Persianized national identity reached new heights. These policies of cultural assimilation sought to erase regional distinctions and promote Persian as the sole official language. Kurdish culture, language, and traditions were systematically marginalized in this period. Reza Shah's "Persianization" policies not only sidelined Kurdish linguistic and cultural identity but also sought to incorporate Kurdish regions into the broader vision of a unified, modern Iran.

However, this era also witnessed a significant Kurdish resistance movement. In the early years of the Pahlavi regime, the Kurdish nationalist figure, Simko Shikak, led a rebellion against the central government, seeking to carve out a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the northwest. Despite his failure to achieve lasting political goals, Simko's rebellion laid the groundwork for future Kurdish movements in Iran (Ansari, 1998).

### **3.4. The Islamic Revolution and the Post-Revolutionary Period**

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran brought a dramatic shift in the political landscape. The overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini raised hopes for greater political inclusion for ethnic minorities, including the Kurds. However, this optimism was short-lived. Despite the Islamic Republic's promises of equality, the central government's policies toward the Kurds were largely shaped by fears of separatism and regional instability.

The Kurds were among the first groups to voice opposition to the new regime. Kurdish political parties, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), which had been active during the Pahlavi period, quickly became involved in the struggle against the central government. The government responded with brutal force, launching military campaigns against Kurdish resistance groups and forcibly displacing many Kurdish civilians.

This period also saw the emergence of a more pronounced divide between Kurds who identified with the Islamic Republic's Islamist ideals and those who rejected it in favour of Kurdish nationalism. The latter group sought autonomy, if not full independence, within Iran. The political repression that followed the revolution solidified a sense of exclusion among the Kurdish people, who increasingly felt disconnected from the new Islamic order (Abrahamian, 1982).

### **3.5. 1980s–Present**

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Iranian government's policy toward the Kurds was characterized by military crackdowns, including the infamous "Anfal" operations in which Kurdish villages were destroyed and their inhabitants displaced. Kurdish political activism was met with suppression, as Tehran sought to quell any attempts at regional autonomy.

In recent decades, the Kurds in Iran have continued to press for greater political rights, cultural recognition, and social equality. This struggle has often been shaped by the influence of Kurdish movements in neighboring Iraq, where Kurdish forces have achieved a significant degree of autonomy. The 2000s saw the rise of Kurdish nationalist movements in Iran, particularly among the younger generation, who sought to assert their cultural and political identity. Protests, uprisings, and occasional armed resistance have been central to Kurdish struggles, though these movements continue to be met with harsh state responses.

The historical trajectory of Kurdish identity in Iran has been marked by cycles of cultural repression, political exclusion, and resistance. While Kurds have maintained their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, their political struggles for recognition and autonomy continue to shape the contours of their identity within a nation-state that often views them as a threat to national unity. This complex historical context is essential for understanding the contemporary challenges faced by the Kurds in Iran today.

## **4. Politics of Exclusion**

The Iranian state's policies toward the Kurdish population have been characterized by a pattern of marginalization, repression, and selective integration. These policies, especially those implemented under the Pahlavi and post-revolutionary Islamic Republic, have played a central role in shaping the lived experience of Kurdish communities in Iran. Despite the Kurds' long history in the region, Iranian state policies have largely ignored their demands for cultural recognition, political rights, and autonomy, in favour of a vision of Persian-centric nationalism aimed at creating a unified, modern Iranian state.

### **4.1. The Pahlavi Era**

Under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941) and his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979), the Iranian state pursued a policy of centralization that heavily impacted ethnic minorities, including the Kurds. The Pahlavi dynasty aimed to create a modern, centralized

nation-state in which Persian culture, language, and identity would be paramount. This vision of national unity led to the systematic suppression of Kurdish culture and political autonomy. Reza Shah's policy of "Persianization" was particularly damaging to the Kurdish population, as it sought to eliminate regional languages, including Kurdish, from public life. Kurdish speakers were forbidden from using their language in schools and government institutions, and Persian became the exclusive language of administration and education (Ahmad C. J., 2019). This top-down cultural assimilation was seen as an effort to weaken ethnic identities and forge a cohesive national identity under the rule of the Pahlavi monarchy.

Politically, the Kurds were further excluded from meaningful participation in the central government. The Pahlavi regime's approach to Kurdish political movements was one of repression, with Kurdish uprisings such as the 1920 revolt led by the Kurdish leader Simko Shikak crushed by military force. Although Simko's rebellion was localized, it illustrated the Kurds' dissatisfaction with the Pahlavi regime's centralization and Persianization policies.

#### **4.2. The Islamic Republic Era**

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the rise of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini initially seemed to offer hope for greater political inclusion and equality for ethnic minorities. The new constitution of the Islamic Republic, which promised equal rights for all Iranian citizens regardless of ethnicity, suggested that the Kurds might finally be able to express their political and cultural identities freely. However, the reality was far more complex.

While the regime claimed to embrace an inclusive Islamic identity that transcended ethnic lines, Kurdish political movements quickly found that the new government was just as resistant to Kurdish autonomy as its predecessors. The Iranian government viewed the Kurds as a potential source of instability, particularly in light of the Kurdish nationalist movements across the border in Iraq and Turkey. The Islamic Republic's policies reflected the fear of Kurdish separatism and the threat of regional disintegration, and this resulted in the militarization of the Kurdish issue.

In the early years of the Islamic Republic, Kurdish political groups such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) rejected the Islamic state and advocated for Kurdish autonomy within Iran. These demands were met with violent repression. The Iranian government responded to Kurdish uprisings with heavy military force, including the infamous 1979–1983 military campaigns, in which Iranian forces attacked Kurdish cities and villages, leading to widespread displacement and loss of life. Thousands of Kurdish civilians

were killed, and entire villages were destroyed, reinforcing the government's stance that the Kurds were a threat to national unity (Abrahamian, 1982).

#### **4.3. Repression of Kurdish Political Movements**

The Iranian government's policies toward Kurdish political movements during the Islamic Republic era have largely been marked by repression, with little room for the peaceful expression of Kurdish identity. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has been at the forefront of enforcing state policies in Kurdish regions. These policies have included the imprisonment, torture, and execution of Kurdish activists, as well as the banning of Kurdish-language schools and cultural organizations (Gunter, 2019)

The state's actions against Kurdish political movements have been justified through the rhetoric of maintaining national security. The Iranian government perceives Kurdish political groups, particularly those with links to Kurdish nationalist movements in Iraq, as threats to the territorial integrity of the state. These groups have been accused of collaborating with foreign powers, including the United States and Israel, further exacerbating tensions. This view has led to the criminalization of Kurdish political activism and the labelling of Kurdish political parties as "separatist" or "terrorist" organizations.

However, despite the repressive measures, Kurdish political parties have continued to operate underground or in exile. Movements such as the PDKI and the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) have maintained their calls for greater autonomy and Kurdish rights, often with support from the Kurdish diaspora in Europe and North America. Their persistence highlights the ongoing struggle for political recognition and inclusion within a state that has consistently sought to marginalize and exclude the Kurds (Hassanpour A. , 1994)

#### **4.4. Cultural Suppression and Economic Disparities**

In addition to political repression, the Iranian government has also pursued policies aimed at suppressing Kurdish culture. Kurdish language education has been severely restricted, and Kurdish cultural expressions, such as music, literature, and festivals, have often been suppressed by state authorities. This is part of a broader policy of "cultural assimilation" designed to integrate ethnic minorities into the dominant Persian culture

The economic situation in Kurdish-majority regions of Iran is also a reflection of state policies. The Kurdish regions, such as Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan, have long been among the most underdeveloped in the country. Despite the rich natural resources

in these areas, including oil and gas reserves, the Kurds have not benefited from the economic development that has been concentrated in Tehran and other Persian-speaking regions. This economic disparity has contributed to the feeling of exclusion and marginalization among Kurdish communities. The state's neglect of these regions has been a key factor in the rise of Kurdish grievances, further fuelling demands for political change (Gunter, 2020).

## 5. **Belonging Through Resistance: Kurdish Identity In Iran**

The Kurdish community in Iran has long navigated a complex landscape of cultural suppression and political marginalization. Despite these challenges, Kurds have employed various forms of resistance to assert their identity and strive for inclusion within the Iranian state. The Kurdish political struggle in Iran reflects a broader regional narrative of a stateless people striving for recognition, autonomy, and rights. While influenced by geopolitical dynamics in neighboring countries, Kurdish movements in Iran possess unique characteristics shaped by the political environment, state repression, and socio-economic marginalization. The roots of Kurdish resistance in Iran can be traced back to the early 20th century, with significant uprisings such as the Simko Shikak revolt in the 1920s and the establishment of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946. These movements were driven by aspirations for autonomy and recognition of Kurdish identity. However, successive Iranian regimes have consistently suppressed Kurdish nationalist sentiments, viewing them as threats to national unity. Under Reza Shah Pahlavi, policies aimed at centralization and assimilation sought to diminish ethnic identities, including that of the Kurds. This trend continued under the Islamic Republic, which, while promoting an Islamic identity, often marginalized ethnic minorities.

### 5.1. **The Republic of Mahabad and Early Kurdish Movements**

The geopolitical landscape of World War II created an environment conducive to Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. The Allied occupation of Iran in 1941 weakened the central government's control over peripheral regions, including Kurdistan. The Soviet Union, which had established a presence in northern Iran, supported minority movements as part of its broader strategy to expand influence in the region. On January 22, 1946, Kurdish leaders, under the presidency of Qazi Muhammad, declared the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad in the city of Mahabad. The republic encompassed Kurdish-inhabited areas in northwestern Iran and sought to promote Kurdish language, culture, and political autonomy.

The national anthem of the new state was "*Ey Reqîb*," symbolizing Kurdish resilience and aspirations (Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad, n.d.)

The Republic of Mahabad emerged alongside the Azerbaijan People's Government, another short-lived state in northern Iran, both of which were supported by the Soviet Union. The Soviets provided military and logistical assistance to these movements, viewing them as potential buffer states and instruments to pressure the Iranian government. However, the extent of Soviet influence over Mahabad has been a subject of debate, with some scholars arguing that the republic was more a product of genuine Kurdish nationalist aspirations than a mere Soviet puppet (The Mahabad Republic: Soviet Puppet or the Result of a Genuine National Movement?, n.d.).

The Republic of Mahabad sought to establish a Kurdish administrative structure, promoting education in the Kurdish language and fostering cultural development. However, it faced significant challenges, including limited resources, internal tribal divisions, and the complexities of transitioning from a tribal society to a centralized administration. The leadership attempted to balance traditional tribal influences with modern nationalist ideals, a task complicated by the diverse social fabric of Kurdish society.

The Republic of Mahabad's existence was precarious from the outset. In May 1946, under international pressure, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its forces from Iran. This withdrawal left the nascent Kurdish republic vulnerable. By December 1946, Iranian government forces re-entered Mahabad, effectively dissolving the republic. Qazi Muhammad and other leaders were arrested and later executed, marking a tragic end to this early experiment in Kurdish self-governance (McDowall, 2004).

## **5.2. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)**

Formed in 1945, the KDPI emerged as the primary political organization advocating for Kurdish rights in Iran. The party called for self-governance, cultural preservation, and economic investment in Kurdish-majority regions. Following the fall of the Mahabad Republic, the KDPI operated underground during the Pahlavi era, continuing to mobilize support despite significant repression by the central government. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the KDPI renewed its activities, taking advantage of the post-revolutionary chaos to assert Kurdish demands for autonomy. However, the Islamic Republic's leadership, particularly Ayatollah Khomeini, rejected these demands, resulting in violent confrontations.

The Iranian state launched military operations in Kurdish areas, displacing thousands and decimating KDPI strongholds (Entessar, 2014)

### **5.3. Komala: Revolutionary Leftist Nationalism**

Komala (the Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Kurdistan) was founded in the 1960s as a Marxist-Leninist group. Unlike the KDPI, which focused on Kurdish nationalism, Komala combined socialist principles with Kurdish liberation. After the 1979 revolution, Komala became an influential political force in Iranian Kurdistan, appealing to the working class and marginalized groups. It operated as both a political and military organization, engaging in guerrilla warfare against Iranian state forces throughout the 1980s. Komala's ideological split with the KDPI often resulted in tensions between the two groups, further fragmenting the Kurdish political landscape (Vali, 2011).

### **5.4. The Role of PJAK**

In the early 2000s, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) emerged as a significant force in the Kurdish political scene. Inspired by the ideology of Abdullah Ocalan and closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, PJAK advocates for democratic confederalism and gender equality. Unlike earlier Kurdish movements, PJAK has a strong emphasis on grassroots organization and societal transformation. The Iranian government has labelled PJAK a terrorist organization, frequently targeting its members in military operations and cracking down on perceived sympathizers (Philips, 2015)

## **6. Post-Revolutionary Policies and Kurdish Resistance**

The 1979 Islamic Revolution initially raised hopes among the Kurds for greater political inclusion. However, the new regime's emphasis on Islamic unity and centralized governance left little room for ethnic pluralism. Kurdish demands for autonomy were dismissed as separatist, and armed conflict between the Iranian state and Kurdish groups intensified.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) played a critical role in suppressing Kurdish resistance. Military campaigns in the 1980s resulted in widespread displacement, destruction of villages, and loss of civilian lives. Simultaneously, the government attempted to co-opt certain Kurdish tribal leaders and communities to undermine support for nationalist movements (Gunter, 2019)

### **6.1. Cultural Resistance**

Cultural expression has been a cornerstone of Kurdish resistance. Despite state-imposed restrictions, Kurds have preserved their language, traditions, and arts as acts of defiance. The Kurdish language, in particular, serves as a vital marker of identity. While the Iranian government allows limited use of Kurdish in certain broadcasts and publications, activists linking cultural expression to political rights have faced persecution. Nevertheless, Kurdish poets, musicians, and writers continue to produce works that reflect their heritage and aspirations, fostering a sense of unity and resilience within the community (international, 2008).

### **6.2. Civic Activism**

In addition to cultural endeavours, Kurdish civic activism has played a significant role in resisting marginalization. Over the past four decades, Kurds have engaged in various forms of non-violent activism, including publishing, language instruction, and environmental initiatives. These activities not only promote Kurdish identity but also challenge the state's authoritarian policies in Kurdistan. However, activists often face severe repercussions, including harassment, arrests, and denial of basic due process rights, underscoring the risks associated with such resistance (Hassaniyan, Summer 2020).

### **6.3. Political Engagement**

Political resistance among Iranian Kurds has manifested through both participation in formal political processes and support for opposition parties. Kurdish political parties, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and Komala, have historically advocated for Kurdish rights and autonomy. Despite being banned and facing brutal crackdowns, these parties continue to operate, often from exile, maintaining a significant following among Iranian Kurds. Additionally, Kurdish participation in broader Iranian political movements reflects a dual strategy of seeking rights within the national framework while advocating for ethnic-specific concerns (Hassaniyan, Summer 2020).

### **6.4. Armed Struggle**

At times, segments of the Kurdish population have resorted to armed struggle as a form of resistance. The PDKI and other groups have engaged in periodic clashes with Iranian security forces, particularly in response to state repression. These confrontations highlight the

ongoing tensions between Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and the Iranian government's efforts to maintain control. The state's militarized response to Kurdish activism often exacerbates the cycle of violence, further entrenching divisions (Hassaniyan, Summer 2020).

### **6.5. Women's Activism**

Kurdish women have been at the forefront of resistance, challenging both gender and ethnic oppression. Their activism encompasses participation in protests, leadership in civic organizations, and contributions to cultural preservation. The slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" ("Woman, Life, Freedom"), rooted in Kurdish feminist movements, gained international prominence during the 2022 protests following the death of Jîna (Mahsa) Amini, a Kurdish woman, in police custody. This slogan encapsulates the intersectional struggle of Kurdish women against systemic injustices (Seyma Bayram, 2022)

## **7. Contemporary Challenges of Kurdish Identity in Iran**

Contemporary challenges for Kurds revolve around cultural suppression, economic neglect, political disenfranchisement, and heightened state repression. This analysis outlines the primary issues faced by Kurdish communities in Iran today. Cultural Suppression

Iranian Kurds face systemic barriers to preserving and promoting their cultural identity. Despite constitutional guarantees for the use of minority languages, Kurdish is not formally taught in schools. Kurdish writers and artists often face censorship or persecution, with the state branding cultural activities as subversive. In 2022, Kurdish journalists covering cultural events faced detention and harassment under accusations of spreading separatist propaganda. (international, 2008). The restriction of Kurdish language education and media creates a generational gap in cultural transmission. Despite grassroots efforts, such as private language classes, the absence of state support severely hinders progress (Watch, Iran:Crackdown on Kurdish Minority, n.d.)

Kurdish-majority regions in Iran suffer from chronic underdevelopment. Despite being resource-rich, particularly in oil and gas, these areas see little investment, leading to high unemployment and poverty rates. Kurdish provinces like Kurdistan, Ilam, and Kermanshah lag behind in infrastructure and industrial development compared to central regions. Due to economic hardships, many Kurds engage in kolbari (cross-border portering), a dangerous and illegal trade that often results in deadly clashes with border security forces (Ahmed Y. A., 2023).

Iranian Kurds have long struggled for political representation. Despite participating in reformist movements, Kurdish politicians are frequently barred from elections or marginalized within national politics. Kurdish leaders advocating for minority rights are often accused of separatism, leading to their disqualification from public office. Crackdowns on Political Parties: Kurdish political organizations like the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and Komala face bans and harsh crackdowns, pushing their activities into exile (Hassaniyan, Summer 2020).

Iranian authorities often resort to militarized measures in Kurdish regions, particularly in response to protests or perceived dissent. Arbitrary arrests, torture, and executions of Kurdish activists are alarmingly common. In the aftermath of the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, Kurdish regions experienced severe repression, with mass arrests and excessive use of force by security forces. Reports from Amnesty International document numerous Kurdish political prisoners sentenced to death after unfair trials, often based on confessions extracted under torture (Gareth Stansfield, 2022).

The Kurdish struggle in Iran is deeply influenced by regional geopolitics. Iranian Kurds are part of a broader Kurdish population across Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, and their movements are often scrutinized due to fears of cross-border separatist aspirations. The Iranian government uses the presence of Kurdish insurgent groups, like PJAK, as a pretext for militarizing Kurdish areas. Iran frequently launches cross-border attacks on Kurdish opposition groups operating in neighboring countries, further complicating the Kurdish struggle (Jazeera, n.d.). Environmental degradation in Kurdish regions exacerbates socioeconomic struggles. Deforestation, water scarcity, and land confiscation for state projects disproportionately affect Kurdish communities. Reports highlight how Kurdish lands are often exploited for natural resources without benefiting local populations (Rudaw, n.d.)

## **8. Path Forward for Kurdish Identity and Rights in Iran**

The challenges faced by the Kurdish community in Iran underscore the need for systemic reforms and collaborative efforts to address marginalization and promote inclusion. A meaningful path forward involves integrating Kurdish rights into broader social justice movements, fostering dialogue, leveraging international advocacy, and strengthening grassroots resilience.

Economic disparities in Kurdish regions must be addressed to alleviate poverty and foster stability. Development programs tailored to Kurdish regions should prioritize local input, fair

resource allocation, and infrastructure development. Partnerships with international development organizations can help ensure transparency and effectiveness in regional development projects. Engaging Kurdish political parties and activists in constructive dialogue is critical for fostering trust and reducing tensions. The Iranian government must abandon its securitized approach and create a platform for political engagement. Civil society organizations and reformist movements within Iran should actively include Kurdish voices in their platforms, framing Kurdish rights as an integral part of broader democratic reforms (Bazoobandi, 2020).

Grassroots efforts to preserve and promote Kurdish culture and language play a vital role in resistance and identity affirmation. These efforts should be supported and amplified. Kurdish women's movements, exemplified by the slogan “Jin, Jiyan, Azadî,” should be further integrated into broader Kurdish and Iranian activism. This approach can foster solidarity across ethnic and gender lines. The Kurdish struggle for rights should be aligned with the demands of other marginalized groups in Iran, including Baluchis, Arabs, and Azeris, as well as with reformist and democratic movements.

International organizations and Kurdish diaspora groups must amplify Kurdish voices and advocate for their rights on the global stage. Kurdish groups across the Middle East should coordinate efforts to present a unified front in international forums. The Kurdish struggle in Iran must be decoupled from fears of separatism to encourage constructive engagement. Highlighting Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights within the framework of Iranian territorial integrity can reduce state resistance (Gareth Stansfield, 2022).

## **9. Conclusion**

The Kurdish struggle in Iran, shaped by historical repression, cultural suppression, and political exclusion, remains one of the most pressing human rights issues in the region today. Despite these formidable challenges, Kurdish communities continue to resist, preserving their identity and striving for justice, autonomy, and equality. The Republic of Mahabad, though short-lived, set a significant precedent for Kurdish aspirations, demonstrating both the potential for self-governance and the obstacles presented by geopolitical and internal dynamics.

The contemporary path forward for Kurds in Iran requires a multifaceted approach. Constitutional reforms that ensure the full recognition of minority rights, economic development programs tailored to Kurdish-majority regions, and meaningful political

inclusion are critical to alleviating the struggles faced by the Kurdish people. Furthermore, a concerted effort to support grassroots cultural initiatives and intersectional feminist movements will help to preserve Kurdish identity and empower marginalized voices.

International advocacy and cooperation are also essential for amplifying Kurdish concerns on the global stage, ensuring that their human rights are protected and that the international community holds the Iranian government accountable for its actions. By fostering dialogue, unity among marginalized communities within Iran, and international solidarity, the Kurdish people can continue to push for meaningful change. Ultimately, the hope is for a more inclusive, democratic Iran where the rights of all its ethnic and cultural communities, including the Kurds, are fully recognized and respected.

In conclusion, the Kurdish struggle in Iran is far from over, but the road ahead is one of hope and possibility. The commitment to a peaceful, democratic, and inclusive Iran, where the diversity of its people is celebrated rather than suppressed, is essential. The Kurdish community, with its history of resistance and resilience, will undoubtedly continue to be a key driver of this transformative process.

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