THE KURDISH PROTEST MOVEMENT AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

THE SECURITISATION OF KURDISH NATIONALISM

Allan Hassaniyan and Gareth Stansfield

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The Kurdish Protest Movement and the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Securitisation of Kurdish Nationalism

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Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran has proven to be intolerable of any domestic dissent and opposition and the country's whole population has suffered from the regime's authoritarian rule. However, people of the peripheral regions of the country have been disproportionally impacted by such authoritarianism. The Iranian government has an inherent fear of a multi-ethnic society and peripheral nationalism, embodied in the movements and activities of the country's Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Baluchis and Turkmen. This paper examines the Kurdish-state conflict in Iran, and argues that Kurdish nationalism, due to its demands for democratisation and decentralisation, and its resistance to the Islamic Republic's value system, has been regarded by the regime and the ruling elite of the Persian majority as a major threat to Iran's national cohesion and territorial integrity. While Kurdish nationalism has mobilised its forces to protest and resist assimilation and exclusion, the Iranian government's reaction is motivated by fear and anxiety toward Kurdish independence and secession. Consequently, Kurdish nationalism has been massively securitised, and the Kurds suffer immensely from a wide range of coercive measures aimed at defusing this nationalism.

Introduction

Iran suffers from a fundamental and unresolved domestic issue, the existence of which has continuously been denied by the country's changing regimes and the ruling Persian elite. This issue can be characterised as a policy of authoritarian exclusion, mismanagement of ethnonational diversity and securitisation of peripheral nationalism.[1] Since the establishment of the modern Iranian nation-state in 1925, changing Iranian governments have had a complex and complicated relationship with the country's non-Persian national communities, including the Arabs, Baluchis, Azeris, Kurds and Turkmen.[2] This is a product of the Iranian government's inherent fear of a multi-ethnic society and peripheral nationalism, and its consideration of nationalist movements as a major threat to Iran's national cohesion and territorial integrity.[3]

As emphasised by Dudoignon, following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, minority national communities have expressed their opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), though each has done so in their own way. For instance, while in Kurdistan a secular national movement has mobilised and expressed its opposition to the government, a Sunni Islamic orthodoxy became the main countercultural element of opposition to the IRI in Sistan and Baluchistan.[4] Nevertheless, all these people and their movements have become the subject of the Iranian state's fierce securitisation of their religious and national identity. Consequently, the relationship between the state and these peoples is characterised by collisions between centre-defined national identity and peripheral nationalism.[5]

Among Iran's national groups, the Kurdish people have been arguably the most vocal in expressing their opposition and dissatisfaction with authoritarian exclusion. There are no exact figures for the size of Iran's Kurdish population; however, Kurds make up a large majority of the provinces of Ilam, Kermashan, Kurdistan and Loristan, and a large part of Western Azerbaijan. Based on this, the Kurdish population of Iran is estimated to number 10-12 million, 12-15 percent of the country's population of about 85 million people.[6] However, this Kurdish society, its national movement and the current living condition of Kurds in Iran are relatively unknown outside Kurdistan. This condition even applies for the major part of the Iranian population, as Iranian state media platforms with their ideological function are their main sources of information about the country's Kurdish people and the Kurdish movement.

[1] Walter Posch, 'Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers: Iranian Narratives on the Kurds', in G. Stansfield and M. Shareef (eds), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (London: Hurst, 2017), pp. 331–52.

[2] For Iranian policy toward ethnonational diversity, see Rasmus C. Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2010) and Alam Saleh, Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2013).

[3] Gunes Murat and Peyman Asadzade, 'Ethnic Nationalism Versus Religious Loyalty: The Case of Kurds in Iran', *Nations and Nationalism* 25/2 (2019), pp. 652–72.

[4] Stéphane A. Dudoignon, *The Baluch, Sunnism and the State in Iran: From Tribal to Global* (London: Hurst, 2017), p. 183.

[5] Posch, 'Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers'.

[6] 'Population of Iran', *Worldometers*, 25 December 2021. Available at https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/iran-population/ (accessed 20 December 2021).

For peoples such as the Kurds, linguistic and cultural exclusion and exclusion from partic-ipating in decision-making have resulted in deprivation of political and cultural rights, and the emergence of a situation in which minorities have held their ethno-national identity and affiliation as the 'primary point of reference', and expressed a disconnect with Iran and Iranian identity.[7] It has been claimed that 'there is an obvious nexus between the emergence of [this movement] and the establishment of the modern Iranian nation-state in 1925',[8] since the securitisation of Kurdish language and national identity in Iran has been a product of the Iranian ruling elite's mismanagement of ethno-national diversity in Iran, beginning under Reza Shah Pahlavi and institutionalised by changing Iranian govern-ments throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[9]

This paper investigates the last two decades of Kurdish politics in Iran, including protest movements, general strikes, armed activities, civic and cultural activism, and other col-lective actions, and the IRI's response. The study notes that Kurdish nationalism in Iran, particularly in regions such as Kermashan and Ilam which have traditionally been consid-ered as the periphery of Kurdish nationalism and the national movement, is growing. The Iranian government has observed this development with anxiety, and has applied coer-cive measures aimed at reversing it, resulting in the securitisation of Kurdish identity and culture. As will be demonstrated, the IRI's tactics have been counterproductive, merely widening the gap between the state and the Kurds and aggravating the situation.

Iran's Decade of Unrest

The past decades have been eventful in Iranian politics. Popular unrest and street protests have become a common feature of Iranian politics such as the Red/Bloody November (Persian: *Aban-e Khonin*) of 2019. Iran has faced several severe national and international crises including high inflation and economic hardship, widespread corruption and mis-management, a lack of freedom and democracy, and regional and international isolation and pressure. After eight years of the hard-line conservative policies of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), the self-declared reformist Hassan Rouhani was elected in 2013. As Rouhani came to office, the Iranian economy was suffering immensely from US sanctions and international pressure on the regime owing to Tehran's nuclear programme, accelerating the already critical domestic conditions of the Iranian state until it was on the brink of bankruptcy. The 2006-2015 sanctions specifically affected Iran's ability to conduct financial transactions with the world. Due to Iran's loss of access to the SWIFT network of financial transactions, Iran's international trade began to operate through unconventional

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[7] Shahram Akbarzadeh, Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Costas Laoutides and William Gourlay, 'The Kurds in Iran: Balancing National and Ethnic Identity in a Securitised Environment', *Third World Quarterly* 40/6 (2019), p. 1145.

[8] Allan Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran: Crossborder Interactions and Mobilisation Since 1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 9.

[9] Marouf Cabi, 'The Roots and the Consequences of the 1979 Iranian Revolution: A Kurdish Perspective', *Middle Eastern Studies* 56/3 (2020), pp. 339–58.

methods including barter and commodity smuggling.[10]These conditions forced Tehran to establish direct diplomacy with Washington shortly after Rouhani's election. In early 2016, some nuclear-related UN sanctions were lifted when the country signed the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015.[11] However, this failed to end the country's international isolation,[12] and hostile US-Iranian relations under President Trump led to the withdrawal of the US from the deal in May 2018 and further extensive sanctions against Iran from November 2018.[13] These conditions contributed to further deterioration of the Iranian economy.[14]

With the election of President Rouhani, Iranians of all ethnicities were promised a new era of stability, prosperity and openness.[15] However, with the extra blow to Iran's economy dealt by Trump's decision, the Rouhani government was unable to resolve the economic difficulties affecting the livelihoods of ordinary Iranians, including a rising unemployment rate. Following the Iranian government's sudden announcement on 15 November 2019 of an increase in fuel prices by 50 percent, widespread public protests emerged across Iran. During these protests, anti-regime slogans were chanted, images of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei were set alight and vehicles were abandoned on streets. The Iranian Interior Minister, Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazli, warned the protesters that they faced strict 'law enforcement' measures.[16] The street protests were quickly met with a brutal crackdown from the Iranian military and security forces.[17] As international news outlets and human rights organisations reported, Iranian security forces killed more than 1500 protesters, injuring and imprisoning several thousands more.[18] The government cut off access to the Internet and telephone networks and harsh conditions continued for several days.[19] The Iranian security forces' response to the protesters differed by region, though. Compared to the central parts of Iran, peripheral regions such as Khuzestan and

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[10] Sonali Chowdhry, Anna-Katharina Jacobs and Katrin Kamin, 'A Crisis in Times of Crisis: Combating COVID-19 Under Sanctions in Iran', *Kiel Policy Brief*, No. 137 (Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), Kiel, 2020), pp. 4–5; Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals That Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), p. 204.

[11] Chowdhry, Jacobs and Kamin, 'A Crisis in Times of Crisis', pp. 4–5.

[12] Ladan Boroumand, 'Iran's 2017 Election: Waning Democratic Hopes', *Journal of Democracy* 28/4 (2017), pp. 38–45.

[13] Michael R. Pompeo, 'Confronting Iran the Trump Administration's Strategy', *Foreign Affairs* 97/60 (2018), pp. 60–70.

[14] Chowdhry, Jacobs and Kamin, 'A Crisis in Times of Crisis'.

[15] 'Iranian President-Elect Hassan Rouhani Pledges Path of Moderation', *The Guardian*, 17 June 2013. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/17/iran-hassan-rouhani-path-moderation (accessed 25 January 2021).

[16] 'Iran Petrol Price Hike: Protesters Warned That Security Forces May Intervene', *BBC*, 17 November 2019. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50444429 (accessed 19 January 2020).

[17] A. Jamshidi, 'The Second Anniversary of The Nationwide Protests of Bloody November 2019', Part One (Persian), *Javanehha*, 16 November 2021. Available at https://bit.ly/3EBaMUC (accessed 28 December 2021).

[18] 'About 1,500 People Killed in November Protests in Iran' (Persian), *BBC Persian*, 23 December 2019. Available at https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50892266 (accessed 18 May 2021).

[19] 'Iranian Kurdish City Under Siege and Family of the Dead Ordered to be Silent', *Iranwire*, 18 November 2019. Available at https://iranwire.com/en/features/6468 (accessed 25 November 2019).

Kurdistan (populated respectively by Arabs and Kurds) had higher rates of deaths and arrests of protesters. These events thus once more brought to the surface Iran's centre-peripheral conflicts and the IRI's intolerance of unrest among peripheral communities.

Iran's Asymmetrical Centre-Periphery Relationship

Political and cultural discrimination and economic disenfranchisement are key features of Kurdish society in Iran, legacies of Reza Shah Pahlavi's authoritarian modernisation and failed homogenisation policy. The current socio-political and economic deprivation of the Kurds and Iran's other minority national communities are evidence that changing Iranian governments have continued these policies towards the periphery.[20] The term 'periphery' has a dual application in the case of Kurds in Iran: they are peripheral not only in geographical and territorial context, but also in their exclusion from decision-making and power-sharing.

To a great extent, the IRI inherited its attitudes towards Kurds from the preceding Pahlavi monarchy. The regime has adopted a similarly uncompromising position regarding Kurdish political and cultural demands. Instead of finding a peaceful solution for the Kurdish demands of democracy and decentralisation, the elite of the IRI have labelled the Kurds' movement and demand for autonomy (Persian: *khodmokhtari*) as a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, sponsored by foreign powers such as the USA and Israel. Thus in the post-revolutionary era, Kurdish society has been subject to the IRI's violent attacks, against which the Kurdish movement has mobilised its forces.[21] The IRI's attempts to implement its ideology, and its securitisation of Kurdish identity, language and culture, have fuelled the growth of Kurdish nationalism, in terms of reaction and resistance to the Iranian government's policy in Kurdistan.[22]

One shared characteristic of the monarchical Pahlavi and the republican Islamic regimes is that both see multiethnicity and multilingualism as a threat to the country's territorial integrity and national unity, and 'therefore the use of non-Persian languages have been restricted, and Persian (culture, identity and language) given a supremacy for unifying the ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous body politic'.[23] The imposition upon the Kurds to speak a language of the other (Persian), rather than their own, in the early twentieth century, was a step towards redefining Kurds' identity in a way alien to a large majority of Kurdish society.

Today, the IRI has tried to 'manage' ethnic diversity and defuse the formation and advance of peripheral national sentiments through various measures. There is a contradiction between the IRI's words and actions regarding ethnonational and linguistic diversity.

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[20] Hassaniyan, 'Kurdish Politics in Iran'.

[21] Nader Entessar, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Kurdish Dilemma in Iran', in D. Romano and M. Gurses (eds), *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 211–24.

[22] Posch, 'Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers', p. 331.

[23] Jaffer Sheyholislami, 'Kurdish in Iran: A Case of Restricted and Controlled Tolerance', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 217 (2012), p. 25.

According to its official discourse, Iran is a multicultural and multi-ethnic entity, and this diversity represents a source of cultural wealth. For instance, Khamenei has stated that 'different traditions and different habits and customs and various mentalities and contrasts are opportunities, so the many elements of this nation can complement each other'.[24] But the reality reveals a fundamental fear of ethno-national and linguistic diversity, conceptualised by Posch as the IRI's 'ethnic challenge'.[25] In the eyes of the government and the dominant national group, allowing non-Persian groups and communities to practise their identity, culture and language would result in national disharmony.

Non-Persians' narratives and assertions of 'self-identification' are not merely excluded, but also criminalised. In its policy for the management of ethnic diversity, the IRI has included the following as threats to national harmony and national unity:

> the right of free association, an increase of political, societal and cultural demands, organizing new political groups, cultural and religious/confessional societies, a demand to obtain higher positions in the administration, increase of publication in local languages, incompetence in speaking Persian, strengthening of extremist ethnic and confessional feelings among experts, intellectuals and ethnic political parties, protests and harsh critiques of officials, strengthening of the ethnic identity and weakening of the national identity.[26]

The IRI thus demonstrates a misleading and contradictory duality in its behaviour towards ethno-national diversity; in the words of Akbarzadeh et al., 'The government thus accepts Iran as a multi-ethnic polity but continues to view minorities through a security prism. It allows minorities to maintain cultural identities but moves swiftly to quell any ethnic political mobilisation, seeing it as a threat to the dominant order.'[27]

The over four decade-rule of the IRI has fortified ethno-national disenfranchisement among Iran's non-Persian communities. Their opportunities for involvement in Iran's political process are reduced to participation in national parliamentary and presidential elections, contributing to the legitimation of the regime's claim to run a democratic political system. Due to their religious and/or ethnic differences with the Iranian government, Iran's minority communities have been denied equal participation in the country's decision-making. For instance, the vast majority of Kurds and Baluchis are Sunni Muslims, making them ineligible for many administrative functions in Iran's Shi'a theological political system. Not only ethnic but also religious minorities, they have been subject to a double form of exclusion.[28]

As a result, minorities' home territories tend to suffer from underinvestment and underdevelopment.[29] Iran's peripheral regions are among the most impoverished areas in the

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[24] Khamenei cited in Posch, 'Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers', p. 332.

[25] Posch, 'Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers', p. 332.

[26] Ibid., pp. 337–38.

[27] Akbarzadeh, Ahmed, Laoutides and Gourlay, 'The Kurds in Iran', p. 1147.

[28] Rasmus C. Elling, 'State of Mind, State of Order: Reactions to Ethnic Unrest in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 8/3 (2008), p. 494.

[29] Dudoignon, The Baluch, pp.182–3; Olivier Grojean, 'Identities and Ethnic Hierarchy: The Kurdish

country, with unemployment rates often considerably higher than the average.[30] While the north-western, western and southern provinces of Iran possess natural and mineral resources, including oil, gas and water, the people of these areas suffer from poverty and a lack of employment. These provinces have witnessed frequent and highly politicised protests against the state's mismanagement of natural catastrophes; ethnic, cultural and religious discrimination; and the exploitation of their natural resources (such as the trans-basin transportation of water) for industrial and developmental projects at the centre, without considering the environmental sustainability of resources such as water and forests in the peripheral regions.[31]

Disillusionment is consequently expressed by groups and individuals, many of whom have participated in Iran's political events, such as the 1979 Revolution, and thus inadvertently contributed to legitimising the IRI. A former member of the Iranian parliament (1997-2005) from the Kurdistan Region noted that the Kurds are tired of being portrayed by the government as 'zealous border guards [Persian: *marzdarani rashid*], rather than equal citizens. But we need to be seen, heard and treated equally'.[32] The label of 'zealous border guards'[33] is often used by the Iranian military and political elite to describe Kurds, Arabs and Baluchis, who each inhabit border areas of the country. This has been deemed to be offensive and patronising by non-Persian communities.[34]

While aware of the economic underdevelopment and high unemployment in Iranian Kurdistan, the elites of the IRI only mention these facts during election campaigns, when they need Kurdish votes. For instance, the conservative presidential candidate in 2017, Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's president since 2021, during his campaign visits to Kurdish cities stated, 'It is unacceptable that given the rich and valuable wealth and resources in this region, the young people of this area have difficulty finding jobs.' However, little has changed for Kurdistan since Raisi's election and militarisation and securitisation of Iranian Kurdistan has increased. The extra-judicial execution of Kurdish political prisoner Heidar Ghorbani on 19 December 2021, which drew scattered and spontaneous general strikes in protest, is one of the most recent examples of the IRI repression of Kurds in Iran.[35]

Question in Iran Since 1979', in G. Stansfield and M. Shareef (eds), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (London: Hurst, 2017), p. 320.

[30] 'Unemployment Gap Across Iranian Provinces (2011–2018)', *Eghtesadonline*, 19 November 2018. Available at https://www.en.eghtesadonline.com/Section-economy-4/27459-unemployment-gap-across-iranian-provinces (accessed 15 November 2020).

[31] Mike Saidi, 'Iran's Khuzestan Experiences More Protests', *Critical Threats*, 15 April 2019. Available at https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/irans-khuzestan-experiences-more-protests (accessed 10 November 2020).

[32] Interview with a Kurd from Kermashan, via Skype, 20 Janaury 2020. The interviewee asked to remain anonymous.

[33] Posch, 'Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers', p. 341.

[34] 'Sardar Ashtari in Sanandaj: The Kurdish People Are the Zealots of Islamic Homeland' (Persian), *Hawzahnews*, 2 December 2018. Available at https://bit.ly/35Cbyjf (accessed 26 November 2019).

[35] 'Political Prisoner Heidar Ghorbani Executed in Sanandaj Prison', *HRANA*, 20 December 2021. Available at https://www.en-hrana.org/political-prisoner-heidar-ghorbani-executed-in-sanandaj-prison/ (accessed 24 December 2021).

The IRI has reacted to the ethno-nationalist demand for equal citizenship with increased securitisation. Apart from the period under President Khatami (1997-2005), the IRI has exercised a strictly securitised approach to Kurdish society; under both Ahmadinejad, Rouhani and Raisi, this approach has accelerated.[36] The IRI's violations of human rights in Kurdistan, hand-in-hand with the Kurdish region's underdevelopment and the continuous deterioration of living conditions, have resulted in Kurdish hostility towards the IRI and its hollow pan-Iranian narratives of Kurds as 'fellow Aryans and Muslim brothers'.[37] After a century's experience of exclusion and disenfranchisement imposed by the monarchist Pahlavi and the theological IRI regimes alike, Kurdish nationalists have arrived at the conclusion that the Kurds in Iran are actually considered neither 'fellow Aryans' nor 'Muslim brothers', but rather viewed and dealt with as a threat and challenge to the Iranian state's existence.[38]

The Root Causes of Protests in Kurdistan

The current social, economic and political conditions in Iranian Kurdistan, and the corresponding Kurdish attitude toward Tehran, call for a scrupulous analysis of the different aspects of the Kurdish-state relationship. The Kurdish-state conflict in Iran emerged in the early twentieth century as a result of the discriminatory policies and practices of successive Iranian governments and the advance of Kurdish national sentiment. The state's policies, including denial of the Kurds' national identity, the prohibition of the use of Kurdish as a language of instruction (i.e. in schools and universities), demographic engineering and various policies of divide-and-rule aiming to defuse Kurdish nationalism, and the Kurdish resistance to these policies, have resulted in value discrepancies between the Kurds and the Iranian government. Such conditions have been identified by scholars including Ted Gurr as explanations for why populations rebel.[39] Public outrage, general strikes and mass protests against the IRI's policies have become important elements of Kurdish politics in Iran.

Reports by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR),[40] the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)[41] and Amnesty International[42] reveal the Iranian state's persecution and executions of Kurdish human rights, cultural and civil society activists. Since the early 2000s, Iranian Kurdistan has

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[36] Allan Hassaniyan, 'The Gains and Risks of Kurdish Civic Activism in Iran', *Middle East Research and Information Project* 295 (2020).

[37] Posch, 'Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers'.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

[40] Hassaniyan, 'The Gains and Risks'.

[41] 'Iranian Kurdistan: Alarming Rates of Executions of Kurds', *UNPO*, 6 January 2016. Available at http://unpo.org/article/18824 (accessed 19 October 2020).

[42] 'Iran: Wrongfully Imprisoned Kurdish Human Rights Defender's Life Hangs in the Balance', *Amnesty International*, 2 June 2016. Available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/06/iran-wrongfully-imprisoned-kurdish-human-rights-defenders-life-hangs-in-the-balance/ (accessed 27 November 2019).

experienced diverse forms of protests, triggered by local events and/or regime brutality against Kurds. For instance, large demonstrations erupted after the 11 July 2005 shooting by Iranian security forces of Shwaneh Qaderi, a Kurdish activist and organiser of a demonstration in Mahabad held in memory of the 9 July 1997 student demonstration in Tehran and on 7 May 2015 in reaction to the mysterious death of Farinaz Khosravani several days earlier in the city of Mahabad.[43]

The absence of employment opportunities locally means that many Kurds have to migrate to the central part of the country to carry out insecure, low paid and seasonal work or turn to the 'profession' of the *kolberi* or border porters, which has become a major point of contention with the state. With deteriorating living conditions, many Kurds have taken on the dangerous work of the *kolberi*, mainly carrying goods from Iraqi Kurdistan to Iranian Kurdistan.[44] *Kolberi* are heavily criminilised by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), with over 100 killed or wounded in 2016,[45] and over 140 other *kolbers* killed during only the first half of 2017.[46] This has resulted in protests from Kurdish civil society. Activists have issued statements and initiated peaceful campaigns demanding the Iranian authorities stop their criminalisation of *kolberi*.[47] On 4 September 2017, public outrage at the killing of *kolbers* escalated into direct confrontation with Iranian security forces in Bane, a city bordering Iraqi Kurdistan.[48]

These protests have become more frequent, emerging at shorter intervals and with more intensity. From 2017 to 2019, general strikes and street protests were repeatedly used to oppose Tehran's discriminatory policies toward Kurds. In Bane, there was a general strike in September 2017. Mariwan, another city in Kurdistan Province, has played host to many protests in recent years, which in some cases resulted in clashes with security forces. In late August 2018, demonstrations followed the mysterious deaths of four local environmentalists who had attempted to control wildfires in nearby forests.[49] It could be argued these protests have become more politicised, some of them spontaneous without clear leadership, but others – for example, the September 2017 strike in Bane and the 12 September 2018 general strike in Kurdistan, and the September 2020 strikes and protests in Haft Tappeh

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[43] Thomas Erdbrink, 'Riot Erupts in Iran's Kurdish Capital Over Woman's Death', *New York Times*, 7 May 2015. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/08/world/middleeast/riot-erupts-in-irans-kurdish-capital-over-womans-death.html (accessed 20 November 2020).

[44] 'Kolbers With a Doctorate and a Master's Degree' (Persian), *Alef News*, 4 July 2019. Available at https://www.alef.ir/news/3980413143.html (accessed 20 October 2020).

[45] 'Iran Authorities Interrogate Kurdish Activists After Protest Against Killing Kolbars', *Kurdistan Human Rights*, July 2017. Available at http://kurdistanhumanrights.net/en/iran-authorities-interrogate-kurdish-activists-protest-killing-kolbars/ (accessed 20 October 2020).

[46] '144 Iranian Kurdish Kolbars Killed or Wounded in 2017', *Basnews*, 15 August 2019. Available at http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/middle-east/367655 (accessed 12 June 2020).

[47] 'Iran Authorities Interrogate Kurdish Activists After Protest Against Killing Kolbars', *Kurdistan Human Rights*, 7 October 2017. Available at https://kurdistanhumanrights.org/en/iran-authorities-interrogate-kurdish-activists-protest-killing-kolbars/ (accessed 10 May 2020).

[48] 'Confrontations in Bane, During Protest to Killing of Kolbers' (Persian), *BBC Persian*, 5 September 2017. Available at https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-41163245 (accessed 23 November 2019).

[49] See: Allan Hassaniyan, 'Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: Causes and Conditions for its Securitisation', *Conflict, Security and Development* 20/3 (2020), pp. 355–78.

Sugar Factory in the city of Shush, Khuzestan province[50] – have been much more organised, with clear collective demands made to the government. While the protests of non-Persian regions share some commonalities with protests in Persian-populated areas, they have provided non-Persian communities with a platform to express anger at the decades of socio-economic deprivation, discrimination and political exclusion they have experienced.

The increasing frequency of demonstrations in Iranian Kurdistan has occurred in line with the intensification of the political and military activities of exiled Iranian Kurdish opposition groups which have been based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) for decades. For instance, the Cooperation Centre of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties, an umbrella organisation of the exiled Iranian Kurdish movement based in the KRI, called on Iranian Kurds to hold a general strike on 12 September 2018, to protest the IRGC's bombing of the headquarters of a base of the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran (KDP-I)[51] in the KRI, killing 18 people, mainly high-ranking KDP-I officials, and injuring 49 *peshmerga* fighters and civilians.[52] This came shortly after Iran's execution of three Kurdish prisoners, Zaniar and Loqman Moradi and Ramin Hossein Panahi, on 8 September 2018.[53] Despite Iranian security forces' attempts to disrupt it, the general strike was a success, not in terms of change of IRI's policy in Kurdistan, but because it was well supported and brought the Kurdish society and their exiled political parties closer together. Furthermore, the general strike proved to be a platform to express discontent with the socio-political and economic deprivation of the Kurds.[54]

The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran's (KDPI) announcement of a new proactive stage of armed struggle against the IRI, dubbed *Rasan* (revival/sudden rise) in March 2016,[55] ended over two decades of unofficial military ceasefire with Tehran.[56] In 2018, around 50 armed clashes occurred between the *peshmerga* guerrillas of the KDPI, the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala), the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) and the IRGC. The estimated number of people killed in these clashes is 150, including 97 members of the Iranian armed forces, 46 *peshmerga* fighters and seven civilians.[57]

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[50] 'Showdown at Haft Tappeh Sugar Factory: Minor Win for Workers, Larger Abuses Left Unchecked', *Iran Human Rights*, 30 September 2020. Available at https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/09/showdown-at-haft-tappeh-sugar-factory-minor-win-for-workers-larger-abuses-left-unchecked/ (accessed 20 December 2021).

[51] The KDP-I is the KDPI's (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran) split political party.

[52] Kamran Matin, 'Rojhelat Rises: Reflections on the General Strikes in Iranian Kurdistan', *The Region*, 12 September 2018, Available at https://theregion.org/article/13107-rojhelat-rises-reflections-on-general-strike-iranian-kurdistan (accessed 10 November 2020).

[53] For more, see: 'Iranian Regime's Missile Attack on September 8th, 2018', *KDP Press*, 8 September 2018. Available at http://kdppress.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/KDP-8th-Septembre-Report.pdf, p. 4.

[54] Matin, 'Rojhelat Rises'.

[55] Gareth Stansfield and Allan Hassaniyan, 'Kurdish Insurgency in Rojhelat: From Rasan to the Oslo Negotiations', *Middle Eastern Studies* 58/1 (2021), pp. 153–66.

[56] Allan Hassaniyan, 'Crossborder Kurdish Solidarity: An Endangered Aspect of Kurdishness', *Kurdish Studies* 7/2 (2019), pp. 148–55.

[57] 'Recorded Armed Clashes Between Kurdish Forces and Governmental Armed Forces in 2018' (Kurdish), *Hengaw*, 2 January 2019. Available at https://bit.ly/2jVv7Rj (accessed 26 November 2019).

The advance of Kurdish nationalism in Iran is a product of the global impact on this movement. This can be studied in relation to multiple events and developments, including the cross-border Kurdish interactions since the establishment of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq in 1992 and the new access of Kurdish society and its movement to global communications technologies and transnational networks including through social media platforms,[58] characterised by Gresh as 'regional and global forces'.[59] Gresh has argued that:

> the Iranian government's ability to rule over the Kurds will continue to erode, unless it caters toward Kurdish demands of minority rights. In an environment where ideas and people more than ever transcend nation-state borders, the Iranian government has struggled to quell Kurdish ethnonational sentiment. The combination of these global forces has led to the recasting and hardening of Kurdish ethnonational identity.[60]

Evidently, post-2019 Iranian Kurdistan has undergone a continuation of the century-long securitisation of Kurdish identity and Kurdish nationalism. The actions of both civil society and armed organisations, and the security and intelligence forces' violent reactions to them, have heightened Kurdish-state tensions.[61] Kurds have viewed the government as unable and unwilling to contribute any peaceful solution to their demands for respect, inclusion and equal access to the rights of citizenship and decision-making, particularly regarding local issues in Kurdistan.[62] While in the 1980s and 1990s Iranian Kurdish political parties such as the KDPI and Komala were the main actors of the Kurdish resistance to government's policy, the activities of Kurdish civil society reveal massive diversification and thickening, related to the number of actors involved in the Kurdish movement in Iran. Despite the government's harsh treatment of activists, street protests have increased in frequency and critical voices from Iranian Kurdish civil society are more prevalent and louder than before. The Kurds are Iran's most politicised and vocal minority national community and are therefore subject to the IRI's use of coercive force.

Understanding the IRI's Behaviour in Kurdistan

The experience of the Kurdish region illustrates the IRI's disproportionate use of violence in quashing protests in minority areas, compared to Persian-inhabited cities such as

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[58] Jiyar Aghapour and Avin Ahmadi, 'The Representation and Reconstruction of Ethno-National Identity on Social Media by Kurdish Women in Rojhelat, Kurdistan-Iran', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 21/2 (2021), pp. 104–25.
[59] Gresh, 'Iranian Kurds in an Age of Globalisation'.
[60] Ibid., p. 188.
[61] Stansfield and Hassaniyan, 'Kurdish Insurgency in Rojhelat', p. 154.
[62] Sarah Glynn, 'Denied Freedom of Thought and Action, But Kurds Are Fighting Back in Iran', *The National*, 6 September 2020. Available at https://www.thenational.scot/news/18700522.denied-freedom-thought-action-kurds-fighting-back-iran/ (accessed 1 April 2022)

Tehran, Kerman and Isfahan.[63] The IRI's sensitivity to ethnonational diversity has become more evident when the regime faces criticism and opposition from peripheral regions, such as during the November 2019 protests when Iranian security forces used excessive violence. Government officials accused the protesters of being sponsored by foreign powers and the Kurdish political parties Komala and the KDPI,[64] an accusation regularly levelled by the IRI in justifying its violent (re)actions. Since November 2019 the security situation in Kurdish cities has deteriorated drastically, with a new wave of militarisation of the region. Security forces have stationed heavy armaments and brought units of anti-riot forces from other parts of Iran to Kurdistan.[65] Many Kurdish cities have been effectively placed under military siege.

The Kurds in Iran also represent an ideal case to address the impact of religious differences within a minority national group on its nationalist mobilisation, since the Kurdish nation is religiously and linguistically diverse.[66] This has been exploited by the regimes ruling Kurds to reduce the capability of the Kurdish movement. Highlighted by Bormann et al., sectarian cleavages within an ethnic group have ramifications for its capacity to mobilise for contentious political action and as a unified entity.[67] However, despite the religious and sectarian differences within Kurdish society, Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish movement have largely 'deemphasized the religious elements in its demarcation of Kurdish identity'.[68]

One noteworthy feature of the most recent protests of Iranian Kurds is that the province of Kermashan has participated proactively, with a death toll higher than anywhere else in Iran.[69] Kermashan, which borders Iraqi Kurdistan, is rich with oil resources, and houses some of Iran's biggest and oldest oil refineries, which together contribute large revenues to the Iranian economy. Kermashan (capital of the Kermashan Province) is the largest Kurdish city in Iran with a population of 950,000 in 2016,[70] and is home to three major Kurdish language dialects, Sorani, Kalhuri and Hewrami, and to Shi'a and Sunni Kurds, and members of the Kurdish faith Yarsanism. Unusually, while the majority of Kurds in Iran are Sunni Muslims, most of the Kurds of Kermashan are Shi'a Muslims. For a variety of reasons, including its geopolitical location near the Iraqi border, its

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[63] Brenda Shaffer, 'Iran Is More Than Persia: Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic', *FDD Press* (Washington, D.C., 2021), pp. 22–3.
[64] 'Government Officials in Kurdistan Accuse Protesters of Collaborating With Kurdish Parties' (Kurdish), *Kurdpa*, 22 November 2019. Available at https://bit.ly/34eScQZ (accessed 15 March 2020).
[65] 'The Security Situation in Mariwan and Kermashan is Critical', *KMMK*, 18 November 2019. Available at http://www.kmmk.info/ku/18409?fbclid=IwAR3pClACXly03AGzQfgdbG-FKc3bUZx_S9cOG4-MITr5E-J3p-YAACVk9wIU (accessed 15 March 2020).
[66] Javad Yarahmadi, 'Language Shift Among Speakers of Kalhuri Kurdish in Iran', *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 7/1 (2021), p. 85.
[67] Nils-Christian Bormann, Lars-Erik Cederman and Manuel Vogt, 'Language, Religion, and Ethnic Civil War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61/4 (2017), pp. 744–71.
[68] Jamal Khosravi, Hossein Aghapouri and Loghman Hamehmorad, 'The Islamist Maktab-Quran in Iran and its Challenges for Kurdish Nationalism', *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 3/1 (2016), p. 62.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Iranian Statistical Centre cited in Yarahmadi, 'Language Shift', p. 85.

large population and its sectarian composition, Kermashan has been on the frontline for the imposition of assimilation policies upon Kurds (and resistance to this) since the early twentieth century,[71] and particularly since 1979. During the years after the 1979 Revolution, Kermashan changed from being a mainly Kurdish-speaking city to an over-whelmingly Farsi-speaking city.[72]

Kermashan's sectarian composition has also long been exploited by the IRI to weaken Kurdish national sentiment in this city in a strategy of divide-and-rule. While Shi'a Kurds, in Kermashan and other parts of Kurdistan, consider themselves to be culturally and lin-guistically Kurdish, their religious affiliation to the IRI has dampened their commitment to the Kurdish national movement, led and dominated by Sunni Kurds.[73] The secular Kurdish movement has also failed to include and create strong ties with Shi'a Kurds. As Tezcür and Asadzade's study shows, these trends are reflected in low levels of recruitment to the Kurdish national movement in Shi'a areas, including Kermashan.[74]

Particularly during the early post-revolutionary years, Shi'a Kurds often sided with the IRI, which has used the appeal of Shi'a Islam as its founding ideology. As noted by Hossain Khlikgi, a Kurdish sociologist and a member of the KDPI Central Committee until the mid-1990s, some Shi'a Kurds sided with the Iranian army in fighting the Kurdish move-ment, posing a great challenge to the movement.[75] In the words of van Bruinessen, 'The Shi'i Kurds of the Kermanshah region, who kept aloof from the Kurdish movement, have provided considerable numbers of Muslim Peshmerga [native counter-Kurdish move-ment paramilitary forces] to help the government fight the nationalist and leftist Kurds'.[76]

The IRI has been careful to try to keep Kermashan Kurds isolated from the sentiments of the Kurdish national movement, although the government has neglected the city as with other Kurdish areas. In December 2017, areas of Kermashan province were hit by a pow-erful earthquake. While state institutions failed to support the affected population, Sunni Kurdish civil society, including Kurdish environmental NGOs and cultural associations, played a significant role in providing aid.[77] However, IRI loyalists warned the government that the civil society actions posed a threat to the state, as they would strengthen Kurdish national sentiment. The sensitivity of the regime's elites became evident when the gover-nors of Kermashan and Kurdistan provinces warned local environmentalists to cease their involvement in aid collection, as it was 'beyond their field of activism'.[78]

The November 2019 protests marked the emergence of a new era of Kurdish identity pol-itics across Iran, including Kermashan. The city's participation in the protests, for which

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[71] Marouf Cabi, 'The Duality of "Official" and "Local" in Modern Iran: Historical And Intellectual Foun-dations', *Middle Eastern Studies* 57/5 (2021), pp. 777–92.

[72] Yarahmadi, 'Language Shift'.

[73] Ibid., p. 85.

[74] Tezcür and Asadzade, 'Ethnic Nationalism'.

[75] Hossein Khlikgi, *Life and Suffering, 1980-1983* (Kurdish) (Stockholm: n.p., 1999), pp. 93–5.

[76]   Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Kurds Between Iran and Iraq', *Middle East Research and Information Project* 141 (1986), p. 23.

[77] Hassaniyan, 'Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan', p. 364.

[78] Ibid.

its people paid a heavy price, demonstrates a shift in attitude among the mainly Shi'a Kurds in Kermashan towards an increased alienation from Tehran. In fact, for several years, the policy of assimilation in Kermashan has not proceeded according to the government's plan. There has always been collective and individual resistance to this linguistic and cultural assimilation; Kermanshahi explains that 'in the last two decades, we have seen a wave of identity seeking movements in the Kermanshah and Ilam provinces, in which the role of literary and cultural activists has shown to be very influential'.[79] The relationship between the Kurds of Kermashan and the IRI seems to have drastically deteriorated, benefiting Kurdish nationalism. As emphasised by one interviewee, a Shi'a Kurd from Kermashan involved in civil society activism, 'While a decade ago speaking Farsi among Kurds in Kermashan was a matter of prestige, and we were encouraged by our parents to speak Farsi rather than Kurdish, nowadays the self-identification of the young generation privileges their language over their religion'.[80] The interviewee explained that in Kermashan there are hundreds of local, unofficial language classes run by volunteers, teaching the Kurdish language to children and young adults. In recent decades, numerous small and mid-sized cultural centres and associations focusing on teaching and publishing in Kurdish languages have been established in Kermashan and Ilam. Literary magazines and socio-cultural associations, such as *Warin*, *Zh-e*, *Zhilwan* and *Zhiyar* have been among initiatives contributing to this development.[81]

The IRI has reacted to the rise of Kurdish national consciousness in Kermashan and Ilam by trying to suppress discourses of Kurdish identity in these provinces. Securitisation of the Kurdish mobilisation in provinces such Kermashan has taken different forms. These include state censorship and limitations on the activities of Kurdish intellectuals, literary scholars, volunteer teachers of Kurdish and environmental activists, including through the persecution and arrest of individuals from these groups and closures of cultural and language centres and associations. Homayoun Abbasi (editor of the socio-cultural magazine *Zhilwan*), Mohiaddin Asghari, Ahmad Basati, Khalil Asadi Bozhani, Ako (Abbas) Jalilian (author of *Encyclopaedia Kordica*), Anisa Jafari Mehr, Dariush Moradi, Sohrab Moradi, Fouad Mozaffari, Sohbat Omidi and Farzad Safreh, are among the prominent intellectual figures promoting Kurdish language and culture who have been arrested in Kermashan during recent years.[82]

Nevertheless, the recent protests and cultural developments in Kermashan reveal that changing Iranian governments' attempts to manipulate Kurdish demography through shifting boundaries and creating new administrative entities, and the tactic of divide-and-rule through exploiting religious differences, have both at least partly failed. Shifting attitudes in areas such as Kermashan, and the intensifying politicisation of Kurdish national identity, have enhanced the threat perception of the political and military elites of the IRI.[83]

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[79] Roji Kurd, 'The Anniversary of the Establishment of the Kurdish Literary Council in Kermanshah Was Celebrated' (Kurdish), 25 October 2016. Available at https://www.rojikurd.net/enjumeni-edebi-le-krmashan-salweger/ (accessed 2 December 2021).

[80] Interview with a Kurd from Kermashan.

[81] Ibid.

[82] 'Eight Writers and Researchers "Arrested" In Kermanshah' (Persian), *BBC Persian*, 18 December 2019. Available at https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50839145 (accessed 15 October 2021).

[83] Hassaniyan, 'The Gains and Risks'.

In addition, regional and domestic developments relating to Kurdish nationalism and aspirations have heightened the Iranian elite's concerns about territorial integrity. For instance, after the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, in which over 93 percent voted for independence,[84] the Iranian government, despite its longstanding good relationship with the KRI and its ruling political parties, deployed severe measures against the KRI including closing all border crossings with the aim of sanctioning and isolating the Kurdish entity. In collaboration with Iraqi security forces, including the Hashed al-Sha'abi militia, Iran also conducted military exercises along the KRI's borders.[85] Iranian Kurds' close following of events in the autonomous region of Rojava, Western or Syrian Kurdistan, celebrating its victories and mourning its losses, may also be perceived by the Iranian elite as a source of Kurdish nationalist threat.[86]

In recent decades, Kurdish civil society in Iran has undergone rapid transformation, particularly in terms of the politicisation of Kurdish identity and alienation towards Iranian identity. Publicly displaying Kurdish symbols including the Kurdish flag, playing banned Kurdish music including songs about murdered Kurdish leaders such as Abdulrahman Ghassemlou, Sadeqh Sherefkandi and Foad Mostafa-Sultani, and celebration of the Kurdish Newroz (New Year) ceremony, all reveal the rising Kurdish national sentiment among Iranian Kurds and their opposition towards Iranian national identity and state policies in Kurdistan.[87]

The Kurdish-state conflict in Iran also reveals connections between domestic and international conflict.[88] Domestic conflicts in certain states such as authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have been linked by the authorities to international and regional conspiracies to justify the suffocation of critics and protests. This explanation is clearly applicable in the case of the Kurdish question in Iran. For four decades, all oppositional activities and demands for equal citizenship raised by Kurdish civil society and political parties have been viewed by the regime of counterrevolutionary goals, sponsored by external powers, aimed to weaken Iran and undermine its territorial integrity. In the immediate post-revolutionary era, the elites of the IRI, among them Ayatollah Khomeini, labelled the Kurdish movement as counterrevolutionary, serving the interests of Western powers, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The leaders of the Kurdish movement, Ghassemlou and Sheikh Ezzedin Hossein, were designated by Khomeini as *mofsid-e fil arz*, or corrupters of the Earth.[89]

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[84] Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, 'Iranian Kurds March in Support of Independence Vote in Northern Iraq', *Reuters*, 26 September 2017. Available at https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-iran-idUSL8N1M717N (accessed 26 March 2020).

[85] 'Iranian, Iraqi Government Forces to Hold Joint Border Drills', *Reuters*, 30 September 2017. Available at https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-iran-exercises/iranian-iraqi-government-forces-to-hold-joint-border-drills-idUKKCN1C50CA (accessed 25 November 2019).

[86] William Gourlay, 'Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma', *Middle East Critique* 27/1 (2018), pp. 25–42.

[87] 'On Newroz Eve, Iranian Kurds Slam the Islamic Regime', *KDP Press*, 23 March 2019. Available at http://www.kdppress.org/index.php/on-newroz-eve-iranian-kurds-slam-the-islamic-regime/ (accessed 15 April 2020).

[88] Thomas J. Sloan, 'The Association Between Domestic and International Conflict Hypothesis Revisited', *International Interactions* 4/1 (1978), pp. 3–32.

[89] Allan Hassaniyan, 'Non-Violent Resistance in Iranian Kurdistan After 1979', *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 6/3 (2019), pp. 98–110.

This discourse has been powerfully and provocatively presented in the national media. Viewed by the Kurds as a way of marginalising their claim for self-rule, such framing of their leaders and movement resulted in large protests in Kurdistan's cities. The Kurds have been framed as a Trojan horse, serving the interest of external powers.[90] For instance, following the KDPI's announcement of the Rasan struggle, the press portrayed this as a dimension of the regional conflict between Tehran and Riyadh,[91] an allegation Iranian Kurdish officials, among them the KDPI leader Mostafa Hijri, have refuted on numerous occasions.[92] Such a portrayal of Iran's Kurdish population demonstrates the IRI's unwillingness and inability to contribute a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. Consequently, it is likely the regime will continue to exercise its securitised approach to Kurdish society, identity and culture, and respond to protests with violence.[93]

Conclusion

This paper has provided insights into the current political development of Iranian Kurdistan, examining street protests and other collective actions. The Kurdish region is the most militarised part of Iran, a situation dating back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and intensifying over the last four decades, resulting in serious human rights abuses, including 'long-term imprisonment, executions and, in some cases, cold-blooded assassinations of civil society and environmental activists conducted by the IRGC'.[94] The government has reacted to Kurdish mobilistation through ongoing securitisation of Kurdish identity, and the arrest, imprisonment and execution of intellectuals and cultural activists. This has occurred due to the ruling elites' fear of peripheral nationalism, viewed as a threat to Iran's territorial integrity and national unity.

The current socio-political development in Iranian Kurdistan should be studied within the overall context of the Kurdish-state relationship in Iran. The IRI's securitised approach to ethnonational regions such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchistan means that it makes sense to study these uprisings in the context of centre-peripheral relationship, where the centre excludes and subjugates the peripheries, and in return the peripheries' raise their voices in protest. Protest rallies in the Kurdish region share some commonalities with protests in Iran's major Persian cities against the deterioration of the country's

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[90] Eliah J. Magnier, 'The New Middle East: Kurds in Iraq and Syria Used as a Trojan Horse', *Global Research*, 11 September 2017, available at https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-new-middle-east-kurds-in-iraq-and-syria-used-as-a-trojan-horse-washingtons-intent-is-to-divide-the-middle-east/5598956 (accessed 15 April 2020); Michael Rubin, 'Is Iraqi Kurdistan Iran's Trojan Horse?', *Commentary*, 4 June 2012, available at https://www.commentary.org/michael-rubin/is-iraqi-kurdistan-iran-trojan-horse/ (accessed 15 April 2020).
[91] Babak Dehghanpisheh, 'To Iranian Eyes, Kurdish Unrest Spells Saudi Incitement', *Reuters*, 2 September 2016. Available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-politics-kurds-idUSKCN11A0BD (accessed 28 November 2019).
[92] Stansfield and Hassaniyan, 'Kurdish Insurgency in Rojhelat'.
[93] Glynn, 'Denied Freedom of Thought and Action'.
[94] Hassaniyan, 'The Gains and Risks'.

economic conditions, for instance the country-wide protests in November 2019, triggered by the Iranian government's sudden increase of fuel prices by 50 percent. However, the recent strikes and unrest in Iranian Kurdistan exhibit particular characteristics, showing that their root causes are not limited to economic hardship. Some Kurdish actions, such as the general strike of 12 September 2018, took place when the situation was relatively calm in other parts of Iran.

In conclusion, the delicate Kurdish-state relationship in Iran requires careful analysis, particularly in terms of the correlation between collective deprivation in the Kurdish region, and the emergence of widespread unrest in the west of Iran. The Kurdish movement in Iran undoubtedly faces a multiplicity of challenges. Nevertheless, over the last two decades, the growth of civic activism among Iranian Kurds has shown that Kurdish society is vibrant and highly politicised, and its movement has succeeded in creating a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the state-imposed national identity and its cultural, developmental and security policies.

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