

Opinion – Rojhelat a Year After Jina’s Movement and the Iranian Response

Written by Allan Hassaniyan

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ALLAN HASSANIYAN, NOV 13 2023

The geopolitical environment surrounding the Kurdish people have left them disadvantaged. The global order’s protection and promotion of the nation-state system and the consolidation of nation-state borders in the Middle East have greatly benefited Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—the four countries currently occupying Kurdistan. However, these developments have also presented serious challenges and further marginalised the Kurds throughout Kurdistan. To assimilate and subdue the Kurds, these occupiers have also increased their efforts and used a variety of mechanisms, including a combination of cultural, economic, and violent tactics. Furthermore, the asymmetrical balance of power has been furthered by these states’ access to advanced military technology, posing new difficulties to the armed branch of the Kurdish movements in various regions of Kurdistan. In a world dominated by the current nation-state system, these challenges have put the survival of the Kurds as a stateless nation, under extreme strain and if not a profound test.

As evidenced by the unstable and unpredictable socio-political context that the 20th and 21st century have presented the Kurds, Kurdish civil society has many difficult tasks ahead of it. To overcome some of its challenges, including extensive assimilation and state’s repression as well as establishing and preserving a politicised discourse of ‘us’ and the ‘others’ reflecting Kurdish identity, history, and culture, the mode of Kurdish civic activism has been constant evolution. A relative achievement of these aims has required Kurdish civic activism to be innovative, creative, and capable of operation, even within the most autocratic and restrictive state structures, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). For instance, In Rojhelat (East Kurdistan), the Kurdish movement developed a distinctive culture of resistance to the IRI’s practices and values. Although Kurdish conflict with and resistance to the discriminatory nation-state system in Iran can be tracked to a century ago, during the early 21st century’s conflictual state-Kurdish relationship, civic activism in Rojhelat has flourished radically and entered a new phase of its existence. Despite its formation and evolution within an Iranian state system, dominated by a strict framework composed of; exclusionary Persian nationalism, autocracy and (Islamic) theocracy, the movement of civic activism in Rojhelat has proven to be vibrant and inventive.

The latest two decades’ Kurdish politics in Rojhelat, provides examples of many events and occurrences, that allow to argue civic activism and Kurdish national awareness, despite the IRI repressive and violent policy to the Kurdish people, to follow a flourishing pattern. The development of civic activism in Rojhelat in the twenty-first century has demonstrated to be steady, persistent, inventive, and pioneering. Additionally, taking into account the civil society’s efforts in Rojhelat during the protests against the state’s murder of Jina Amini on September 16, 2022, and in the subsequent year, offers examples of how the campaign for intersectional rights has been a crucial aspect of this development. Kurds in Rojhelat never accepted the rule of the IRI, and the Kurdish people have been resisting this regime’s authority and values since the early days of the post-1979 revolution, but after Jina’s murder, the Kurdish-state conflict grew significantly and marked the beginning of a new phase. The Kurdish catchphrase, *Jina, Jiyan, Azadi* (Women, Life, Freedom), ignited the revolutionary uprisings that began during Jina’s funeral at Aychi Cemetery in Saqhez, Jina’s hometown. These uprisings proved to be radical and groundbreaking, not only for Kurds but also for other oppressed and progressive people and communities in Iran and throughout the Middle East. This also explains why it quickly spread throughout Iran and other parts of the world, uniting locality.

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Nevertheless, neither the Kurdish protests and the use of the slogan *Jina, Jiyan, Azadi*, nor the excessively violent reaction of the regime to these protests were accidental, yet they each respectively represented a different practice and value system; a century-long Kurdish struggle for emancipation versus 44-years of IRI's futile attempt to control the Kurdish mind and loyalty. The Kurdish-IRI relationship has been shaped under the shadow of conflicts and confrontations taken place during the historical moments of the 1979 revolution. While about 85 percent of the Iranian people voted for the Referendum of Islamic Republic on 31 March 1979, Kurds in Rojhelat boycotted unanimously this referendum: an utmost rejection of the IRI's value system and vision for Iran.

The Kurdish boycott of the Referendum of the Islamic Republic was a step that resulted in the regime's collective punishment and revenge of Kurds in Rojhelat. Nevertheless, from the Kurdish point of view, Kurds as society and movement cannot be blamed for the failure of the 1979 Revolution and the 44 years of the IRI autocratic rule. Although, uprisings following Jina's state-murder created a revolutionary moment in many places across Iran, but the situation in Rojhelat has from the moment Jina's funeral was held in the Aychi Cemetery until today remains revolutionary. Thanks to the Kurdish collective actions taken place during Jina's funeral, and the afterwards attacks on the symbols of regime's authority and present in Kurdistan, the September 16, 2022, has become a pivotal day in IRI-society relationship in Iran, and a moment of the crumble of the wall of fear of the regime's brutality. This moment was also transferred by other people and communities across different parts of Iran, making the protests semi-countrywide, with regions and provinces such as, Sistan and Baluchistan, Kurdistan and Mazandaran playing the leading role.

Jina's Revolution and Civic Activism in Rojhelat

Taking the case of Jina as an example, the act of resistance to the IRI began from Jina's family; Mojgan Eftekhari (mother), Amjad Amini (father) and Ashkan Amini (brother). After being beaten by baton in head at the moral police's custody, Jina's half-dead body was taken to the Kesra hospital (Tehran), however her brother Ashkan was told by the intelligence officers that the ambulance carried someone else rather than Jina. However not trusting this, Ashkan taking a taxi followed the ambulance, to trace Jina's whereabouts. Otherwise, Jina's body would have been buried in secret place unknown, similar to many thousand cases and examples of people killed and executed by the IRI, but buried by the state in secret place. Following Jina's murder, her family faced intense pressure to keep quiet, bury her body as soon as possible, covertly, and without a public funeral. Jina's family, however, resisted and refused to comply with the authority's request despite being subjected to several threats and forms of intimidation. Jina's body was transported by air from Tehran to Tabriz and then transported by ambulance to Saqhez.

According to Diyako Alewi, an eyewitness and participant in Jina's funeral, "the civil society in Saqhez is very politicised and proactive. Before the ambulance arrived in Saqhez, a group of civic activists who were suspicious of the intelligence service's plans to capture and burying Jina's body in secret met and escorted it. When the ambulance arrived in Saqhez, between 7000 and 10,000 people were at the Aychi Cemetery waiting for Jina's body. A group of civic activists suspecting of the intelligence service's plans of kidnapping and burring Jina's in secret, met and escorted the ambulance before its arrival to Saqhez. By the arrival of the ambulance to Saqhez 7000 to 10000 members of the public were waiting for Jina's body in the Aychi Cemetery. Because of the enormous turnout for Jina's funeral, the authorities were unable to control the situation", and Jina was buried in accordance with the wishes of her parents and the community.

However, the Aychi Cemetery came to be a space of contention between, on the one side, Jina's family and funeral attendees and on the other, the IRGC and intelligence forces (Itella'at-e Sepa). Jina's father was threatened by the head of the intelligence office and Jafar Tawan, the governor of Saqhez, to either hand over the body or bury her right away before morning. However, in the words of Jina's father "I defied orders and resisted obeying them, and warned them that if they keep insisting on their plan, I will bring this to the media's attention. After that, they retreated, and the funeral happened as we had wished, between 10:00 and 10:30 am". The public's unwavering support for the Jina's family and the family's own firm resistance to the IRI's authority was a unique act of collective resistance, yet quite uncommon to the regime. Because within the IRI's rule regardless of case, it is always the authority that have the final words.

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In the initial months of the protests that followed Jina’s murder, the IRGC, Basij, and other regime militia and intelligence elements killed between 600 and 700 demonstrators, more than 250 of whom were from Kurdistan. The funerals or/and *chle* (40 days after death’s ceremony) for demonstrators killed by the regime in Kurdistan became a unique political event. Parents, children, and relatives of those killed gave political speeches, publicly challenging the legitimacy of the IRI. Mourning was replaced by outrage toward the regime, and parents and relatives were expressing pride of their loved ones died for the freedom of Kurdistan and the Kurdish people. The Iranian regime was publicly called out as an occupier of Kurdistan during these ceremonies, and as such, it ought to withdraw from this land. For instance, Mohammad Mawloodi during his father’s (Ghafour Mawloodi) funeral, killed during the protest in Bokeran stated that “The regime’s is treating Tehran protesters with batons, but in Kurdistan it is using bullets. I will tell you why; because the Islamic Republic is fascist in Tehran, but it is an occupier in Kurdistan”, and it is how occupier is dealing with occupied. ‘*Jin, Jiyar, Azadi*’, ‘*neserweten ta serkawten* (no rest until victory), ‘*Kordestan gorestani fashistan* (Kurdistan is the graveyard of fascism)’, etc., are among catchphrases chanted during political speeches given through funeral ceremonies.

The burden of Revolution

During and after events taken place on September 16, 2022, and the following months, the regime intensified the militarisation of Kurdistan to unprecedented degree ever. This appears to be reminiscent of the post-1979 revolutionary period, where Kurdish cities and towns were under the control of the Kurdish political parties; the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Komala, and Iranian army and IRGC invaded Kurdistan to impose a bloody Jihad on Rojhelat. Similar to Sistan and Baluchistan where on Friday 30 September 2022, regime forces used fighter helicopters against the protests killing around 100 protesters in the city of Zahedan, on a day that is already known as the Black Friday of Zahedan, it used heavy weapons such as Caliber-50 in Kurdish cities such as Jwanro/Jawanrood (21 November 2022), causing the death of dozen peaceful protesters. IRI’s long-standing animosity towards Kurdistan was enough for it to through these uprisings turn the streets of Rojhelat into a condition that resemble a battlefield.

2022–2023 marked the most historically challenging times for Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchistan. People of these regions have been the every-day’s targets of the IRGC and other militias of the regime. Since September 2022, the number of attacks on female primary schools using nerve gas, the kidnapping of male and female civic and cultural activists, and the targeting of environmental activists in Kurdistan have increased significantly. Only during the early two months, following Jina’s murder, Kurdistan held 5-6 general strikes (totalling more than twenty-five days) where all shops and businesses were shut in protest to regime’s use of brutal violence and killing several hundred Kurdish protesters.

As retaliation for the Kurds’ pioneering role during Jina’s revolution, the IRI has instituted and is implementing a systematic de-development of Kurdistan. This policy aims to further impoverish the already socioeconomically and politically marginalised Rojhelat. Kurdish provinces in Iran have long been the most militarised areas, with every element of daily life scrutinised and approached through security-oriented lenses. This condition has caused further deterioration of Kurdistan’s sociopolitical condition. Many weeks’ forest fires in July 2023, initiated by the IRGC have destroyed the once-beautiful forests and landscape around Mariwan and Kermashan, showing the regime’s determination to destroy Kurdistan and punish the Kurdish people in Rojhelat collectively for their anti-regime actions, but it also wants to use Kurdistan as a model of punishment to quell critic voices across other parts of Iran.

Although the focus on international media and Persian diaspora media and Satellite TV stations have constantly been on the otherwise sporadic protests across Iran’s central provinces such as Tehran. The coverage of the protests and bloodshed in Kurdistan, Sistan, and Baluchistan by Persian diaspora media and satellite TV channels (such Iran International) were only to interrogate and make sure that political leaders and activists of non-Persian national groups were not separatist. The uprisings that followed Jina’s murder had a great chance of leading to a regime change if they were persistent and long-lasting. However, in spite of the enormous number of casualties, these uprising abruptly decreased. The demands of the populace in large cities like Tehran dwindled to the introduction of the mandatory hijab, and nighttime chants from behind windows, free hugs, and sweets sharing took precedence. Meanwhile, hundreds of people were killed in peripheral areas like Kurdistan, and Sistan and

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Baluchistan.

The police, IRGC, and other militias of the regime engaged in the brutality were worn out after the first two months of the revolt; however, the intermittent protests in the central regions abruptly stopped. There are different explanations for this. For this, there are several reasons. The uprisings of 2022 exposed stark contrasts between Persian and non-Persian national groups’ conceptions of a free society, their willingness to embrace danger and adopt drastic measures to bring about change, and their capacity to mobilise collective protests. The level of mobilisation, risk taking and a desire for mass collective protest actions and protests proved weak in the capital. With the exception of universities located in Tehran, it is hard to find many examples of street protests to bring more than thousand individuals together. However, unofficial accounts, however, claim that around 80.000 people attended Jina’s Chle, mostly from Saqhez and other Kurdish cities. Despite the regime’s closure of the main routes to Saqhez, many people from the nearby villages and other parts of Rojhelat reached Saqhez by hiking its terrain, taking secondary routes and walking landscape pathways.

Regions such as Rojhelat has several active political parties, including the KDPI (1946), Komala (1979), Khabat (1980) and PJAK (2004), and, some of which, such as the KDPI, has more than seven decades of active role in the leading and mobilizing the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat. These parties have individually and together played an instrumental role during the 2022 uprisings. For instance, the recent general strike observed during every cities of Rojhelat, including Ilam, Kermashan, Mahabad, Urmia on September 16, 2023, at the first anniversary of Jina’s murder, took place after a joined announcement issued by the six political parties of Rojhelat. But the provinces in the centre of Iran lack these kinds of organisational sources, which results in a distinct experience and outcome when it comes to organising collective actions. Even though there was a lot of hope and optimise about change, the 2022 protests halted because of the intervention of divisive individuals such as Reza Pahlavi, son of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iran previous monarch. Many progressive Iranian groups were disappointed about the sudden influence given to him during this uprising to act on behalf of peoples inside Iran.

On the first anniversary of Jina’s death, the regime brought military forces (8500 in addition to the existing number of military forces in this city) from other Iranian towns, including Qazvin, Tabriz, and Hamadan, to Rojhelat in order to thwart any uprisings and further militarise Kurdistan. Access to Aychi Cemetery was obstructed by tanks and other military vehicles, and the area was declared ‘prohibited’, therefore a young man named Fardin Jafari from Saqhez was shot by the IRGC, since he tried to walk come close the Cemetery. He was at first hand declared death but later the news claimed him to be hospitalised because of severely of his injury.

A few days before the anniversary Jina’s uncle, Sefa Aeli was kidnapped by plain clothes intelligence forces and his whereabouts is still unknown. According to report on the day of the anniversary of Jina’s murder the Amini’s house was surrounded by a huge number of IRGC forces, and Jina’s father was first under house arrest, then was taken to the intelligence office and intimidated to not visit the Jina’s shrine on the anniversary. Furthermore, the regime has in order to prevent people from travelling to the cemetery where Jina was buried in, opened the water of a dam called Chraqhwise to flooded routes heading there. In the words of Kamran Matin “taking a cue from US tactics in Vietnam, Iranian state has reportedly opened a dam to flood a secondary route leading to the cemetery where Jina Amini is buried to prevent people from reaching there to mark the anniversary of her state-murder. This is in addition to filling Kurdish towns & cities to the brim with heavily armed troops and armoured vehicles. As always IRI acts in Kurdistan as a colonial occupying force”.

Conclusion

The regime’s extensive use of indiscriminate violence and cruelty to quell protests in Kurdistan (Mazandaran, Sistan and Baluchistan) is unprecedented in other parts of Iran. The deep militarization of Kurdistan, the construction of enormous checkpoints, and the imposition of quasi-martial rule highlight the fact that the relationship between the Kurdish state and Iran is one of colonisation and colonisers. In fact, Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluch are still after the uprisings, started a year ago (September 2022), carrying massive burden of a revolution, while the other parts of Iran are watching from distance. On the first anniversary of the revolution, however, people from the central regions were traveling to the Caspian region (northern Iran) for an extended summer vacation rather than demonstrating acts of

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support and solidary to the uprisings in Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan.

The question posed by these circumstances is whether the Persian population in Iran, in particular, would be willing to pay any price for a regime change, or if they would prefer the status quo? This is because regardless of who has ruled Iran, their cultural, economic and political privilege and statues has remained protected and promoted. This has been what has mattered most, not the value of the regime ruling the country. In actuality, the Kurdish right to self-determination and complete Kurdish independence—rather than just a regime change in Iran—is what will truly fulfil Kurdish dignity and liberation. Kurds in Rojhelat have stepped into a new era, where they dare to speak about their right openly and loudly. Nevertheless, as the Kurdish poet Sherko Bekes said “Tehran doesn’t simile to any lips, but death.” Yet, Kurds in Rojhelat have also never flattered Tehran, but resisted.

About the author:

Dr Allan Hassaniyan is Lecturer in Middle East Studies at Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He is author of *Kurdish Politics in Iran: Crossborder Interactions and Mobilisation since 1947* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). His current research focuses on state-society relationships in Iran and Kurdistan, and environmental movements and ecological security and challenges in the Middle East.