

How the Kurds Make the Case for Democratization

Dastan Jasim. GIGA Institute for Middle East Studies

The Kurdish cause is mostly fought for by groups that consider themselves specifically progressive and, in many cases, even leftist. It has quickly developed into a cause that goes way beyond the national question or a struggle for cultural rights against many forms of oppression like gendered or capitalist exploitation. This democratic nature of the Kurdish struggle has a lot to do with how their struggle is situated geopolitically and historically. Nowadays, many challenges are ahead for the Kurdish community to really prosper, but one thing is sure: Kurds will not deny these challenges. In this article, the author recounts the important participation of women, for example in the recent Rojava Revolution.

When we think about minorities and ethnically persecuted groups, we often think about groups that are not only oppressed as minorities but specifically by regimes that taunt the world overall with their expansionism, threats of war, or even straight executions of war. We think about the Uyghurs and Tibetans of China, the Chechens or Buryats of Russia, or the native Americans of the United States. It is internationally not hard to feel for them and to imagine solidarity with them because Russia, China, and the United States are all countries that have been involved negatively in almost all parts of the world right now, and chances are high that you have a negative association with one of them. You might even be victimized by the same military might as the mentioned groups.

One would, in light of this, think it is a given that these oppressed groups, in turn,

fight for progressive and democratic values, as it is often right-wing regimes and states that feel the right to occupy ethnic and religious groups. However, that is not a given. Many Uyghurs and Chechens, for example, indeed belong to Islamist groups and, in their oppression and plight, were led into the arms of radical agitators if they had not been radical before. Chechens have, for example, made up a large share of the fighters and the high-ranking personnel of the Islamic State (ISIS) and have partaken in the mass killing of another specifically targeted ethnic group in this world: the Kurds.

The Kurds are an ethnic group originating from northern Mesopotamia with a rich cultural heritage dating back thousands of years. Their language, literature and religion reflect their unique journey throughout history. The Kurdish language belongs to the

Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family and has several distinct dialects, such as Kurmanji, Sorani and Gorani. Kurdish literature, which is deeply rooted in oral traditions, has evolved over centuries, with poetry playing a central role. Famous poets were, for example, Ahmad Khani or the female Mastura Ardalán. In terms of religion, the majority of Kurds nowadays adhere to Islam, predominantly Sunni or Shia, although there are many other groups, such as the Yazidis, a religious minority with ancient roots.¹

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What is striking in the Kurdish culture, their dances, poetry and holidays, is that there are many elements from the pre-Islamic era, such as ancient Mesopotamian and Zoroastrian influences, which are proudly kept by Kurds. One example is the holiday Newroz,² the Kurdish new year, which has its roots in pre-Islamic religious practices that celebrated life by paying respects to the sun and fire. Although not religious, it is the most

important Kurdish holiday and shows how culture in many cases is more important for Kurds than religion only. Kurdish culture is therefore marked by layers of complexity and uniqueness to their language, literature, and religious practices.

Although they do not get as much attention as, for example, the Tibetan or Palestinian people, the Kurds are considered the biggest nation without a state. They are approximately 50 million people predominantly spread over Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. At the same time, there are also many Kurds living in today's Russia and Lebanon, as well as in different European and American diasporas. Before the creation of the modern nation-states, they were divided into the territories of the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Empire. They had already engaged in the struggle for national recognition. Their calls were not heard, but rather the creation of the Republic of Turkey and Iran was accompanied by large-scale genocidal campaigns against Kurds. The Kurdish language was wholly outlawed in Turkey for decades. Similarly, the consolidation of Syria, Iraq and Iran went hand in hand with the establishment of an ultranationalist state discourse. Early on, Kurds resisted this and created many national and transnational

1. Speaking Kurdish, the Yazidis form a sect so far removed from their Islamic origins that Muslims call them "devil worshippers." They claim, albeit in a mythical way, descendants of the Umayyad caliph Yazid, who ordered the massacre of Ali's son, Hussein, and his small troop in Karbala in the year 680. The Yazidis had their heyday from the 12th to the 14th-century, and afterwards their history has been nothing more than a long and continuous persecution, the last one, extremely savage, was made by the Islamic Estate. The surviving communities live entrenched in two small mountain ranges near Mosul, Shaykhan and Jebel Sindjar (Note of the Editor).

2. A holiday of pre-Islamic origin celebrated in the Middle East for at least three thousand years and is strongly rooted in the rituals and traditions of Zoroastrianism. Today, it is still celebrated in many countries that were part of the Persian Empire or were influenced by it, such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and certain territories of the former Soviet republics of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It is also celebrated in India by Parsi Zoroastrians and Iranians living in India, and is a holiday in Turkey, where it is called *Newroz* or *Bayram* in Turkish. The Kurds of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria celebrate Newroz, whose greeting is: *Newroz pîroz be/bo!* or *Newroztan pîroz bê!* (Editor's note).

movements, holding off their cultural and political extinction.

The mass murder by ISIS was only a recent example, while, for example, the most significant use of chemical weapons after World War Two was also waged against the Kurds in 1988 by Saddam Hussein. Therefore, it might not be low levels of oppression, too few deaths, or an overly latent form of racism that leads to the Kurds being forgotten often but several other factors. One of the most important factors is that, in contrast to the examples, the Kurds have multiple occupiers, namely Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The sociologist Ismail Beşikçi even went so far as to call Kurdistan an international colony, as it is not only oppressed by these four countries but by a global system that actively led them to be in this position (Beşikçi, 1991). Ironically, the four countries occupying the Kurds have also always seen themselves as decolonial, especially Turkey and Syria, portraying themselves as products of a war against Western imperialism. The Kurdish question is, therefore, for many, too far away, too unrelatable, and sometimes even strategically unfit to be addressed.

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What is unique about the Kurdish cause, however, is that, unlike many mentioned examples, the Kurdish cause is mostly fought for by groups that consider themselves specifically progressive and, in many cases, even leftist. It has quickly developed into a cause that goes way beyond the national question

or a struggle for cultural rights against many forms of oppression like gendered or capitalist exploitation. In my research, looking at ten years of data gathered from Iraq, Iran and Turkey measuring people's political attitudes, I found out that being Kurdish had the strongest and most significant positive effect on being pro-democracy (Jasim, 2022). Therefore, in my research, I have worked for a long time on the question of why the Kurds have, in so many cases, chosen democratic, progressive and leftist values in their fight against occupation instead of conservative or even religious-fundamentalistic approaches.

This democratic nature of the Kurdish struggle has a lot to do with how their struggle is situated geopolitically and historically. Naturally, one would think that the Soviet Union would have directly appropriated such a leftist struggle in the Middle East, as they did in Afghanistan or Syria. But while having contemplated supporting a few Kurdish projects like red Kurdistan or the Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad, the Kurdish cause was considered counterproductive to Soviet strategic goals in the Middle East. Thousands of Kurds from the Caucasus were deported to Siberia, the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad was dumped, and a deal with the Tehran regime was found (Gafarli & Güc, 2022, p. 117f). Deals with Ba'athi Syria and Iraq were also more lucrative than any cooperation with the Kurds. Of course, there have always been Kurdish hardliner Marxist-Leninists who could always find a new-witted excuse for why the Soviet Union acts the way it does. Still, many normal Kurds who were leftist could not sympathize with this reckless lack of support for the Kurds and instead for some of the most murderous regimes of the Middle East. Instead, Kurdish political

thought and practice found their renaissance in the 90s and 2000s, hence, in a post-soviet age. This leads many to cite the Kurdish and the Zapatista struggle in Mexico as the blueprints of the new age of leftist mobilization. Significantly, the 1978 Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) started as a Marxist-Leninist party and was shaped considerably by the Turkish left, but departed from this school of ideology in the early 2000s, with the PKK's founder, Abdullah Öcalan, finding more and more inspiration in the writings of the eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin.

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A truly liberated Kurdistan, Öcalan stated, cannot be achieved through an independent socialist state, but rather a revolutionized society, first and foremost, and a new form of political organizing through grassroots organization – the three central pillars of this ideology are social liberation, ecology and feminism (Öcalan, 2020). In particular, the last factor is one of the decisive ones when explaining why the Kurdish cause has significantly chosen the path of democratization. Aside from the disenfranchisement with authoritarian leftism and the new ideological discourses, the factor of women's liberation has always been important in the Kurdish struggle and has triggered many democratizing social dynamics. Whether it is the early Kurdish female icons of resistance such as Zarife Xanim of the Qocgiri rebellion, Leyla Qasim of the resistance against Saddam Hussein, the 1981 female Guerillas of the Komalah party fighting

against the Revolutionary Guards of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or Kurdish female Guerillas of the PKK founded in 1996, the Kurdish female struggle has not only been an empty slogan or a fancy advertisement but the backbone of what has made the Kurdish cause progressive by nature. Fatemeh Karimi, for example, describes in great detail how the female fighters of Komalah have always been a force in democratizing their ranks and actively fighting their comrades in their sexist views of the world (Karimi, 2022). The PKK co-founder Sakine Cansiz, in her autobiography, also describes how her fight against regressive elements in the Turkish left led her as a Kurdish woman to realize how deeply connected the Kurdish anti-colonial and gendered struggles have been (Cansiz, 2018). Not least, the pictures of the brave Kurdish female fighters of the Women's Protection Unions (YPJ) have made headlines worldwide, as they not only fought against ISIS but also liberated many women who have themselves been subjected to the femicidal genocide of ISIS. Instead of bowing down to an empty "choice feminism" as we can see in many movements worldwide, the Kurdish female cause has always stuck to universal values and fought for the self-determination of women instead of hiding the exploitation and oppression of women behind a cultural relativist façade – even if that meant criticizing the role of religion and tribal norms in everyday life. We can therefore state that being the leftist underdogs of the world, being part of the few leftist movements that survived the end of real socialism and even reinvented themselves, and explicitly incorporating a feminist movement have helped the Kurds develop such an inherently pro-democratical cause.

Aside from my quantitative research and the historical evidence, the political evidence speaks for itself. The most considerable pro-democratic, ecological, feminist and progressive opposition in Turkey is the Kurdish-initiated HDP, now running under the name of the DEM party. Equally, the most significant pro-democratic and feminist movement that Iran has ever seen was the consequence of the murder of a Kurdish woman, Jina Amini. It was initiated in her Kurdish hometown of Saqqez and ran under the Kurdish slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom” – Jin Jiyan Azadi. In Iraq, the struggle against Saddam and the post-war reconstruction of the democratic system of modern Iraq was powerfully shaped by Kurds. The judge leading the trial against Saddam Hussein even was a Kurd, and the first democratic president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, was a Kurd. And, finally, the first feminist revolution of the Middle East and the democratic forefront against ISIS that became the first multi-cultural and decisively leftist autonomy in the Middle East was the Rojava Revolution, also spearheaded by the Kurdish movements.

Wherever you genuinely want to talk about democratization in the Middle East (Vali, 1998), it is as if you cannot circumvent the Kurdish cause, and that is not a given. The Arab Spring, for example, started with people taking to the streets the struggle for liberation, equality and participation. In many cases, however, the societies themselves were not democratized, and the call for involvement only led to a tyranny of the masses or, consequentially, to the rise of even worse dictatorships. It is, therefore, clear that the Kurdish push to revolutionize and democratize society first before assuming some power

is paramount to understanding the success and failure of popular movements.

However, these gains are in great danger now more than ever. In Iran, we see that the popular movement has been brutally oppressed, and many people were either directly killed during the Iran Protests starting in September 2022 or were executed later in political and unfair trials. Iran is oppressing dissidents and oppositional voices not only in Iran but also abroad, and with its rocket program and drone war, it has repeatedly shown that it drags its war way beyond its borders. Kurdish positions are explicitly targeted so that many do not dare to speak up anymore.

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In Turkey, after a short period of optimism in 2014 and a short-lived peace process with the PKK as well as the rise of the HDP as the first oppositional parliamentary bloc in Turkish parliament with a democratic agenda, the Kurdish cause has been wholly securitized, and a civil war was waged by Erdogan against the civilian population in many Turkish-occupied cities like Nusaybin, Diyarbakir or Cizire. Erdogan has changed Turkey's already flawed and intensely nationalistic political system to a presidential system and has greatly limited the possibility of real political change. Furthermore, he has infiltrated all significant sections of politics and economy with his people, making political change, let alone democratization, almost impossible there.

In Iraq, corrupt political elites are working together with Turkish and Iranian

hegemonic powers that have co-opted their every movement. While Kurds, civilians first and foremost, are almost daily hit by Turkish targets, neither the Kurdish administration in Erbil nor the Kurdish foreign minister of Iraq are willing or capable of doing something about it. Pro-Iranian militias rule the country to a great extent, and many who fled the region because of ISIS cannot come back now, as militia rule and corruption make the country a silent battlefield to this day.

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In Syria, similarly, the population, mainly the Kurds, was left alone. Once celebrated as heroes in the war against the international terror of ISIS, now they are left alone with thousands of ISIS militants and family members to take care of. On top of that, three recursive Turkish military invasions of Kurdish areas in Northern Syria have not only significantly led to the ethnic cleansing of Kurds there but also helped the comeback of many Islamist groups that often directly work with Turkey and even are on the Turkish payroll in many cases. The hard fought for gains of the fragile Kurdish democratic autonomy founded in 2012 are in danger every day.

Indeed, one could choose not to care, but all four mentioned cases are imminently connected to what is happening now. Iran and Turkey are responsible not only for massive transnational repression happening here in Europe right in front of us but also because their reckless proxy wars are liable for the strengthening of Islamist structures

that do not cease attacking civilians in the very heart of Europe. The EU pays Turkey to keep refugees away from Europe but is actively engaging in worsening armed conflicts that push even more and more people to flee their homes. All four countries, Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria, engage in the instability of the region, the deterioration of the security situation, and the economic damage of millions of people.

If we go beyond this, however, letting the Kurds down is not only strategically but also normatively a great danger. People do not change their opinion for the better because it is strategically or economically better to do so. It is a delicate social grassroots process that has to start in people's local discourses and everyday lives and translate to a locally owned practice. People do not choose democratization because the West tells them so or because it might make them rich; they choose it because it makes sense for them locally and regionally and because they recognize their agency in making that decision.

Making that choice comes with many internal struggles. Not all Kurds are of democratic, let alone leftist, thought, and many follow reactionary ideologies. However, the intensity of not only the external political discourse but also the internal debate has helped the Kurds passionately shape their future while not bowing down to narratives of the external enemy. Being Kurdish often meant criticizing the treatment of women in one's community, while Kurdish women were tortured in the prisons of Turkey and Iran. Being Kurdish often meant criticizing ecological mismanagement by Kurdish forces while the occupiers of Kurdistan engaged in large-scale ecocide. Being Kurdish meant fighting against cultural genocide while

at the same time questioning what one's own culture is, what is worth keeping, and what maybe are relics of the past that bring nothing but suffering and pain to one's own community.

Outsiders watching the Kurdish cause are often not only confused by the many layers of oppression and the many actors in play but also by the different answers they get from Kurds themselves when asked about their political opinion on their homeland, their movements, and their parties. However, as much as some want to portray this as a weakness, I think this is the fundamental strength and the democratic essence of Kurdish political culture. It takes no power or force for granted; it does not easily bow down to one-dimensional narratives just because the national question glues the social fabric together. The Kurds never had one-dimensional enemies, forms of oppression, and forms of resistance; hence, they were never allowed the luxury, the privilege of one-dimensional thought. It is this setting that has qualified them to develop their own democratic civic culture. You will never get easy answers to questions in any Kurdish political setting, but why would you in any political setting?

Are we living in times where we can afford easy answers, narratives and approaches? When challenges on the level of war and peace, economy and development, ecology and sustainability are more and more entangled, can we expect simple answers to be anything but a lie?

Sometimes, when looking at Westerners developing a great obsession with the conflict in Palestine while being completely silent about what happens to the Kurdish nation, I cannot help but go beyond my first lines of explanation that the Kurdish cause

is complicated and hence more ignored. I think it just does not give the one-dimensionality and simplicity many are longing for these days. Are the Kurds perfect? In no way, shape or form. Many challenges are ahead for the Kurdish community to really prosper, and even if magically all forms of external oppression diminishes, there are so many internal challenges and disputes. But one thing is sure: Kurds will not deny these challenges; they will be named, they will be discussed, and first and foremost, other than other political actors in the Middle East, Kurds take responsibility for wrongdoings. They call out their own when corruption and mismanagement are at play. They criticize their leaders, reinvent their movements, and call out not only what their occupiers do but what their own privileged classes, their capitalists, their men, their chieftains, and military leaders do. And that is not a weakness; it is a power.

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In times when cultural relativism and a straight-up romanticization of the tyranny of the colonized and de-colonized has become the norm, I think the Kurds set a crucial example. People searching for an exotic point of reference might not get lucky researching them. But those who are genuinely interested in looking at the jungle of Kurdish political thought, approaches to democratization, outward and inward critique, multi-faceted development, and

most importantly, the discussion and implementation of universalist ideals will find a people that is at the forefront of re-defining the agency that people, no matter how oppressed or colonized they are, have. People who do not make excuses try to better what is in their hands, even if the powers occupying them are still there. People that do not think an occupied man is someone to find excuses for when he beats his wife. A community that does not lend apologies to parents who survived genocide but now reproduce trauma in front of their children.

No, none of these processes are comfortable. We talk about a constant deconstruction and reconstruction of reality, where the omnipresent mode of political practice through words and vocabulary that are en vogue is not enough, where people have to very clearly voice and pronounce what they mean when they say things, where they have to justify deeds not based on culture but on morals, and where suffering is not an excuse but a motivation to do better. To never take on the moral corruption of one's occupier to end up the most corrupted of them all.

Overall, in days when a large part of the world's population is affected by at least one

form of systematic oppression, I think this is the real question ahead. What do agency and responsibility mean in the framework of oppression? Engage with the Kurds; they might tell you what it signifies.

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