

REVIEW

Kurdish Politics in Iran: Crossborder Interactions and Mobilisation since 1947. Allan Hassaniyan (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Pp. 236. Hardcover \$110. ISBN 9781316516430

Reviewed by Michael M. Gunter, Tennessee Technological University

(Received 30 May 2024; accepted 1 June 2024)

Iran's Kurdish population, numbering approximately 8 million, is second in the Middle East only to Turkey, home to some 15 million Kurds. Nonetheless, Iran's Kurdish ethnonationalist movement is the weakest in the region, including in comparison with Iraq and Syria, home respectively to Kurdish populations of 6 million and 2 million. Allan Hassaniyan, a lecturer in Middle East studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, the University of Exeter (UK), has authored a well-written book that explains why the Kurdish movement in Iran remains comparatively underdeveloped.

Hassaniyan shows that first Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, by crushing Qazi Mohammad's Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in 1947, and then the Islamic Republic since 1979 have freely and successfully unleashed their military strength to dampen Iranian Kurdish demands for autonomy. Hassaniyan then draws on firsthand experience living in Iraqi Kurdistan to reconstruct the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' many attacks against the Iranian Kurdish movement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the mid-1990s. As Hassaniyan reminds the reader, these were not the first attacks on Iranian Kurdish activists in the region. When the Iranian Kurds sought refuge across the border in Iraqi Kurdistan, Mulla Mustafa Barzani (d. 1979), a hero to many in Iraqi Kurdistan, turned against the Iranian Kurds by murdering some of their leaders, especially those affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), and handing their bodies over to the Iranian authorities. Hassaniyan demonstrates how Barzani, who sought to garner Iranian support against his foremost enemy, the Iraqi government in Baghdad, employed condemnable methods in his targeting of Iranian Kurdish leaders. Nevertheless, none of the examples listed in this book are new, having been well covered by previous studies such as those by David McDowall, Abbas Vali, and Farideh Koochi-Kamali, among others. The author's claim that his book is the first systematic study of the past seven decades of the Kurdish movement in Iran is therefore problematic.

In the 1980s, a fratricidal civil war between the mostly nationalist KDPI and the Marxist, class-oriented Komala significantly weakened the Iranian Kurds. Moreover, this fault was compounded by major differences within each party: in the KDPI this took the form of struggle between progressive nationalist leftists and "feudal" forces, whereas the Komala split between those who saw the Kurdish movement partially as a nationalist struggle and those who viewed it exclusively as a class struggle. In addition, the KDPI sought to engage cautiously with the Islamic Republic, whereas Komala eschewed all such engagement and blamed the KDPI for weakness vis-à-vis the Iranian state. Hassaniyan concludes that the fratricidal Komala-KDPI war undermined the Kurdish movement.

Hassaniyan's opening chapter provides a cogent introduction to the Iranian Kurdish movement from the fall of the Mahabad Republic in 1947 to 2017. When compared with the rapid developments in Turkey, Iraq, and—since 2011—Syria, this artificial cutoff year of 2017 leaves fewer unanswered questions, given the Iranian Kurdish movement's relative lack of progress. To probe this seventy-year period, the author draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources that include political documents, historical records, photographs, video recordings, and newspaper clippings. Among the more notable archives utilized are the CIA's Historical Review Office collections, the collection of the *Nashriyah* newspaper at the University of Manchester, and private holdings, such as those belonging to the Marxist revolutionary Mansoor Hekmat (d. 2002). Hassaniyan's concluding bibliography reveals his skillful incorporation of both Western and Middle Eastern sources, with the exception of Denise Natali's work.

The second chapter explores the emergence of Kurdish nationalism and its politicization in the early modern and modern Middle East. Casting a longer view over the Kurds across the region, Hassaniyan points out how the control of the Kurds' homeland by different political and economic entities have complicated their efforts to realize political unity and cultural cohesion. Chapter 3 next examines the sociopolitical and ideological aspects of the Iranian Kurdish peasant uprising of 1952–53, which is regarded as the first collective class-inspired rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan. Although rapidly crushed, by challenging the authority of the Kurdish feudal class, the peasant uprising of 1952–53 united class and national demands for the first time. Hassaniyan's reconstruction of this episode is useful for the reader. In exploring the underpinnings of the uprising, however, the author questionably maintains that the *agha* (landlord) could "impose the 'first night' rights of *droit du seigneur*" over the peasants until 1962, when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi instituted land reform (40).

Chapter 4 covers the KDPI's largely failed attempts to revitalize its movement in the 1960s through cross-border interactions with Masoud Barzani's Iraqi Kurdish movement. Chapters 5 and 6 next analyze interactions between various Iranian Kurdish actors and their methods of cooperation in challenging the newly established Islamic Republic from 1979 through the 1980s. Chapter 7 delves into internal disputes as well as the impact of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) on the Iranian Kurds. Finally, in chapters 8 and 9, the author examines the domestic and regional conditions that have negatively influenced the trajectory of the Iranian Kurdish movement between 1990 and 2017.

The US removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 empowered Iran. This development, when coupled with the Iranian Kurdish parties' long-term dependency on the safe haven of the KRI, weakened their influence inside Iranian Kurdistan. Reflecting on these changes, the author concludes that the Iranian Kurdish movement "failed to take advantage of the opportunities occurring during the past century, and it has suffered from *exile nationalism*," or massive emigration (166).

Turning to the past decade, Hassaniyan broaches *Rasan*, or the revival of the Iranian Kurdish military and political activities beginning in 2015 through revolutionization of the movement and mobilization of the Peshmerga (guerrillas) and civil society. He underscores the reliance on peaceful collective means of resistance such as strikes, hunger strikes, and strategic shuttering of the bazaars (marketplaces) and schools. Finally, Hassaniyan's conclusion summarizes the previous chapters and vaguely proposes a path forward for the Iranian Kurds: "new-thinking and rethinking of the strategy for the Iranian Kurdish movement, hand in hand with cooperation between progressive forces of the Iranian Kurds, would be the guarantee for a transparent and sustainable liberation struggle in Iranian Kurdistan" (201).

From the perspective of Tehran, the Iranian Kurds' ethnonational demands for equal rights of citizenship and local autonomy are provocative and antipathetic to state authority. Therefore the Iranian Kurds have suffered from discriminatory practices, such as underrepresentation within political and military institutions, the denial of language rights, and

economic underinvestment in Kurdish-majority areas. Tracing the historical roots of these practices, Hassaniyan points to the postrevolutionary show trials conducted by Sadiq Khalkhali (d. 2003), which resulted in the execution hundreds of Kurdish civilians as well as political activists. The Islamic Republic's agents also notoriously assassinated the KDPI leader Dr. Abdulrahman Ghassemlou while he was (naively) negotiating a peace agreement in Vienna in July 1989. Indeed, documentary evidence reveals that between 1992 to 1998 more than three hundred persons linked to Iranian Kurdish parties were assassinated in the KRI. Despite hopes for change, Iranian president Muhammad Khatami's weak leadership (1997–2005) failed to produce meaningful reform, or to open any possibilities for rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and Kurdish parties.

As Hassaniyan highlights, in every year since 2015, there have been at least one to two mass demonstrations that have pitted protestors against Iranian police and security forces. The most important of these followed the death of Mahsa Jina Amini, an Iranian Kurdish woman arrested in September 2022 for not wearing the proper head covering, at the hands of Iran's Guidance Patrol. Her murder led to massive protests throughout Iran that shook the government, albeit temporarily. In addition, the government's killing of *kolberi* (cross-border porters) and its failure to address environmental issues continue to stoke tensions. Although their political movements have realized few concrete gains, the Iranian Kurds continue to oppose the Islamic Republic's practices of repression. Hassaniyan's reconstruction of this resistance is sound, well written, and well documented. His book is recommended for scholars, government officials, and the informed public alike.