

The Islamic Republic of Iran's Multipronged Approach to the Repression of Kurds

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Abstract

Since the establishment of the modern Iranian nation-state in 1923, successive regimes and governments of Iran have pursued an intricate policy of suppressing and persecuting its Kurdish people, presenting a significant threat to the Kurdish national identity, culture, and society. The successive Iranian regimes have, along with military means, employed the state's cultural, educational, religious, and economic institutions to accomplish their goals of assimilating and conquering the Kurds. An examination of Kurdish history and politics in Iran reveals that while the international community has some knowledge of the Iranian state's extensive deployment of military force and explicit militarization of Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat/East Kurdistan), the broader psychological and nonmilitary (soft power) practices employed to suppress the Kurdish movement, identity, and culture are lesser known to the outside world. By focusing on mass media and policies of “divide-and-rule” as measures and mechanisms used by the Iranian state to subdue its Kurdish citizens, this article aims to provide an analysis of the post-1979 state-Kurdish relationships in Iran.

Keywords

Broadcasting, Iranian cinema, Kurds, psychological warfare, Rojhelat

Introduction

The Kurdish people, a nation with a population of 36–46 million (Britannica, 2024; Institut Kurde, 2017),¹ have been split against their wishes between the nation-states of Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The division of the Kurdish people and Kurdistan following the First World War has resulted in the Kurds being

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numbered among the world's largest nations without a nation-state of their own. Consequently, they have been the subject of harsh and discriminatory policies in each country that controls them (King, 2013). For instance, one major characteristic of nation-state building in Iran since the 1920s has been the controversial process in which, under the banner of modernization and the homogenization of culture, identity, and language, Persian culture, history, and language have been elevated to the highest level of superiority. The Iranian state, under the authoritarian rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941), initiated a process of linguistic and cultural genocide against the non-Persian people.

Persianized Iranian identity, Persian language, and culture have been imposed on the Arab, Azeri, Baluchi, Gilekis, Kurdish, Turkmen, and other non-Persian groups and communities using excessively coercive measures. Since the early twentieth century, Iran has been a laboratory for different policies of assimilation of non-Persian national communities into a manufactured Aryan-Persian identity (Elling, 2013; Saleh, 2013; Vaziri, 1993). The Iranian state has viewed and dealt with the politicization of non-Persian national communities as a threat to its existence. In addition to military and coercive force, it has used psychological warfare and “soft war” measures in the subjugation and demonization of these communities (Bahari, 2020).

The Kurdish people have not been exempted from the imposition of a state-defined national identity. Over the last century, successive regimes in Iran have implemented a wide variety of policies to assimilate Kurds into the mainstream national identity. The Kurdish people in Iran, similar to the Kurds in Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria, have suffered immensely from the occupying nation-states' policies of homogenization and the denial and annihilation of Kurdish identity, culture, and language (Entessar, 2010). For instance, in Iran, the Kurdish region² has historically been the most securitized region of the country, and Kurdish political and national identity have been dealt with as a threat to Iran's national and territorial integrity. This assumption has been used by changing Iranian regimes to justify their securitization of Kurdistan and the persecution and suppression of Kurdish political and cultural activists. The systematic militarization of Kurdistan and securitization of Kurdish identity, culture, and language started during the Pahlavi era (1925–1979) and have been maintained by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) (Entessar, 1984; Hassaniyan, 2021b; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a).

The Kurdish resistance to Persianizing identity resulted in the decade-long uprising of the Kurdish leader Ismail Agha Shkak, also known as Simko (Soleimani, 2017), an early twentieth-century leader of the Kurdish national movement in Iran, and the later declaration of another Kurdish leader, Qazi Muhammad, of the Kurdish Republic in 1946, centered in Mahabad (Vali, 2011). The Republic was terminated after 11 months following the Iranian army's harsh attack on Kurdistan and the execution of Qazi Mohammad and dozens of other Kurdish leaders (Vali, 2011). Nevertheless, the Republic has had a significant symbolic value for the formation of Iranian Kurdish national identity, becoming an inseparable part of Kurdish collective memory and popular narrative for national liberation and “[the] Republic crystallized in the minds of Kurds their

right to self-determination, as well as their ability to run their own affairs” (Romano, 2006, p. 245).

The Kurdish people in Iran participated actively in the 1979 Revolution, which led to the birth of the IRI. They viewed the collapse of the Pahlavi regime as a promising opportunity for the emergence of a peaceful relationship with the government, which would grant them political and cultural autonomy. However, the violent reaction of the Islamic regime to the Kurdish claim of *khodmokhtari* (autonomy) and the Kurdish resistance to the regime resulted in the massive securitization of Kurdish life (Cabi, 2023; Hassaniyan, 2021a). While Kurds in Iran make up 12–15% of the country’s population, in recent decades, office-holders of the UN Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Iran have repeatedly reported that almost half of Iran’s political prisoners and executions are Kurdish political, cultural, environmental, or religious activists (Hassaniyan, 2020). The persecution and execution of political and civic activists, massive militarization and deliberate underdevelopment of Kurdistan, the destruction of human and natural environment, and plundering of its natural resources are among the multipronged approach to Kurdish repression measures used by the Islamic regime in its marginalization of and assaults on Kurds. But there is also another aspect of the IRI’s repression of the Kurds: an orchestrated and obscure assault targeting Kurdish national and cultural identity and societal cohesion in Kurdistan.

Nevertheless, since the outbreak of the widespread uprisings across Iran in 2022, ignited mainly by Kurdish protests against the brutal murder of the 22-year-old Kurdish woman Jina Amini (also known by her government-mandated name Mahsa Amini) by the so-called morality police on September 16, 2022, nearly 600 protesters across Iran have been killed by the police and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Hassaniyan, 2022b; Radpey, 2022; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2023). Protesters were subjected to a high level of violence, including the use of live ammunition, especially in regions and provinces like Kurdistan, Sistan, and Baluchistan, with ethno-religious differences from the dominant Persian identity and a long history of resistance to the regime. During the protests, these regions had the largest number of protesters killed by the IRGC and the police.

In addition, the government launched disinformation campaigns and labeled protests in these regions as “separatist activities” to undermine and dismantle Iran’s nascent intercommunal unity and solidarity (Hassaniyan, 2022a; Mohammadpour, 2024). During these uprisings, Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat/East Kurdistan) has been marked by various types of state persecution that are specific to the Kurdish people and their struggle against the IRI. While the government attempted to end the protests in other parts of the country with the limited human casualties, its attempt to turn the uprising in Kurdistan into a regular warfare became evident as early as the second week of the protests in September 2022. The regime systematically disseminated fake news and videos about the presence of members of the military wing of Kurdish political parties (*Peshmerga*) among the protesters. Videos showing IRGC gunmen posing as *Peshmerga* and intimidating residents in Kurdish villages and towns quickly went viral on social media (Hassaniyan, 2022a; Mohammadpour, 2024). Under the guise of

maintaining national security, the regime's goal in using these strategies was to suppress the uprising in Kurdistan brutally. However, as is subsequently elaborated, these strategies were not exclusive to the 2022 uprising but rather a continuation of the IRI's use of a combination of military and psychological tactics since its founding in early 1979 (Cabi, 2023; Hassaniyan, 2022a; Mohammadpour, 2024; Radpey, 2022).

Although the state-Kurdish conflict in Iran has a longer history, with roots dating back to the early twentieth century, this study focuses on the post-1979 period Kurdish-state relations. The study does not intend to downplay the destructive impact of the IRI's military attacks on the Kurds that have resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands and massive material destruction (Cabi, 2023; Hassaniyan, 2021a; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020a). However, attention will be dedicated to the less discussed and furtive aspects of the IRI's targeting of the Kurds (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020b). In this article, these are framed as psychological and soft warfare on the Kurds, which aim to destroy their identity and sociocultural cohesion and demoralize them in their endeavors. Since preserving and promoting Kurdish national identity, culture, and language have been the main focuses of the Kurdish national movement in Iran, the regime has attempted, through the diffusion of popular culture, television broadcasting, cinema, etc., to belittle Kurdish culture and identity. For instance, Iranian films have for many years attempted to dehumanize and demonize the Kurds, especially Kurdish men, representing them as violent, backward, and uncivilized. In addition, by creating and deploying local collaborators, known as *jash*,³ the IRI has sought to sow division among the Kurds (Entessar, 2010; Mofidi, 2022; Vali, 2011).

Throughout modern history, broadcasting services, print, and new social media networks have played an important role in disseminating knowledge, information, and popular culture. However, these platforms have also been deployed by the institutions of states (for instance, education systems, religious militaries, and intelligence agencies) for propagandistic purposes and to strengthen and/or enforce homogenized nationalist sentiments among their populations (Mofidi, 2022; Sheyholislami, 2011; Soleimani & Osmanzadeh, 2022). These media have played an important role in cross- and intranation-state conflicts and competition. Nonstate organizations have also benefited from broadcasting, with new media promoting their cause. Leading organizations of the Kurdish movement have systematically employed these media, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) being a successful example. *MED-TV*, the first Kurdish language satellite TV channel (and possibly the first significant satellite TV channel owned by a stateless and oppressed people), established in Europe in 1994 and granted a broadcasting license by Britain's Independent Television Commission, has become a powerful tool in promoting Kurdish national and cultural identity and a challenge for the states occupying Kurdistan (Hassanpour, 1998). In the words of Amir Hassanpour, "everyday MED-TV raises the Kurdish flag in about two million homes. It is obvious that Turkey treats each satellite dish as a Kurdish flag hoisted on the rooftops of every building in the 'southeast'" (1998, p. 99).

Method and Conceptual Framework

Throughout the IRI's 45-year existence, the Kurdish movement has consistently been one of the most proactive and vibrant oppositions to it. In response, the regime adopted multiple tactics to combat the Kurds. In terms of studying the Iranian state's multipronged approach to Kurdish repression, this article has chosen four cases to discuss: (a) Iranian media; (b) Kurds in Iranian cinema; (c) war of demoralization, and (d) the *jash* factor. Several useful sources are available for each case, particularly in Kurdish and Persian. For instance, in recent years, the bilingual Kurdish-Persian *Govari Tishk* (Tishk Journal) has become an important intellectual platform for critical studies on a wide range of themes and topics, including the media, cinema, Kurdish-state relations from intercolonial perspectives, and the political economy of Kurdistan. *Govari Tishk* is a nonprofit journal produced by Iranian Kurds in exile in Iraqi Kurdistan, though many articles are written anonymously by Kurds within Iran. In English, Kurdish, and/or Persian, other materials drawn upon in this article include online material, social media content (Facebook posts), opinion pieces, and short essays.

The state has systematically deployed the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) service to attack the identity, culture, and language of non-Persian national communities. For instance, during the early postrevolutionary period, parallel to the military attack on Kurdistan, in the IRIB and government newspapers, the IRI launched a comprehensive attack on the Kurdish people and their movement, resulting in Kurds' condemnation protests. Another source of data in this study is materials produced and distributed/aired by Iranian state and state-sponsored media platforms portraying the Kurds (and Kurdish culture, identity, and society). This includes documentaries, movies, television series (Linebarger, 1948, p. 25), and other material that can be characterized as popular culture. This section conceptualizes the IRI's inaudible war on Kurds through the lens of psychological warfare. Drawing on David A. Charters (1977), it can be argued that the IRI is pursuing an ongoing process of psychologically selective violence against the Kurds, aiming to threaten, intimidate, belittle, demobilize, and demoralize the people. Psychological warfare, as a conceptual framework, provides various explanations for why and how states rely on psychological measures, either against other states or in a domestic context.

Paul Linebarger (1948), a pioneer in the conceptualization of psychological warfare, stresses that "neither warfare nor psychology is a new subject. Each is as old as man" (p. 25). According to this strategy, "the best success in war is achieved by the destruction of the enemy's will to resist, and with a minimum annihilation of fighting capacity" (Lasswell, 1951, p. 261). Psychological warfare is an unconventional category of war, with the application of the science of psychology as its instrumental element. It is a rigorous, intricate, and continuous process designed to reach and demoralize the enemy and has also been called the war of "hearts and minds" (Clow, 2009). Psychological warfare, unlike military warfare, is a kind of soft war that, in many cases, employs nonviolent means to sow fear and confusion. Planned psychological activities such as propaganda, manipulation, and subliminal techniques are used against the targeted audience's culture,

sentiment, and behavior or are aimed at changing the attitude and behavior of the enemy. Thus, propaganda is at the epicenter of psychological warfare and may be described as “organized persuasion by non-violent means” (Linebarger, 1948, p. 25). Propaganda aims to manipulate the behavior of a particular audience. It selects facts and presents them in a manner that enhances instinct over mind to achieve a desired outcome. In the words of Garth S. Jowett and Victoria J. O’Donnell, “to identify a message as propaganda is to suggest something negative and dishonest. Words frequently used as synonyms for propaganda are lies, distortion, deceit, manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, brainwashing, and palaver” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2012, p. 2).

The growth of the Internet has made it possible for new social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as the popular search engine Google, to become significant worldwide sources of almost uncontrolled information. The use of television to convey escalating messages has also been widespread. Autocratic regimes have used these media to bolster their legitimacy, popularize dominant narratives, and disseminate false information. Today, widespread use of the Internet has enabled much broader and more personalized communication than previously, but it has also contributed to significantly increased dissemination of propaganda and fake news (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2012). Nevertheless, the IRI has used psychological and soft warfare, as well as propaganda, in its relations with the Kurds living within the border of Iran. For this purpose, the media has played an especially important role. The following section sheds light on Iranian cinema, films, and other forms of visual popular culture, considered in this study to be elements of psychological warfare against Kurdish culture, identity, and, not least, the Kurdish movement in Iran. Through the creation of thousands of Facebook, Instagram, and other Internet pages and accounts, monitoring all social network platforms and spreading fake news and propaganda, the IRI has engaged in ongoing psychological and soft warfare against the Kurdish nation (Khosrawi, 2021; Rahimnejad, 2021).

Iranian Media as a Propaganda Machine

Wherever there is a communication channel, there is also a potential medium for propaganda. Modern propaganda campaigns use all available media: Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms have become important means of communication for social and political groups worldwide. Access to the media is also indisputably an instrument of power that can be deployed as a weapon of warfare (Payne, 2005). The Kurdish movement, language, culture, and identity have been the major targets of IRI’s media attacks. The absence of a national media celebrating and defending the Kurds has made them an easy and constant target of psychological and propaganda warfare by the states occupying Kurdistan (Bahari, 2021; Fershi, 2021).

Iranian media, as an ideological apparatus of the regime, produces, reproduces, and imposes the authority and values of the dominant structure. By conveying the desired message, these channels determine the position of the “subject.” In an

authoritarian context such as the IRI, mass media, like other tools, develops and spreads the dominant structure's values and cultural hegemony and encourages assimilation (H. Rojhelat, 2021, pp. 160–161). Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's second and current Supreme Leader, has explained that "the media is an important medium, and if it is in the hands of the enemy, it will be a dangerous tool because its effect can be similar to biological weapons used on the battlefield" (Khosrawi, 2021, p. 30). Similarly to all other sociopolitical and cultural activities in Iran, cinema cannot be studied in isolation from the ideology of the IRI.

The Islamic regime, despite its rigid conservatism, has paid close attention to the sociopolitical importance of cinema. The IRI's founding figure and first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared that cinema should be used as a tool for "educating the people;" all art, he believed, should be put at the service of Islam (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 6). Therefore, since its inception, the IRI has regarded its cinema industry as a subject of great significance. Films serve as vehicles for state propaganda to realize a set of intelligence and ideological goals; Iranian officials, such as the Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi (2013–2021), do not hide that "the goal is to use entertainment mediums as a vehicle to 'educate the public' and 'protect society against espionage'" (Alavi cited in Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2021). Studying Iranian cinema reveals that it is a medium for disseminating ideological and propagandist messages rather than just a source of entertainment. Therefore, many feature films and television series have been produced in the security and political genres by a small number of producers and directors, with the sponsorship and involvement of IRGC (Bajoghli, 2017; Bozorgmehr, 2020; Erdelan, 2021; Ghobadi, 2019).

The IRIB is the sole official provider of broadcast news and films in Iran and operates in many languages, including Persian, Kurdish, Arabic, and English. The IRIB and its branches are not independent but state-controlled institutions characterized as "propaganda purveyors" (Dross, 2007). Since the early days of the IRI, the IRIB has served as a powerful medium for feeding the public with distorted history and news. According to reports, in the last decade, the IRIB has broadcast coerced confessions of at least 355 people to suppress dissent and intimidate civic and political activists on behalf of the security services (Gambrell, 2020). As an organ of state suppression, the IRIB uses mass communication tools and "operates as a media hub that links a vast network of security, intelligence, military and judicial organizations" (Gambrell, 2020). This institution's close collaboration with the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC has led to its involvement in the "soft war" on the regime's dissidents. A report prepared and published by the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and Justice for Iran (JFI) identifies the IRIB as a "means of silencing, shaming, demonizing, vilifying, intimidating, punishing, and even torturing the detainees, [and is] indispensable to police, intelligence, and military arms of the state" (2020, p. 14).

Iran's non-Persian and non-Shia religious and national communities, along with other political dissidents, are among the primary targets of the IRIB's forced confessions and defamatory allegations. Activists originating from these regions are commonly classified as separatists, extremists, or terrorists. For instance, the Kurds are labeled as uncivilized savages and communist terrorists; Arabs are

depicted as lazy, violent, and Islamic extremist terrorists; and Azeris are similarly represented as stupid, bigoted, and chauvinistic (Saleh, 2013, p. 127). Kurdish political activists, environmentalists, and ordinary members of Kurdish civil society have been among the victims. The cases of Zanyar and Loqman Moradi,⁴ two Kurdish cousins arrested in August 2009, and Ramin Hossein Panahi (Kurdish political activist), executed on September 8, 2018, are two examples among dozens of the regime's uses of forced confessions and defamatory media, with the participation of the journalists and IRIB, and aired by its channels. These coerced confessions and their broadcast by the IRIB primarily aim to initiate a malicious campaign that tarnishes and undermines the reputation of the targeted individuals. Furthermore, it aims to erode civil society's morale by presenting prominent figures who have crumbled during interrogations and are inclined to confess (International Federation of Human Rights and Justice for Iran, 2020, pp. 45–49).

In recent decades, the regime and the IRIB have established a wide range of satellite television channels for Persian and non-Persian audiences, including for Kurdish and Arab audiences. *Al-'Alem*, *Sahar TV*, and *Press TV* are a few examples. For instance, *Sahar TV*'s main audience is Iraqi Kurds. Online media platforms, including *Kurdpress*, *Diarunadiar*, *Bultannews*, *Koordestan-e Imrooz*, *Akamnews*, *Kurdtoday*, and several others, have also been created and sponsored by the IRGC and its intelligence service (*Itella'at-e Sepah*) to disseminate propaganda and fabricated news aimed at undermining and targeting Kurdish political parties. These web pages are bilingual, with comprehensive content on Kurdish issues. One misleading perception is that by establishing such media platforms and disseminating news and information, the IRI is promoting the Kurdish language and culture. However, in reality, these efforts seek to misinform, demonize, and humiliate the Kurds in their language. Through perpetrating this soft and psychological warfare, the regime is attempting to define the values of its target community; any other values and discourses to which the regime is hostile are subject to attack and belittlement. The IRI's exercise of authoritarian rule through the media takes place to establish and impose its hegemony, an exercise of violence through soft power (H. Rojhelat, 2021, p. 161).

Kurds in Iranian Cinema

Since its establishment, the IRI has used popular media, especially cinema and television, to attack the Kurds (Khosrawi, 2021). Iranian state-sponsored cinema is an ideal subject through which to understand the psychological warfare the IRI is conducting against the country's Kurdish nation (Naseri, 2021, p. 235). Kurds have been portrayed as a criminally backward tribal society in the extreme, with allegations of behavior including beheading outsiders and cannibalizing Iranian army personnel. Through this dehumanizing image, the regime attempts to introduce the Kurds to the rest of Iran. Kurdish culture, costume, and language are all ridiculed in films, popular television shows, and newspapers. Iranian films portray supposedly Kurdish characters wearing a caricature of traditional Kurdish dress, making clumsy movements, and using odd expressions unfamiliar to the

Kurds (Bahari, 2020, p. 294; H. Rojhelat, 2021, p. 164). As emphasized in Saro Erdelan's (2021) study of Iranian cinema, these films assert that only assimilated (Persianized) Kurds can be considered acceptable. Belittling and demonizing the Kurds and disseminating falsification about Kurdistan is not a recent trend, though. Similar incidents of media attacks on the Kurds perpetrated by the IRIB in the early 1980s resulted in public outrage in Kurdistan's cities (Bahari, 2020, p. 294). *Tehran Musavvar* (1979), a monthly Persian magazine, highlighted that "public radio and television play a destructive role, distorting the truth of the events in Kurdistan."

The Kurdish movement has been a particular target of Iranian cinema. According to scholars such as Hiwa Rojhelat (2021), Iranian cinema aims to represent this movement as baseless and illegitimate, with actors and organizations merely proxies of the West and other regional powers (p. 169). After 1979, numerous films and documentaries have focused on events and clashes in Kurdistan. Many of these films fall within the genre of *Defa'-e Moqadas* or "Holy Defense," focusing on the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). These films seek to legitimize the regime's brutality in Kurdistan, glorifying regime figures such as Mostafa Chamran, Sayyad Shirazi, Mohammad Boroujerdi, and Sadeghi Khalkhali,⁵ and characterizing the Kurdish movement as violent and corrupt. To mention a few examples, *Zendan-e dole too* (Doletoo Prison), *Kani Manga* (a place in Rojhelat), *Hamase-y Darr-e-y Shler* (The Epic of Shler Vally), *Che* (a letter), *Ashk-e Serma* (Cold Tear), *Shor-e Shirin* (Sweet Verve), *Hekayet-e Asheghi* (Love Stories), *Istad-e dar Ghoobar* (Standing in the Dust), *Koy-sanjagh* (a town in Iraqi Kurdistan), and *Roozhay-e abedi* (Eternal Days) are films and television series portraying the Kurdish national movement, produced and/or sponsored by institutes affiliated to the IRGC from the 1980s to the present. The early films' targets were mainly *Peshmerga* and Kurdish political parties. *Kani Manga* and *Hamase-y Darr-e-y Shler*, aired in Iranian cinemas in the 1980s, exhibited a distorted image of the Kurdish national fighters as brutal, mindless, morally corrupt, and acting mercilessly and violently even toward their people.

The more recent films and TV series also focus on the Kurdish movement. However, they display more popular and mass culture elements, some featuring Kurdish actors and/or producers (Naseri, 2021, p. 235). Films like *Shor-e Shirin* (Sweet Verve) and *Hekayet-e Asheghi* (Love Stories) have greater entertainment value than the previous productions, sometimes focusing on romance and with less focus on the conflict, therefore distracting viewers and critics' attention from their subtle but powerful propaganda function. Many of these films feature Kurdish men acting disloyal and irresponsibly toward their community, family, or wife, and a Kurdish woman falling in love with a *Pasdar* (a member of the IRGC) and turning her back on her Kurdish husband and the Kurdish movement to collaborate with the IRGC in Kurdistan. *Hekayet-e Asheghi*, produced by Ahmad Remezan-zadeh (2016), contains several features. Common for all these movies is that the Iranian army and IRGC are presented as saviors, rescuing Kurdish society from its backwardness and the *Peshmerga*'s brutality, clearing Kurdistan of mines, and educating the Kurds on the importance of love and coexistence. According to Erdelan (2021), the degrading message of a romantic relationship between a

Kurdish woman and a Persian *Pasadar* and a mustached Kurdish man's disloyalty and irresponsible behavior toward his family is to encourage the Iranian audience, as well as the Kurds who are the subject of these films, to believe that "the regime has succeeded to win over the Kurds and their movement without using arms, and has succeeded in creating assimilated Kurds, with full loyalty to the IRI" (Erdelan, 2021, p. 130).

The regime has accelerated its cinematic assault by broadcasting short films and documentaries from 2015 to 2022. These include the television series *Noon Khe* (N-KH)⁶ (Aghakhani, 2019) and the so-called documentaries *Koy-sanjagh* (Heghightajo & Nikdast, 2017) and *Lebey-dovom-e tigh* (The Second Edge of the Blade) (Kurdistan IRIB, 2021). *Noon Khe* is a comedy that Kurdish critics have viewed as another element of the IRI's psychological and soft war in Kurdistan and an attempt to belittle Kurdish culture, language, and identity. Some of the actors in *Noon Khe* are Kurdish, which critics have seen as the regime's attempt to prove that it has succeeded in assimilating Kurds into its value system. *Noon Khe* has provoked denunciation and protests from several Kurdish NGOs and civil society activists (Naseri, 2021). This and similar series and films are the regime's reaction to the rise of Kurdish national sentiment and Kurds' practice and cherishing of their culture and identity. The regime views this development as a threat to the cultural and political dominance of Iran's Persian majority.

Critics have stated of such series and films that "when Iranian colonialism is faced with the rise of Kurdish nationalism, it seeks to quell this development before it reaches a peak with a full-fledged media attack" (Rahimnejad, 2021, p. 264). The regime's sponsorship of the production of popular culture aims at Kurdish assimilation, for example, by trying to convince Kurds that their identity is a subcategory of Persian identity and the destruction of their sociocultural cohesion. This approach of the state is not limited to the Kurds, though. The IRI has used the same belittling approach against other non-Persian national communities, including the Arabs, Azeris, and Baluchis. For instance, the television series *Fetile* (Candle Wick) (Fars News Agency, 2015) does for an Azeri-speaking audience what *Noon Khe* has done for Kurds. *Fetile* has similarly been viewed as an assault on Azeri culture and identity, drawing condemnation until the regime ceased its airing. A similar protest occurred in Gilan Province in reaction to another series named *Varesh* (Rainfall) (Bahari, 2021, p. 294; Kavry, 2019).

IRIB's branch in Kurdistan Province (Kurdistan IRIB), to mark the 42nd anniversary of the 1979 Revolution, aired *Lebey-dovom-e tigh* in 2021 in another attempt to distort the history of the Kurdish movement and label the role of Kurdish political parties during the revolution and after as treachery, serving the interests and agendas of external powers. *Lebey-dovom-e tigh* presents a collection of excerpts of criticisms from Kurdish political and civic figures who have spoken about themselves and other Kurdish political leaders and parties in different media outlets, but mainly livestreamed on Facebook. These excerpts are taken out of context and reconstructed to serve the IRI agenda. Such documentaries and series, according to Hersh Naseri, "aim at narrating and visualizing events taking place in Kurdistan through the regime's perspective, to label the Kurdish movement as

illegitimate, and the Islamic regime's brutality and violence as a legitimate and necessary action" (Naseri, 2021, p. 235). These productions serve a vast propaganda machinery that insults a whole nation rather than seeking to inform and entertain Kurdish and Iranian audiences. *Lebey-dovom-e tigh*, like many programs of the Kurdistan IRIB, has caused anger, particularly from politicized Kurds in the diaspora. Due to Kurdistan IRIB's unpopularity, the Kurdish people commonly refer to this as "*Jash TV*" (R. Rojhelat, 2021, p. 35). The IRIB's programs in Kurdistan have a small audience, although the regime tries to use all means of trickery to gain a larger audience for its programs. For instance, the television station sent text messages to province residents before the *Lebey-dovom-e tigh* airing, encouraging them to watch the program (Bahari, 2021).

The War of Demoralization

While the common end of the war on the Kurds in Iran, Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria is the subjugation and annihilation of the Kurdish identity, language, and culture, the means and measures deployed by these states to achieve this aim have been different. For instance, the Turkish Republic has, since its establishment in 1923, denied the existence of the Kurdish nation and perpetrated several massacres, including the Dersim massacre of 1936–1937. There have been massacres and other atrocities committed against the Kurdish people in Syria. The most recent incident occurred on March 12, 2004, in Qamishli, where protests were brutally suppressed, resulting in the deaths of 30 Kurds and injuries to 160 others (Tejel, 2008). The genocidal activities of the Iraqi state during the 1980s resulted in the deaths of around 200,000 Kurds (Kirmanj & Rafaat, 2021; Sadiq, 2023). The outside world has become aware of the horrific massacres of Kurds in Türkiye and Iraq, even though their full extent remains unappreciated. However, in Iran, particularly under the IRI, despite the suffering of Kurds from the state's exclusionary policies, the human rights violations against the Kurdish people remain relatively unknown to the world outside Iran and Kurdistan. This neglect is a product of Iran's strategy in its repression and marginalization of Kurds. Iran has been able to carefully hide this from global society to the point that even some Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan believe the Iranian regime has pursued more peaceful and inclusive relations with its Kurdish population (Posch, 2017).

This faulty assumption has resulted in the erosion of Kurdish cross-border solidarity between Kurds and Kurdish movements in different parts of Kurdistan. For instance, the media and ruling elites of Iraqi Kurdistan regularly celebrate the anniversary of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and mourn the deaths and killings of prominent political and military figures of the IRI, including Khomeini (Abna 24, 2023), and Qasem Soleimani, a notorious senior officer of the IRGC's cross-border unit, the Quds Force, killed by an American drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. For instance, Nechirvan Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, stated in an August 2021 meeting with the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran that "we consider ourselves part of Iran and its revolution" (Snur News, 2021). On another occasion, during a January 2022 ceremony marking

the second anniversary of Soleimani's death held in the city of Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan, Governor of Sulaymaniyah Province Haval Abubakir proclaimed his wish to commemorate Soleimani's death as a "World Day of Peace and Dialogue" (Mustafa, 2022). Such statements are made in Iraqi Kurdistan, while the IRI responds to any sociopolitical claim of the Kurds in Iran with violence and brutality. It is important to note that whenever such statements are made, vocal, though minor segments of civil society in Iraqi Kurdistan, denounce and distance themselves from such sentiments (Dengi Amerika, 2023). While such support for the IRI does not represent the wider Kurdish people in Iraqi Kurdistan, it nevertheless causes anger and disappointment among Iranian Kurds, who see such sentiments as evidence of the IRI's success in dividing Kurds.

Throughout the history of the Kurdish struggle, the regimes occupying Kurdistan and repressing the Kurdish movement have devoted huge resources to this fight. While the effective annihilation and assimilation of the Kurds have been the primary ambition, dividing them internally and demoralizing them into abandoning the Kurdish movement have been among the strategies deployed in pursuing this aim. Demoralizing Kurdish society has been the main aim of the IRI's psychological war on Kurds through spreading propaganda, disinformation, and distorted narratives about the Kurdish movement and its political parties and leaders. Sowing the seeds of division within the Kurdish movement (particularly between political parties) and Kurdish society is a primary reason for spreading misleading narratives about the Kurdish movement. The regime produced documentaries on critical moments of the Kurdish movement, such as the weeks and months immediately after the 1979 Revolution and the more recent clashes of the *Rasan* Campaign (see below) (Stansfield & Hassaniyan, 2022) and attempts to make Kurds feel disappointed about their movement and its parties.

However, the literature on Kurdish politics and the Kurdish-state conflict in Iran reveals a different perspective. According to this literature, the IRI's repressive policy is the product and continuation of a historical trajectory with roots in the early twentieth century. Since the establishment of the modern Iranian state, the Kurdish national movement has continuously been considered a threat to Iran's national security. Successive Iranian ruling elites have been fearful of what they view as the existential threat of Kurdish nationalism in Iran. According to Shahram Akbarzadeh and others, "The extent to which Kurds – or Kurdish political mobilization – pose a threat to Iranian sovereignty is open to debate. One may assume that historical events figure in Tehran's perception of the Kurds as a threat, thus its securitization of the Kurdish issue" (Akbarzadeh et al., 2019, p. 1148).

The IRI's multifaceted assault on the Kurds and the Kurdish reaction has resulted in the significant politicization of Kurdish identity and Kurdish alienation from Iranian identity. Borrowing from Akbarzadeh et al., these developments "ultimately undermine the security of the Islamic Republic" (2019, p. 1158). Due to the militarized nature of Rojhelat, conducting fieldwork and research in the region to quantify the impact of the IRI's psychological warfare precisely is extremely difficult. However, despite the immense price Kurds have paid in terms of human life, other suffering and repression, the ideological and political role Kurdistan has played during Iran's recent uprising supports the arguments that the

IRI's violent assaults on and attempts to assimilate and dehumanize the Kurdish people have backfired (Hassaniyan, 2022c; Saadi, 2022). In the words of Akbarzadeh and others, "there is a clear emotional disconnect between Iranian Kurds and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Historically, such a disconnect has been at the heart of dissident movements and a source of concern for the central government" (Akbarzadeh et al., 2019, p. 1157).

Kurdish Online and Cyberactivism

In recent decades, cyberactivism and the use of different social media platforms for political purposes have accelerated exponentially among Iranian Kurds. Social media and other digital communication tools have provided Kurds in Rojhelat and other parts of Kurdistan with many opportunities for their movement, deployed to serve various purposes, including developing and promoting the Kurdish language and political aspects of the Kurdish movement. These are methods that Kurds, as marginalized and subaltern national groups, use to promote their cause. Communications between Kurdish opposition groups, individuals, and society have improved, thanks to the appearance of many social media platforms and other digital means of communication. Online and cyber activism has mainly occurred among exiled and diaspora Iranian Kurds residing in Europe and North America, who have revealed and condemned the IRI's oppressive policies and activities in Kurdistan. The period from 2015 to 2023 has witnessed a wide range of hashtag campaigns denouncing the regime's execution and persecution of political, environmental, and civil society activists, including the murder of Jina Amini. The emergence and rise of online bilingual (Persian and Kurdish) magazines and newspapers has been another important element of political and civic activism in Iranian Kurdistan in the digital age.

This development started in the late 1990s, and despite the full-fledged securitization of different aspects of life, this process has continued until the present. Simultaneously, the IRGC has also invested massively in creating media platforms to publish and spread disinformation about Kurdistan, aiming to conduct multiple forms of assaults, challenging Kurdish culture and identity. After two decades of declining activity (1995–2015), this occurred when the Kurdish political parties initiated a new challenge to the IRI's authority in Kurdistan. For instance, the Kurdistan Democratic Party Iran (KDPI), the mainstream political organization of Iranian Kurds, after announcing and initiating the campaign of *Rasan Rojhelat* (the Revival of Rojhelat/Eastern Kurdistan), injected new life into the political and cultural struggle of the Kurds in Iran (Stansfield & Hassaniyan, 2022). The regime is experiencing political and economic difficulties and is worried about the emergence of any systematic and popular collective opposition, such as the Kurdistan movement, which posed a major challenge to the IRI in the post-1979 era. In the words of Behari, the Kurdish movement "may in the future become a gateway to democracy and a symbol of freedom. Thus, it has made the rulers in Tehran devote their brutality to the fight against the long-standing Kurdish political position" (2021).

As a stateless national diaspora (Eliassi, 2021), the Kurds in exile have utilized modern media outlets like print, broadcasting, Internet, and other digital communication technologies to promote a specifically Kurdish worldview (Aghapouri, 2020). Social media and other digital platforms have provided virtual communities and spaces for Kurds to deploy to intensify their political struggle proactively. Social media use and digital activism by exiled or diaspora-based Kurdish political organizations and individuals have increased significantly in recent years. Digital mass communication tools are used in various ways, serving knowledge production, awareness campaigns, and cross-community and ideological dialogue. The journal *Govari Tishk*, currently popular among different segments of Kurdish society, uses digital technologies to produce, print, and distribute different sorts of information, for instance, podcasts related to Kurdistan and the Kurdish movement and regular online lectures, seminars, and roundtables involving experts and politicians. Despite the IRI's authoritarian restriction on access to information, it can be accessed inside Iran at a low economic cost.

At the everyday level, social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, are used to rally political campaigns and disseminate information about the movement at home and in the diaspora. These forms of media are also platforms where the discursive struggle between different political ideologies and visions takes place. As a recent development, following Iran's 2022 uprisings, there has been intensified Kurdish cyberactivism (particularly on Twitter), where Kurdish academics and political activists are challenging undemocratic visions (for instance, exhibited by Iranian monarchist groups) for post-regime-change Iran while disseminating information about the events inside Iran and Kurdistan in different languages, including English, to the wider global community. Another aspect of online and cyber activism has been the use of social media livestreaming to facilitate public conversations between (ex-)members of Kurdish political parties such as the KDPI, Komala (Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan), PJAK (Kurdistan Free Life Party), and Khabat (Organization of Iranian Kurdistan Struggle) to share their organizational experience (Rawan, 2022).

These conversations sometimes include critical reflection on the performance of the leadership of the Kurdish movement and interorganizational relations, which have sometimes resulted in armed clashes and other forms of inter- and cross-organizational discord. In particular, the fratricidal war between the KDPI and Komala in the 1980s has been the subject of intense online debate and Facebook livestreams, in which the modes of mobilization and roles and functions of the leaderships of Kurdish political parties have been critically dissected. However, such online conversations have never questioned the Kurdish movement and its overall objectives, limiting the critiques to the political parties and their leadership (Kurdistan IRIB, 2021). Nevertheless, the abovementioned film *Lebey-dovom-e tigh* reveals that the regime has closely monitored Kurdish online activity and cyber activism. While *Lebey-dovom-e tigh* is a fabrication of history, the IRI has drawn on Kurdish activists' online discussions to try to instill in the Kurdish people that their parties have failed and that any movement that opposes the regime is doomed to failure (Bahari, 2021).

Furthermore, despite limited financial resources, the use of satellite television and other broadcasting technologies to promote the Kurdish cause and identity and to counter IRI propaganda measures has been a growing trend since the early twenty-first century. For instance, many political parties currently have their television stations, such as the KDPI's *Kurd-Channel*; Komala's *Rojhelat TV*, the PJAK's *Newroz TV*, and the Communist Party of Iran's *Komalah TV*, with their main offices based in European capitals (Posch, 2017, p. 345). In addition, Kurdish cinema has been another platform, growing exponentially to introduce different aspects of life and politics in Kurdistan. In recent years, Kurdish films have gained attention inside and outside Kurdistan. In the words of Suncem Koçer, "Subsequent to and in line with efforts to unify Kurdish cultural production in diaspora, Kurdish intellectuals have endeavored to define and frame the substance of Kurdish cinema as an orienting framework for the production and reception of films by and about Kurds" (2014, p. 473). Among other cinematic activities in and outside Kurdistan, the London Kurdish Film Festival has, since 2001, served as a model for other Kurdish diaspora groups in European, American, and Australian cities (Koçer, 2014).

The *Jash* Factor

In line with the abovementioned psychological warfare carried out through cinema and television broadcasts, the IRI deploys the *jash* in the military fight against the Kurdish movement, used to spy on civic, cultural, and NGO activists in Kurdistan (H. Rojhelat, 2021, p. 165). The *jash*, "native collaborators, indigenous instruments of sovereign domination in their respective parts of greater Kurdistan," has been shown to be an effective force during the Kurdish-regime conflict in Iran (Vali, 2016, p. 298). In Iran, the *jash* militia, known by the regime as *Peshmerga Mosolman* (Islamic Peshmerga), was established to exploit local knowledge in the fight against the Kurdish movement and to divide the Kurds by using them against each other. The policy was first implemented in the early 1980s by sponsoring and arming the tribes and former feudal landowners to challenge the authority of Kurdish political parties. From a military perspective, the *jash* performed an important service to the regime in controlling Kurdistan from 1983 to 1986; however, they never succeeded in legitimizing its military presence in Kurdistan (Vali, 2018, p. 30). The activity of the *jash* has caused the delay of Kurdish liberation, with many *jash* taking part in the destruction and genocide of Kurdish identity. They have a double function, both directly maintaining sovereign domination in Kurdistan by fighting the Kurdish movement on behalf of the state and reinforcing the presence of the occupiers. One activist with an alias of NH has wondered whether "without the Kurdish *jash*, operating under the guidance of the likes of Khalkhali, Chamran and Beroujerdi, the IRI's assaults and genocides in the 1980s would have succeeded so easy and so quickly, whether the *Pasdaran* of Imam-e Zaman [the Shia Twelfth Imam] would so easily have occupied the terrain of Kurdistan, and whether the regime would so easily have established its military bases in Kurdistan" (NH, 2010, p. 11).

In addition to the military aspect of the *jash*, the IRI has been motivated by the requirements of psychological warfare to spread a culture of mistrust and humiliation by turning some Kurds into “the servants of one sovereign master”. Since *jashayeti* (collaborationism) has, for some, become a source of income, members of the *jash* have become deeply dependent on the regime; they and their families’ livelihoods depend on the oppression of their fellow Kurds. According to Kheliqhi, “creating, funding, and arming the *jash* paramilitary forces and integrating them into the IRGC has resulted in many sociopolitical problems” for Kurds (Kheliqhi, 1999, p. 13). It has created a deep cleft in Kurdish society, with individual *jash* and their families becoming despised and isolated from the Kurdish society (Bruinessen, 1992). The IRI’s spread of *jashayeti* to many sectors of Kurdish society has meant that the phenomenon is not limited to only members of militias armed by the regime but extends among academics, bureaucrats in provincial and local governments, media workers such as filmmakers, etc. (H. Rojhelat, 2021), sowing the seeds of division and mistrust within Kurdish society.

This trend has been steadily on the rise since the decrease of Kurdish armed resistance, the regime’s consolidation of military and administrative control over Kurdistan in the late 1980s, and the concurrent increase of the regime’s awareness of the effectivity of psychological and soft warfare. The deployment of former and current militiamen in civic administration, journalism, and academic positions represents another aspect of the overall policy of the IRI to sustain its domination in Kurdistan. The active presence of the *jash* in the provincial and local administration and their control over local municipalities, city councils, chambers of trade and commerce, and other business and professional organizations in key rural and urban Kurdish centers signifies not only their political influence but also their rising economic fortune in their community and beyond. According to Vali, the *jash*’s clientelist relation to the state has provided them with extra-judicial power in terrorizing Kurdish society. Their economic gain and financial privileges assume the specific form of rent, an effect of tribal lineage and political power in the state’s security organization in the region (Vali, 2018, p. 301).

The *jash* militias have, based on the regime’s needs and whims, been several times de- and reconstructed, degrading the positions of their members. Such humiliation has resulted in dissatisfaction and protest. The decline of Kurdish political parties’ armed resistance after the mid-1990s did not result in the regime’s abolition of the *jash* but in restructuring this “institution” and its use in different ways other than in the military and intelligence context. Nevertheless, the security forces have retained the most brutally effective members. For instance, some members of the anti-Kurdish movement paramilitary groups have been elevated to positions within the intelligence and security forces and have been given a free hand in terrorizing people within their power bases. Their extrajudicial and criminal behavior has resulted in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty within Kurdish society. Individual *jash* has been used to terrorize Kurdish society. There are many examples of politically active Kurdish women, especially those who have not joined the political parties such as *Peshmerga*, becoming victims of their brutality.

Many women have been forcibly married to *jash* or religious and conservative tribal leaders. In the words of Kurdistani, “such punishments have resulted in suppressing politically active Kurdish women and frightening many others from entering politics” (2020, p. 216). The strategies of the IRGC and the *jash* have amounted to the terrorization of the Kurdish people, especially in rural areas. This has included sexual harassment and several reported cases of rape, theft from villagers, and making the locals engage in forced labor. Inhabitants of rural areas that have sought to resist the *jash* face severe punishment, including harassment and imprisonment. Many have left their villages to escape these conditions and resettled in towns and urban centers, either in Kurdish cities or other areas like central Iran. This high level of internal displacement and depopulation of the rural areas in Kurdistan has severely impacted demography, social cohesion, food and other agrarian production, and increased unemployment and underdevelopment in Kurdistan (NH, 2010).

The career path of a *jash* member is exemplified by one “Hiwa Tab,” an ordinary *jash* from the city of Mariwan, who, after decades of collaboration with the IRGC, was given a high-ranking position, appointed as head of the local IRGC intelligence service or *Itella‘at-e Sepah*. Tab joined the IRGC as a *jash* when he was 16 years old. His collaboration started with spying on the local community until he was elevated to a high-ranking position within this organization. He used his organizational power to establish his private militia.⁷ For a decade in the 2000s, Tab’s gang imposed itself on Mariwan and the surrounding region, committing wide-ranging criminal activities, including murder and harassing the local community. The IRI and IRGC’s acceptance of this situation for many years is explicable by the regime’s hostile attitude toward the Kurds; the story provides an example of the regime’s use of the *jash* in terrorizing Kurdish society and spreading fear and uncertainty.

Nevertheless, Tab and the members of his gang were ultimately arrested by the authorities, received a hasty trial, which passed the death sentence, and then executed. Tab’s gang, like their victims, became themselves victims of the regime’s cynical approach to the Kurds. Both the regime’s initial tacit support for Tab and his private militia and its later turning against them can be considered as tactics in the IRI’s campaign of psychological warfare against Kurds: initially using Tab to divide and repress the Kurdish people, the regime could later present itself as the guardian of law and order to which Iranian Kurds must submit (NH, 2010, pp. 6–10).

While the military purpose of creating *jash* units is obvious, their usefulness in sociopolitical and cultural aspects remains relatively understudied. As mentioned in previous studies, creating and deploying the *jash* units has served as a colonial “divide-and-rule” strategy. These policies have always aimed to sow the seeds of fragmentation and distrust, posing immense challenges to the Kurdish movement (Hassaniyan, 2021a, p. 147). The IRI’s deployment of the *jash* units has effectively served the regime’s aim of controlling Kurdistan militarily; however, these *jash* units have not succeeded in legitimizing the military presence of the regime in Kurdistan. As emphasized by Abbas Vali (2018), deploying this paramilitary tribal force as part of the regime’s anti-nationalism policy has, however, significantly undermined the regime’s legitimacy.

Conclusion

This study investigates the multifaceted assaults and repression waged by the IRI against the Kurds in Iran, which includes a wide range of tools and techniques. From a Middle Eastern regional perspective, the increasing access to communication technologies by authoritarian governments has served to advance the state's psychological war on society, leaving civil society in a critically disadvantaged position. The IRI and other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have come to rely on modern surveillance and communication technologies, such as the Internet and television broadcasting, which allow these regimes to implement their authoritarian policies and to terrorize and violate the rights of their citizens. In addition to the multiplicity of approaches to psychosocial warfare, the IRI's militarization of Kurdistan and maintenance of Kurdistan in underdevelopment have contributed to the further deprivation of the Kurdish people in Iran. The asymmetrical power relationship characterizing the state-Kurdish relationship and the IRI's manipulation of Kurdish identity, including asserting them as a branch of the Aryan people (Posch, 2017; Vaziri, 1993), has left the Kurds in a difficult position to overcome the full-fledged psychological and soft war imposed on them.

However, Kurds and their political movement in Rojhelat face other issues. Fragmented political mobilization and ideology, reflected in the activities of the political parties of Rojhelat, is a challenging aspect of Kurdish politics in Iran, resulting in a wide range of self-inflicted obstacles facing the Kurdish movement in and outside Iran. For instance, during the early months of Iran's 2022 protests, the KDPI and Komala were (mainly) communicating their statements of support for the protesters in Kurdistan as a united front and through the Cooperation Centre of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties (CCIKPP), established in January 2018. However, such cooperation began to erode because of the unilateral and controversial engagements of Abdullah Mohtadi, the Komala leader, with the Iranian royalists. For instance, Mohtadi unilaterally became a party to the so-called *Manshor-e Hambestegi-e Melli-e Iranyan* (Persian: Charter of Iranian National Solidarity), known as MAHSA, whose signatories also included Reza Shah Pahlavi, son of the second Pahlavi ruler, Mohammad Reza. This resulted in anger and denouncement from Kurdish activists, including some members of Komala, because of opposition to Pahlavi for his monarchist views, which do not represent the different national communities and identities in Iran (Yousefi, 2020). The KDPI also denounced this charter for not providing a democratic vision for post-regime change in Iran (Radio Farda, 2023). While it took the KDPI and Komala several decades to normalize their post-civil war (1984–1988) relationship and form the CCIKPP, this move instantly inflicted serious damage to the relatively unified KDPI-Komala line and cooperation demonstrated early in the protests of 2022.

The rallies of Iranian diaspora communities, Persian and non-Persian, in support of the country's recent protests, brought to the surface a hitherto elusive form of Iranian nationalism (Eliassi, 2022). Since the protests inside Iran happened in dispersed geographical locations, largely homogeneously composed of different

ethno-religious groups, such conflict did not occur in the country. However, outside Iran, for instance, European and Northern American cities, Persian and non-Persian communities protested simultaneously in the same venues. Monarchist and constitutionalist groups and individuals have verbally attacked diaspora Kurdish communities and Kurdish political parties, accusing them of separatism and of threatening Iran's territorial integrity. There are several examples where Kurdish demonstrators have been physically attacked and injured by monarchist and ultranationalist Iranian groups because Kurdish demonstrators were carrying the Kurdish flag (Mohammadpour, 2024). There are also examples of ostensibly anti-IRI Persians in the diaspora calling for Iranians in major Persian cities such as Tehran and Isfahan to cease attending the protests and be cautious about regime change, as—they claimed—this would only benefit Kurdish groups and would result in Iran's territorial disintegration (Hassaniyan, 2022b). Akbar Ganji, previously a member of the IRGC and currently a dissident living in self-imposed exile, released a strongly anti-Kurdish video in November 2022, in which he warned people in the central provinces of Iran against joining the protests, which he claimed were a manifestation of a "Kurdish agenda," highlighting that "the spread and expansion of these protests would endanger Iran's territorial integrity, which is an end and agenda of the uprising in border regions such as Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchistan" (Hassaniyan, 2022b). This and similar statements of Persian elites reveal the mutual distrust between Iran's Persian and non-Persian national communities.

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Notes

1. The Kurdish Institute of Paris (Institut Kurde, 2017) and Britannica (2024) project the Kurdish population to be between 36 and 46 million. Nevertheless, these data still need to be subject to debate due to the lack of a thorough census in any of the states that occupy Kurdistan (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria), which would offer an accurate or approximate figure for the Kurdish population. Despite Kurdish sources indicating higher numbers, the states that occupy Kurdistan have either denied the existence of Kurds or intentionally refrained from sharing any data or statistics regarding the Kurdish population in territories under their occupation.

2. The five provinces that make up the predominantly Kurdish province in Iran are Kurdistan, Kermashan (Kermanshah), Ilam, Lorestan, and West Azerbaijan (populated by Kurds and Azeris, respectively). This region is also known as the Kurdish region or Rojhelat (East Kurdistan).
3. *Jash*, literally meaning a donkey foal, is a derogatory Kurdish term for a native collaborator.
4. False accusations against them included the murder of the imam's son during Friday prayers in Mariwan. After being tortured for several days, they were taken to meet the imam in October 2010 to confess that they had assassinated his son. This program was carefully staged for airing by Press TV, the IRIB's 24-hour English-language channel. In a letter to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, Zanyar and Loqman Moradi described instances of the severe physical and mental torture they experienced: "They brought a bottle and said you must agree [to confess], and if you don't, you must sit on this bottle. And they also threatened to rape me and said, 'You choose! You either accept or this is your last choice.' I had to accept because I couldn't bear this type of torture, and I had severe bleeding and burns on my genitals and could no longer stand these brutal tortures" (International Federation of Human Rights and Justice for Iran, 2020, p. 28).
5. Chamran was appointed by Khomeini as the Minister of Defence and led the regime's attack on Kurdistan in the early 1980s. Boroujerdi, an IRGC commander, earned the ironic title *Masih-e Kordestan* (the Messiah of Kurdistan) for his brutality and loyalty to the regime in Kurdistan. Shirazi was the head of the Iranian army during the regime's attack on Kurdistan in the early 1980s. During the postrevolutionary conflict, the regime appointed Sheikh Mohammad Sadeghi Guivi (better known as Khalkhali) as a judge and dispatched him to Kurdistan. Khalkhali's brutality earned him a reputation among the Kurds as *Qesabe Kordestan* (the butcher of Kurdistan). Through a series of hasty trials that lacked even the most basic elements of judicial integrity, Khalkhali executed hundreds of Kurdish civilians, including many women and teenagers, as well as political activists.
6. Noon Khe or N-KH are two letters in Persian alphabet and might refer to the initials of the main character in the comedy series—Noureddin Khanzadeh.
7. According to various sources, Tab and his band were responsible for the deaths of over 300 people, including villagers, traders, and *kolbers* (cross-border porters) over the decade. According to one source, in most cases, the corpses of the victims were dressed in the uniforms of PJAK guerrillas. The gang members allegedly received payment from the IRGC for the delivery of each body. In addition, they enabled drug dealing and the spread of drug abuse in Iranian Kurdistan (Maasumi, 2013).

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