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Profile

Kurds comprise around 10 per cent of the population of Iran. They are mostly settled along the borders with Iraq and Turkey. Kurds originate from different peoples with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For example, the Kurdish dialect of Kirmanji is spoken in northern Iran and much of Turkish Kurdistan, Sorani is spoken in most of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. In southern Iran, Gurani which is a distinct language is spoken, but Kurds around Kermanshah speak a dialect closer to Persian.

Historical context

Kurdish-government tensions in Iran have a long history of many centuries. However, in focusing on its recent history one can begin with Reza Khan's (later Reza Shah Pahlavi) backlash against the Kurds in 1922, recapturing control over the lands that Kurdish leaders had gained control over since 1918. He recaptured their lands and dealt ruthlessly with the Kurdish leaders. Once again, after the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, some Kurdish leader reasserted themselves and spread their control in western Iran. The Kurds even declared the Mahabad Kurdish Republic in January 1946, but it only lasted 11 months and the Iranian government recaptured Mahabad and eliminated the Kurdish leaders involved.

The period after 1946 saw the decline in Kurdish fortunes, the co-option of the Kurdish tribal leadership and the downgrading of the political power base of Kurdish landowners through the land reforms of the 1960s.

Struggles for independence in the Kurdish regions continued after the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini warned Kurdish leaders in 1979 that any attempts towards independence would attract the harshest response. A well-organised rebellion by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran

(KDPI), Komala and the Kurdish branch of the Fadayan was nevertheless launched in spring 1979. The Iranian regime responded harshly with the banning of the Kurdish Democratic Party followed by an armed campaign against the Kurds. Subsequent to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, both sides became engaged in ongoing violence in order to bring the Kurdish areas under their own control and wipe out the Kurdish guerrilla fighters. Hundreds of villages were bombed, with their lands seeded with landmines and its populations dispersed.

While the Islamic Republic had to contend with armed resistance movements such as the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (KDPI or PDKI) and Komala, although both these groups have reportedly ceased armed conflict in favour of advocating a federal solution. In 2004, however, another Kurdish group, the Kurdistan Independent Life Party, with purported ties to Turkey's PKK, was involved in another cycle of armed conflict that has, according to local government authorities, led to hundreds of deaths on both sides. This sort of bloodshed continues as an outcome of decades of mistrust and betrayal. In 1989 the KDPI tried to enter into dialogue with the government but its leader, Abdol Rahman Qasimlu, was assassinated, as was his successor 18 months later. Many assume that the government was responsible for these killings. 1992 saw further killings, that of a senior Kurdish leader and three of his collaborators in Berlin. The Berlin courts found senior Iranian government authorities to have been behind these assassinations. Relations with the government soured yet further when, in late 2000, a Kurdish Member of Parliament publicly alleged the existence of a campaign of repression and serial killings against the Kurdish community in Iran. In the following year, in October 2001, all six members of the Iranian Parliament from Kurdistan province collectively resigned, though this was later apparently withdrawn. Their joint letter to the Interior Minister claimed that the legitimate rights of the Kurds, especially the Sunni amongst them, were denied and their calls for justice on the political, economic, cultural and social levels had been neglected.

Another notorious incident occurred in July 2005 when Shivan Qaderi, a 25-year-old Iranian Kurd, whom locals described as an opposition activist, and the authorities as a smuggler and criminal, was shot dead along with two others and had his body bound and dragged by the police through the streets of Mahabad, in the province of West Azerbaijan. Qaderi's mutilation prompted six weeks of protests across Kurdish regions that resulted in dozens of deaths, thousands of arrests, and the closure of a number of Kurdish news outlets that had been reporting on the protests. According to locals, cases akin to Qaderi's are frequent and protests of one form or another common. In August 2010, for example, the mother of Behmen Mesudi set herself on fire in front of Orumiyeh Prison after her son was tortured and then beaten to death by a prison guard. As of the beginning of 2011, up to 20 Kurdish prisoners are believed to be awaiting execution in Iran, including several political prisoners.

Current issues

Around 10 per cent of the Iranian population is Kurdish and concentrated in the north-west, along the borders with northern Iraq and south-west Turkey; another sizeable community of Kurds lives in the north-east, along the border with Turkmenistan. Clashes between Kurds and Iranian government forces came to the surface once again in recent years. Though some Kurdish expression has been tolerated in terms of publications and broadcasting, this has not included in education. In 2014, it was reported that the government had banned Kurdish-language publications and penalized journalists for criticizing government policies. Schools were forbidden from teaching the Kurdish language, and most Kurdish names for children were not allowed to be registered at official registries.

Meanwhile the Kurdish insurgency against the Iranian government has persisted, with a series of attacks on security forces, while authorities have continued to crackdown on Kurdish opposition members. Amnesty International documented in 2016 that dozens of Kurds were arrested without warrant for 'affiliations' with the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, whilst many others continued to serve prison sentences for alleged ties with outlawed Kurdish opposition groups.

In terms of land rights, there are high levels of property confiscation and governmental neglect in the Kurdish region of north-west Iran -- Iranian Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Ilam provinces. The Kurdish region has abundant water resources. Dams have been built by the government to facilitate water irrigation and for hydroelectric power generation, but Kurds are generally excluded from the benefits of this investment. They experience poor housing and living conditions because of forced resettlement, and the expropriation of rural land for large-scale agricultural plantations and petrochemical plants which pollute the surrounding environment.

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