



**AMERICAN
FRIENDS OF
KURDISTAN**

Fact Sheet on the Kurds in Iran

American Friends of Kurdistan
Washington, DC

Mission

American Friends of Kurdistan Mission

American Friends of Kurdistan (AFK) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(4) advocacy organization.

AFK strengthens, protects, and promotes American-Kurdish relations and supports policies that advance the national security and prosperity of Americans, Kurds, and our other allies.

AFK is the first organization of its kind, founded in 2019 by a group of Americans who believe American policy toward Kurds and greater Kurdistan is lacking and all-too-often ignored.

A century after the Sykes-Picot Agreement divided Kurdish communities across four countries, we believe the status quo has largely failed the Kurds and America's strength in the region has been undermined as a result.

AFK advocates for the development of a unique, realistic, and tailored policy for every region of Kurdistan which includes northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. With an estimated 45 million Kurds worldwide, and over 40 million of them living in the greater Kurdistan region, we believe it is in the American interest to empower Kurds to lead their own peaceful efforts toward democratic self-determination in keeping with American values. Kurds are on the frontline in the war against radical Islamic terrorism and are one of America's strongest allies in the Middle East.

AFK is independent and nonpartisan. We will achieve greater support for the U.S.-Kurdish alliance by advocating for bipartisan Congressional solutions, while also working to educate American civic and national security leaders at all levels of government.

AFK is the only advocacy organization established specifically to enhance American-Kurdish relations. We are not affiliated with any American or Kurdish political party, and we do not accept financial assistance from any government.

The Kurds have a saying, "no friends but the mountains." At AFK we believe the Kurds have a mountain of American friends.

Background

The Kurds in Iran are estimated to be about 7% out of a population of 83 million. The Kurds predominantly inhabit the Northwestern provinces of Western Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Ilam. Kurds are the third largest ethnic group in Iran and are predominantly Sunni Muslim with some practicing Shia Islam. The face of Kurdish nationalism in Iran has been historically represented by the Kurdistan Democratic Party- Iran (PDK-I), the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KŞZK), and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK). Iranian Kurdish struggle for national identity has occurred under both the Iranian monarchy and Islamic Republic. In World War I, Kurdish tribes launched a revolt in 1918 capturing territory in western Iran. Then, General Reza Khan, suppressed the rebellion, enacting harsh reprisals against the Kurds as he ascended the throne as reigning monarch.

In World War II the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 deposed Reza Khan, with his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi being installed as the reigning monarch by the allied powers. In 1946 a Soviet-backed Kurdish state was established called "The Republic of Mahabad" by Qazi Muhammed, founder of the PDK-I. This Kurdish state would be conquered swiftly by the Iranian military after the halt of Soviet backing and Soviet withdrawal. The Kurds would take part in the 1979 Islamic Revolution as they had suffered greatly under the Shah's rule. After the revolution the Kurds would rebel against the Ayatollahs government until the mid-1990s in response being denied political representation.

In 2004 a new Kurdish movement was founded, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) which has been engaged in an insurgency against the Iranian government. In recent years, tension between the Kurds and the Islamic Republic have continued to escalate with the main Iranian Kurdish opposition groups resurfacing in 2016 to clash with the Iranian government, other Kurdish groups in Iran have since joined in the fight against the central government. The Kurds in Iran are not as prominent as their fellow brethren as they lack political unity and have not been involved in ongoing major regional conflicts.

Map of Kurds in Iran



Source: [U.S. Institute of Peace](#)

Kurdish Village in Iran



Source: [Middle East Eye](#)

Politics

List of Major Iranian Kurdish Groups



Source: [Middle East Eye](#)

PDKI Peshmerga fighters in Iran



Source: [World Politics Review](#)

The PDK-I is the oldest and most notable Kurdish independence organization in Iran. It was founded in 1945 based upon democratic and socialist ideals. It was the PDK-I that founded the short-lived Kurdish republic in 1946 known as the "[Republic of Mahabad](#)", named after the northwestern city of Mahabad. The Kurdish state would collapse less than a year later as Soviet military presence and support dissipated. The PDK-I would be banned in Iran shortly after and founder of the PDKI, Qazi Muhammed, would be executed for treason by the Pahlavi regime after the collapse of the Kurdish state.

With the rise of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in the early 1950s, the [PDK-I would support](#) Mossadegh's anti-monarchy and anti-imperialist stance and saw an ally in their struggle. However, the CIA would orchestrate a coup known as Operation Ajax, in 1953 to oust democratically elected [Prime Minister Mossadegh](#) and reinstall Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as reigning monarch. After the monarchy was reinstalled, the Shah used the Iranian military to crack down on PDK-I activities leaving the organization largely weakened. After the Shah has been reinstalled, the Kurds again suffered repression with many members of other PDKI fleeing to Iraq. The PDK-I would not manifest in large numbers again until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which would end 2,500 years of monarchy in Iran. The Kurds continued to seek an independent state after the 1979 Revolution and rebelled against the Islamic government. Ayatollah Khomeini used the Iranian military similar to the Pahlavi regime, to eliminate the Kurdish rebellion with [thousands of Kurds being killed](#), executed, and arrested.

During the Iran-Iraq War, both Baghdad and Tehran fueled [Kurdish separatist movements](#) on opposite sides to fight against each other in the ensuing conflict, leaving thousands of Kurds dead and many villages destroyed. In 1989, Iranian intelligence agents would carry out an assassination of the Secretary General of the PDK-I, [Dr. Abdulrahman Ghassemlou](#) on July 13th, 1989 in Vienna, Austria. The Iranian government would go a step further in 1992 and assassinate three other high-level PDKI leaders abroad. Both incidents would greatly affect the PDK-I's ability to operate as an organization, leading to the PDK-I arranging a ceasefire with Tehran in 1996. Moving into the 21st century, the PDK-I begin to alter their goals, shifting from demanding an independent state to seeking more political autonomy from Iran. In 2016 the PDK-I launched a major revival and has since been waging an ongoing insurgency against the Iranian government in the northwest provinces.

In the late 1960s a group of university students and Kurdish intellectuals founded the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KŞZK). Secretary General Abdullah Mohtadi has been its leader since the party's inception as he was a founding member. The KŞZK is predominantly a left-wing Marxist organization that has close ties with other communist groups within Iran. The KŞZK seeks democracy in Iran and seeks fair political representation for the Kurds as well. Since 1983 the KŞZK has been based in northern Iraq in the KRG with its primary goal being to establish an autonomous region in Iran not an independent Kurdish state. The party took part in the 1979 Islamic revolution alongside the PDKI and was able to establish itself as a political party, however it was largely crushed in the 1979 Kurdish Rebellion against the Islamic Republic.

In 1983 the KŞZK would join the Communist Party of Iran as the Kurdish wing of the movement. In the mid-1990s the KŞZK would cease its low-level guerrilla activities against the Iranian government, resurfacing again in 2017 as a result of increased Kurdish clashes with the Iranian government. During the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign on Iran, the KŞZK would register as a foreign agent, in an effort to further legitimize their cause.

PJAK is a far-militant Kurdish separatist group founded in Iraq in 2004. PJAK that has strong ties to the PKK in Turkey, as it was founded by members of the PKK. The founder and leader of the PJAK, Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmad has expressed the importance of the PJAK's relationship with the PKK. Many believe that the PJAK is merely an extension of the PKK in Iran due to this fact. The PJAK's base of operations is in the Qandil Mountains near the Iran-Iraq border.

The PJAK's goals are similar to that of the PDKI and KŞZK in that it seeks a democratic Iran with more political autonomy for the Kurds and the promotion of women's rights. In 2009, PJAK was designated as "terrorist organization" by the U.S. Department of Treasury. PJAK did briefly halt its guerrilla activities in 2011 after a ceasefire with the Islamic Republic. However since 2016, PJAK has resumed its insurgency against the Islamic Republic, much like its other Kurdish counterparts.

Abdullah Mohtadi



Source: Defense Post

Komala Peshmerga fighters



Source: U.S. Institute for Peace

PJAK guerrilla fighters



Source: NY Times

Human Rights

When Reza Khan ascended the throne as Shah of Iran he enacted similar nationalization reforms as Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had done in Turkey around the same time. Reza Khan forced the Kurds and other minorities to learn Persian (farsi) as the national language, with no respect for minority rights. Traditional religious schools were eliminated for a more government run contemporary education system. Any other language besides Persian was forbidden as Persian was meant to act as the national language began to unify the country under a single identity. In addition, Reza Khan shied away from developing the economy of the predominantly Kurdish northwestern provinces of Iran.

After being deposed by the allies in 1941, his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was installed as reigning monarch, he would continue his father legacy of “Persianization” of Iran. Similar to the Turkish government’s usage of the term “Mountain Kurd”, the Pahlavi regime referred to the Kurds as “true born Aryans” and “original Iranians”, according to one researcher.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi suppressed Kurdish culture and language under his rule but by more passive means. For example, any government or public writing was in Persian, Kurdish was not formally taught in school. However, Kurds were allowed to speak their language in the private. The Shah's land reforms also greatly disrupted the traditional tribal dynamics of Kurdish society.

Kurds being executed in 1979 for “counterrevolutionary activities”



Source: Time Magazine

With growing resentment against the Pahlavi regime during the 1970s, the Kurds would join on the side of the Islamic Revolution seeing this as an opportunity to advocate for independence and self-representation. After the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in early 1979, the Kurds had hoped for more autonomy from the new Islamic government controlled by Ayatollah Khomeini. The new Islamic regime would refuse to give the Kurds representation and political independence, this caused a revolt in 1979 led by the PDK-I and KŞZK.

The Islamic Republic deployed the Iranian military to the western provinces to combat this rebellion, carrying executions as well as destroying towns and villages. By the time the Iranian military successfully subdued the revolt in 1982, over 6,000 Kurds had lost their lives with over 10,000 deaths in total.

Since 1979 the Kurds have continued to face state repression from the Islamic Republic. Kurds also face extreme religious discrimination due to the fact they are majority sunni muslims, as there have been reported instances where Kurdish sunni clerics being kidnapped and illegally detained.

Kurdish women are regularly raped and sexually assaulted with many afraid to speak out in fear of reprisals. Those sexual assault related crimes that are reported have a low likelihood of being tried by Iranian courts and those that are tried have a high acquittal rate. They are also subject to honor killings and prone to higher suicide rates than men due to the unfair system of justice in Iran. Not to mention that the legal age for women to marry is 13, adding on to the social pressures of Kurdish women. In 2015, a Kurdish woman was raped and killed by a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) in the city of Mahabad. This sparked massive outcry from the Kurdish community over the abuses and poor treatment of the Kurds perpetrated by the Islamic Republic. Protests immediately erupted with 86 Kurds being executed by Iranian authorities for taking part in the protests.

In Iran Kurdish human rights activists are regularly subjected to torture and illegally detained, women activists are especially given harsher punishments than men. According to a report by Amnesty International, it was found that Kurdish activists are regularly detained, and then threatened with rape if they did not confess. One such Kurdish activist, Ajlal Qavami, was allegedly threatened with rape by other prisoners who were HIV positive.

Interestingly enough, Kurdish human rights activists have recently faced the same kind of treatment in Iraqi Kurdistan for criticizing the ruling Barzani and Talabani tribes. In Iran, the police use the threat of rape to coerce confessions from Kurdish activists, while in Iraqi Kurdistan, activists face the same threats from their own Kurdish brethren.

Kurdish protests in the city of Mahabad



Source: [The Kurdish Project](#)

Kurdish diaspora protests executions



Source: [Open Democracy](#)

Groups demanding release of Kurdish detainees in Iran



Source: [Center for Human Rights in Iran](#)

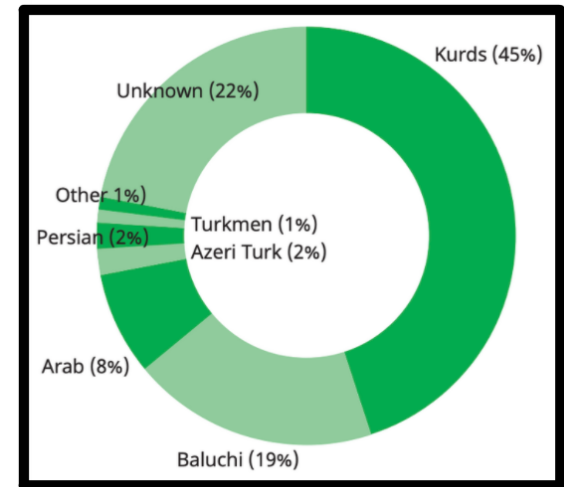
The Kurds' history of lacking economic opportunities which began during the reign of Shah Reza Khan has yet to change under the Ayatollahs regime. The Islamic regime has instituted legal basis for discrimination towards ethnic and religious minorities.

The 1995 Selection Law formally allows discrimination towards minority groups in regard to employment and provides for the the “Gozinesh Process”. The Gozinesh process gives employers a set of criteria to judge whether or not a prospective employee is eligible for hiring. This has been one of the attributing factors that has caused the provinces with large Kurdish populations having high rates of unemployment, with Iran’s Kurdistan province experiencing over 16% unemployment in 2018.

Reports of executions, torture, and other human rights violations continue to rise. In 2017 it was reported that over 100 Iranian Kurds had been executed by the government and almost 70 had been executed in 2018. Kurds are regularly arrested for protesting injustices perpetrated by the Islamic Republic. For example, a 2019 State Department report found that Kurdish civil society within Iran is severely repressed in that many Kurdish NGOs are closed down by the government. Those that are members of these organizations are regularly arrested and detained just for being members of such organizations.

In addition, restriction of the Kurdish language is still enforced by the government but is relaxed to a degree. For instance, Persian is the official language, but Kurdish language schools have been established, only for them to eventually be shut down by the government. In 2020, prominent Kurdish activist, Zahra Mohammadi was arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison for “forming a group against national security”. This is in reference to her membership of the Nojin Socio-Cultural Association, a Kurdish NGO that offers Kurdish language classes to the public. This is part of the Islamic Republic’s campaign of passive cultural oppression to non-ethnic Persian’s.

Political Prisoners in Iran as of January 2018



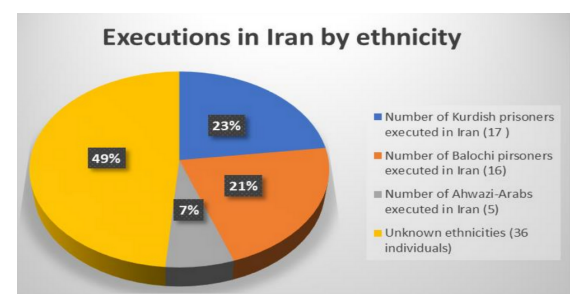
Source: [Minority Rights](#)

Zahra Mohammadi giving Kurdish lessons



Source: [Open Democracy](#)

Executions in First Quarter of 2021



Source: [Kurdistan Human Rights-Geneva \(KMMK-G\)](#)

Recent Developments

Rising Suicide Rates

In Iran face high suicide rates have continued to rise in recent years as the economic situation has continued to worsen. This has also adversely affected ethnic and religious minorities like the Kurds. This problem affects Kurds in all age groups and even those that educated with Between April and May 2021 almost 30 ethnic Kurds committed suicide. Some of the reasons cited for the high rate of suicide include; poverty, unemployment, and forced marriage. Both men and women were among the individuals who took their lives. Kurdish men and women have committed suicide through means of hanging, self-immolation, self-inflicted gunshot wounds, and swallowing pesticides. The Islamic Republic refuses to address this issue seriously often not recognizing its existence in the country.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Internationally, Iran has been one of the countries to suffer the most from the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic. The government of Iran has downplayed the affects of COVID-19 by underreporting the numbers of cases and deaths as a result of the virus. The government has even prosecuted doctors who have reported higher numbers than officially announced. Iranian Kurds have suffered greatly during the pandemic as they often lack access to basic medical services. In 2020 it was reported that provinces with large Kurdish populations have only 143 beds for every 100,000 people. While in provinces with large ethnic Persian populations it is estimated that up to 200 hospital beds are available for every 100,000 persons.

"Kolbars"

In Iran's northwestern provinces the Kurds are faced with extreme economic hardship due and have little to no opportunities for employment. This is especially prevalent in Iran's mountainous and rugged Kurdistan province. As of 2020 unemployment sits at 50% in Iranian Kurdistan with the inflation rate, not too far behind. "Kolbars" or Kurdish smugglers, smuggle goods between Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. Many Kolbars are educated and have been forced to act as smugglers with the lack of economic opportunity, earning on average \$7-\$12 per trip. This is not a new phenomenon as Kurds have acted as Kolbars since the Pahlavi dynasty. Some of the dangers that Kolbars face during the treacherous journey include; extreme weather, disease, Iranian border guards, and mine fields leftover from the Iran-Iraq War. In many cases Kolbars are regularly fired upon by Iranian border guards and in some cases killed.



Source: [Foreign Policy](#).

Fact sheet created by James Motamed and edited by Diliman Abdulkader.

AFK fact sheets will be periodically updated.

The goal of AFK fact sheets is to give an overall picture, it does not cover all aspects of the topic.

AFK fact sheets are sourced in the form of hyperlinks, if any links are missing please reach out to the AFK team and we will include the most accurate source.

Please feel free to use any AFK fact sheet as a resource.

AFK is the leading independent advocacy and education organization in Washington working to enhance U.S.-Kurdish relations.