

Resistance is life

The Autobiography of Kameel Ahmady

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Resistance is Life: The Autobiography of Kameel Ahmady

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Resistance is Life

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Resistance is life. In the artistic and political landscape of Kurdistan, this is a familiar slogan. It is a message that, despite its widespread use and trans-partisan appeal, finds its roots in the political literature of one of Kurdistan's most prominent parties – a party that has elevated the slogan to a philosophy of struggle. However, the choice of *Resistance is Life* as the title of this book transcends political affiliations. It reflects the intrinsic meaning, the unadorned message and the very existential philosophy embedded in the phrase. It speaks to the beauty and elegance of *why* and *how* people live in this land. To forge a life worthy of living in such geography is a challenge – a resistance as complex as the lived worlds of the individual and the collective. In that sense, resistance, as life itself, is not confined to the realm of political or military struggle. It means, rather, standing firm against anything that deprives the individual of the right to choose and to live freely. In this reading, religious and customary beliefs, the constraints of society and faith, and even the cliché of personal or mental limitations, are all like ramparts. Against these, we must stand. *Resistance is life!*, we proclaim, weaving meaning into our lives through the very fabric of our challenges. Therefore, *resistance is life*, surpassing any specific or unique interpretation, is a philosophy of living.

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Foreword

On a rainy winter day in the solar year 1351 (1972), Baajeh Masoum, the neighbourhood midwife in the Marouf street of Naqadeh, brought me out of my mother Amine's womb. I was the first son in the Kak Karim family. Given the ingrained gender biases of that time, my birth, after two daughters, was considered a significant event.[1] They named me Mohammad on my birth certificate, perhaps hoping for another Mohammad born from another Amine.[2] However, I was called Kameel, and thus I became Kameel,[3] never embracing the name Mohammad.

I received neither divine revelation nor the burden of a mission. The name Kameel, meaning 'complete' in both Arabic and Farsi, became familiar to me and gave direction to my life.[4]

Throughout my life, despite all my imperfections, I have strived to embody the meaning of my name. Perhaps to reflect *Kameel*, I have never remained idle, persistently seeking and pursuing completion.

---

1 Although I do not agree with the gendered perspectives prevalent in traditional societies and am well aware of their harms, I would like to mention, before delving deeply into my life story, that the roots of these beliefs are embedded in the mechanisms of traditional communities. In such societies, a son is considered not only a workforce and an economic support for the family, but also a protector and guarantor of the family's security, alongside the father or in his absence. Additionally, in these cultures, sons continue the family name and, through marriage, expand the family, making the birth of a son symbolise the continuation and growth of the family. I believe these topics are not unfamiliar to non-Kurdish readers as well.

2 Ameneh / Amine is the name of the prophet Mohammad's mother.

3 Also spelled *Kamil* or *Camil*.

4 In many cultures, including among the Kurds, choosing a name for a newborn child holds great significance. Kurdish names often reflect their aspirations and hopes, with names such as Zhina, Azad and Kurdistan being common. Additionally, names related to natural phenomena and elements are frequently chosen by Kurds.

Now, having recently crossed the threshold of fifty, I want to tell my story. How many other children were born the day I entered this world? How many are still alive in this new century? How many did not escape the clutches of war, poverty and misery and have left this world? How many dreams and hopes have been shattered by society's traditions, cultures and rigid ways of thinking? Who has been able to experience a bigger world, or who has been trapped, becoming victims and victimisers?

I cannot concern myself with the fates of all those born on that same day in February 1972. I have my own story.

I am a child of Kurdistan, a land forever striving for freedom, with a history as tumultuous as the heights of the Zagros Mountains on which Kurdistan rests. No – it does not rest; it sits proudly alert on the slopes and peaks. Its wakefulness, coupled with much suffering, continuously whispers of freedom and liberty.

When I first opened my eyes in the Zagros, there were many girls and women being exchanged as blood money for men of the clans. Even men, despite their 'superior' gender and masculine power, were not given birth certificates, the first social right and proof of one's identity. These mechanisms of denial stemmed from the compulsory military service enforced by the Government. I remember the day Kak Karim – my father – finally went to the civil registry office and said, 'Give me an identity paper, so my children can have identities too!' He waited until his years surpassed the age of compulsory military service to obtain identity papers, so that he could avoid conscription.

Even as its narrator, I admit that parts of my life story are hard to believe, as if they are drawn from my imagination, while other parts are brighter and clearer than the computer screen in front of me. Indeed, our lived experiences *are* blends of reality and imagination, especially those that, due to their distance from our present time and circumstances, seem like melodrama.

The day Baajeh Masoum's skilled hands brought me into this world, my family was overjoyed. My aunt Esmer hurried to tell Kak Karim, 'You have a son!' Without understanding, I simply cried or nursed in my mother's arms.

What did I know of my significance to my family? Of my family's expectations of me? I never knew – not that day, nor in the years that followed. I did not know the trials that awaited my homeland and its

people. I did not know what I would be searching for when I toddled along the village pathways, or when, as a grown man, I hiked the smugglers' pathways through treacherous mountains, fleeing a corrupt regime.

Even today, I wonder if I truly understand. That is why I have written and written, and perhaps I still do not know!

Stories usually begin with arrivals, but I am going to speak of departures. Departures are integral to my story – journeys sparked by compulsion or choice, necessity or desire, subjugation or freedom.

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Acknowledgement and Appreciation

Every individual, because of the social nature of the human species, inevitably has a dialectical relationship with numerous economic, social, cultural and political structures. In narrating the past, I too was obliged to face not only my own history, but also the economic, social, cultural and political histories of the city, country, region and world that affected the lives of myself and my family. Therefore, this book, in addition to being an individual memoir, covers aspects of the contemporary history of Kurdistan and Iran, which has probably remained unwritten from the perspectives of historians and sociologists; it also presents an image of the social and political anthropology of the region.

At present, the Farsi version of this work is made available electronically and free of charge to all interested people, researchers and readers, and its English and Kurdish translations will also be prepared for publication soon.

During the three and a half years that the authorship, arrangement and compilation of this work took, many people participated and collaborated with me, and I am grateful for the active presence of each and every one of them. That includes some institutions and organisations; people who gave considerable advice on the local, national, regional and global levels and checked the validity of the data and information; a number of the elderly survivors of the region; senior members of my family and experienced acquaintances, who, by transferring memories of experiences and narrating the subjective and objective content of their lived histories, revived parts of the hidden background of the region; and reviewers, translators, advisors, designers, editors and all the friends who contributed

to the process of writing, researching, compiling and publishing and whose support and companionship was effective in advancing and augmenting the content of this work. I am grateful for the affection and kindness of my family, who, with patience, endured my absences and put their hearts and souls into it, and whose advice and collaboration enriched the content of the work. I offer my thanks to every one of these comrades, and I hope that the fruit of this work will illuminate the horizons of peace and pave the way for unity in building a brighter future.

The names of all the contributors do not fit in these lines, and some of the collaborators (who played essential roles in the accomplishment of this work), due to work conditions and other justified issues, do not wish me to mention their names, but I embrace all of them and my other companions with humility and have kept their thoughts in this collection. It is necessary to mention some of the colleagues, in particular, and to praise their patience in enduring the ups and downs of the work: I press your hands, dear fellow travellers, with affection and wish for your thoughts an ever-higher ascent and continuous perfume.

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Part One: The Unceasing Struggle

Introduction

It seems that departures are hereditary. You might want to stay and shape your future days in one corner of the world, but the call to depart won't leave you be. It calls you, whether you hear it or not, and you find yourself on a path. Sometimes I reflect on these thoughts and conclude, 'Perhaps departures are in some people's blood; it's a destined fate that you have no choice but to face.' 'Departure', however, hasn't always meant moving from one place to another. Sometimes, it's a significant inner journey. I don't know if my ancestors only wandered geographically from one place to another, or if their travels were internal as well, but I know I have experienced both extensively.

It feels as if travel chooses its people. It seems to point at you, saying, 'You're not meant to stay where your heart is.' Then your heart is torn between staying and departing. You know you're connected to the people of your homeland, like a young plant needing soil, water and sunlight, but you have no choice but to depart home and settle in distant places. It seems that the ambiguity between staying and departing is always intertwined with me, with us and with the inhabitants of my homeland, and the social life of this land has always been interwoven with escape and migration.

I spoke of my ancestors and their continuous and persistent departures. Hereditary departures that began two centuries ago and have reached me. To recount my story, I must take you back about two hundred years to show you how my ancestors moved from region to region and village to village for various reasons, and how the heavy shadow of 'departure' has never abandoned us. I don't know much about the outcomes of these past departures, but I am fortunate to have continued their stories, having heard many tales and narratives about them from my elders and committed them to memory. These stories, or rather roots, have always lingered in a corner of my mind, and along the roads and paths of life, I have recalled them. Sometimes I have even traversed the same paths along which my ancestors fought and migrated.

To recount my life, I will first take you to the background and living environment. Thus, in this Part One, I will speak of my family background, the culture and geography of the region, and even the politics and people in my life. I will talk about the 'significant others' in my life – those who

have greatly contributed to who I am today. You might think that some of this information is not very useful, but the people in this chapter, both tangible and intangible, are present throughout the book. They stay with you until the end, just as they have journeyed with me in this world for a lifetime.

Chapter One: Migrations

The stories my elders told transported me to Qamtara.[1] In my imagination, I travelled to Mahal,[2] a place where many of my ancestors are rooted.

Two centuries ago, in the mid-11th century of the solar calendar, two brothers named Rasul and Mohammad, known as Rasuali and Hamadali, lived in Mahal. The suffix —*ali* is a nickname that has fascinating roots in the beliefs and customs of this land. Until just a century ago in Iran, we were without birth certificates, and people were known by their professions, skills or distinct traits, just like these two brothers.

If you are not familiar with the Kurdish language and culture, you might not know the belief behind the suffix of these two brothers' names or why the people of Mahal called them Rasuali and Hamadali. Belief in supernatural beings is historically common in most cultures and ethnic groups. Kurds referred to one of these beings as *Al* or *Shavah*. Apparently, this being, Al, would appear to women after they'd given birth and, attacking the newborn, would take its life!

In common belief, a few individuals had the skill to capture these supernatural beings with hooked needles. These individuals were called *al-gir* ('genie-catcher' or 'exorcist').[3] In those days, if someone had the

1 A village in the Central District of Mahabad County, located in West Azerbaijan Province, Iran. The Tappeh-Qala (meaning 'Castle Hill'), situated in the south-east of Qamtara village, is one of Iran's national heritage sites in Mahabad. Its history dates back to the 10th century CE, and it is registered under the number 15981 in Iran's historical records.

2 An area situated between Mahabad and Bukan.

3 *Al* (in Farsi) and *Shavah* (in Kurdish) are two synonymous names for a supernatural being (*jinn*) that attacks newborns in their first hours of life, stealing their souls. Although Al is sometimes heard in Kurdish as well, Shavah is specifically used when this being attacks and steals the soul of a newborn: *Korpakeyi Shavah barduye*, meaning 'Al has attacked his/her newborn.' Shavah typically uses the darkness of the night to abduct the newborn's soul, which is why the room of a new mother (*zayistan*) is kept light for several days. Additionally, to ward off Shavah or Al, the Quran and iron objects are placed beside the newborn. The belief in Shavah and Al likely originates from Zoroastrianism and has persisted among the Kurds, although the belief in Al and similar beings is not exclusively Zoroastrian. The topic of Kurdish religion before Islam is complex and extensive, and discussing it in this brief context can be controversial.

ability to capture genies, they were considered very fortunate and were highly regarded.[1] Such a person was seen as possessing a strange power, and through them people, not only in their own village, but also in the neighbouring areas, would turn to supernatural beings to solve their complex problems. Their homes were always hubs of visitors, which earned them significant social standings.

From the perspective of the people of Mahal, Hamadali and Rasuali possessed this power. In oral narratives, Hamadali traps a genie in his house with a needle (hook). The unfortunate genie, begging and promising to do this and that if freed, was eventually released by the older brother. Though liberated, the genie remained in their service, fulfilling their requests. The truth behind these stories is unclear, but these legends are a small part of what my family and I have heard about our ancestors.

Hamadali and Rasuali were born in the mid-11th century of the solar calendar in the village of Khatoon-Bagh and lived there for a long time.[2] They later moved to the village of Qamtara in the Akhtachi-e-Gharbi rural district, which is part of the Mahal region and known for its stormy, snowy winters.

According to Kurdish historical texts and the oral narratives of the region's people, from ancient times until today, three groups or clans have lived on both sides of the Mahabad road: the Mahali on the right side (between Mahabad and Bukan) and the Mokri and Marzing on the left (east) side (the area between Miandoab and Mahabad). Until not so long ago, the main occupations of all three clans were animal husbandry, farming and gardening, and villagers still engage in these activities today. Oral narrators recall many stories of intermarriages between these clans.

Nonetheless, some believe that a group of Kurds were Zoroastrians before the advent of Islam.

1 It was a society with a fatalistic approach, which sought power not in reality and rationality but in supernatural forces. To address challenges, it relied not on collective wisdom, but on a collective spirit derived from shared beliefs rooted in tradition and religion, invoking supernatural beings.

2 Khatoon-Bagh village is located in the Akhtachi-e-Gharbi rural district, 20 kilometres from Mahabad city in West Azerbaijan. Weaving *kilims* (rugs) is a common practice in this area.

Image 1: Maternal Genealogy

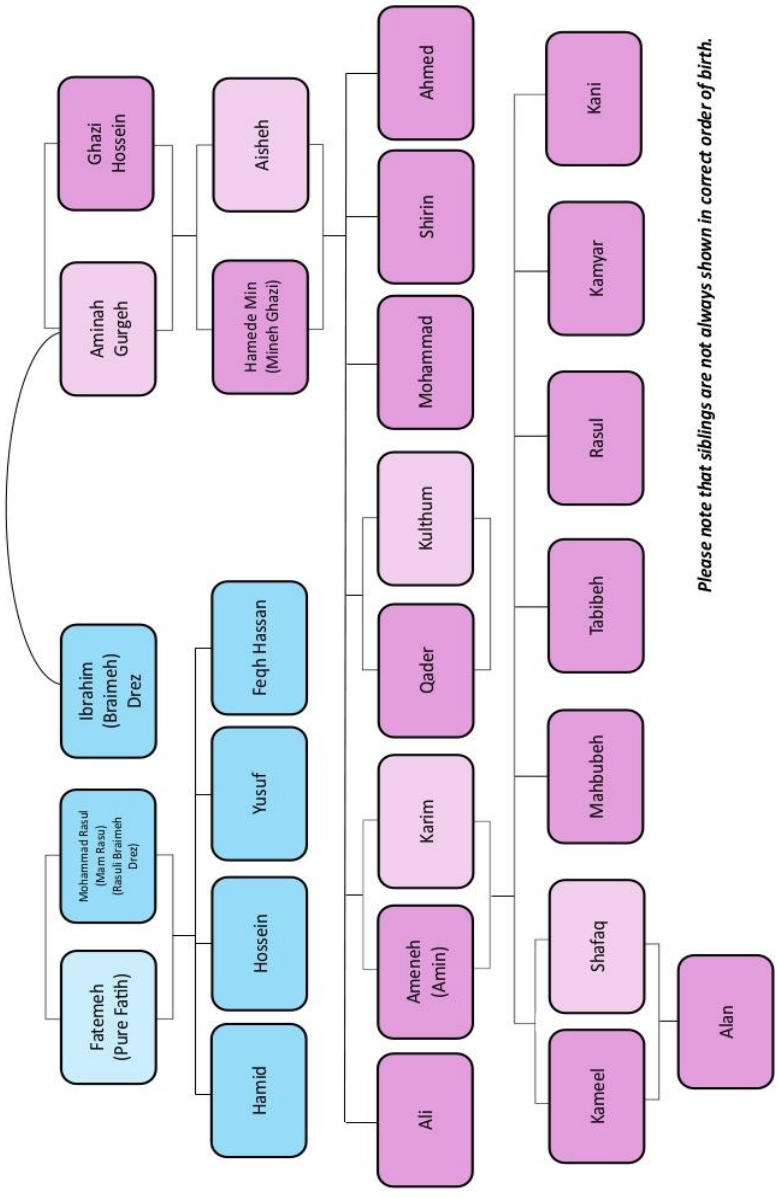
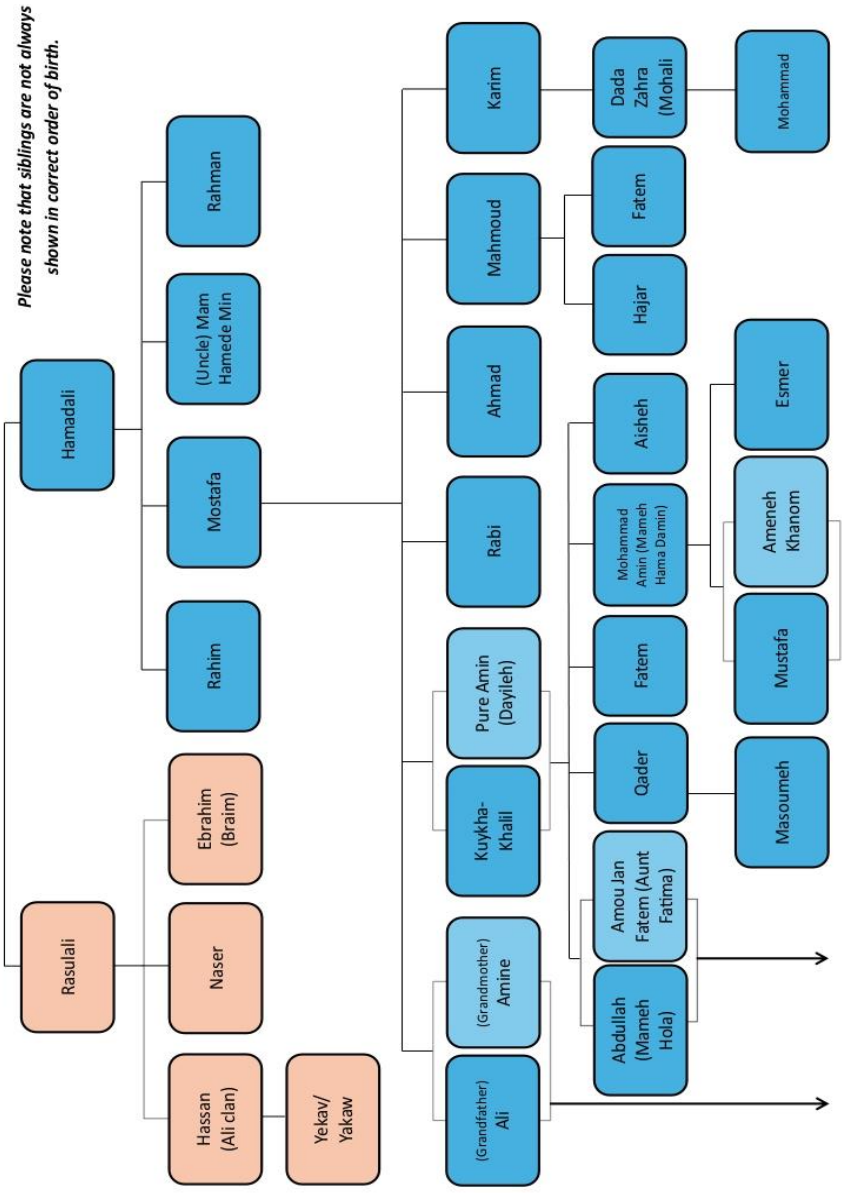
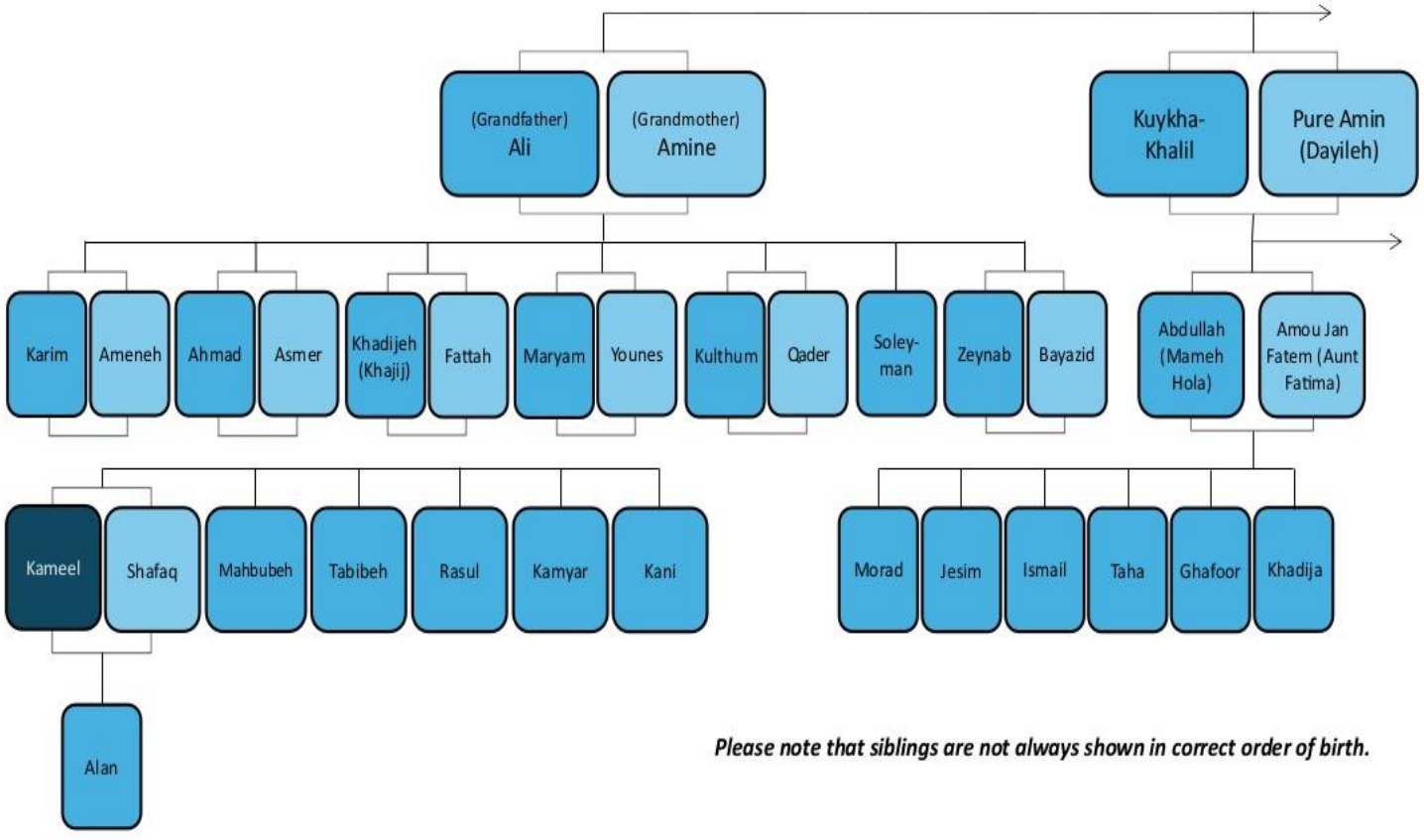


Image 2: Paternal Genealogy





Please note that siblings are not always shown in correct order of birth.

Where Have I Come From?

How can one study anthropology without grappling with the term 'origin' and all its derivatives? Originality, especially in terms of race, is a form of self-deception from a genetic standpoint. Humanity has traversed millions of years of evolution, journeying from present-day Africa across the globe. During these epochs, humans have intermingled with various evolutionary branches, and only in the recent blip of history have they settled in specific locations, putting names to their races and lineages. After centuries of migration, a group established itself in a particular place, naming it 'home', 'village', 'town' or 'country', with a flag and a government and passports that allow travel to similarly defined nations.

Today, some individuals seek to trace their ancestors' migration paths through DNA testing, aiming to answer the question, 'Are you the authentic Kurd or Arab you claim to be?' I used to believe that even conducting such a test was racist, because the fundamental question remained: 'Is it the flesh, blood and proteins in my body that make me a Kurd, or is it language, culture and civilisation?' I often asked myself if some of the beliefs of parties like Nazis and fascists were based on inherited genetics. However, while writing this biography, I wrestled with myself and ultimately decided to take the test to verify my family's oral history, which my elders had extensively recounted. How accurately the lab test would reflect these myths, these thrilling stories, and these migrations and interminglings with other people-groups was intriguing to me.

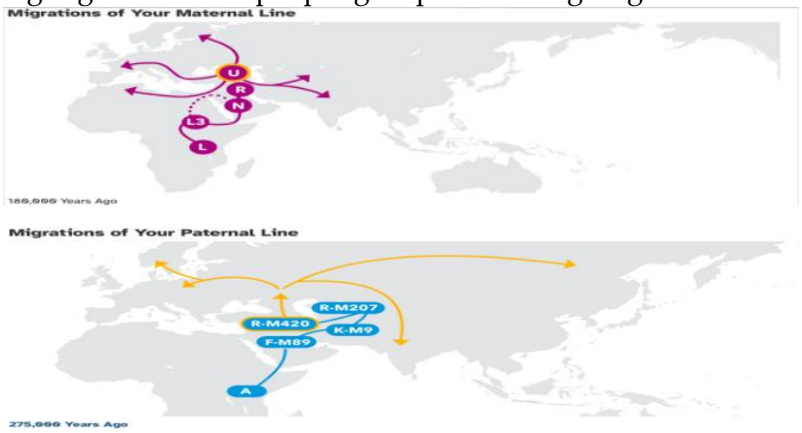


Image 3: The migration paths of my paternal and maternal ancestors – the results of a DNA test.

The test results revealed two surprising points: firstly, many stories about my ancestors' migrations and places of residence in the Mesopotamian region and present-day Kurdistan were accurate. They confirmed our longstanding Kurdish-speaking presence in the Zagros Mountains. Secondly, the test traced human migration from Africa to Europe millions of years ago. It showed humanity's survival through the Ice Age and its movement from central Europe to Asia, its eventual settlement in Malatya Province, northern Kurdistan, in present-day Turkey, near the Zagros Mountains, and then its reach of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan and even central and northern Iran. After several lengthy migrations and seasonal movements centuries ago, my ancestors eventually settled in the Mahal and then the Mokrian regions.

This test not only revealed the migration routes of my ancestors, but also the familial relationships on my mother's and father's sides, forming new connections. Interestingly, these relatives weren't only Kurds, but

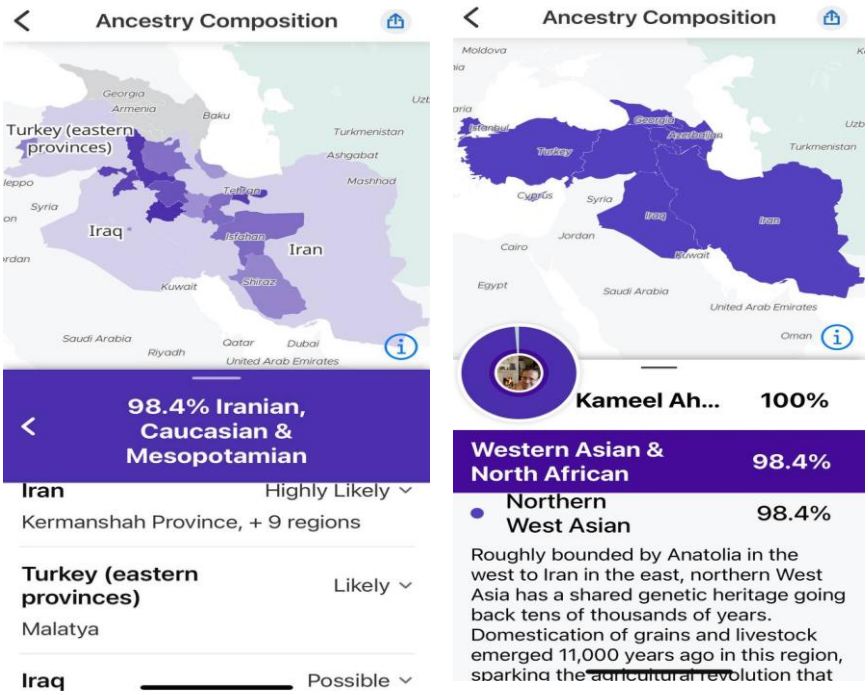


Image 4: The successive migrations and movements of my ancestors over several centuries from regions of Turkey's Kurdistan (Northern Kurdistan) to the other Iraqi Kurdistan (Southern Kurdistan) and Iranian Kurdistan (Eastern Kurdistan).

included Arabs, Caucasians, Georgians and members of other European and Asian races.

Returning to our story: the Mahal region was densely populated, and many of its residents frequently relocated. Like many in the area, Hamadali and Rasuali, the genie-catchers, moved from village to village.

During that time, landlords held significant power and could evict peasants for any reason, such as poor performance or disobedience. It appears that Hamadali and Rasuali were a threat to the feudal authority of the village lords, or 'masters' (*agha* in Kurdish). My ancestors moved from Khatoon-Bagh to Darman[1] and then to Haji Ali Kandi.[2] Their stays in these villages were short, until they permanently settled in Qamtara village.

According to my readings and what I've heard, two family branches descended from Hamadali and Rasuali. Hamadali had four sons: Mostafa, Rahman, Rahim, and Mam Hamad'amin (Uncle Mohammad Amin).

Mostafa, the eldest, was my grandfather Ali's father. Mostafa's other children were Khalil, Mahmoud, Karim, Ahmad and Rabi (Rabieh).

Ahmad died in childhood and Karim died young, and their names were later given to my father and uncle. Karim left behind a daughter named Zahra, known as Dada Zahra. After Mostafa's death, his eldest son Khalil took in Dada Zahra and her son Mohammad.

Mam Hamad'amin had no children.

Rahman's descendants, now known by the surname Rahmani, led by his eldest son Kake Rasul, moved to the Masueh[3] village near Naqadeh after settling in the Shamat region[4] of Mahabad. The family still resides there or in Naqadeh city.

Most of the Rasuali clan descendants, with surnames such as Khezri, Qaderi Aghdam and Soltani, reside in my maternal grandfather's village, Gerdashavan, while others are spread across nearby villages like Shavele and Vezni, near Naqadeh. Other branches of the Ali clan, led by their elder Hassan, were cousins. Years later, one of Hassan's sons, a skilled farmer

1 The name of a village in the Mahabad county of West Azerbaijan province, called *Derman* in Kurdish.

2 The Kurdish name of a village in Mahabad county.

3 Masueh is a village in the central district of Naqadeh county in West Azerbaijan province. Each year, the nomadic population of this village migrates to summer pastures in late June and stays until early September.

4 Shamat is a historical area around Mahabad.

who produced a bountiful wheat crop with one irrigation, became known as Yekav.[1]

Unlike most of the Ali clan's descendants, one branch of Rasuali's other sons (Ebrahim and Naser) did not at first migrate farther after moving to the famous village of Saholan.[2] They later relocated to Achidareh and Kanirash, residing in the Mahal region.



Image 5: Identity card of Kuykha-Khalil.

Today, their younger generations have moved to Bukan and Mahabad, and, through familial marriages, the kinship between these two branches has been preserved over the years.

1 In Kurdish, *aw* means 'water' and *Yekaw* means 'one water'. The Yekaws/Yekavs, who later became known as Sekber (Se-Yek-Ber), moved to the Sandus area with Kuykha-Khalil, the head of the clan. Some migrated to Lajan and, over the years, strengthened their kinship through intermarriage. Most now live in Naqadeh city and its surrounding villages, such as Youneslu, Dilan Charkh, Hassan Nuran, Halbe, Koyik and Sarukani (a village near Pasveh).

2 This area has a famous water cave by the same name. The Saholan Cave is in the village of Saholan, 42 kilometres south-east of Mahabad city. The name comes from the many pigeon nests inside the cave. This cave is listed as a national natural monument of Iran.

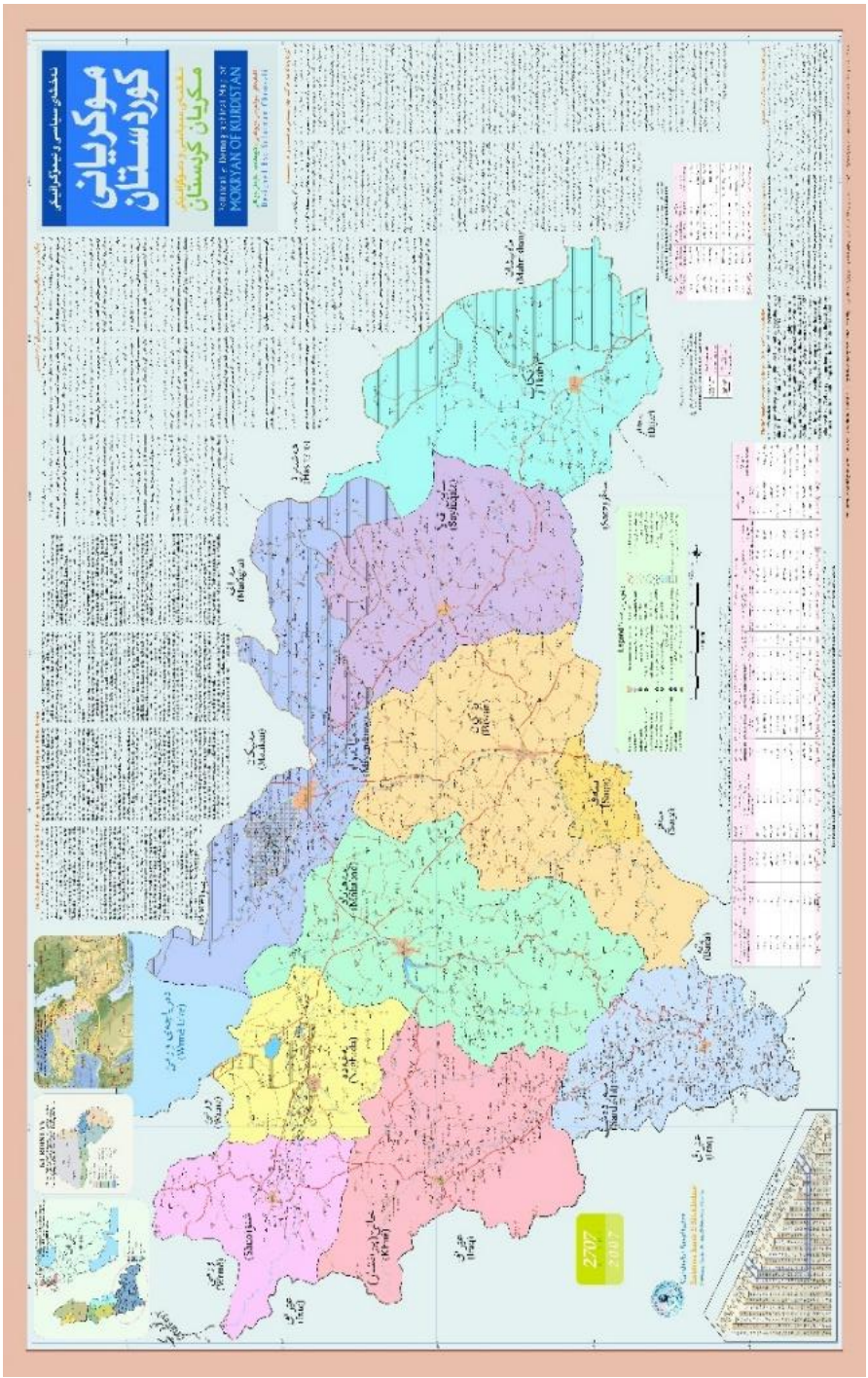


Image 6:The Mokrian Region

The Beginning and End of Kuykha-Khalil's Migration

The recorded date of birth of Hamadali's grandson, Khalil, is in 1893, but it is likely that he was actually born in 1901. He was the eldest son of Mostafa. Khalil significantly affected the destinies of many members of the Ali clan, especially the Hamadali branch and his own family, which later became known as Ahmady. Described by those who knew him as brave, intelligent, patriarchal and economically savvy, he was a commanding presence in the village.

He fell in love with a girl from the village of Qamtara and formally proposed to her, but her family refused to give their consent. Undeterred, Khalil eloped with her,[1] taking matters into his own hands. This act sparked a serious dispute between the two families, as elopement violated expectations and offended the girl's family, creating tension and a risk of retaliation.

Eventually, the families arranged a customary reconciliation to restore harmony. As part of this agreement, Khalil's sister, Rabi, was married to a man from the girl's family – a traditional practice intended to balance social obligations and mend relationships.

Khalil's bold and decisive act earned him the nickname 'Kuykha-Khalil',[2] a name that celebrated his determination and marked his ultimate success in uniting with his beloved. In this way, his personal courage and strategic thinking became a defining part of both his own family's history and the wider clan's story.

Let me briefly explain the types of marriage among Kurds. In the Mokrian region, 'marriage by abduction' used to be relatively common and still occasionally happens. There is also 'woman to woman' marriage, where a brother and sister marry another brother and sister; there is *navber*

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1 To elope in Kurdish is *radookeawtn* (ra-do-awa-ke-wa-tn), meaning 'to follow each other'. For a girl who elopes, *radookeawtn* means 'the one who followed', and for the boy, *halgertn* means 'the one who took', implying that the man is the active party. This custom, but with different names and characteristics, also exists among some Turkish and other ethnic groups.

2 In Kurdish, *Kuykha* or *Kokha* is equivalent to the Farsi *Kadkhoda* ('village head'). In the Kurdish dialects of the Mokrian area, and sometimes among the region's Turks, the small 'k' is pronounced 'ch', such as in the word *Kuykha*, which is almost pronounced 'Chokha' or 'Chuykha', although it is written with a 'k'.

marriage, where families arrange marriages for their children at birth; and there is also *Barkhwen* marriage, which I will explain later.

When a boy and girl desire each other, but the girl's family does not consent, sometimes the boy 'abducts' the girl. This abduction is a display of the boy's power and manliness, which he is willing to use when he cannot achieve his goal within existing societal rules. The girl, supported by the boy, decides to secretly flee her parental home, hoping to later marry during a reconciliation between the families.

Traditional society created a solution for the tensions arising from this act, which often involved significant sacrifice: to make peace, one of the youngest and most beautiful girls from the boy's family was married to a boy from the girl's family who might not meet the usual standards for a groom. This was supposedly to remove the so-called stain of shame. This practice is known as *Barkhwen*, meaning 'blood price'.

This method was used by many Kurdish youths to achieve their dreams, although it ruined the hopes of other young men and women.

From another perspective, this type of marriage can be seen as a gender-based struggle by girls against familial and societal authority, which is often met with severe consequences. It can be viewed as a counter to arranged marriages, which were common at the time, when the choice of partners was not always up to the bride and groom. Due to the patriarchal structures prevalent in most traditional societies, women were considered honour and property. A girl's elopement with her chosen boy caused family tensions and, in some cases, ignited long-lasting conflicts between clans. The girl from the boy's family, by accepting *her* forced marriage, prevented the spilling of blood that could come from the anger of society.

Khalil's siblings were also born in Qamtara and its surrounding villages. In their youth, after a brief stay in the Sandos region, they moved to Lajan, an area on the route from Mahabad to Piranshahr, bordered by Naqadeh to the north. As they hailed from Mahabad and Bukan, they were known as *Mahali*. Interestingly, my paternal grandfather Ali and my maternal grandfather Mine Qazi were both from the same area and were recognised for their sweet Mahali dialect, which slightly differed from other Kurdish dialects in Lajan.

Kuykha-Khalil was appointed as the village head in his father Mostafa's old age. At that time, village heads were the second-most powerful in the village after the master. They implemented the master's orders. They

managed villages the master could not reside in, resolved villagers' disputes and sometimes managed the master's servants, overseeing the collection of his grain share (usually 20%). Naturally, fulfilling the master's orders often involved oppressing the villagers.

The descendants of Hamadali were robust, and Khalil too was known for his strength. He always rode a Kurdish horse and was draped in a fur cloak,[1] with a dagger under his Kurdish sash and a Brno gun in his hand. Though his social position and that of his father Mostafa contributed to his becoming the village head, he was suited for the role. However, his tenure was short-lived due to conflicts with regional lords.

Lords viewed large rural families as potential threats and feared they would form powerful groups to challenge their authority.[2] Consequently, they would find reasons to disperse them. If the family leader was charismatic, strong and popular with the villagers, the threat was even greater. Khalil's popularity alarmed the masters, and when their conflicts with him escalated, they decided to expel him and his clan.

A messenger was sent to Khalil with a notice giving him only a few days to leave the area. Despite having older siblings who followed him, Khalil knew that staying would endanger the younger clan members. Thus, he gathered his kin, packed their livestock and belongings, and left the Mahabad and Bukan areas for Mokrian,[3] passing through Shamat and Sharviran.[4]

1 In Kurdish, it is called *peste*, and in the Hawraman regions, it is called *faranji* – made from both animal skin and felt.

2 As previously mentioned, the importance of sons is more evident in such situations.

3 Shamat and Sharviran ('ruined city') are historical areas around Mahabad. In the Sharviran area, which has been a habitat for living beings since ancient times, due to the presence of a river, there is an old bathhouse from the Safavid era named after the historical village of Laj, located on the eastern bank of the river, 21 kilometres from Mahabad. The bath's foundation is made of local stone, and the rest of the structure is built with square red bricks.

4 Mokrian is a large and historical area centred around Mahabad, named after the Mokri family, who ruled the area from the 9th to the 13th century AH. Today, the southern counties of Lake Urmia, including Sardasht, Naqadeh, Saeen-Dej, Takab, Miandoab, Oshnaviyeh, Bukan, Piranshahr and Mahabad, are part of the Greater Mokrian region.



Image 7: Qarani Agha, a leader of the Mamesh clan.

Around 1919, Kuykha-Khalil headed toward Sablakh[1] (Mahabad), a small town, hoping to seek refuge with the town's governor. Unbeknown to him, the masters had written to the town's chief justice, advising against accepting him and his clan due to their 'rebellion'. Khalil asked for permission from the town's rulers and Qazi Ali[2] to stay in the town or its outskirts. He even waited in Sablakh's vicinity for a few days, hoping to gain their favour, but he was unsuccessful. It is said that Qazi Ali tried to keep the large clan in Mahabad, recognising their economic and military potential, but the city's elders, fearing enmity with the masters who had written to them, rejected the idea. Having been turned away, Khalil and his clan moved to the fertile region of Sandos near Naqadeh.

Although he did not receive support from Mahabad's rulers and the chief's family, decades later, Kuykha-Khalil supported the recruitment of Peshmerga forces to back the Kurdish Republic led by Qazi Muhammad. He and some of his men pledged allegiance to the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, fighting until its collapse. They were known as *Qol-Soor-e Democrats* ('loyal Democrats') for their steadfast commitment. They even participated in the establishment ceremony of the Kurdish Government and fought in Bukan and Saqqez against the Shah's army.

1 Mahabad is the capital of Mahabad county and one of the cities of Kurdistan. Before the Pahlavi era, it was called *Savojbolagh* in Azerbaijani Turkish (in the Mahabadi dialect, *Sablakh* or *Sablagh*), which was changed to *Mahabad* during Reza Shah's reign.

2 Father of Qazi Muhammad, the founder and leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and the founder of the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad.

Kuykha-Khalil and his family briefly stayed in the village of Barani Kurd,[1] near the famous Hasanlu Hill,[2] then moved to the nearby village of Wazni. However, they did not stay there long and continued their journey, finally settling in Lajan[3] for a while. This area was under the control of Qarani Agha[4] of Pasveh[5], a prominent local lord.

Khalil's family experienced many ups and downs, striving for stability, settlement and security and enduring considerable hardships due to the masters' fears of rebellion and centralised power. The size of Khalil's family contributed to this fear, along with his charisma.

During their migration to Lajan, other relatives joined them, enduring hardships on the mountainous road of Meydan (between Mahabad and Pasveh), but Kuykha's armed men assisted them.

Qarani Agha was one of the leaders of the large Mamesh[6] clan. With his permission and support, Khalil moved to the village of Barkamaran[7] in

1 A village in the Mohammad Yar district of Naqadeh County in West Azerbaijan Province, Iran.

2 Located seven kilometres from Naqadeh city, its history dates back to 7,000 BCE. The most famous archaeological artifact found at this site is the Hasanlu golden bowl from the Iron Age, currently housed in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran. Excavations began in 1934 by an antique dealer and continued with 22 digs from 1956 to 1978 by a University of Pennsylvania team, uncovering sections of the south-western hill and revealing a fortress and fortifications.

3 Located between the cities of Naqadeh and Piranshahr, with the road from Piranshahr to Mahabad passing through it.

4 Qarani Agha, son of Mohammad Amin Agha and a prominent landowner and occasional government official who died in 1946 in Pasveh. He supported Qazi Muhammad and the establishment of the Kurdish Republic. Some Mangur, Mamesh and Dehbokri clans initially had conflicts with Qazi Muhammad but eventually supported his government. After Qarani Agha's death, Qazi Muhammad, accompanied by a high-ranking delegation from the Kurdish Government, attended his funeral.

5 A large village (in Kurdish, *Pasveh*) near a major garrison and training centre, with a historically significant and protected hill. Pasveh was the administrative centre of the Lajan region and the leadership centre of the Mamesh tribe.

6 A migrant clan from the Hakkari region that was also part of the Belbas Federation. Qarani Agha Mamesh I was one of the most prominent leaders of this clan who, after the death of Bapir Agha I, took over the leadership of the Belbas Federation.

7 Barkamaran: a village in the central district, located 17 kilometres from Piranshahr. The Barkamaran Hill dates back to the first millennium BCE but is estimated by archaeologists to have been constructed in the Parthian period, continuing into the Sassanian era.

1923, becoming its headman. Life smiled on him again, and my grandfather, Ali, a skilled rifleman, became his right-hand man and constant companion. It's said my grandfather's opinions were very important to Kuykha. However, headmanship near the Mangur clans was not easy, as I will explain later.

My family lived for some years in the village of Kasa-Karan,[1] an area troubled by bandits. They were given the land to cultivate. Conflicts often erupted between the Mamesh and Piran lords and the Mangur clans, sometimes forcing Kuykha and his men to participate in those battles. Their departure from Barkamaran wasn't peaceful, either, involving a full-blown family feud that reached the village centre.

In the spring of 1936, my grandfather married my grandmother, Amine, who was from the nearby village of Azad,[2] near Mahabad. They had three sons and four daughters. According to records,[3] my aunt Khadijeh was born in 1944, my father Karim in 1947 (coinciding with the execution of Qazi Muhammad and his companions) and, two years later, my uncle Ahmad was born in Barkamaran. My other aunts, Maryam and Kulthum, were born in Pasveh, and my uncle Soleyman (who died in childhood) and my youngest aunt Zeynab were born in the large village of Jaldian.

Some of the Rasuali clan decided to stay in the villages of Barkamaran and Kasa-Karan. One branch of these residents was my maternal grandfather's family, who settled in Gerdashavan.[4] The rest moved back to Naqadeh and the village of Wazni, where they had lived previously. At some point, the relationship between Kuykha-Khalil and his brothers soured due to conflicts, prompting my grandfather Ali, Mahmoud and

1 Kasa-Karan (in Kurdish, *Kasekeran*): a village located 15 kilometres from Piranshahr, situated in the Lajan rural district.

2 Azad: a village in the central district of Mahabad, 22 kilometres from Mahabad city, located in the Mokrian-e Sharqi rural district.

3 Many birth dates may be incorrect, because most people were registered for a birth certificate years later.

4 Gerdashavan: a Kurdish name meaning 'the miller's hill', referring to an ancient area dating back to the fourth millennium BCE. The village of Gerdashavan is in the central district, 16 kilometres from Piranshahr. The hill in the middle of the village is a historical site, and any excavation is prohibited. This site, known as Gerdashavan Hill, is of special significance due to its nine-metre-thick deposits and four architectural phases. No similar site in Iran from the fourth millennium BCE with such a significant accumulation height has been reported.

Rabi to separate from Khalil. My grandfather settled in the village of Eshnozang[1] with his inheritance.

A few years later, Khalil moved to the village of Shinabad,[2] near Piranshahr,[3] which had only two neighbourhoods, Zargatan and Kohneh Khaneh. He was invited by the prominent Piran lords,[4] Qarani Agha and his father Mohammad Amin Agha, son of Hassan Agha Piran,[5] to become the village headman and engage in trade.

As I mentioned, Khalil was known for his economic acumen and had planned his migration strategically. The establishment of the Kurdish Republic in Mahabad in 1945 coincided with Khalil's headmanship in Shinabad. According to oral traditions, he and the lords raised the Republic's flag atop Shinabad Hill at Qarani Agha's residence.

During this period, Khalil, along with some family members and Mohammad Amin Agha, with his three hundred armed horsemen, fought for the Kurdish Government. They spent time in areas like Bukan and Saqqez, battling the Shah's army in places like Qarabad and Sarv Arab Oghli. Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his men, who were the military force of the fallen Kurdish Republic, took refuge in Shinabad and its surrounding area that winter, leading to events in the villages of Pasveh and Silveh that I will detail later.

Kuykha eventually had a dispute with Mam-Qader Amini, the lord of Kohneh Khaneh in Piranshahr, and left Shinabad. It's said that the master demanded free labour from Khalil for a water canal from Kohneh Khaneh spring to Shinabad, which Khalil refused to give. Furthermore, Qarani

1 Eshnozang: a village located 14 kilometres from Piranshahr, situated in the Lajan rural district.

2 Shinaveh: a large village in the central district, located two kilometres from Piranshahr.

3 Piranshahr: located in Mokrian, Iranian Kurdistan, south-west of West Azerbaijan province, only five kilometres from Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, with the Haji Omran international border crossing and large military garrisons. With a population of over 100,000, Piranshahr is a Kurdish-speaking city. It is renowned for its green-and-white granite, has a history dating back 8,000 years to the Bronze and Iron Ages, and has visible traces of the Mana civilization.

4 The Piran clan migrated approximately 470 years ago from the village of Piran in the Julamerk Hakkari region (where Sheikh Said Piran resided), under the leadership of Emir Khan or Sheikh Amir Belbas, to the Lajan Piranshahr area, settling in the old Lajan village.

5 Hamadamin Agha, Qarani Agha, Hassan Agha.

Agha allegedly took Khalil's tobacco harvest to Mahabad for sale but withheld the full payment. These actions exacerbated conflicts, forcing Khalil to make a significant decision: to end his constant migrations.

Khalil knew his tribe had grown and he had aged, making it difficult to manage such a large group. He decided to use his savings to change their way of life and settle in a city. Thus, he moved his sons and grandchildren from Piranshahr and its surrounding villages to Naqadeh. In 1951, he sold several hundred sheep and goats and purchased three houses with large courtyards on Khayyam Street in Naqadeh from a Jewish family.[1]

Although his family lived in the city, Khalil and my father continued working in the nearby villages. Their life in Naqadeh was a new beginning, marking the end of the long journeys of the Rasuali clan, though the memories of their migrations remained.

My uncle Qader, the second son of Kuykha-Khalil, recounted that Qarani Agha would sometimes come to the caravanserai. Sitting on the veranda, smoking his pipe, he would jokingly say loudly, 'Khalil, it was I who made you into such a man. If I hadn't taken your tobacco money, you would never have become a city dweller and the owner of a caravanserai.'

Blond, Blue-Eyed People

I mentioned earlier that fortune had smiled upon Khalil in Pasveh. Pasveh is a large village that, according to Yaqut al-Hamawi in his *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, was a city with the same name a thousand years ago. This information is also found in the well-known book *Marasid al-Ittila* by Abdul-Haq Baghdadi.

1 The presence of Jews in Kurdistan dates back to the 7th century BCE and the Babylonian exile. They typically resided in the mountainous regions of northern Iraq, north-eastern Syria, south-eastern Turkey, and north-eastern Iran. Over time, a cultural fusion occurred. Kurdish Jews not only spoke Kurdish, but also began writing some texts in Kurdish using Hebrew script, known today as Judeo-Kurdish. During the Ottoman period, Spanish Jews were welcomed for their capital and skills by Ottoman sultans and migrated to Iraq, moving to Kurdistan when cholera spread in Baghdad. They formed a significant population in Iraq before World War II. Additionally, the *Tuhfeh Nasiri* mentions Kurdish Jews in 1890 who, along with Armenians, Sufis and dervishes, participated in the governor's reception (Tabibī & Sanandaji, 401.) In Iran, Kurdish Jews notably lived in Bukan. Unfortunately, comprehensive research on them is lacking. At least one hundred Jewish families lived in Naqadeh, mainly engaged in trades like goldsmithing, before migrating to Israel after its establishment.

During that era, most of Pasveh's inhabitants supported Babak Khorramdin, a commander recognised as Kurdish, who fought against the Abbasid Caliphate for over two decades. Although there is much debate about Babak Khorramdin's origins, it is recorded that he was from Azerbaijan and did not speak Farsi well in his youth, which indicates that he was not a Fars. Many scholars have used this as evidence of his Turkish origin, overlooking the fact that other ethnicities, including Kurds, also lived in the region. Regardless of Babak Khorramdin's identity, this controversy and the disregard for the presence of certain groups in the area have always been of interest to me. I believe this issue has persisted into the present day.

Pasveh is in the north-east of Lajan. In the north-west of Lajan lies the village of Jaldian, to the east of which is the famous Jaldian military base, near the three-way junction of Piranshahr, Oshnaviyeh and Naqadeh. Beyond Piranshahr, toward Sardasht, is the village of Badinabad, nestled on the eastern slopes of the Qandil Mountains, slightly below the Guri Dilanan, a site where, in spring, hundreds of young men and women engage in traditional Kurdish dance (called *Rashalak* in Kurdish, meaning 'mixed-gender dance') as they go to the Qandil Mountains to collect spring herbs. A river flows along this path, descending from the rich waterways of Qandil to the east and joining the Lavin River near the *Gerdimaymande*. The Badinabad River and the Lavin River form the approximate border between the Lajan and Manguran regions.

The Mangur are one of the Kurdish clans of the Mokrian region in Iran's West Azerbaijan province. They are a simple, nomadic, pastoral people whose livelihoods revolve around agriculture and animal husbandry.

They are scattered across a rural, triangular area that includes three cities – Mahabad, Piranshahr and Sardasht – and extends to the Iraqi border. They prefer the mountainous or elevated areas. The region they inhabit is known in Kurdish as *Mangurayati*, meaning 'the dwelling place of the Mangurs'. Although the name of this region has gradually evolved to reflect the clan's name, this doesn't mean that other clans do not reside there or nearby. The majority of the clan lives in two sub-districts: Mangur-e Gharbi, part of Piranshahr, and Mangur-e Sharqi, part of Mahabad.

Some attribute the blue eyes and red hair of the Mangurs to Russian or Armenian immigrants, while some historians consider them part of a clan

called the Kak Darvishi. The six main sub-clans of the Mangurs are Mirot, Aman, Zerin, Sham, Zin and Khidr.

The Mangur region's inhabitants are narrators of intriguing and sometimes tragic tales. Their social structure is tribal, with numerous branches and sub-clans, seven of which are well-known. Interestingly, women led five of these branches for certain periods, and the names of five of the seven main sub-clans are derived from those women. Although there have been attempts to trace the women's origins, their histories reflect the power and gender dynamics within their tribal lifestyles, which is thought provoking. Amir Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, a Kurdish ruler and historian, recounts that the Mangurs referred to their tribal leaders as *Mazen*, meaning 'chief' or 'noble'.

In the past, three clans – the Mamesh, Mangur and Piran – were involved in severe conflicts over agricultural lands in the Mokrian region. During these wars, Kurdish-bred horses served as mounts, and swords and spears were the weapons. These conflicts eventually led to peace, but the Mamesh and Piran clans sometimes formed alliances to defeat the Mangurs.

According to historical documents by Mirza Rashid, the author of *Tarikh Afshar*, the Mangurs eventually formed an alliance with the Mamesh and Piran clans called the Belbas Confederation (or Federation), waging wars against the Government and the Turks in the regions of Urmia, Sandus and Maragheh.

In 1155 AH, Bapir Agha Mangur, chief of the Zarin sub-clan, father of Hamzeh Agha Mangur, and an accomplice in the famous uprising of Sheikh Ubaidullah Nahri[1] (who was accused by the Government of banditry and raiding caravans and villagers) was invited by Ahmad Agha, the ruler of Maragheh, to attend a wedding in the city. He went with

1 Sheikh Ubeidullah Nahri (1826–1884), who traced his lineage back to Sheikh Abdul Qadir Gilani, was a leader of Kurdish uprisings in Hakkari within the Ottoman Empire. His rebellion is considered by some as one of the first efforts toward Kurdish independence and the establishment of a Kurdish state. From late 1879 to 1880, with the support of Kurdish clan leaders and Hamza Agha Mangur (the leader of the Mangur clan), he managed to control the territories between Lake Urmia and Lake Van. However, the uprising was ultimately crushed in December 1880 following an assault by Ottoman forces.



Image 8: Some of the tribal chiefs of the Mangur and Mamesh clans during World War I. Piranshahr, 1913.

approximately a thousand armed horsemen from the Mamesh and Mangur clans, but Ahmad Agha ambushed them at night while they were asleep, killing Bapir Agha and his horsemen.

The Mangurs are generally a sturdy and warrior-like people. Some of their leaders aligned with the ruling powers throughout history, whether during the Ottoman invasion of Iran, the Russian incursions or today, when some Mangur chiefs have sided with the Iranian Government against Kurdish opposition groups. Some of the Mangur Aghas – families appointed as landlords of the Mangurs by the ruling authorities in the last century or two – have gravitated toward the Islamic Republic, taking up arms against its adversaries. However, it is worth mentioning that some of them were initially drawn to Kurdish parties, including the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, and played significant roles in the political and military arenas.

Ali, Far from Khalil

My paternal grandfather, Ali, took a different path than Kuykha-Khalil. As I mentioned earlier, a conflict arose between Kuykha-Khalil and his brothers, leading my grandfather to migrate to the village of Eshnozang near Pasveh. He initially made a living by herding livestock and later returned to trading and transporting goods across the border.

My grandmother recounted, 'At that time, my husband Ali and a few others were the only ones smuggling in the area.' However, calling their work 'smuggling' is somewhat misleading, as it was more akin to trading and was not illegal. My grandfather and the others would transport tea from Iranian Kurdistan to Iraqi Kurdistan and bring back items like soap and fabric.[1]

Grandfather's brothers, Khalil and Mahmoud, along with my grandmother, were unhappy with his risky occupation. Kuykha sought help from the master of Pasveh to resolve the matter, even threatening to report him to the gendarmerie to deter him from trading. Yet these pressures had no effect on my grandfather, who continued his work until, one day, he was arrested on his way across the border. They accused him of aiding the rebels in the Qandil Mountains,[2] who were in conflict with the Pahlavi regime.

Grandfather was imprisoned in Iraq and later in the gendarmerie of Piranshahr on charges of collaborating with the insurgents hiding in the Qandil Mountains. My grandmother said, 'When they found out Ali had cooperated with the Republic of Mahabad (the Kurdish Government) and sworn loyalty, he was tortured in prison.'

This bitter experience forced my grandfather to abandon his trade and remain housebound for a while.[3] My father remembered his housebound

1 The same activity that was considered trade and business during my grandfather's time is now regarded as *kolbari* and smuggling. A *kolbar* is someone who crosses the borders between Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan illegally to carry goods like clothing, cigarettes, tyres and alcohol on their back into Iran to earn a living. The classification of this trade as smuggling emerged when the Government and other legal systems began to regulate and legitimise labour practices.

2 The rebels, called 'outlaws' by the Government, always found refuge in the Qandil Mountains. These mountains have long been a haven for Kurdish parties and hold numerous memories and stories of Kurdish fighters and parties. Even now, Kurdish party forces fight against the governments of Iran, Turkey and Syria from Qandil, which no government has been able to capture because of their rugged and sometimes inaccessible terrain. These impregnable and beautiful Qandil Mountains stand tall on the eastern and southern sides of Kurdistan, stretching from the west of Piranshahr to the sky-reaching mountains of the Jasooshan area in Sardasht. Qandil has always been a friend and supporter of Kurdish fighters, possibly giving rise to the famous phrase 'Kurds have no friends but the mountains'.

3 What my grandfather experienced is the story of all those who have been tortured and abused by power structures in institutions like prisons or under house arrest. Their bitter experiences seem to affect their spirits and minds so profoundly that they prefer seclusion

days and would say, 'He was not as fortunate as his brother Kuykha-Khalil.' In the early days of his seclusion, all his livestock and possessions were stolen, leaving Ali with five children and no job. My father recalled, 'One day, I went with your grandfather to take the cattle and buffaloes to the river. After lunch, we went to find them, but they were gone. Only a young buffalo had escaped the thieves; the rest were gone. We searched everywhere but found no trace of the livestock.'

Later, the livestock, which were quite numerous, were found in the stable of the master of their village in Eshnozang. Perhaps the master and his men had stolen the livestock, but my grandfather had no evidence to prove it and was too isolated to dare protest.

My grandfather, after a period of seclusion and depression, moved to the village of Pasveh. Luck favoured him slightly in the new village. The new lord, Aziz Agha, the son of Qarani Agha of Mamesh, supported him, providing him with a house, and my grandmother baked bread in the master's kitchen. Sometime later, the master coveted my grandfather's remaining buffalo, but my grandfather refused to part with it, and in 1956 he moved to Jaldian. The master of this village, Kak Abdullah Qaderi, was a cousin of the master of Pasveh, and they were in constant rivalry.

My grandmother said, 'When the master suspected your grandfather was planning to move to Jaldian, he sent the village headman to summon him to his great hall atop the historical hill of Pasveh. He said, "Ali Azad! I've heard you plan to go to Jaldian. You know of our enmity with the master there. Go wherever you wish, but not there. You also have no right to take the house gate with you."' (My grandmother, from the village of Azad in Mahabad, also noted that the master would mockingly call my grandfather by his wife's birthplace, which likely was not pleasant in the male-dominated and ethnocentric society of that time.)

Midway through spring, my grandfather secretly packed up at night, removed the house gate he had skilfully crafted from wood and, loading everything onto a few donkeys and horses, sought refuge in Jaldian. My grandfather remained in this village until the end of his life and even took up gardening for a few years.

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and inactivity to anything else. I believe this inactivity and isolation are precisely what the power structures aim for.

According to my grandmother's account, a short illness brought my grandfather Ali to his knees and swiftly led to his death. Several local physicians tried to treat him, and even Kuykha took him to doctors in Naqadeh and Mahabad, but to no avail. The doctors said he was suffering from a severe illness, possibly a type of cancer that could not be diagnosed or treated with the medical facilities available at that time.

They say my grandfather was a man of honour and, as the people of that time put it, a guardian of familial honour, holding quite strict views toward women and girls. They recount a story where a daughter of a relative eloped to marry a man and was later forgiven. Even Khalil had accepted her, but when my grandfather saw the girl in her father's house, he pushed her away, saying, 'You are a disgrace to the family! We don't want you.' Unfortunately, this action apparently caused harm to the child she was holding in her arms!

Ali was as fiercely protective of the family honour as he was brotherly. He had great affection for Kuykha-Khalil, and, even though they had differences for a time, knowing Kuykha had enemies, Ali would secretly guard his brother's house in Barkamaran at night. One night, Kuykha's wife saw him from the rooftop and rebuked her husband: 'You sleep at night while your brother stands guard with a gun. You must go to his house and reconcile with him tomorrow.'

My grandfather was a capable marksman and fought alongside Khalil wherever necessary, whether against the Mangurs or with the Peshmerga of the Kurdish Government and Mulla Mustafa Barzani's forces on the Bukan-Saqqez front against the Pahlavi army.

When my grandfather passed away in 1958, my father Karim was about twelve years old. He said, 'One day, I woke up to the sound of crying and wailing, and without anyone saying much, I understood that Father had left us forever.' They buried him in the Jaldian cemetery, and life became even harder for my father, uncles, aunts and grandmother after his death. Amine, left with six young children, went to the village master's house and resumed baking bread.[1]

Having previously mourned the loss of her son Soleyman, she now donned mourning clothes for her husband. Soleyman was the second son of the family. He and another uncle, Ahmad, contracted *khurkeh*, a type of

1 In Kurdish, *nankari*, meaning 'bakery'.

infectious skin disease similar to smallpox, which took Soleyman's life and left a lasting mark on Ahmad's face, making him blind in one eye.

After my grandfather's death, Kak Abdullah and his sons provided more support to my grandmother and her orphaned children, but the loss of their father was something my aunts could never easily come to terms with. The bitter memories of those days remain with them in adulthood.

The Revelation of Grandmother's Secret Marriage

After my grandfather passed away, my father took on the responsibility of caring for the livestock and managing household affairs. Later, Uncle Ahmad was placed with a family as a servant.[1] At that time, it was common for child servants to receive a specific amount of wheat, a set of clothes and some local cheese[2] annually in exchange for their work. My eldest aunt, Khadijeh, became responsible for the household chores of a man who had recently lost his wife. My uncle recounted, 'Thanks to the master's generosity and the villagers' religious beliefs, most people gave us their share of *zakat*, and, during festivals, they brought us wheat, barley and legumes as gifts. Our financial situation became better than some of the poor villagers'!'

My grandmother continued baking bread at the master's house and held a good position among the women of that household, including Begom and Maryam Khanum, Kak Abdullah's wife, and Khadijeh, the master's cousin.

Life went on this way until my grandmother did something extraordinary – she entered a secret marriage. Amine married a man named Sufi Mohammad Amin, who was from the village and already had a wife and children.

One morning, when Amine entered the storage room of the master's house, her life further changed. She found an oil tin full of coins hidden under the firewood and took it to her secret husband. In those days, oil was a valuable commodity, often hidden to prevent theft. People would smear

1 A young boy or adolescent who was hired to work in the house and fields from spring to late autumn was called a *kardar*.

2 Kurdish cheeses come in different purity levels – *meyle*, *panir*, *lorak* and *shirezh* – and still have a significant presence on Kurdish dining tables.

it with mud and hide it in walls. But my grandmother had found a tin of oil containing something much more valuable than oil – coins.

The story goes that two thieves, one of whom was a servant at the master's house, had gone to steal oil from a wealthy man named Mam-Mine. They took four tins of oil that were hidden in the walls, unaware that two of the tins were filled with coins. The first thief took his share and left, but the second thief hid his share in the master's storage room, which my grandmother later discovered and claimed.

She and her husband took most of the coins to Mahabad and spent them. Suddenly, my grandmother was like a new woman: she bought new clothes and even got some gold teeth, an extravagance she could not previously afford, and her lifestyle transformed. Everyone became suspicious of her, wondering what had happened, but when her secret marriage was revealed, they assumed her new husband had changed her financial situation.

When my grandfather died, Khalil asked Amine several times to move to Naqadeh. He even came to Jaldian himself and made his request to the master. However, my grandmother did not have a good relationship with her brother-in-law and refused, saying, 'When we needed you, you abandoned us. Now that your brother is gone, you want to make amends?' But living in a traditional society dominated by men meant she could not escape their influences.

Around the same time that Amine's secret marriage was exposed, my tall and beautiful elder aunt Khadijeh fell in love with a young seminary student and eloped with him. The student was studying at the Jaldian Mosque, one of the prominent religious schools in the region at that time.

When Kuykha-Khalil learned of these events, he did not delay for a single day. He sent several male relatives to Jaldian to bring Khadijeh back. Upon their arrival, the student, out of fear, abandoned Khadijeh and fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, not returning for several years. Khadijeh took refuge in the home of a relative in the nearby village of Balagchi near Naqadeh, hoping for their intervention. Eventually, Kuykha forgave Khadijeh and, despite my grandmother's opposition, married her off to a young man from the extended family of his eldest daughter-in-law. Khadijeh moved

to her new home in the village of Gol,[1] but, as my grandmother was with her new husband and her younger sisters were too young, she had to return to Jaldian for a while to cook for her siblings.

In the spring of 1960, Kuykha, unable to bear the situation any longer, sent his middle son, Mohammad Amin, along with a few others, to Jaldian to bring my father, uncle and aunts to Naqadeh. They were loaded into a truck – referred to as a 'Russian gas truck' – along with all their belongings and taken to Kuykha's large caravanserai. Thus, my father, uncle and aunts became city dwellers in their childhoods, living in two rooms at the end of Kuykha's big caravanserai. Uncle Ahmad, who was a servant in a house in the same village, had to stay there until the end of autumn, according to his contract, which was my grandmother's only solace after suddenly being separated from her children.

Naturally, the master of Jaldian opposed this move, but Kuykha's sons were determined to carry out their father's orders under any circumstances, and, since the matter was a family issue, the master remained silent to avoid involving the village.

With her children gone, Amine could not bear it. Her mind was always on her children, and she could not focus on anything else. She realised that her second husband could never replace her children's father and eventually she divorced him to move to Naqadeh and be with her children. Kuykha was estranged from my grandmother, having disowned her in anger after her marriage. In his view, my grandmother had brought shame to the family. Her frequent visits to her sister Fatemeh's home in Naqadeh and her secret meetings with her children only made Kuykha angrier.

The children endured hard lives without their mother. When they entered the caravanserai, which was almost like a military barracks, they gradually understood the meaning of being orphans. Only Khadijeh, the newlywed, who mothered and supported her siblings, provided some comfort. Although the women of the family tried to ensure the children lacked nothing, no one could fill the void left by their parents. Amine still worked for the master of Jaldian, who, seeing her distress, even dressed in

1 The village of Gol is located 28 kilometres from the city of Naqadeh and is known for its protected wetland, which is a habitat for rare birds. In Turkish and Kurdish, *gol* means 'a large pond'.

his best clothes and went to Kuykha to ask him to take my grandmother back.

Amine lived with shame for a long time, constantly trying to avoid facing Kuykha. She had done nothing wrong, but for years she struggled internally, wondering whether she had really done something bad and betrayed her late-husband's family, or if, as a young widow, she had had the right to fall in love with another man and live with him. Many women in this land fall victim to societal behaviours. The feelings of men and women in traditional communities are often sacrificed to social structures. In traditional communities, where the extended-family system prevails, the purpose of marriage is to increase the family's power and wealth, strengthen familial ties and enhance social cohesion. Within this framework, marriage based on love and affection is not a priority; maintaining and expanding social cohesion is. Even men had to accept unwanted marriages within this mechanism. This was why my grandmother's secret marriage brought such harsh criticism. Although remarriage after a husband's death was somewhat more natural in the Mokrian region than in other parts of Kurdistan, in the traditional society of that time, where marriages were always public, my grandmother had secretly married and left her children behind. Years later, her third marriage and the family's reaction showed that the sensitivity was not to remarriage itself, but to the secretive nature of her second marriage, conducted without the elders' knowledge.

Several years after Kuykha's death, on the recommendations of Uncle Abdullah (Mam Hawla) and Uncle Qader – both sons of Kuykha-Khalil – Amine married a man who had recently lost his wife. He lived in the village of Hewarbi, located on the Piranshahr-Naqadeh road. My younger aunts remember this period bitterly, feeling that they had been rejected by their mother again. Once again, her home was elsewhere, and they had to travel a long distance to see her. However, they also feel that, although my grandmother did not like her husband, he was a good man and behaved like a father.

After this marriage, everyone got along fairly well. My grandmother stayed in Hewarbi while her husband was alive, but always complained about the marriage, both openly and secretly. My paternal family and my grandmother's husband's family were related. They were among those

who migrated with Kuykha from the Mahabad region and still had good relations with our family.

In Kurdish culture at that time, the paternal family played an essential role in an individual's life. It was said that the paternal relatives were the backbone (*khezmi peshte*), meaning they acted as the support of the family. This was not said about maternal relatives, who were usually not considered very close in tribal systems. The fact that the paternal family was more important than the maternal relatives, highlights the dominance of gender-discriminatory structures in the social systems of that time. The prevalence of such beliefs (and proverbs that reinforced them) also had economic drivers. Family members shared a common family name and inherited from each other. Together, they formed a large and powerful group that could more easily resist threats to traditional communities. These threats included political and social dangers posed by *khans* ('chiefs') or strongmen in the absence or weakness of the law, as well as economic threats. In traditional societies, where institutions like insurance were absent, such bonds helped people.

Amine of Gerdashavan

My maternal grandfather was related to my paternal family and hailed from the region of Mahal. During the migration of Kuykha-Khalil, Mine Qazi was not in his caravan, but moved with his father from Mahal to Lajan. Those who remember the time say that, after Khalil left, the rest of that large clan also left Mahal.

My grandfather had a sick father, and after the death of his mother and the worsening of his father's illness, they did not stay in the village of Khatoon-Bagh. He put his sick father on a horse and travelled from Meydan and Mahabad to the village of Barkamaran in the Lajan area.

My grandfather's name was Hamadamin. After his father, Qazi Hussein, he was called Mine Qazi, with 'Mine' being a shortened form of Hamadamin. His father was a wise judge and a trusted figure in the region, a man who people approached to resolve disputes and conflicts. In traditional societies, where a modern judicial system did not exist, local trusted figures like my great-grandfather held high statuses and solved many complicated issues, including family disputes, neighbour quarrels

and even murders.[1] My grandfather continued down his father's path, and people, trusting his wisdom and fairness, came to his large house in Gerdashavan for advice.

Mine Qazi became the second-wealthiest man in Gerdashavan. He had a good relationship with Kak Mohammad Rasul, nicknamed Mam Rasu, a relative who had sheltered him and his father upon their arrival, although a subtle rivalry always ran beneath their friendship and kinship. Wealth was the main lever of local power, and with financial capability, livestock and land, one inevitably tasted power. Most residents of Gerdashavan have now moved to Piranshahr or nearby cities, except for my uncles and some sons of Mam Rasu's family, who remain in the village. They have houses in nearby cities but prefer village life and a connection with nature.

When they lived in Mahal, Mine Qazi, who was quite young, brought his sick father to Lajan to be hosted by the Kuykha family. Mam Rasu was a cousin of Kuykha's. My great-grandfather, Qazi Hussein, married a widow named Aminah, a relative of Mam Rasu's. She was a quick and clever woman known as Aminah Gurgeh. She had first married a tall man named Ibrahim, nicknamed Ibrahim Drezh ('the Tall') and had two sons by him. Ibrahim, Mam Rasu's relative, became a refuge for my grandfather, who was his half-nephew.

Mine Qazi proposed that he shepherd Mam Rasu's sheep in exchange for Mam Rasu caring for his father. Mam Rasu, a wealthy man with many sheep, agreed to take care of the old judge. They both remained loyal to their agreement. At that time, shepherding was not an easy task, and shepherds had to stay in the Qandil Mountains for months, but Mine Qazi made this sacrifice for his father. Because of this, he was revered by people until the day he died.

My grandfather, whom I called *Bapira* in Kurdish, was an interesting and reserved man. Like most Kurdish men of that era, he did not show his emotions and appeared cold, a trait that could be attributed to life in mountainous and cold regions. I remember he seemed to favour boys over girls and thus paid more attention to his grandsons than his granddaughters.

1 The roles of such individuals, remnants of the tribal system, gradually diminished in the modern era with the establishment of the judicial system.



Image 9: My father visiting Mine Qazi during his illness. Gerdashavan Village, 2003.

My grandfather initially lived in Barkamaran. His wife, Aisheh, my grandmother, was from the same village. She was quiet and simple, living under her husband's dominance like most women of that time. My grandfather's word was law for her. She also seemed cold to me, and I could not establish a strong connection with Neneh, or 'Grandmother', as we say nowadays. She did not make much effort to win my affection, possibly feeling overshadowed by my close relationship with my paternal grandmother.

Grandfather Mine Qazi's shepherding skills increased, and he gradually amassed considerable wealth. He was so skilled that he became known as a vet (*baytal*), recognised for his knowledge of livestock diseases. Eventually, as his wealth grew, he moved with the Mam Rasu and Kuykha-Khalil families from Barkamaran to the village of Kasa-Karan, finally settling in Gerdashavan.

Mine Qazi was considered a manly figure by the standards of those times, with a demeanour that meant few dared to oppose him. When he entered a room, women and girls would hide out of shame or fear, trying not to confront him. He was the epitome of those fathers and grandfathers who resisted changes to the traditional culture of Kurdistan, especially in

the villages – a culture that is now vanishing. One example of this culture is the separation of men and women during meals. In some families, even husbands and wives ate separately, and young brides would cover their faces when drinking tea or water in the presence of men.

Interestingly, most men did not call their wives by their names, and women often referred to their husbands as the father of their children or by other indirect terms. Only in private might they comfortably call each other by their names. My parents called each other 'Daughter' and 'Son' or *Keche* ('Girl') and *Kura* ('Boy'), which I found endearing. To understand this, one needs a deep knowledge of traditional and Eastern societies' views on gender roles, modesty and respect.[1]

The Non-Practising Judge and His Daughter

My mother was the only woman who had any influence over my grandfather and dared to stand up to him and speak her mind, albeit cautiously. She was his chief advisor, playing a significant role in all important decisions. She was often called Amine (or Amin) and was the third child and eldest daughter of the family. Her brothers and especially their wives were wary of her.

My grandfather did not form close bonds with any woman other than my mother and did not allow his wife and daughters-in-law to have a significant presence in his decision-making.

My mother was relatively short, with blue eyes, fair skin, red cheeks and an ever-present smile. Intelligent and capable, she exuded a somewhat cold demeanour. She was authoritative, responsible and charismatic, which made her the leader of the women in the family. She managed most of the tasks related to our large family and led others within the village's traditional ways.

When I speak of my mother's authority, it's essential to imagine it in the context of the male-dominated society of Kurdistan at that time. She was

1 One consequence of modesty in marital relationships is the lack of transparency in expressing emotions verbally. This might be why in Eastern cultures, compared to Western societies, emotions are more often expressed through body language than words. While this method is criticised in today's world for leading to misunderstandings and the suppression of emotions, often by men, it still holds a certain appeal for Easterners. Romantic poetry is filled with such allusions to looks and gestures.

someone who could challenge from within that structure the prevailing notion of women as weak and subordinate to men.



Image 10: My mother. Autumn 2005.

She always took the initiative for new tasks and decisions. During the summer harvest season, when we went to Gerdashavan, she worked alongside and even ahead of the daughters-in-law in the fields. Despite having moved to the city after marrying my father in her teenage years, she worked hard during the harvest season. In contrast, my only maternal aunt married a humorous, simple and passive man from the Mangur clan, a part of the Bab-Raso clan. No one ever understood the compatibility between them. At my grandfather's behest, my uncle Ali married the sister of his brother-in-law, in what was known as an 'exchange marriage'.

My grandfather was short and, despite his authoritative personality, very hardworking. He woke up around four in the morning every day, though not for prayer. He never prayed or went to the mosque, even in a religiously inclined community, earning him a reputation for irreligion. Some extremists even considered him impure, but he remained steadfast in his ways. He did not participate in social gatherings typically held in mosques or ceremonies like funeral prayers and religious feasts. I don't know the exact reason, but he was not traditionally religious. I wish he were alive so I could ask what caused him to distance himself so much from religion. Perhaps his close relationship with nature, having spent years as a shepherd, or his judicial knowledge, gave him a different understanding of religion. It seemed that nature and judgement together influenced his beliefs and actions, creating a persona that did not conform

to the religious practices of his time.[1] This non-religious stance was also passed on to my mother, who never prayed.

Mine Qazi would wake up early, while everyone was still asleep, to irrigate his lands and fields. By the time the household woke up around seven, he had already done a lot of work and returned home for breakfast. He would have breakfast twice, once at four and once again at seven, and then continue working tirelessly.

I rarely saw him sitting unless he was mending shoes and boots for his large family, sitting on his small stool outside the old kitchen. He skilfully repaired suede and plastic shoes, a task locally known as *sarga* (meaning 'cow's head') – melting and glueing old shoe pieces together with a hot iron. He was so adept at this that the patches were barely noticeable. I enjoyed watching him work, smelling the melting plastic, appreciating his precision and the sharp knife cutting the leather.

One day a week, my grandfather would go to town for shopping, but, unlike others, he rarely took a tractor or minibus. Mine Qazi usually walked the distance. After we settled in Piranshahr, following our displacement[2] in 1980, he would walk to our house every week, complete

1 In a traditional rural society, the structure is based on collectivism, with individuals' cohesion influenced by a collective spirit that is derived from shared traditions and religion. Usually, people follow these beliefs because, if they do not, they face criticism and ostracism from the community. Thus, conformity has a functional purpose for them. Consequently, in past generations, individuals who defied the village community's norms were rare, and it was uncommon for someone to bravely adhere to their true beliefs and not perform religious practices merely out of habit. In that region and especially at that time, such individuals were criticised, and public opinion and prevalent beliefs compelled many people to pray only to be seen by the village preacher in the mosque. This duplicitous behaviour, based on visible conformity, which is also considered hypocrisy and flattery for personal gain in a theocracy, became widespread in Iranian society after the 1979 Revolution.

2 In this book, you will often read the term 'displacement' or 'displaced'. While this has a close meaning to its Farsi equivalent, in Farsi it carries negative connotations. In short, 'displacement' in Kurdish literature means 'forced relocation' – moving to another city or village due to political conflicts or war. The Kurds experienced displacement both before and during the Iran-Iraq War. In Farsi, those who moved due to the Iran-Iraq War were called 'war-stricken'.



Image 11: Uncle Qader (L) and Uncle Ali. Gerdashavan village, spring 2009.

his tasks and then walk back to the village. He was an odd character who seemed to enjoy solitude. When the bell rang at six or seven in the morning, I knew my grandfather had arrived, and his arrival meant the end of my sleep. Groggy, I would move my bedding from the living room to another room, trying to sleep again, but his loud voice would keep me awake.

My mother would prepare tea and put some raisins and dates on a tray, and they would hold their important family meetings behind closed doors. My grandfather, who served as a judge for others, would consult my mother on family disputes and financial decisions. Despite being the arbiter for others, he also sought my mother's guidance on family matters. After their private discussions, they would have breakfast together, and then my grandfather would usually disappear, often having lunch with my uncles at the famous Hassan Kababchi's kebab house. Uncle Ali sometimes tried to bribe me to eavesdrop on my mother and grandfather's conversations and report back to him. As a child, I was occasionally tempted to do so in exchange for a tractor ride or something similar.

Uncle Ali, the second son of the family, harboured ambitions of power and was sensitive to the close relationship between my mother and grandfather – perhaps even envious. He believed that a son should be his father's trusted confidant, but his sister had taken that role, which was difficult for him to accept. Though he managed some of my grandfather's financial affairs in the village, he always wanted to know what was discussed in those private meetings between them.

Uncle Ali was handy, driving an American Shahbaz Jeep, always dressed sharply in shiny leather shoes, which we called 'Tabriz shoes'. After the other uncles left my grandfather's house, he stayed by his father's side for years, reportedly benefiting more from my grandfather's wealth than his brothers did, due to their special bond. Later, Uncle Mohammad, the fourth child, surpassed everyone, using his and his wife's intelligence to become the family's and village's wealthiest and most influential member.

My uncles and aunts knew how much influence my mother had over my grandfather and accepted her position. Their relationship was so strong that even controversies surrounding my mother's marriage to my father could not affect it, and my father became the beloved son-in-law. Much of my grandfather's financial matters were managed under my father's supervision.

My mother, the eldest daughter, dared to elope with the man she loved. She was the first in her family to move to Naqadeh after marriage, starting a new life in a city far from their village. Adapting to city life and living with a large family in a caravanserai, she experienced a new, multicultural lifestyle.

The urban culture and lifestyle that the Shah tried to standardise across the country changed my mother's lifestyle and strengthened her influence over my grandfather. Her intelligence also played a role in shaping their relationship. Most of her paternal family turned to her to organise administrative matters, and she served as their urban connection. Anyone in my grandfather's house who fell ill would come to my mother to be taken to the doctor or hospital. Due to these interactions, she knew everyone's secrets. She provided a haven for her family in the city, constantly helping them with her resourcefulness and guidance.

My father was a businessman, and his power and influence bolstered my mother's authority. He acted as a financial and banking advisor, managing my grandfather's earnings from the village harvests. My grandfather, distrustful of banks, like many people of that era, preferred to keep his money with my father. He maintained a notebook and received weekly allowances from my father, a testament to the trust and respect my father had earned. My uncles were all illiterate, which made my grandfather rely ever more on my father, who was literate and trustworthy.

My uncles and my mother did not have the opportunity to pursue educations in the village. My mother attempted to become literate by attending classes for a while, but the onset of war and displacement forced her to abandon the endeavour. She had the capacity and merit to achieve more with education and active participation in society, but that opportunity was never given to her – much like many other women of her generation, including my grandmother Amine and Aunt Khadijeh.

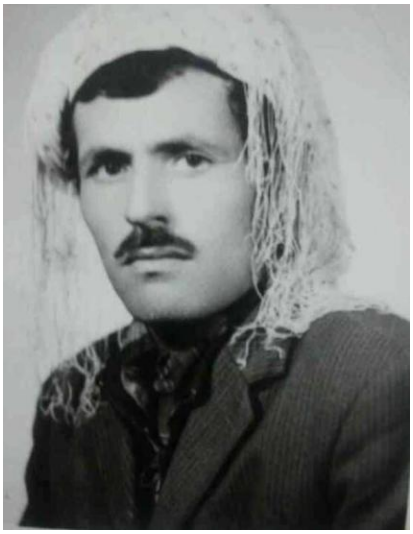


Image 12: My father in the northern Iranian city of Amol, 1968.

Karim's Heartbreak

Before he married my mother, my father, Karim, had fallen in love. He fell for Khadijeh, a girl from Naqadeh, in around 1965. Several proposals were rejected. After prolonged opposition and wearisome negotiations, the situation escalated to the traditional practice of exchanging daughters for marriage.[1] Khadijeh's family noted that Karim had several sisters and suggested

1 In the past, some families had a tradition where if a girl married into another family, the groom's family would, as a sign of trust and respect, offer a girl to the bride's family. This tradition, while creating significant social problems and numerous negative consequences such as divorce and incompatibility between the brides and grooms, served as a means of control and supervision in both families in the absence of supportive laws and institutions. It was as if the siblings were watching over and supporting each other, as they were all members of a larger family, and marriage did not distance them.

that, if their daughter married into Karim's family, two of his sisters should marry into theirs. In this peculiar custom, daughters were given as *barbahas*[1] to the bride's family. Willingly or unwillingly, they had to become *ben-peshks*[2] for their brothers and were forced into silence. Silence among women in traditional societies was commonplace.

Khadijeh's father proposed this exchange, signalling his reluctance toward the marriage. Mam Hawla, the eldest son of the late Kuykha-Khalil and head of the family, disapproved of the suggestion, asking, 'You only have one son; why demand two daughters from our family?'

Khadijeh's father replied, 'One daughter is for Khadijeh's uncle, who is single, and the other for her brother.'

The disagreement escalated, leading to a deadlock. Pure Amin, Kuykha-Khalil's wife[3] (whom the daughters of the clan called Dayileh[4]), a powerful and seemingly calm, yet irritable woman, had become partially blind due to cataracts, making her even more impatient than before. She did something astonishing: she went to Khadijeh's father's house and, amid a heated argument, exclaimed, 'Does your daughter have two holes that you're demanding two girls in return?' Naturally, this caused a huge uproar and permanently ended any prospect of my father's marriage to Khadijeh.

After these events, my father fell in love with my mother and they married.

Later, my aunts recounted that Khadijeh had confided in them, saying that Dayileh's insult prevented the marriage and kept her away from Karim. Khadijeh would always say with a mix of sorrow and bitterness, 'What a pity! A tall, handsome city boy married a village girl. I was willing to bake bread for a lifetime and support us single-handedly, just to be with Karim.' It seems Khadijeh was deeply in love with my father, but the peculiar customs of that time kept her from uniting with her beloved.

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1 'Rate and equal burden', meaning taking a girl in exchange for another girl who has been proposed to.

2 Meaning 'the last share'.

3 In Kurdish Sorani, *pur/Pure* means 'aunt', but sometimes it is also a respectful title used for elderly women.

4 Meaning 'mother' or 'little mother'.

Unlike their somewhat complicated marriage, my parents' initial acquaintance was simple. In those days, a lovely custom existed in villages where people helped each other with farming, household chores, carpet weaving, washing carpets or harvesting, called *Harawaz* or 'mutual aid'. During one such Harawaz day, my father visited Drezh. My mother was helping Mam Rasu and his wife, my father's cousin, weave a large carpet set up in the kitchen. My mother spent several hours each day weaving there. While Amine was working, Karim saw her, and they took a liking to each other. Noticing their special glances and behaviour, my father's cousin arranged for them to talk and connect. From then on, during his trips to the village to help Mam Rasu's sons, my father would see my mother in the barn or other places.

Informally, Mam Rasu's sons told Mine Qazi, 'Karim, Kuykha-Khalil's nephew, likes your daughter and wants to marry her.'

My grandfather's initial reaction was, 'I won't give my daughter to a widow's son.'

This firm response, reflecting clear patriarchal views, upset my father's relatives. Despite being a relative of my father's family, Mine Qazi staunchly opposed the marriage. My grandfather believed that marrying his daughter into a fatherless family would bring insecurity and unhappiness, not to mention he didn't want her to move far away to a city that was hours from Gerdashavan, especially in an era without cars, paved roads or easy transportation. His reasons for opposing the marriage seem typical within the thinking of that time.

My father was disheartened by my grandfather's rejection, but, as men in love were bolder than they are today and didn't easily accept defeat, he persisted, sending different people to propose to Amine over time. Elders and clan leaders, in Kuykha-Khalil's absence, accompanied him to Gerdashavan, each time returning with a negative response. During this period, one of my father's young and impetuous cousins, with a few armed horsemen, went to my maternal grandfather's house at night, causing a ruckus and taunting him: 'Who are you to refuse us your daughter?' However, this only strengthened my grandfather's resolve not to give his daughter to Karim.

The Great Escape

Karim did not back down. He wanted Amine and saw no choice but to elope with her. This practice of elopement, while still present in the region, has diminished over time. As I previously mentioned, elopement can occur for several reasons: sometimes a girl threatens to elope to pressure her family into acceptance. Fearing scandal, the family often consents. Other times, a girl might choose to elope to avoid being forced into an unwanted marriage. Occasionally, even a married woman with children might resort to elopement.

In a small, traditional village, such events are extremely difficult to accept and can have severe repercussions, even murder and bloodshed. Numerous Kurdish folklore stories revolve around tragic and unfulfilled loves, *Mem and Zin* and *Khaj and Siamand* being among the most famous. The masterpiece *Suri Davran*, meaning 'The Passage of Time', by the poet Hemin,[1] inspired by such events, narrates the story of a young intellectual's love, elopement and death with a princess. The circulation of these stories indicates the cultural significance of young lovers eloping in the mountains of Kurdistan.

Eventually, my father, with the help of Feqi Hassan, Mam Rasu's educated son, who had studied the Quran, decided to elope with my mother. After several unsuccessful attempts at formal proposals, he felt he needed to take drastic action, perhaps to demonstrate his genuine intentions and perseverance in love. The elders had dismissed their love and prevented their union. My mother's family's objections were not logical, and perhaps eloping, after all other efforts had failed, was a form of feminine protest of these outdated traditions. Some people even supported such acts by young people.

Before the elopement, some relatives, including Feqi Hassan, invited my father and Uncle Ali to a meeting to plan the escape. Uncle Ali, who had his sights set on marrying Aunt Kulthum, told my father, 'You bring Kulthum, and I'll bring Amine,' suggesting they exchange sisters in defiance of the family's customs. Amine agreed, because she loved my

1 Mohammad Amin Sheikh al-Islami Mukri, known as *Hêmin*, meaning 'composed', or Hemin Mokriani (born in spring 1921 in Mahabad/died 16 April 1986 in Urmia), was a poet, translator and writer.

father and wanted to be with him. Aunt Kulthum, being young, knew nothing of this male pact. Uncle Ali and my father secretly met at a place called Kani Khoda, near Gerdashavan, to discuss and coordinate the escape.

I don't know what happened to disrupt their plan, but, soon after my father and mother eloped, Uncle Ali's plot was exposed. My maternal grandfather, Mine Qazi, was furious and confronted Uncle Ali, demanding to know why he hadn't stopped the disgrace. He declared, 'As long as I live, you will never marry Kulthum!'

By the standards of that time, the plan of these four young men was progressive and daring, and it's no wonder that it was considered a scandalous act of dishonour for years!

The night before the escape, my father, with the help of Feqi Hassan and Hassan's mother Fatemeh (Mam Rasu's wife), hid in their barn. He didn't want anyone to notice his presence in the village prematurely. Everyone knew he was in love with Mine Qazi's daughter. If he were spotted, word would reach my grandfather, making the escape more difficult.

While my father hid in the barn, my mother snuck out under the pretext of feeding[1] the house dogs. She told my grandmother she needed to feed the dogs because they were barking too much. She hid a basket[2] of bread and a small bundle with clothes, bread and cheese under her Kurdish shawl and slipped out of the house.

Thus, fourteen-year-old Amine eloped with seventeen-year-old Karim, hoping that their families would eventually accept their marriage. My father even brought a bodyguard named Morad for protection.

They quickly made their way on foot to the mountainous area of Gerdashavan. My grandfather's family soon noticed my mother's absence and guessed what had happened. My father always recounted that night with excitement, saying, 'In that dark night, it was just Amine, me and one armed man against about ten armed men from the village, searching for us

1 Bread that is half-baked is fed to herd dogs in two servings, evening and morning; the weight of *Sevleh* might reach a kilogram.

2 Since the topic of a bundle (*boqcheh*) has come up: in Kurdish, there is a saying used for unmarried and virgin Kurdish boys and girls, implying that they are like an unwrapped bundle, *weki boxcei nekirawey*.

on horseback.' They hid under tall cliffs near my father's village, Barkamaran, behind the village of Shelemjaran,[1] east of Gerdashavan.

They were filled with fear about the consequences of their love. Despite deciding to escape to the mountains, they were scared of the repercussions. Even their armed companion feared being killed by the villagers. They heard my grandfather and the men cursing as they searched, but luck was on their side, and in the darkness none of the men spotted them. They waited until the men left, then made their way to Barkamaran, then to Pasveh, and finally to Gerdashavan. From there, they hired a private car to take them to Naqadeh and to the caravanserai. My aunts recalled that my mother, a petite girl in a red chintz dress, was immediately given a more suitable dress by Aunt Maryam upon arrival, so as not to appear undignified.



Image 13: My mother and father. 1985, Piranshahr.

In Kurdish culture, and likely in similar cultures, the next step after an elopement involves representatives from both sides negotiating for reconciliation. The day after my parents' escape, negotiations began. Several clan elders and even a representative of the Friday Prayer imam of Naqadeh approached my grandfather. However, his pride was deeply wounded, and he stubbornly resisted. He knew his opposition would ultimately fail but wanted to stand his ground. In Shafi'i jurisprudence, which the Kurds predominantly follow, a girl cannot marry without her father's consent, but it is also accepted that if a man repeatedly proposes and is rejected, the girl can marry him without her father's permission, provided she has a paternal grandfather's consent.[2]

1 A village in the Lajan district.

2 In ancient times, this type of marriage was also called 'self-willed marriage'. According to this type of marriage, if a girl and boy, upon reaching puberty, wanted to marry each

The representatives reminded my grandfather of this and warned him that his daughter could marry without his consent. Faced with this, he reluctantly agreed but with a condition. He said, 'I didn't want to give my daughter to Karim to take her to the city, but now that it's done, I want one of Karim's sisters for my eldest son, Qader.' He knew Ali wanted Kulthum, but, out of anger, he demanded Kulthum for Qader. Uncle Qader, against his will, divorced the girl he was engaged to and married Kulthum.

The consequences of my grandfather's anger and patriarchal decision-making were borne not only by Ali, but also by Kulthum, Qader and his fiancée, who all became victims of this story. My paternal family offered Kulthum as a blood price to Qader and used her as a bargaining chip to prevent further conflict.

Kulthum, around thirteen years old, was devastated by this forced marriage. Like many girls in such crises, she cried and dreamt of at least marrying Ali, who was younger and more handsome, but my grandfather's authority overruled her dreams.

At that time, my uncle Mam Hawla said that this was the only way for Karim and Amine to marry without enmity. Kulthum cried, protested and pleaded to marry Ali instead, as she had no interest in Qader. But Mam Hawla stood firm, and the marriage proceeded. For years, a sense of shame lingered between my aunt and Uncle Ali and even between Ali and Qader.

Finally, my mother married my father. A grand wedding was held in the autumn of 1965 at the same caravanserai. For my father's uncle and cousins, it was important that he had a dignified wedding, despite his father's absence. Amid the joy and celebration, young Kulthum's heart was heavy, but she hid her sorrow for her brother's and mother's sake and joined the other children in dancing the traditional *Se-Chkayi* or *Se-Peyi* meaning 'Three-Step' dance in the large courtyard.[1]

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other against their parents' wishes and insisted on doing so, their marriage was not legally prohibited and was registered as a self-willed marriage. In this case, the girl was disinherited, unless her parents voluntarily gave her something or willed her a share of the inheritance. Today, in Kurdistan, the marriage of a girl without her father's consent, but with her grandfather's personal attorney, is carried out according to the Hanafi school of thought.

1 Two types of Kurdish dance that are now less common. Dance, or *Halparke*, is a prominent feature of Kurdish culture, with a history spanning thousands of years. Halparke has many variations, but in all its forms, the first person, called *Chupi*, holds a handkerchief and stands to the right of the participants, leading the dance. The last

Two weeks later, my maternal grandfather's family came to take Kulthum back to the village. Kuykha's wife (pure Amin), a respected elder in my maternal grandfather's family, stood up to Mine Qazi with another harsh word. Back then, when cars were scarce, the groom's family usually came with several jeeps to fetch the bride, especially if the journey was long, to ensure they arrived for lunch. When Pure Amin saw that the groom's family had come with only one car and just my grandfather and two others inside, she was displeased and protested, 'Mine Qazi! Did you come for the bride with just one car? Do you think she has no family, and we'll let you take her with just one car? You need to hire two more jeeps, American Shahbaz, or we won't give you the bride.' She insisted that if the cars did not escort Kulthum to her new home, she would call off the marriage.

Finally, my grandfather lost his temper and exclaimed, 'Pure Amin, I don't have access to more cars or drivers right now.'

But Pure Amin did not relent and said, 'Mine Qazi, remember that we asked for a daughter from you, and you refused, dragging out the matter. Now I won't let you take this innocent girl this way.'

Eventually, Pure Amin won the argument, forcing my grandfather to hire two more cars. My grandfather rode in one car; Kulthum, with some relatives, rode in another; and the third car remained empty as an escort, as Pure Amin had demanded. She was a formidable woman who seemed to defend her brother-in-law's children in her way, as they had no other protector beside her and her family.

The story of Aunt Kulthum's marriage affected me so deeply that, in 2005, while I was a student in London, I wrote it as a narrative and it was published in *The Guardian*.[1] In my account, Aunt Kulthum was a teenage girl full of emotions and dreams, living in a world of imagination and girlish aspirations. At the same time, the harsh and relentless social norms

person, standing to the left and holding a handkerchief in their left hand, is the lowest in this hierarchy and is called *Gavani*. All participants are involved in the overall dance, and an interesting aspect is that men and women participate together without gender separation, forming part of this whole. The philosophy of Halparke is interpreted as equality and unity (See: Hawraman Music (2022) 'Kurdish dance Halparke kurdi HD Dabke Kurdi' [YouTube video]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w8tJrYBuBc (Accessed: 31 October 2022).

1 See Amhady, 2006.

around her shattered her beautiful world, leaving her with nothing but a sense of powerlessness and weakness rooted in her gender and femininity. Additionally, Uncle Ali's and Uncle Qader's masculine pride and strength were mocked and humiliated by the tribal society's rules during their teenage and young adult years. They, too, were victims of this tradition and culture.

Farewell to Kuykha

The passing of elders in the community where I grew up was significant; it symbolised the community's shedding of traditional garb and donning of new attire.

At the time of Kuykha's death, the cultural fabric of cities and even villages was transforming, and the old traditions that had resisted change were gradually fading. The heads of families, who epitomised the defender of the traditional lifestyle, were slowly disappearing, leading to significant changes in family structures.

Despite the modernisation of Iran's family structure after the 1960s, in many areas, like Kurdistan, there were still families where grandparents, children and grandchildren lived together in one large house and courtyard. However, there was one major transformation: no longer did one individual make decisions for the entire clan or dictate the children's marriages. This led to further small – and large – transformations of Iranian, and especially Kurdish, families. Gradually, this evolution contributed to the reduction of harmful traditions[1] in society and, consequently, in my own family.

Urbanisation in Iran was increasing, the traditional feudal system was waning and the power structures within families were changing. This is why Mam Hawla, Kuykha-Khalil's oldest son, spent most of his life moving between families, fostering peace and reconciliation and consulting with them. These consultations often focused on avoiding

1 It is necessary to mention that tradition itself is neutral and cannot be entirely harmful, because the purpose of tradition is to improve societal functioning, not harm it. When I use the term 'harmful traditions' or 'wrongful traditions', I refer to specific traditions that are inherently harmful or misunderstood by members of society, causing harm, or have not been adapted to societal growth/change and thus have lost their previous functions and do not align with new social structures.

restrictive and harmful traditions, and a participatory system was visibly replacing the single-decision-maker system. It seemed that centralised power was transitioning to a decentralised, consultative form of power in urban and civil societies.

In 1961, Kuykha-Khalil passed away due to old age. A few years later, in 1966, Pure Amin, who had gone blind, also passed away. Their mourning ceremonies lasted several days at the Grand Mosque of Naqadeh and continued afterward at the caravanserai. People came and went, and, during these visits, some lost or forgotten relatives living in the regions of Bukan, Mahabad and Naqadeh reconnected.

Kuykha was the head of the clan and had such authority that few dared oppose him. He was the first to urbanise most of his clan members and was so influential that families, even distant cousins and other clan members from the Mahabad, Oshnaviyeh and Lajan regions, relied on him for resolving their personal and social matters.

As he aged, his eldest son, Abdullah, known as Mam Hawla, took his place without question and remained in this role until 2003, when he passed away from a heart attack in Piranshahr. Although he wasn't very old, his problems wore him down. Shortly afterward, his wife, Amozhene Fatem (Aunt Fatima), joined him.

Mam Hawla was less involved in accumulating wealth and trading, and, despite his status, he always had an average financial situation compared to other families. After his passing, due to existing disputes, my father unofficially took on some family-coordination duties, such as organising weddings, funerals, holidays and economic matters.

Kuykha-Khalil and Mam Hawla belonged to different generations, came from different eras and circumstances, and had unique personalities and lifestyles. Their ages and generational differences can be seen in their attitudes, decisions and even familial interactions. Kuykha was authoritative and chieftain-like, but Mam Hawla, despite his similarities to his father, had a different leadership style. In his time, Khalil needed to be strong-willed and decisive to manage the large task of urbanising a big family. The mission required steadfast belief and authority. As a chieftain, he might have done things I don't approve of, such as dealing harshly with his tenants, which I can't defend, but many believe that part of a chieftain's duties back then required such behaviour. They might be right; if Khalil hadn't had such authority and had chosen a gentler approach, he wouldn't

have managed such a big task. People in the region always remember him with respect, indicating that he performed relatively well during his lifetime.

Mam Hawla was more flexible from the beginning, prioritising peace and reconciliation over conflict and wealth accumulation. He was a witty man whose curses and jibes captivated everyone. The peak of his power was when he took his father's place. Girls of my aunts' age remember that period bitterly, because Mam Hawla tried to strengthen familial marriages.[1] Some young women of that time blame their life's failures and unwanted marriages on Mam Hawla, yet, in the end, they sigh and attribute it to the times, eventually praising his virtues. Even though some fathers were alive and had decision-making power, Mam Hawla, as the clan leader, made decisions for others.

What mattered in traditional urban and rural society was the trust families had in each other. They felt secure and powerful together. A Kurdish proverb says, 'Even if family eats your flesh, they won't break your bones.' This proverb seems to underpin one part of the social relationships of that era. My aunts and other young women in the clan wanted to marry someone of their choice, whether a stranger or a relative, but ultimately married someone with close or distant blood ties, clan ties or a relative.[2]

Kuykha-Khalil made several significant moves that benefited all the families, but Mam Hawla couldn't offer such services. Once the family became urbanised, no major, significant events could be initiated. The upheavals of the Revolution, internal conflicts and the Iran-Iraq War

1 Familial marriages were a type of endogamy and were indicative of a style of homogamy. Women, girls and often men had no choice in selecting a spouse, as matches were made by the extended family for the interests of the clan. These marriages were pragmatic, and individual preferences were irrelevant. This tradition symbolised the exercise of communal power over individuality – the sacrifice of personal freedoms for communal goals. Endogamy reinforced kinship networks and served economic functions, by providing labour and enhancing economic development, and political functions, by acting as a military force against outsiders. Such marriages accumulated wealth and power through expanding kinship networks, sidelining individuality for group interests.

2 'Endogamy' refers to marriage within one's social group. Such a community maintains marriages exclusively within the group, strengthening social ties and preventing population decline. Endogamy is common among immigrant and ethnic minority groups, helping them avoid extinction and preserving religion, culture and language over time.



Image 14: Naqadeh, Caravanserai Courtyard, 1977. From right: Mameh Qader, Mam Hawla, and Mam Hawla's sons Ghafoor, Morad, Jesim and Taha (seated)

disrupted many arrangements and distanced families for a long time. Despite the Revolution, Mam Hawla tried to keep everyone united. After the Naqadeh War, which led to the displacement of most Kurds in the city, most family members gathered in Gerdashavan and nearby villages in the Lajan and Piranshahr regions, but the social system had changed, making family management difficult.

From this perspective, Mam Hawla's job was harder than Kuykha-Khalil's. Khalil led a cohesive clan without major social upheavals, making decisions for them, while Mam Hawla had to manage a family scattered by revolution and war.

In that era, children grew up and became independent. My father Karim and Uncle Ahmad had separated from the family and married. The dominance and authority of clan elders were diminishing daily, with younger members rebelling and resisting their elders' wishes.

Years later, my peers and I insisted on making our own decisions about life, education and marriage. We didn't want to follow elders or traditions, and this shift was evident in the new generation's marriages. My sisters

and most of our female relatives married outside the kin group. Mam Hawla and other tradition-following elders were gradually losing their power and authority, forced to adapt to changing norms.

Some customs appeared modern on the surface yet retained their traditional essence. Families and relatives visited from nearby cities during winters for sock games.[1] They usually attended wedding and funeral ceremonies together in groups. Weddings, still held with pomp and excitement, no longer had a feudal-like atmosphere in communities where multiple generations lived together, following one person's commands.

The Revolution accelerated these changes. Many family and clan members joined political parties and took up arms. During the early years of the Revolution, Kak Morad, Mam Hawla's eldest son, became a prominent commander of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, and his other son, Kak Jesim, was also a Peshmerga. My father; his cousin Mohammad Amin; Uncle Ahmad; and three sons of Mam Rasu's from Gerdashavan, along with several others, volunteered as reserve forces for the Democrats. Kak Yusuf, a son of Mam Rasu's, was an official Peshmerga of the Party. Kak Mustafa, the eldest son of Uncle Mohammad Amin, and his wife Amine from Bukan were also official Peshmerga of the Democratic Party. Later, Mam Hawla and my father's cousin and brother-in-law, Kak Fattah Abdoli, rose to high political ranks within the Party. Kak Fattah Abdoli[2] became a member of the political bureau and the Party's representative in Europe.

For a while, the Democratic Party played the role of the government in Kurdistan, especially in the Mokrian region, fighting against traditional and class norms rooted in ancient Iranian and Arab cultures. The involvement of close relatives in the Democratic Party influenced us, gradually altering our political and social thinking; we distanced ourselves

1 *Jorabeyn* or *goravibazi*: this game has no age restriction and requires ten handmade Kurdish women's socks and a small object like a marble or maize. One player hides the marble in a sock while the opposing team guesses which sock contains the marble, earning ten points for a correct guess. The game is symbolic and preserves a culture's heritage (Razavi, 2011).

2 Fattah Abdoli: on 17 September 1992, Fattah Abdoli was assassinated along with Dr Sharafkandi, the leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and two others, Nouri Dehkordi and Homayoun Ardalan, at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin. At the time, Abdoli was a member of the central committee of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and its representative in Europe.

from traditions and embraced new relationships that emphasised freedom, equality and justice.

These new concepts had been absent from traditional rural life, which was dominated by a collective culture and the rule of tradition and religion, and from the modern urban life, which was dominated by instrumental rationality leading to commodification and extreme individualism. When I talk about changing relationships and creating transformations in Kurdish society and traditional large families, I refer to these fundamental issues, which changed young people's perspectives on family and social life.

During and after the war, especially during the reconstruction period, the Kurdish community also evolved. Urbanisation expanded. More sons and, consequently, daughters pursued higher education. Women played more active roles in society, breaking free from traditional constraints and the confines of home and family. The heads and elders of families, despite their power and authority within clans, were no longer effective in facing this new era. They, too, needed to change their views and attitudes. They had no choice but to understand and adapt to the new world and its changing values and expectations.

Chapter Two: Significant Others

Certain people have profound effects on our lives. Some of them come into our lives during childhood and become lifelong companions, walking with us through every moment, even if we're separated by vast distances. They are our kindred spirits, whose destinies are intertwined with ours.

I want to recount the unique stories of individuals who have left indelible marks on my mind and heart. Some of them were burdened by the oppressive traditional culture and suffered through unwanted marriages; others were luckier and led better lives. Each one strived to live well and endure their days. Those of us still living continue to strive, and we deeply miss those who have passed away.

These significant people are the 'others' who have shaped me. Some have uplifted me. Some, intentionally or unintentionally, have clipped my wings. Whatever the case, we have lived side by side, sharing our lives. I carry traces of them, and they carry traces of me.

Not an Ordinary Grandmother

She was beautiful, tall, broad-shouldered, resilient and courageous, having weathered many of life's storms. Her embrace was the safest place in the world for me. I will speak much of my grandmother, Amine, in this book: a strong and kind woman who taught me how to love and be loved. It's rare for these qualities to coexist in one person, but Amine was intelligent enough to balance both kindness and authority. She supported us emotionally with her kindness and steadied us with her authority, ensuring our growth. Amine often defied the conventional norms of her time. She was a free thinker, which, perhaps above all, taught me how to live.



Image 15: My grandmother Amine. Naqadeh, 1999.

As I mentioned earlier, she hailed from the village of Azad near Mahabad, a place known for its spirit of freedom, which seemed to influence her as well. Her free-thinking made her distinctive among the women of her era. I believe this was partly due to her frequent travels to Mahabad during her formative years. Grandmother had experiences that seem to have broadened her life beyond the lives of other women. She was known as Amine Sablāghi or Amine Azad, 'Sablāgh' being an old name for Mahabad used by many of the town's older families.

Before marrying my grandfather Ali, Amine had endured an unsuccessful marriage in her youth. Her father married her off to a man she didn't love, and she lived with him for only nine months. Seeking a way out of this undesirable marriage, she found her opportunity in the village of Pasveh.

Here's the story.

Amine's aunt's husband died, and she went to Pasveh to help her aunt, who baked bread for the local master, Qarani Agha.

One day, while Amine was baking bread at her aunt's place, some government officials and gendarmes visited the master. They ate her bread and praised it highly.

After the guests left, the lord came to the kitchen to see who the new baker was. He asked, 'Did you bake today's bread?'

Amine replied, 'Yes. I am Amine, and I have come from Sablāgh to help my aunt.'

The master asked her to stay and bake bread, but Amine said she couldn't because she was married. The master then offered her and her husband jobs if they stayed.

Seizing the opportunity, Amine showed him the bruises from her husband's beatings and explained, 'I was married off against my will, and he beats me daily.' The master promised her a divorce if she stayed to bake bread for them, and Amine, having long awaited such a chance, agreed.

Her previous husband made various attempts to make her return, including bringing his brother to Lachin, but the master's men captured him and imprisoned him in a stable. After a severe beating to avenge Amine's suffering, the master told him, 'You can only leave if Saleh Modarres, the village cleric, annuls your marriage.'

Resisting initially, her husband eventually accepted and divorced Amine. She then stayed in the master's household, free from her forced marriage, until she returned to her village, Azad, after her father's death, to support her orphaned brother, Mohammad, and sister, Fatima. Her return coincided with Khalil's decision to find a wife for his brother Ali.

The Marriage of My Grandparents

Kuykha-Khalil, unfamiliar with the Lajan region and its people, preferred to find a girl from the Mokrian area, like the family. He searched extensively until he found Amine. The villages of Qamtara and Azad are on opposite sides of the road, and Khalil was pleased to find a girl of the same origin for his brother on the other side of the road. Apparently, they had known each other from before and were distantly related, which hastened the marriage process.

After both families agreed, it was decided to wait until Amine's brother and sister were older before she started her new life with Ali. From what I've heard, Amine's brother, Mohammad, was an interesting character, fond of music and art, and spent most of his life carefree, enjoying himself with local musicians. My grandmother said her brother married several times and had a unique personality, most unlike the typical people of that era.

Her sister, Fatima, married a skilled craftsman who initially made tin stoves. He was known as Mohammad Tanakesaz ('the tinsmith'). Despite their deep love and affection, the two sisters never got along and would

argue over every little thing. We often joked that they couldn't stay together for more than half an hour without fighting. Their first argument was over opening and closing the window – one felt cold while the other felt hot – and that was just the beginning.

Amine and Fatima had interesting stories from their childhood. Once, they recounted how they loved candy but had no money to buy it from a Jewish peddler (*cherchi*), so they collaborated to steal some wild-olive flour from their home's storage to trade for chocolate. They didn't share the chocolate with their brother, Mohammad, who then complained to their father. Their father, who had marked the flour bags with a wooden seal called a *shaql*[1] in Kurdish confirmed the theft and punished them severely.

After Fatima's marriage, my grandmother married my grandfather, Ali, and moved from the village of Azad to place near Pasveh and Barkamaran, where the Kuykha-Khalil clan lived. In accordance with custom, the bride's family took her on horseback, dressed in a red bridal gown, and handed her over to the groom's family midway. My grandmother always spoke enthusiastically about her wedding day, proudly saying, 'From Azad Mahabad to Barkamaran Lajan, three horses were exhausted under me. I was a beautiful and robust bride.' And, indeed, Amine symbolised feminine kindness and strength. She would recall, 'At my wedding, the men played Kurdish polo,'[2] a sweet memory that stayed with her.

In Meidan,[3] my grandfather's family took her to begin her new life about twenty kilometres away in the village of Barkamaran. After several relocations in the surrounding villages, she eventually returned to Pasveh, now under the control of Qarani Agha's eldest son, Ali Agha Amir Asha'iri.

After his father's death, Ali Agha Amir Asha'iri became the head of the Mamesh clan and remained loyal to the Pahlavi court. As Qarani Agha's

1 *Shaql*: a wooden seal used during the feudal period. A servant loyal to the landlord would mark the peasants' grain, especially wheat, preventing the farmer from stealing before the landlord took his share.

2 *Jelit* play: according to UNESCO, 'cultural heritage is not limited to monuments and objects. It includes living traditions inherited from our ancestors, such as oral traditions, performing arts, and sports like polo, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts, which is called intangible cultural heritage' (Visit Iran).

3 Meidan: a flat area above the mountain halfway from Mahabad to Pasveh, connected by a road built for military purposes during 1967/68. The road, built by Russians during World War II for their troops, still exists in the west.

second son, he was so devoted to the Shah that, during a speech in parliament, he declared, 'The Kurdish language is one of the dialects of Farsi!'[1] He served in the 20th and 24th terms of the National Consultative Assembly and, after the 1979 Revolution, he was sentenced to death by the judiciary. However, he managed to save his life by fleeing to Iraq and later seeking asylum in the UK, where he died in London.

In the late 1990s, I met his sons and some family members at a friend's wedding in London. Their demeanour was kind and pleasant, and they had many memories of my grandmother, whom they still referred to as 'Amine Azad'. (Everyone who knew Amine Azad holds an image of her in their mind. She seemed to leave a trace of herself in people, unintentionally.) They knew my family and father well, and, despite their modern lifestyle being influenced by European culture, they still exhibited traditional norms and values like humility and hospitality.

Looking back, I realise I have always been fortunate to have experienced pure and genuine love. This feeling of happiness is deeply personal and doesn't necessarily relate to my material conditions. For me, it is deeply connected to my grandmother. My first and most lasting feeling of being loved came from her. Her love was so unconditional and real that, whenever I feel overwhelmed in life, I can close my eyes and go back to my

1 Considering that the Kurdish language is one of the main criteria of Kurdish national identity and an important unifying factor among Kurds, the discussion about the history of the Kurdish language and whether Kurdish is a language or a dialect has always been influenced by this discourse. This has made it a complex topic with extensive dimensions that can be examined from historical, linguistic and geographical perspectives. The predominant view is that the Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-European language family and is part of the Iranian branch of this family. However, alternative perspectives also exist, some of which claim a much older and more autonomous origin for Kurdish, linking it directly to the early languages of Mesopotamia and the Zagros region – positions that are not widely accepted in scientific circles. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that the theories of European linguists are also never entirely free from errors, political leanings or particular interests, and thus should not be accepted uncritically. What must be recognised is that the question of the Kurdish language's roots has long been a political matter, influencing even scientific research in the field. There is no room here to dive further into this debate, but references in academic works and encyclopaedias summarise the predominant theories. What can be said with certainty is that the Kurdish language, like any other, is fluid and has both influenced and been influenced by its neighbours. Unfortunately, this topic at times becomes a tool for the political objectives of certain groups.

childhood, hide under her skirt and secretly watch the world from behind the lace and wool, feeling at peace. That was my childhood refuge.

My grandmother's skirt will forever hold symbolic meaning for me and will never fade from my memory. This amazing woman's remarkable strength and commanding presence could even tame my rather strict father. We called her 'Neneh'. She was tall, sturdy and well-dressed. Over her Kurdish dress, she wore a feminine cloak unique to the Mokrian region and a women's headscarf called a *charuqeshan*.

She was a woman whose authority was unmatched in my eyes. My grandmother had been married a couple of times, lost her husband early, and raised her children alone. She experienced both rural and urban life and dealt with their challenges. Her strength, authority and dignity allowed her to adapt to any environment, providing security and peace for herself and her family.

I, being rebellious and mischievous, often clashed with my father. It was as if there was an unspoken power struggle between us. In this conflict, my grandmother often sided with me, helping me get what I wanted. She made me a strong, albeit spoiled, boy who couldn't be contradicted. The stories of her support and occasional spoiling are many. During summers, she would gather all the grandchildren, set a table and seat me next to her, giving me the best part of the meal. When we were in Naqadeh, she would take me and my cousin Habibeh on outings from morning till night, using her financial support to help me buy the books and magazines I wanted.

My mother, busy with her own family responsibilities and other children, didn't seem to mind the bond between me and my grandmother. After all, it reduced the burden on her by one child. My grandmother was well-liked, and those who loved her also loved me. It seemed that anyone who wanted my grandmother had to accept me, too. I was my grandmother's favourite. Aside from her, I received some of that love from my eldest aunt and uncle, but never in the way my grandmother loved me. Her affection for me was of a different kind.

Victim of Old Traditions

Amine's daughter Kulthum was very young when she moved from her village to the city and adapted to urban life. Then, just as she was getting accustomed to her new urban lifestyle, she was sent back to the village, still

at a tender age. For a girl accustomed to city life, waking up early to milk cows and sheep was not an easy task.

Her husband, Uncle Qader, was the chief shepherd of the family. Shortly after their marriage, the child bride and her husband had to migrate to the Qandil Mountains.[1] They were forced to endure several months of harsh living conditions each year in the cold mountains, without any amenities.

In traditional societies, the concept of 'adolescence' does not exist; individuals are either children or adults. In many traditional communities, boys and girls are expected to take on responsibilities and form families after puberty. This is not limited to marriage, but also extends to other responsibilities, making these individuals – children or adolescents by today's Western standards – essential members of the community.

My aunt described those early days of her marriage as the hardest period of her life. As a young girl who had never worked before, she had to endure the hardships of a rural, mountain life and fulfil her new responsibilities. Kulthum is one of countless young people who became victims of so-called 'necessary marriages' that aimed to strengthen family and kinship bonds.

Although I am aware of the issues surrounding modern marriage and family formation, I believe that the greater freedom of choice in modern marriage allows individuals to more easily accept its hardships – because they had a say in the choice and it was not merely a product of environment and social expectations.

In traditional systems, individuality has little place, and the system takes precedence over the individual. Even my mother, who married for love, suffered the consequences of my aunt's marriage because, in traditional systems, everyone is organically connected and functions like the gears of a machine.

In the early years of Kulthum and Uncle Qader's marriage, the families lived far apart, with two cities between them, and their interactions were limited. After the Revolution, the war and the harsh conditions of that time, kinship with the Mine Qazi family helped my family. In Kurdish, they say,

1 In Kurdish, *Hewar* or *Geramin*, and *Koistan/Saran Geramin* means 'lowland'.

'A friend, even if he is your father's brother, is good.'[1] When we sought refuge in my grandfather Mine Qazi's house during those difficult times, everyone gradually concluded that there was no longer any resentment among family members. Time had healed all wounds, and we were all happy, but Aunt Kulthum continued to suffer in silence.

My mother had also faced many challenges when moving from the village to the city. My aunts sometimes discussed this, saying that what happened to Aunt Kulthum was experienced by my mother in a different form. Apparently, it took a long time for the younger family members or other daughters-in-law to accept my mother as the wife of the eldest son. At first, there was a condescending attitude of 'we are city-dwellers and you are from the village' – a prejudice that exists to the present between villagers and city-dwellers. Interestingly, the villagers usually submitted to this discrimination. So it took time for my mother to be accepted into her husband's family. Aside from the competitive struggles a new bride faces in a traditional community, she also had to overcome discrimination and exclusion due to her rural background. However, my mother, with her rural upbringing and familiarity with domestic responsibilities, had learned the skills of homemaking and cooking from a young age. She was a skilled, prudent and capable woman who had a better chance of succeeding in competition with the younger brides. The other daughters-in-law did not compete with her in this area, knowing they would surely lose.

Besides the discriminatory attitude toward her rural background, my mother faced another significant issue: Karim's family blamed her for Kulthum's misfortune and sometimes taunted her. These jibes hurt my mother. Despite the many challenges she had overcome for the love of my father, after finally uniting with Karim, she bore the pain of Kulthum's rural exile. My second aunt, Maryam, who often speaks frankly, sometimes reminded everyone of this, saying that Amine and Karim's love caused Kulthum to end up in the village. When I wanted to publish Kulthum's story in *The Guardian*, I spoke with all family members, including my aunts, to understand the hidden aspects of this tragic tale. My youngest aunt, Zeynab, had deep resentment over this matter because she herself later fell

1 Kurdish proverb: 'To advance your cause, you might need a friend who is not entirely sincere, but their presence is better than their absence.'

victim to the tradition of forced marriage. She was compelled to marry a man she did not know and move to a village near Mahabad. Zeynab and Kulthum, until her death, continually lamented and protested the fate imposed on them. These forced marriages never became normal for them, and they bitterly remembered those responsible. Sometimes, with sad expressions, they would secretly say, 'The elders of our tribe made us miserable.'



Image 16: Aunt Kulthum. Gerdashavan, summer 2005.

Kulthum said she was not ready for marriage – that she was a child still playing when she was taken by jeep to the village of Gerdashavan. She mourned this union until the end of her life. Two old and tormenting traditions destroyed her and Zeynab's lives and dreams: child marriage and the tribal practice of arranged marriage. Although love and romantic relationships were not like they are today, it was important for my aunt to marry a man she had fallen in love with, not one she had never met or loved.[1]

1 The forced marriage of girls to elders was common among various ethnic groups, signifying a time when women were strategic pawns in strengthening family and regional ties. Such practices were not unique to Kurdistan but were common in traditional societies worldwide. Locally, practices like bride price and exchanging sisters for marriage also had economic aspects, serving the interests of clan structures. These marriages marginalised women's identities, emotions and freedoms, treating them as tools for achieving clan goals. Men forced into such marriages also faced a loss of agency, impacting their masculinity and pride. Economic exchanges of wealth and power through these marriages highlight the intersection of cultural practices and economic mechanisms.

Kulthum's only support in the village was her cousin Fatemeh, the wife of Mam Rasu, who had also fallen out with my grandfather's family over this marriage. Mine Qazi and his family accused them of causing their daughter's elopement, which was true. Although this relationship was eventually repaired, it took a long time for things to return to normal.

During the early days in the village, Aunt Fatemeh, or Pure Fati, helped Kulthum. Kulthum had seven children from this marriage, five daughters and two sons. Years later, her eldest daughter, Zuleikha, eloped with a boy who was related to her husband, Uncle Qader. Aunt Kulthum supported her daughter's decision to avoid repeating her own fate.

These experiences made the issue of unwanted marriages a significant topic in our family. My father sometimes inadvertently referred to the traditions of marriage, expressing his sorrow for what happened to Kulthum, Zeynab and Maryam. He believed that his and my mother's marriage was a product of youthful love, and they had no intention of harming anyone. Behind his words lay sorrow. The memory of what had happened to Aunt Kulthum pained him. He would say, 'I didn't want these things to happen, but the elders taught us that the only way to love was this.' Regarding Aunt Kulthum's marriage to Uncle Qader, he said, 'Kake Hawla agreed to it to prevent further conflict between the families. He fell into the trap of tradition to reduce the number of victims of this love.'

I am closer to Uncle Qader than to my other uncles, and I have often listened to him talk. He said about his marriage, 'I couldn't oppose my father's request; I was even forced to divorce the girl I was engaged to and marry Kulthum.' However, I think deep down he was pleased to have married a young and urban girl.

My aunt, on the other hand, never forgot that her life was ruined due to grandfather's strictness, Mam Hawla's decision, and Karim and Amine's marriage. Until the end of her life, whenever she spoke of it, she was sad. The sadder part was that she had accepted her fate as unchangeable. In her later years, she bore no grudge against my mother, who had passed away by then, saying, 'I am glad . . . Kake Karim and Amine lived a life full of love.' And then she would laugh. 'Mirza Kameel,[1] if I don't accept it, what should I do? It's over for us, and we must be content.'

1 *Mirza* in both Farsi and Kurdish means 'an educated person'.

Cause and Effect

Uncle Ahmad, the third child in the family, suffered from a skin disease in his childhood. As a result, he became pockmarked[1] and lost one eye. He was not a handsome young man, and when the family thought of finding him a wife, the prospective candidates rejected him.

A family from the Yekav clan suggested a marriage alliance with a family distantly related to them from the village of Khalifehlu.[2] The father had passed away, but they were relatively well off. They had two sons named Bayazid and Qarani and four daughters named Asmar, Zubeida, Zeynab and Tuba. Uncle Ahmad married Asmar, and their eldest son Bayazid, who was still unmarried, according to local tradition, could marry one of Uncle Ahmad's sisters. It was unclear whether Aunt Maryam or Aunt Zeynab was to be the chosen bride, but knowing Maryam, they were aware she preferred city boys. Thus, the lot fell to Zeynab, who was very young.

In those days, during marriage proposals, the bride usually did not see the groom. It was sufficient for the groom and his family to approve of the bride. Uncle Ahmad, along with his cousin Qader and one of the girl's relatives, went to Khalifehlu. After initial discussions, Kak Bayazid came to Kuykha-Khalil in Naqadeh with one of his relatives to see Aunt Zeynab. She was instructed to sit by the window of the large guest room, fill an ewer and take it to the restroom. (Since there was no plumbing in Naqadeh yet, when guests arrived, they would fill ewers and place them near the toilet in the corner of the yard.) As Zeynab passed by the window carrying the ewer, Bayazid saw her.

Kak Bayazid was a simple, straightforward man. This was how he and Aunt Zeynab, with just a fleeting glance of each other, entered a life together that their elders planned for them.

This was not unique to them. In most of Kurdistan and traditional societies in general, brides were often sent to their marital homes without any acquaintance with their grooms, and some of these marriages had unfortunate outcomes. These marriages were not strokes of luck for the girls, and sometimes the boys; rather, they were misfortunes. They did not

1 In Kurdish, *gruwe*.

2 Khalifehlu is a village located between Mahabad and Naqadeh.

even have the chance to see their future spouse's face, let alone understand his or her temperament and character, to ensure they would get along well and achieve happiness.



Image 17: Uncle Ahmad. Naqadeh, autumn 1971.

Zeynab and Asmar were married in 1971 on the same day, with identical dowries of two thousand tomans. They were quickly sent to their husbands' homes. Their weddings took place during a bitter winter, recorded in history as the coldest winter in Iran, with blizzards known as *Div-e Sepid* ('White Demon').[1] The jeep carrying Zeynab got stuck in the snow, and the bride was taken to her home, with great difficulty, on horseback. Many guests stayed at the Kuykha house for days until the roads cleared and they could return home. Zeynab was young and always recounts with a bitter smile, 'I was so young and inexperienced that I tried to mount the horse backwards.' She knew little about married life. Being the youngest daughter and child in the family, she grew up in the city and was unfamiliar with the nuances of rural life, either.

At that time, when a girl got married, a *barbook* ('bride's companion') would accompany her. This woman was responsible for preparing the bride for the wedding night and teaching her how to interact with her husband. Barbooks gave sexual education to young brides, while a married man from the groom's relatives or friends, called a *bra zava* ('groom's spiritual brother'), would take on this duty for the groom. After the sexual relationship, the Barbook would show a blood-stained, white cotton cloth to the mother-in-law and then to the bride's mother, as 'proof' of the bride's

1 In February 1972, a severe blizzard hit Iran, resulting in over 4,000 deaths and ending a 13-year drought. Some consider it the worst blizzard in history – it holds the Guiness World Record for the deadliest blizzard. Snow reached a depth of six metres in some areas. The event began on 22 January 1972 with a heavy snowfall forecast by *Ettela'at* newspaper under the headline 'White Demon'.



Image 18: Aunt Zeynab and her daughter, Mehri. 1999

virginity. Barbooks were paid for their services and received gifts, as they held important jobs that required great skill and brought in good income.

In Aunt Zeynab's marriage, after the barbook returned, my grandmother went to Khalifehlu to stay with her daughter for a while and teach her how to live in the village. After my grandmother, it was my mother's turn to teach her the ways of rural life.

Zeynab eventually learned all the tasks a rural woman had to do, from milking cows to helping with livestock and farming, to managing household chores. In general, women with more independent personalities gradually established their places in their families, while others with more dependent natures, lacking in assertiveness and independence, adapted to the existing dominant structures. Zeynab was among the former group and, unlike Kulthum, was not quiet and subdued. She quickly took charge of many tasks, and when her husband died of cancer in 1987, she was already the head of the household.

In the first months of marriage, Aunt Zeynab endured a lot of hardship and was not at all satisfied with her life. She would, only half-jokingly, send messages saying, 'Tell Maryam not to marry like me. If you don't love a man, speak up and don't agree to an unwanted marriage.'

Zeynab and Kulthum were examples of girls who went to their marital homes very early and, having no idea of married life, carried the bitterness of unwanted marriages in their hearts for years. During conversations with my aunts, I repeatedly realised that, as young girls, they had no clear concept of marriage. It seemed they were stuck in the adolescent stage, unable to experience development and maturity in the usual, logical

manner. They didn't even know the reason for marriage as they fell victim to their elders' games and the tradition of child marriage.[1]

Child marriage was common in Kurdistan until a few decades ago. It still exists to some extent in some areas. After I finished my studies abroad and returned to Iran, my first research topics were female genital mutilation/cutting [2] and child marriage,[3] both of which are social harms rooted in my lived experience and prevalent in my family. The experiences of my mother, aunts and other female relatives motivated me to conduct extensive group and field research to highlight to society the damages caused by these phenomena.

Zeynab had five children, four from her first husband and one daughter from her second marriage. A few years after Kak Bayazid's death, she married a man younger than herself, but they quickly divorced. Interestingly, after Kak Bayazid's death, Aunt Zeynab moved to Mahabad permanently, refusing to continue rural life. She was always in love with urban living and captivated by Mahabad.

Kak Bayazid endured Aunt Zeynab's occasionally harsh behaviour because she was beautiful and from the city. He was willing to do anything to keep her happy, perhaps out of fear or maybe because of a sense of insecurity. His simple and straightforward ways were always the main reason for Aunt Zeynab's complaints. When Kak Bayazid returned home from the fields, she wouldn't let him enter the house until he changed his clothes at the door and put on clean ones. He would reluctantly comply. Watching this scene and the interaction between Aunt Zeynab and Kak Bayazid was enjoyable for us as children. During summers, she would pour water from an ewer over his hands and feet, washing them before allowing him inside.

One summer evening, while we were having dinner at Aunt Zeynab's house, the kitchen lamp blew out. Aunt Zeynab exclaimed, 'Oh no, my skilled husband, we're doomed! Now, who will save us from the

1 Child marriage occurred in various forms, including 'older sister/younger brother' marriages, infant betrothals known as *nav-bar*, and marriages arranged at birth without the involvement of the children. Child marriage also included giving girls as blood money.

2 Ahmady and colleagues, 2015 and 2021.

3 Ahmady and colleagues, 2019a.

darkness?' She laughed and teased Kak Bayazid. Eventually, amid the laughter and jokes, Kak Bayazid agreed to change the lamp. His actions showed his inexperience. They placed a stool under his feet and explained what to do. When the new lamp was lit, his son Amir, who was about my age, ran around excitedly from room to room, shouting, 'My dad is a figsher!' Amir had a slight lisp, pronouncing 's' as 'sh', which made his half-Farsi, half-Kurdish sentence even funnier. He couldn't believe Kak Bayazid had managed to fix something! This memory stayed with me, and even now, when I successfully repair something, I say aloud, 'My dad is a figsher!'

Uncle Qader, Aunt Kulthum's husband, and even Aunt Maryam's husband, Kak Younes, had similar personalities to Kak Bayazid. All three were somewhat passive, simple, kind and straightforward. Perhaps they were passive because their hardworking and clever wives always took on the male responsibilities, preventing the men from taking charge and internalising the division of labour at home. These three women worked hard for their shared lives, but always harboured desires for different ones, longing for comfortable and peaceful urban lifestyles.

The Urban Groom

My father's sisters, like other women, had little say in their marriages; it was the elders who, following the tradition of arranged marriage, sent the girls off to their marital homes. Aunt Maryam, who we also called Bajeh-Maryam, first fell in love with her cousin and at one point had a suitor who was a gendarmerie sergeant. It was rare for Kurds to join the army or gendarmerie at that time, but this one had.

Aside from this issue, there was another problem: he did not have a sister to facilitate a marriage alliance, making him an unattractive option to the family elders. Since my father and uncle were already married, there was less pressure on Aunt Maryam. However, if the future groom had a sister, another marriage would likely be arranged for a young family member.

The sergeant's proposal was rejected, and the men of the clan opposed Maryam marrying her cousin. They did not relent because, when my grandmother secretly married in Jaldian, she would come to her sister's house in Naqadeh and meet with her children there. The elders said that

my aunt and uncle allowing this was a significant affront to the Ahmady family!

In that traditional environment, strange reasons prevented girls from marrying. The shadow of tradition was so heavy that even my father, despite being more lenient than others, told Maryam, 'If you want to marry our cousin, elope with him! Rest assured, I'll make peace and reconciliation, but don't put me in opposition to the cousins.'

Aunt Maryam failed to achieve her desire but remained steadfast. From the beginning, she had said she wouldn't marry a rural man and would wait for a man who wouldn't take her away from the city. At that time, it was customary for wealthy families to transfer land to the bride, but Maryam said, 'Even if they name land and gardens after me, I won't go to the village.'

She finally married Kak Younes in the autumn of 1972, a few months before my birth. He was from the well-known Emami family of Naqadeh. Kak Younes was a tailor, a profession new to our family, and his appearance was always stylish and clean, differing slightly from the usual look of men at that time.

Maryam reluctantly agreed to marry Kak Younes but constantly delayed the start of their married life. She remained engaged to him for a year, which was unusual at that time. The Emami family visited several times, bringing gifts to win over the bride, but Maryam bravely resisted. Who would manage to send her to Kak Younes' house, and with what tactic?

At that time, it was common for many people not to register their sons' births, to avoid government records and, consequently, compulsory military service.[1] My father, like many of his peers, did not have a birth certificate. (Since my grandfather insisted on a registered marriage for my parents, a man from the Yekav clan, Karim Yekav, was listed as my mother's husband on her marriage certificate! We laughed and joked about this for years; the story was so bizarre that it couldn't be easily forgotten.)

1 Before Reza Shah's reign, Iran established its first civil registration office in 1918. In early 1925, mandatory military service for men aged 19 to 40 was enforced, and obtaining an ID became compulsory. Bribery and mediation were common to avoid conscription in landlord-controlled areas. After the 1960s, the end of the feudal system and mandatory primary and secondary education made ID registration essential for school enrolment, allowing the Government to track eligible men for military service.

After Aunt Maryam refused to go to Kak Younes' house, tensions rose. My father, who held a fatherly position for his sisters, had to devise a plan. He told Maryam, 'Younes' brother, who is our neighbour and a government employee, might report me to the gendarmerie to be arrested and sent to military service.' With this tactic, Maryam agreed and started her life with her husband.

Aunt Maryam still says, 'When my Kaka said this, I broke inside, but I agreed to go to the marital home.' The sacrifices and support of sisters for their brothers were sincere, but the reverse was less common.



Image 19: Aunt Maryam and Sabir. About 1974.

Maryam and Kak Younes, compared to my other aunts and their husbands, had more in common, and urban living was evident in their behaviour and lifestyle. Kak Younes loved my aunt very much. When Aunt Maryam was pregnant with her first child, Sabir, she craved snow in the middle of summer when there was no snow nearby. Kak Younes bundled up and went to the Qandil Mountains, near the Iraqi Kurdistan border, to bring her snow.

We always talked about this act of Kak Younes, finding it astonishing. In those days, Kurdish men, because of their pride and authority, usually did not show their feelings to the women they loved, seeing such expressions as contrary to their manliness. Thus, such a romantic act was strange and drew attention.

Maryam lived in the city and had a different experience to her sisters'. The Emami family was among the first generation of employees and

educators in the city, more cultured and modern compared to other families.[1]

Kak Younes, like other grooms in my father's family, was simple and calm. Unfortunately, his life with Maryam was not long. He met the same fate as Kak Bayazid, Aunt Zeynab's husband, and died of colon cancer in 1982 when my aunt was pregnant with their daughter Sabri. After her husband's untimely death, Aunt Maryam never remarried. In her married years, she learned tailoring from Kak Younes and worked with the sewing machine to raise her children – her husband's legacy. My father was by her side, helping, and the sound of the sewing machine and her constant pedalling, often late into the night, still echoes in my ears.

Bone-Setting in the Village of Gol

Aunt Khadijeh (Pure Khajij) was a tall, beautiful and attractive woman, like her mother. She was politically astute and supportive. She had many suitors – men from the family both in the village and the city wanted to marry her – but she showed little interest. In the midst of the quarrels between Kuykha and my grandmother, she and her siblings had moved to the caravanserai, and she didn't want to leave her brothers and sisters alone. She acted as a mother to them in Amine's absence, showing constant kindness and sacrifice.

I mentioned before that, when living in the village of Jaldian, she fell in love with a young student and eloped with him, but she was brought back and, after a while, was married off to a man named Kak Fattah.

Kak Fattah was the son of Khatoon and Mirza. Khatoon was the sister of Mam Rasu and the sister-in-law of Mam Hawla, a famous local landlord who was a good friend. We called her 'Pure Khatoon', and her husband 'Mirza'. I don't know his real name, but since he was literate, he was called Mirza. They lived in a village called Gol, located on the road from Urmia to Mahabad and Naqadeh. Apparently, they were looking for a suitable match for their eldest son, Kak Fattah, and Kuykha-Khalil and his friend

1 For women tired of harsh, traditional environments, moving to the city symbolised freedom. Urban life appeared modern but in reality shared many similarities with rural life. Low education levels and limited exposure to other cultures meant that traditional values persisted in urban areas, as well. The urban facade of modernity often masked a core of traditional beliefs and practices.

Ahmad Agha, the lord of Aliabad[1] village in Naqadeh, suggested Khadijeh. They came to propose. Aunt Khadijeh's marriage was very important to the paternal family, and her mother-in-law, Pure Khatoon, certainly worked hard to make this match happen.

Mirza's family was famous and wealthy, connected with the local khans, and, most importantly, they were relatives. These advantages persuaded Khadijeh to marry; otherwise, Fattah was not her preference. Kak Fattah was a good man – kind, humorous and moderate. Contrary to cultural norms, he made casual and sometimes physical jokes with female relatives! This behaviour was frowned upon in that culture and did not fit the societal definition of a man. However, despite this, such men were not uncommon! Kak Fattah's family loved my aunt. They respected her and were generous with gifts and attention to the bride. At that time, her dowry was set at three thousand tomans, one of the highest dowries in Naqadeh and its surroundings for a long time.

I heard that, on the day of their wedding, my grandmother refused to eat lunch at the ceremony, saying she was not satisfied with the match. Kuykha responded, 'Don't eat if you don't want to. These are our orphans, the girl is ours and we've given her a husband.' Later, my grandmother was sitting in protest in the courtyard of the caravanserai when Khalil sent a message: 'Leave the caravanserai courtyard and return to Jaldian.' At that time, when a girl's father passed away, the paternal family or grandfather considered themselves her owners, not even allowing her mother a say in her life.

After her marriage, Aunt Khadijeh moved to a house with a yard the size of a football field. Kak Fattah and his brother Kak Salim lived on either side of the yard, and when their father passed away they brought their mother, Pure Khatoon, to live with Kak Salim and his wife on the other side of the yard.

Pure Khatoon was a bone-setter – a *synchi*.[2] She, her brother Mam Rasu and her sister Fatima had learned traditional medicine from their father in Khatoon-Bagh and Qamtara, and Pure Khatoon practised bone-setting in the village of Gol.

1 Elyawi: a village near Naqadeh in the Solduz rural district.

2 *Synchi* is a Turkish term equivalent to the Kurdish *baytal*. Its use among Kurds reflects the cultural exchange between Kurdish and Turkish-speaking populations in Solduz.

This beautiful village, located near Lake Urmia and the Hasanlu Dam, is full of water and protected wetlands, known for their tall reeds, which are home to rare birds. When we visited Gol in the summers, I had many adventures in that enjoyable environment with my cousins.

Pure Khatoon's yard was always full of cars with various license plates – people from the city and village coming for treatment. People of different ethnicities with broken limbs, accident victims, and those with sprains and dislocations would come. She was a powerful, capable woman, who sometimes enlisted the children to help with her work, seemingly intending to teach us through this method. I vividly remember how she dealt with her patients. She was very clever, keeping the patients distracted with conversation, then suddenly setting their broken bones, cracking their joints or twisting their necks. For a few minutes, the patients would scream and shout, then calm down, as if they had never been in pain.

Watching Pure Khatoon's skill, tricks and strong hands healing the patients was a delightful experience during my childhood. Amid all the sounds of pain and injured muscles in her yard, there was a woman who knew the magic of medicine and tried to teach it to others – just like Aunt Khadijeh, who gradually learned traditional medicine alongside her. Pure Khatoon was so strong that she became one of the most influential figures of my childhood. Her authority, skill and capabilities were so fascinating to me that I wanted to stand and watch her work for hours. From accompanying her and my aunt, I learned things about traditional massage and manipulation, knowledge that still stays with me, enabling me to identify stress and inflammation points in the shoulders, spine and back. I remember how, in Pure Khatoon's yard (and sometimes even today!), I would often jump on people and crack their joints.

Women's Rivalries and a Sweet Nazee with a Long and Fair Neck[1]

Every morning, Pure Khajij and her older daughters, Ayesha and Zahra, whom we called *dada* (meaning 'sister'), would churn the butter. While

1 *Nazee nazdar* refers to a graceful girl with a long, white neck.

doing this, my aunt would sing strange folk songs,[1] most of which lamented being far from her father's home or complained about mothers-in-law and the hardships of rural life. These songs and melodies have settled deep in my soul.

On the other hand, the quarrels between the two brides of the family, my aunt and her sister-in-law, were recurring and plentiful in that large courtyard. The two women would sometimes taunt each other without making eye contact, addressing each other loudly but indirectly from opposite sides of the yard.

The interesting thing was that, during their arguments, they continued with their chores, as if nothing could distract them from their daily responsibilities and housework. These repetitive tasks were so important to them that they never postponed them, even after a quarrel.

These peculiar women's fights were our morning entertainment as children, and we would secretly laugh at their words and taunts.

Of course, life wasn't always cheerful, and sometimes incidents would cause tension in the family. One of Aunt Khadijeh's daughters got into an illicit relationship, which deeply saddened my grandfather. This happened a few months after she was engaged to my youngest uncle, Ahmad, and when the affair became public, my uncle immediately divorced her, straining the relationship between the two families for years.

During this time, my parents endured a lot of pressure. Marriage and divorce were not just personal matters between a man and a woman, but often had a familial aspect, affecting the relatives for years. When these events occurred, I was a teenager, and I defended my cousin. When she married her desired partner and moved to Oshnaviyeh, I persuaded my father to invite them to our home for a celebration.

Aunt Khadijeh had a very close relationship with my father and had a significant influence on his personality. In our father's family, Khadijeh was the most politically astute, and, despite her simplicity, she managed to keep her large family together even to this day. Her ways of interacting with, making decisions for and influencing the members of her household

1 A *mashk* is a goatskin container used for churning yogurt to separate butter and buttermilk. The rhythmic movements and songs of the churning process, soothing for the churner, are considered some of the finest work songs, reflecting the process and the churner's hopes for abundant butter and buttermilk.

were evident, so, after my father's death, I consulted her more often. She had a unique insight into issues and examined matters related to her siblings with special affection and care, never discussing them in public.

I remember that, when she had something to do or wanted to discuss a matter, she would take me to a room, close the door behind her, and stay quiet until she was sure no one was eavesdropping. These actions amused me and reminded me of my grandparents, who would talk behind closed doors. It was strange that, despite such closeness, kinship and constant togetherness, she had a sense of mistrust, a need to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and to protect secrets. This fascinates me from sociological and psychological perspectives. Khadijeh might have feared being judged or showing weakness to her husband's family – common fears in traditional societies.

Aunt Khadijeh is a reminder to me of all the good days and memories of the past, and perhaps her great resemblance to my grandmother has doubled my affection for her. Although our relationship was strained for a while due to an issue with one of her sons-in-law, I am glad we have restored it.

There was another significant event in Aunt Khadijeh's life: the second marriage of Kak Fattah. Even after all these years, it's still surprising that he did such a thing! He had been secretly involved with a woman from his family who lived next door, Nazee, and suddenly we found out they had married. However, his relationship with Nazee was not entirely hidden. At least once or twice, I saw him sneaking into her yard from the second-floor window of the house. Naively, I mentioned what I had seen, but no one reacted, outwardly ignoring the issue. It seems that, in some cultures, as long as a matter is not official, it is bearable, and everyone pretends to be unaware.

When my aunt heard about Kak Fattah's marriage, she got upset and came to our house. Her brothers and relatives came to persuade her, but Khadijeh wouldn't return. Finally, Kak Fattah and his family elders, with my father's permission, came to our house to resolve the matter. My aunt asked Kak Fattah to increase her dowry and even have their marriage contract renewed. They raised her dowry to the current rate and bought her several sets of new clothes.

This was the punishment and compensation Kak Fattah received for the emotional betrayal and harm he caused my aunt. An emotional betrayal in

a traditional marriage could be somewhat compensated with money and goods, valuing a woman like Khadijeh in a material and non-emotional way. Her family, like other families at that time, was relieved, feeling they had supported her and not let her be wronged. This type of reaction and compensatory action reflects the man's position and commitment to his wife in that society, and vice versa.

It was decided that I, then thirteen years old, would accompany my aunt back to her home as my father's representative. This gesture indicated that, after her upset, she was returning triumphantly and with honour, accompanied by a man from her family. This event gave me a lot of confidence, making me feel quite grown-up. That day, I kept a serious face all the way and didn't speak to my uncle-in-law.

We planned to go to the newly established Keyvan Mall in Naqadeh so my aunt could buy the best and most expensive Kurdish clothes from a well-known fabric shop. She bought many fashionable, glittering clothes. At that age, her regular clothes were Kurdish and woollen, and I knew she wouldn't wear the things she'd bought. However, she also picked up a few woollen shawls that were more suitable for her.

On the way back to the village, as we boarded the minibus, I sat next to her and whispered, 'Pure Khajij, why did you buy these clothes if you're not going to wear them?'

She replied, 'I wanted him to know that I deserve all these, and if I don't wear them, my daughters will.'

Although Aunt Khadijeh was deeply hurt, beyond her sorrow, the issue had implications for others, especially her children. With Kak Fattah's second marriage, some dynamics in their household changed, as the new bride entered their lives and impacted the atmosphere. New items arrived, and the groom bought gold, clothes and other things for Nazee.

This rival's presence was significant for a woman like Khadijeh, who had always appeared strong and dignified throughout her life. Her pride was hurt, and this blow left her heartbroken and depressed.

The new bride would serve tea to everyone in the mornings, trying to respect the household owners, but my aunt's eldest daughter wouldn't take tea from her, and the others (mostly the daughters) wouldn't talk to her. They ignored or mocked her. Among Kurdish women, such household rivals are called *Soore o Toore*. When a man takes a second wife, his first

wife also refers to the children as Sure o Tore, meaning troublesome and idle relatives.[1]

We were used to addressing the realities of family life with humour. Usually, I was responsible for creating this humour. I remember one summer morning, during breakfast, Kak Fattah turned on the radio to listen to a song and lighten the heavy atmosphere. He tuned into Kurdish Radio Baghdad, but suddenly the song 'Nazee' started playing, which was a hit at that time. The singer sang, 'Hey Nazee, Nai Nazee, Hey Nazee Gardan Gazi.'[2] Hearing the song, I couldn't help but burst into laughter. My aunt's children, who were my age, started laughing too. My aunt turned her face away, Nazee looked embarrassed and Kak Fattah turned off the radio.

This second marriage didn't last long. A year or two later, Kak Fattah divorced Nazee, who had given birth to a beautiful daughter, and Aunt Khadijeh's life returned to normal.

Aunt Khadijeh, with her large house and the long tables she would set, played a crucial role in keeping the family members together. Her house was located near the three-way junction of the road from Urmia to Mahabad and Naqadeh, and whenever we travelled in the area, we would visit her. The village of Gol was also interesting, with a relatively liberal atmosphere, and the most folkloric and grand weddings and celebrations in the Sandus[3] region were held there. They also had the tradition of *majma* at their memorial services, where each family would send two meals for the male and female guests, signifying their sharing in the family's grief.

Aunt Khadijeh's house was the centre of all significant events. When my father was released from Urmia prison in 1982, he went to her house, and news of his release spread from there. Many reconciliations and family settlements also occurred or were initiated there. If someone from the family eloped with a girl, they sought refuge there. My cousin Amir, who was involved in selling so-called contraband goods, would hide his items

1 Sharafkandi, 1990.

2 *Hey Nazee, Nai Nazee, Hey Nazee Gardan Gazi* means 'Oh sweet Nazee, with your long and fair neck.'

3 The term *Solduz*/*Sulduz* (*Sundus*/*Sandos* in Kurdish) for Naqadeh is politically and ethnically sensitive; hence the deliberate use of 'Naqadeh' in the text.

there or load them up from the garden. Aunt Khadijeh's house was strategically important and a haven for various family members.

In 2004, when my mother suffered a stroke and was hospitalised in Urmia, our comings and goings were centred around my aunt's house, where everyone stayed. As my mother approached the final days of her life, Aunt Khadijeh was by her side and turned off the device connected to her brain. According to hospital regulations, this device had to be disconnected by an immediate family member. My aunt said, 'Your mother moved and passed away. She took her last breath.' This always troubled her, as she believed her action had a role in my mother's death. Like many others who are with their loved ones in their final moments and make such decisions out of necessity, she carried the perpetual grief mixed with guilt and self-reproach.

Aunt Khadijeh was like a grandmother. She rarely said no to me. She was the only woman who smoked, and since I had a desire to smoke from a young age, I was fascinated by this. She would say to me, 'Go to the village shop and get me a pack of cigarettes' and then wink, implying it was okay if I smoked one on the way. I cherished her deeply for understanding the adolescent desire to experience new things. She saw me, and, as a teenager whose greatest concerns were being noticed, feeling free and being loved, I relished that. She didn't encourage me, but she allowed me to be comfortable with her, which was a great blessing for a teenage boy. She and my uncle created an environment where I could smoke occasionally without fear of reprimand from the elders, making me feel manly and grown-up.

Adolescence is a period when few believe in your maturity. The significant people in your life often lack an understanding of this phase and still see you as a child. You are constantly striving to prove yourself, and this relentless effort can be exhausting and disheartening. As a result, you are drawn to those who grant you this freedom and believe in your ability to choose and decide. These few individuals are the *important others* in your life and will always be present, even if they are not physically with you nor in this world any more.

Mahbubeh, the Apple of Father's Eye



Image 20: My sister Mahbubeh. Naqadeh, 1972.

The modern world has imposed many changes on human society, but it still hasn't managed to diminish the role of the family, especially in traditional communities. The fates of family members are intertwined, and no matter how different their paths may be, they always come back to each other, as if connected by an invisible thread.

My sisters Mahbubeh and Tabibeh and I were born approximately three years apart. Four years after me, my brother Rasul was born. We were born in Naqadeh; Kamyar and Kani (whom I will soon explain) were born in Piranshahr.

A year after my parents' marriage in 1966, Mahbubeh came into this world, a girl with light eyes and beautiful, fair skin. Being the first child was enough to attract everyone's attention to her. Contrary to the culture of the time, my parents wished for their first child to be a girl, and they were very happy. The birth of this beautiful baby sweetened their married life. In those days, having a son was important for several reasons: continuing the family lineage, preserving the father's name and keeping the household's lights on (economic reasons). It is natural for such desires to be strong in a traditional society. This feeling continues to some extent even today, as evidenced by the common saying among middle-aged Kurdish women, 'May God not take your son from you.'[1]

1 The importance of a son was significant for both father and mother. If the child was a boy, the mother would be relieved from the burden of prayers and vows, but if it was a girl, she had to answer to society and those around her for a natural, uncontrollable event. Sometimes she was even blamed for not having a boy. The labels of 'a barren woman' and 'a woman who only bore daughters' were heavy stigmas; if someone was branded with these, she was constantly humiliated and, in some cases, it provided an excuse for the man to divorce her or take a second wife. The religious and legal structures are also reflective of this culture. A daughter's rights are half of those of a son. However, the tangible reality in parts of society is that the rights of a woman are even less than the religiously prescribed limit.

Mahbubeh, like any first grandchild, was adored by the aunts. Maryam and Zeynab, who were unmarried at the time, spent hours with her. Mahbubeh was the apple of my parents' eyes, and my father was always proud of her. She was the top student, polite, well-mannered and dignified, holding a special place, as the first child, for my mother as well.

However, Mahbubeh couldn't always act as she wished. For various reasons, including the self-censorship instilled in girls by culture and tradition, she found her desires and dreams unattainable.

Although Mahbubeh was less active in family matters than her siblings, her opinion was always important to the family. She was a sensitive girl who often got the highest grades in school, and a score of 19.5 out of 20 could bring her to tears. Perhaps being the centre of attention deprived her of the opportunity to be strong.

During a time when most teenage girls were thinking about marriage and motherhood, Mahbubeh was constantly studying and reading. She had a calm personality and, unlike my second sister, wasn't much into joking and laughing. She studied at a teacher-training university and became a primary-school teacher. Then, in the late 1980s, she became a student counsellor. After getting married, she became very religious, to the extent that she completely boycotted wedding celebrations. She didn't even attend the 13 Bedar (an Iranian festival), and she eventually became the head of the women's pilgrimage caravan.

According to the tradition of that time, during the summer each of us would stay with one of our relatives, and Mahbubeh usually chose Aunt Maryam. In the family, Mahbubeh resembled Pure Maryam the most and had a close relationship with her. Both were well-mannered, urban, strict and sensitive individuals.

Mahbubeh's friends, who were also from the old families of the city, were determined and serious like her and somewhat reluctant to form new relationships. I remember, during childhood games, we would tease her by singing the ending credits of the Morad Barghi series and suggesting she was in love with Morad Barghi, which would make her angry and upset.[1]

1 Murad Barqi was the name of the character in long-running comedy series *Sergeant Major* (1967–1969) and *The Nomad* (1973), which were broadcast on TV before the

Tabibeh, the Spirited Jokester



Image 21: My sister Tabibeh. 1981.

Tabibeh was born in 1969, although both Mahbubeh and Tabibeh are unsure about the years recorded on their birth certificates. The lack of a birth certificate for my father made it difficult to know and record our exact birth dates, a story I will elaborate on later.

In those days, having a second daughter in a Kurdish family was not a simple matter, but my family was not upset or disappointed that their second child was also a girl. However, I can guess that, because of the cultural and traditional atmosphere of the time, they might have *preferred* their second child to be a boy. Perhaps my mother was indirectly pressured and did not say anything.

I must add that, contrary to the common attitude, our family was somewhat girl-centred, so much so that in my teenage and young adult years I thought my father paid more attention to the girls and did not have the same attachment and fondness for me. Sometimes I even thought he forgot he had a son. Later, I considered that perhaps my stubbornness and opposition to my father, along with my grandmother's constant support, set him against me. Maybe, consciously, to compensate for my perceived unkindness, he deliberately gave what I wanted to my sisters.

Tabibeh's personality was completely different from Mahbubeh's. She was quick, humorous and lively, always playful and charming to everyone. From the moment she was born, she was a noisy baby and cried a lot. They would put her in a Kurdish cradle called a *lank*,[1] but her cries wouldn't stop. No matter how much my mother rocked the lank, Tabibeh wouldn't quiet down. Sometimes, when my father got tired of her crying

Revolution to great public reception. These works were by Parviz Kardan, who recently passed away in the USA.

1 A *lank* is a cradle made by a carpenter from plane or willow trees, and the child is placed in it until they learn to walk.

or returned home weary from travel, he would tell my mother to take the lank out of the room.[1]

Tabibeh's birth coincided with a significant event. They say that while Tabibeh was in the cradle, the news of Murad Shirij's[2] killing shocked the people of Naqadeh, Sardasht, Piranshahr and Mahabad. Murad was assassinated by a guest who was having lunch with him. He was a man in his thirties who, along with some young men from the Lajan region and other parts of Kurdistan, had been labelled outlaws by the Government, though everyone knew the reality was different. They were a small armed group initially motivated by financial reasons, but later they stood up against the gendarmerie.

Murad and his group chose the high mountains of the region, including Qandil, as their sanctuary, and gradually their activities became political and purposeful. The Shah's regime labelled them 'bandits' and 'thieves' to discredit them and showcase the power of its security system following the fall of the Kurdish Republic and the execution of Qazi Muhammad. The area of Murad Shirij's guerrilla activities extended from the Lajan, Mamesh and Piran regions in Piranshahr to the Mangur areas in Piranshahr and Mahabad, and Sandos in the Naqadeh and Oshnaviyeh regions. According to multiple accounts from my grandfather and uncles, he visited my maternal grandfather's house in Gerdashavan and had a familial relationship with the wife of Yusuf, the fourth son of Mam Rasu.

1 The cradle was highly important among Kurds for raising children. Kurdish mothers adorned their babies' cradles with various beads and ornamental stones, believing they warded off the evil eye. In Kurdish folklore, literature and popular songs, the cradle is frequently mentioned. The famous Mahabad poet Hajar wrote, 'My child! I have more experience than you; if I have tied your hands in the cradle, do not worry. You are a Kurd, and you are bound to be enslaved, so you might as well get used to it from an early age!' In the text of this poem, there is a social critique of the oppression Kurds have endured throughout history. Alongside laying their babies in a lank, Kurdish mothers have created unique lullabies, which are an essential part of the region's folklore and are still hummed by mothers today when putting their children to sleep or calming them.

2 *Shirij* is a local cheese that is combined with a plant and is widely consumed in Kurdistan. However, for Kurds, Shirij also refers to a tragedy. In the years 1967 and 1968, the armed struggle of the Kurdistan Democratic Party's Revolutionary Committee, led by figures like Suleiman Moini, Ismail Sharifzadeh and Mulla Awara took place. They re-entered Iranian territory from Iraqi Kurdistan and carried out many guerrilla operations, capturing garrisons and gendarmeries. These activities were mainly influenced by the political atmosphere of the 1960s.

The news of Murad Shirij's assassination was announced by a man named Mohammad Amin Hatami, known as Hamadamin Chicho, from the Herki Kurdish clan. He said, 'Murad was killed in a nomadic tent.'

This news quickly spread in the region. Killing Murad was so important to the regime and the gendarmerie that they paraded his body in Kurdish towns for several days. They then tied him to a ladder in front of the Naqadeh gendarmerie and put a cigarette in his mouth to display the Shah's regime's power and victory to the Kurdish people and political parties.

When they hanged him, people gathered in groups in front of the gendarmerie, looking at his body with sighs and groans. This display, orchestrated by the power structure, is known in European social history as a 'penitential rite', a ritual rooted in the fear of power, when governments sought to humiliate and teach lessons to the people. I believe that by not attending such rites one could honour the character of someone like Murad. Neighbouring women had told Aunt Maryam, 'You, too, come and watch.' She first used the excuse of taking care of baby Tabibeh and then said she did not enjoy watching anyone's humiliation, especially someone like Murad Shirij, whom the State feared even in death. This refusal and Aunt Maryam's response reflected her modern and dissenting mindset at a time when almost everyone attended such displays.

Tabibeh was a sweet-talker. Family members usually asked her to talk and show her sweetness. She liked this role and, as any child would, wanted to be noticed, supported and loved. Among the family members, Tabibeh had a good relationship with Aunt Zeynab and stayed at her house for long periods while Aunt Zeynab was training as a nurse at the



Image 22: The body of Murad Shirij, Gendarmerie. Likely Naqadeh, 1968.

Mahabad hospital. Perhaps there were similarities between Tabibeh's and Aunt Zeynab's personalities and concerns that attracted them.

In her childhood, Tabibeh was more independent and unafraid of speaking in front of men. Unlike many men of that time, my father, due to his market and trade involvement, had many non-family friends who frequently visited our home, and their gatherings were full of jokes. They even formed a 'Donkey Party' and issued membership cards for themselves, calling each other playful names like 'Poet Donkey', 'Bespectacled Donkey', 'Communist Donkey' and so on.

The story of the 'Donkey Party' is somewhat known among Kurds. This story initially came from Turkey's Kurdistan to Iraqi Kurdistan and then to Iranian Kurdistan. It was a satire and critique of the political parties of that era, which are manifestations of democratic societies. The famous Turkish satirist Aziz Nesin might be the first Kurd to critique the political parties in Eastern dictatorships, which were caricature-like imitations of the political parties in Western democratic countries, with his story about the Donkey Party.[1]

Tabibeh attended these gatherings, naming my father's friends and being asked to give her father a nickname. She would start the jokes and leave the gathering, which would then turn into a men's party. Most of us accepted Tabibeh as she was, just as we had come to understand and accept other family members, but her humour sometimes caused offence, and later, when she married the person of her choice, she experienced a turbulent and difficult life.

In Naqadeh, I attended Anushiravan School, while Tabibeh and Mahbubeh attended Azar Midocht Primary School. Both Tabibeh and I had a teacher named Sara, who was also our neighbour, but after the Revolution and the gender segregation in schools, we were separated and the education system underwent a fundamental change.

Kameel: Choosing a Unique Name

When Mahbubeh and Tabibeh were born, my father, my uncle's family and my grandmother left the caravanserai. After a few relocations, they rented a house on Maroofi Street (now Imam Shafi'i Street) in Naqadeh in 1969.

1 Nesin, A., 2018.

This house belonged to a man named Karim Kurmanj and was located in a dead-end alley. A year later, I was born in this house, but we did not stay long and moved to another house on Mulla Saleh Street (now Sonnat Street).[1] This new house, also in a dead-end alley, belonged to my mother's half-uncle, Haji Saeed. Initially, he rented it to us and then sold it to my father and uncle in 1975 for 7,000 tomans, a significant sum at the time. The house was divided by a wall, with Haji Saeed and his wife living on one side and us on the other. Often, they would spend time with us, and we, as children, would play with the wooden toys Haji skilfully made.

The peculiar and somewhat sad part of my birth is that I do not know the exact date I was born! Recently, I discovered that, contrary to what is recorded on my birth certificate, I was born in the last week of February, not in October. Knowing one's birth month and day is emotionally significant for an individual. As I mentioned earlier, my father did not have a birth certificate due to his fear of conscription and could not legally register his marriage until after my birth. After marrying my mother, my father registered the marriage at the insistence of my maternal grandfather. However, my mother remained legally married to Karim Yekav[2] until my father obtained his birth certificate.[3]

Having a birth certificate offered advantages such as being officially recognised as a citizen and registering one's spouse and children. However, it also meant being subject to mandatory military service, which many, including my father, found unacceptable. Consequently, the exact date of my birth remained uncertain, and no one remembers it accurately

1 Mulla Saleh Street, which is nowadays called Sonnat Street – Kurds often change the pronunciation of Arabic names and truly Kurdify non-Kurdish words.

2 Karim Yekav lived in the village of Dilan Charkh, Naqadeh and was killed in his home by the peshmerga (Qiyada Movaqat) forces of Massoud Barzani (who later became the president of the Kurdistan Region) in February 1983. I will write about the massacre of civilians in the villages of Naqadeh and Oshnaviyeh in the following sections.

3 The main reason for this anonymity and collective lack of identity is that individuals do not feel a sense of belonging to the Government, and in their view, the State does not have enough legitimacy; therefore, they do not feel committed or responsible toward it. They are even willing to collectively accept a lack of identity to avoid military service. This collective aspect indicates that the issue of birth certificates and military service has social roots. The strict requirements and regulations in developing countries have encouraged people to take protest and defensive actions, creating a basis for the society to transform in a distorted and irregular manner, even during modernisation.

after all these years. For instance, people say I was born near Newruz, in winter, summer or spring, so there is no consensus.

Many in my generation faced similar situations due to their families' resistance to conscription.[1] Amusingly, when my elder sister Mahbubeh reached school age, she was listed as my uncle's daughter, and for years my father's name and those of two aunts, Zeynab and Maryam, were on my uncle Qader's birth certificate. This led to jokes about Mahbubeh being able to claim inheritance from Uncle Qader's children! This flawed system persisted till the birth of my uncle's children, with many of his children, including Habibeh and his only son Omid, being listed under my father's name.

It seems that, shortly after my birth, my father went to the civil registry office in Naqadeh and registered three births at once: my sister Tabibeh, my cousin Habibeh and me. Birthdates were recorded consecutively: Habibeh on 30 September, Tabibeh on 1 October and me on 2 October. Consequently, our birth-certificate numbers were issued sequentially. Through extensive interviews for writing this autobiography, I discovered that I was born in late February, not early October, although there is no consensus on our exact birth dates among my aunts and sisters, each recalling something different. We do know that my mother was pregnant and about to give birth at the time of Aunt Maryam's wedding, and so my mother hosted the welcoming party for Maryam sooner. I was born a few days after the party.

Until a few months ago, I associated my birth month symbol with Libra, but now, after all these years, I must identify with Aquarius. It's even more absurd that, until recently, my family sometimes celebrated my birthday on 2 October, evoking feelings of modern and commercial birthday celebrations. We would gather, and I would receive gifts from some loved ones. Now, all these have lost their former meaning. I need to randomly pick a day in late February 1973 to mark my birth.

1 For traditional and rural families, sons are the labour force and the strength of the family, and their absence for two years is a significant loss. Moreover, many families and clans saw the soldier as an agent of the State and did not want their sons to be State agents. This actually reflects the longstanding historical conflict between the state and the nation in Iranian society, which is one of the features of this society's social structure. The political-economic factors were another obstacle to military service in the rural society of that time, bringing with it many social and cultural challenges.



Image 23: Me in primary school.

Following the custom of those days, my mother did not go to a hospital or maternity clinic. On a rainy February afternoon in 1973, a local midwife named Baajeh Masoum[1] came to our house and delivered me.

As the first son, my birth brought joy to the family of Kaka Karim, who had two daughters before me. Naturally, my birth was a cause for celebration, and everyone in the family wanted to name me. In those days, whoever first informed the father of a newborn son's birth received a gift called *Mezgini*[2] in Kurdish.

The first to inform my father was my aunt Asmar, who eagerly sought him out to share the news, saying, 'Kaka, you have a son!' She asked for a valuable shawl and dress as her reward – a request my father later fulfilled.

My birth was celebrated with a large naming ceremony[3] attended by senior family members, a tradition not usually observed for the birth of

1 'Mum'.

2 *Mezgini*: the reward given to the first person who informs the father about the birth of the child is also called *goê zabanê*. This reward prompts everyone to compete to bring the news to the father.

3 In the past, naming newborns was taken very seriously, like any other tradition or ceremony, and families, rather than just the parents, usually had a significant influence in naming the children. In Kurdish families, naming ceremonies were often accompanied

daughters. The family gathered to decide my name, a significant matter. Family traditions and expectations influenced the choice. Uncle Abdullah (Mam Hawla), representing the elders, suggested naming me after the family patriarch, his father Kuykha-Khalil. Some younger family members, including my aunts, opposed this, preferring a newer name over that of a deceased ancestor. Mam Hawla insisted, saying, 'This is tradition. My brother Qader named his son after our father; why can't you do the same for us?'

The family did not easily relent. Eventually, my grandmother cleverly proposed naming me Mohammad, knowing it was a revered and religiously significant name that would not be easily rejected. However, there were already several boys named Mohammad in the family, including my grandmother's brother. The younger women, led by Aunt Maryam, again objected, insisting on a different and unique name. The name 'Kameel' emerged from that session, proposed by Aunt Maryam after Kameel Emami,[1] a renowned poet and translator from Bukan. In Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish, *Kameel* means 'complete' or 'perfect'. It is written and pronounced 'Kameel' in Kurdish, while in Arabic, it is 'Kamel'. Though uncommon in Iran, the name Kameel is used in English and French[2] with the same Kurdish pronunciation. Interestingly, it is a common name in France and in some African countries, used for both boys and girls. In Iran, non-Kurds often thought I was Armenian or Jewish, or that I had chosen a foreign name. In Europe, some accused me of turning my back on my culture, assuming I had changed my Iranian or Islamic name to one with a foreign pronunciation. The name Kameel often invited diverse and extensive judgements about me.

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by *goê zabanê*. This compound word is made up of *goê* meaning 'ear' and *zaban*, which means 'tongue', or 'the tool for speaking'. In the olden days, Kurds would invite relatives and close neighbours for this ceremony. Religious families would also invite the village Mulla. The Mulla would call the name in the baby's ear, thus announcing it. The goê zabanê naming ceremony sometimes included a feast.

1 Seyyed Kamil Emami Zanbil, known by his pen name Awat and famously called Seyyed Zanbil (in Kurdish: Sayid Kamili Imami), was a renowned poet of Kurdistan. He was born in 1903 in a family of the Zanbil Sayyids in the city of Bukan. During his lifetime, he published his poems and ghazals in a collection called *Diwan Awat*, which includes many of his works.

2 In French, *Cemille*.


Image 24: Me. Autumn 1979.

In that naming session, some suggested naming me Mohammad Kameel, and it was ultimately decided that my official name would be Mohammad, but I would be called Kameel. From the beginning, everyone called me Kameel, and Mohammad remained a formal, unfamiliar name on paper. My grandmother was the only one who occasionally called me Mohammad Kameel. In school, administrative settings, banks or similar situations, being called Mohammad felt so foreign that I would react slowly and reluctantly.

In Iran, I tried three times to officially change my name from Mohammad to my known name Kameel, but the courts in Naqadeh and Urmia issued negative rulings, stating, 'The name Mohammad is sacred and cannot be changed to a meaningless name like Kameel.' This is despite my being known as Kameel both in Iran and abroad, with my works published under this name. While it may seem trivial, having two names and an unclear birth date has always been unsettling for me.

Rasul: Handy and Organised

In the rainy autumn of 1977, my brother Rasul was born, and our family gained another son. There is no doubt that having two sons was a source of strength for the family.

Rasul is the smallest in stature among us. I vaguely remember his birth. The midwife had arrived, and my mother was in a dimly lit room, enduring labour pains. They had prepared tubs of warm water. One woman dressed in Kurdish attire, wearing men's Kurdish trousers known as *patul*. These baggy trousers, often made of wool and gathered at the ankles, were considered practical for women working around the house. She was constantly coming and going, filling and emptying the tubs and assisting the midwife. I stood watching, and I don't know why no one thought to send me out of the room. Perhaps it was because there was no

deep understanding of childhood, and, consequently, no sensitivity or management in dealing with a child.


Image 25: Rasul. Autumn 1979.

Perhaps this experience played a significant role in shaping my interests and concerns in research and writing about childhood. Although, eventually, my aunt and sister noticed my presence and took me out of the room, I had seen much of the childbirth process, which is strange and astonishing for a child. At that young age, I sensed the blood and the moment of the baby's birth. This feeling was revived thirty-nine years later in Diyarbakır, Kurdistan, Turkey, during the birth of my own son.

That day, my aunts, aunt-in-law and the elder women of the family were our guests. When I heard my brother's crying, I felt relieved, believing my mother's suffering was finally over. My aunts congratulated me on Rasul's birth. A small and beautiful baby had come into the world, and, as everyone said, I now had a brother, which didn't mean much to me at that age.

Rasul was a sweet and talkative child. He was the youngest (at least for a while) and as such was especially under the care and protection of my father and mother.

Due to our age difference, we weren't often playmates, and if Rasul wanted to join me and my cousins Sabir and Amir, we wouldn't let him. He would get angry quicker than the rest of us, and sometimes we would tease him. As we grew older, I always felt guilty for this behaviour, even though I was a child myself and the age difference and lack of sufficient knowledge on how to deal with children and their problems led to such situations (sometimes even encouraged by the adults). However, he mostly hung out with peers his age. Maybe that is why we never felt a sense of intimacy with each other. Sometimes I envied the close relationships between other siblings and felt a longing for my brother.

Rasul was very organised from a young age and had a great interest in fixing things around the house. He demonstrated this discipline and

handiness more as he grew older, especially during family outings (picnics), where his skills in making a fire and grilling were commendable.

When he was younger, our parents paid more attention to him, and, after Mahbubeh, he was the beloved of the house. He usually had whatever he wanted at his disposal and spent most of his time with our mother.

I was closer to Tabibeh, drawing inspiration from her as a modern and contemporary girl, and perhaps Rasul was inspired by us, but it seemed each of us had our own circle of friends in the family and neighbourhood, something today's children usually don't have.

When I was in Europe, after a long time apart, Rasul and I met in Istanbul. This trip had a strange but pleasant feeling. It gave me a more precise, deeper understanding of my brother. Later, when I lived in Iran, during the events there and losses of our loved ones, I experienced this brotherly bond and closeness with him several more times.

Kani and Kamyar: The 1980s Children

There was a significant gap between the births of Rasul and Kamyar and Kani. After years of deliberation both joking and serious, my parents decided to have another child, and Kamyar was born. By then, Mahbubeh had married and left the house, while Tabibeh was preparing for her own marriage.

Unlike many firstborn sons, who were expected to continue and expand the family business, I was not the kind to carry on such traditions. My parents seemed to have no such expectations of me and understood that they could not rely on me in that way. Instead, Amine and Karim needed a son who would stay with them and accompany them in their old age. Perhaps they thought that Rasul, being the second son, would marry and move away, leaving them alone.

On 7 June 1988, news of Kamyar's birth arrived. I had gone to the village of Khalifehlu to help with a family task. I was working in Aunt Zeynab's fields[1] with my cousin Habibeh and her brother Sabir, harvesting and

1 These fields were referred to as *qurgh*, and their owners were legally prohibited from ploughing them. Near these lands, adjacent to the main road from Mahabad to Urmia and Naqadeh, and opposite a restaurant owned by Haji Hossein, a distant relative of ours, the then-commander of the Kurdistan Corps, Mohammad Boroujerdi – who the Government dubbed the 'Saviour of Kurdistan' and who was one of the founders of the Kurdish

gathering plants while being relentlessly bitten by mosquitoes. I seized the opportunity to escape the exhausting work, using Kamyar's birth as an excuse.

Seeing Kamyar was a strange feeling for me; I wasn't sure what to do with this new addition to our lives, especially when I was contemplating moving to Europe.



Image 26: Kamyar and Kani

Not long after Kamyar's birth, while we were still getting used to him, my mother unexpectedly became pregnant again, an occurrence humorously referred to as *Allah-Verdi*, a Turkish term meaning 'God-given'. Kani, the last child of the family (*pashebere*), was born on 9 February 1992 during a harsh winter. I was finishing my military service, and heavy snowfall had blocked all the roads. Kani was born in the hospital, but my mother faced complications during childbirth from her pre-existing high blood pressure, which worsened after Kani's birth. One of the contributing factors to her later stroke, which eventually led to her death, was this unintended pregnancy.

Muslim Peshmerga – was killed by a landmine explosion on 22 May 1983. Following this event, a large-scale attack was launched on the villages in the region, resulting in the displacement of many villagers, including Aunt Zeynab's family, for an extended period. Many believe that the execution of 59 young people from Mahabad in Tabriz prison was an act of revenge for Boroujerdi's death. The Friday Prayer leader of Urmia, Gholamreza Hassani, who was also the representative of the Supreme Leader in West Azerbaijan Province, famously threatened, 'In revenge for the blood of martyr Boroujerdi, this entire area should be flattened and onions planted there.'

The doctors at the Piranshahr hospital said they lacked the necessary facilities, and my mother needed to be transferred to the provincial centre in Urmia. However, the snow made travel impossible. An ambulance set out but could not reach its destination. It returned to Piranshahr. My mother was in a critical state, and it was a harrowing time for her.

My father owned a shop, and, coincidentally, one of his customers was a military doctor. My father, through desperate pleas and the promise of payment, persuaded the doctor to perform a caesarean section for my mother. Perhaps she was the first civilian woman to give birth in a military barracks. My elder sister, who had recently married, went with her husband Kak Hussein to the Piranshahr barracks, and Kani was born in a protected underground hospital with cold, war-era tiles and maze-like corridors.

It had been years since a child had been born into our family. We had had a peaceful life. But the arrival of Kamyar and Kani changed everything. The sound of babies filled the house again, breaking the silence of the adult world. My parents were no longer young and lacked the patience for child-rearing. Kamyar and Kani proved to be demanding infants, so caring for them became a significant challenge.

These late-1980s children forced new experiences and habits on the family. They changed my parents' behaviour. My father was no longer the serious and stern figure he once was; he had become older, more relaxed and kinder to the children. Kamyar and Kani's roles in the household became more prominent than ours, with more interaction between them and our parents. Their relationships were different, evoking both jealousy and longing in me. While our generation had been somewhat neglected, Kamyar and Kani received increased attention and care. Ther was a strong sense of responsibility and concern for their future needs.

Kani, as the youngest child, had different expectations of my parents than our generation did, which made them more attentive and patient. In large families, the first and last children often play significant roles. The first child is sometimes called *Dadê* if a girl or *Kake* if a boy, while the youngest, being the *pashebere*, receives special attention from parents and siblings. My wife and I often call our son *Kake*.

Naming Ceremony

I previously discussed my own naming ceremony, which is referred to as *Goy Zabanah* in Kurdish, and highlighted the significance of this celebratory feast for naming sons.

The names for Tabibeh and Mahbubeh, and even mine, were chosen by Aunt Maryam with the agreement and perhaps collaboration of other aunts and young family members. While all the aunts were involved in naming the girls, Aunt Maryam had a more prominent role. Similarly, Tabibeh later had a strong influence in our family when naming newborns. When Kamyar and, later, Kani were born, Tabibeh and I tried to play active roles in choosing their names, although Tabibeh was more determined about it.

Kani's official name is Naskeh, which she always laughs about because it has different pronunciations in Farsi and can sound amusing. My mother wanted her daughter's name to be Naskeh, but Tabibeh and I insisted on choosing a meaningful Kurdish name. Kani means 'spring' in Kurdish, while Naskeh means 'delicate', and I think both names suit my sister well.

Kamyar's name was chosen by consensus, although other names, like Shevyar, meaning 'night companion', were also considered. This name was special to Tabibeh and me, but as far as I recall our parents were not particularly fond of it.

The names Kani and Kamyar pleased me because they both started with the letter 'K', creating harmony with my own name, Kameel. A similar harmony among Mahbubeh, Tabibeh, and Habibeh gave us a sense of belonging and closeness – a feeling that might have been lacking due to our age differences.

Today, in Kurdistan and throughout Iran, due to the reluctance of civil registration officers to include local names in official documents,[1] children

1 Due to the dominance of religious approaches in the Civil Registration Organisation, birth certificates for children whose families choose Arabic and Farsi names are issued easily and without delay. Some people have faced pressure from law enforcement and business administrations when they insisted on using these names for their shops and businesses. This is because the Government cannot tolerate Kurdish independence efforts. I've heard that some families who refused to comply with the names imposed by the Civil Registration Organisation for their children have ended up in court.

often have two names.[1] The name registered in the official documents must conform to the standard names available in the registry, while families choose names that reflect their own cultures. A recent example is Kani's child, born not long ago in 2021. The registration office in Mahabad refused to register the name Zhiya and forced them to use Zhiyar instead. Zhiya means 'life'.

When I was away from Iran and my brother Rasul's son was born, I wanted to name him after the famous Mahabadi poet Hemin, but the baby was named Pouya. Names reflect the period we live in; nowadays many Kurdish families use Farsi names as well. My brother's daughter is named Asal, and Mahbubeh's two sons are named Reza and Sina, while Tabibeh's two daughters are Ghazal and Roman – names used by many girls throughout Iran. By contrast, Kani and Kamyar were more common and popular Kurdish names. These days, though, we are again witnessing the rise of historical and ancient Kurdish names.[2]

1 One of the most famous examples is Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a well-known Kurdish girl who was killed in the custody of Iranian police for not adhering to government-mandated hijab and dress codes. Her death sparked widespread protests and strikes across Iran. Her Kurdish name was Jina, which highlights the structural discrimination against other identity and ethnic groups such as Kurds and Turks.

2 In Iran today, many families look for names in ancient and historical cultures and books, sometimes finding names that are difficult to pronounce or even meaningless. I call these new names 'dictionary names'. Young parents want to find a name that is unique and hasn't been used before. Interestingly, in Western culture, using old names that often have religious roots is not seen as a disadvantage, but as a cultural and social prestige, evoking a sense of historical authenticity. Some believe the traditions of naming and the differences between our society and Western culture show that, sometimes, the criterion for naming in our society is a way of 'showing off' – the social-competition mechanism has entered this arena as well, playing a determinative role.

Chapter Three: Birth and Early Years

I was born and raised in Kurdistan, a vast region in the west of the Iranian plateau that now forms the western border of the country. Many Kurds see it not as part of Iran, but as a territory known as 'Greater Kurdistan'. Urbanisation and development, modern life and other manifestations of modernity have always arrived later in Kurdistan than in many other parts of Iran. The advancements seen in Tehran and Iran's other major cities began in the 1960s but took significantly longer to reach Kurdistan.

You might think that being born in such a region is disheartening, but that's not the case at all. Everyone is born somewhere in this world and experiences their own share of gains and losses, ups and downs. Kurdistan is my share, and I cherish it deeply.

As I mentioned earlier, I was born in Naqadeh, a bilingual city where Kurds and Turks lived side by side and where modernity was in no rush to arrive. Indicators of urban development, such as expanded education opportunities and public welfare, were mostly limited to large cities. The areas where we lived lacked even the most basic services, and life in the surrounding villages and small towns was still in a pre-modern phase. My birthplace is a good example of the influence of geography on culture.

The Impact of Culture and Geography on Human Existence

The Constitutional Revolution marked the beginning of modernisation in Iran, a process further invigorated by Reza Shah Pahlavi. Some historians believe that Reza Shah continued the modernisation that had already begun but used a more authoritarian approach. Infrastructure projects, school and university construction, and urban planning were going on in

neighbouring countries, and the Shah of Iran emulated these advancements.

Turkey's president, Atatürk, had modernised Turkey, so Reza Shah sought to replicate his methods. Thus, development commenced. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, diligently pursued his father's legacy. This was an era of extensive cultural and social transformation, which, although significant, requires critical examination – what transpired was not wholly positive.

Reza Shah's brand of modernity was forceful and high-handed. The resulting uneven and maladaptive development led to numerous social and cultural harms. The signs and consequences of this lopsided progress became evident in small towns, peripheral areas and even border regions.

A critical look reveals how uniform directives and centralised authority – often at odds with local cultures – can create problems. According to British sociologist Anthony Giddens, these impacts stem from the failure to harmonise global influences with local/indigenous practices in an interactive and adaptive manner. The effects become especially pronounced in social crises, family tensions, and religious and ethnic prejudices.

In cities like Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad and Isfahan, modernisation and development proceeded rapidly, and those living in the capital or other major cities benefitted to some extent. In Naqadeh, we lived almost isolated from these changes. Life continued in a pre-modern fashion. Everyday tools and practices remained traditional, although my father's cousins, who travelled to Tehran, would bring back modern items, familiarising us with these advancements.

When I attended nursery school in Naqadeh in the 1970s, I encountered some of these transformations firsthand. The school, a symbol of urbanisation, featured foreign goods and modern, more appealing toys. However, after the Revolution, the glamour of this Western modernity dissipated, and the changes took on a different character.

It should be noted that the advancements in technology and machinery in Iran were concentrated in specific parts of the major cities. Even in Tehran, access to modern amenities was not uniform, and, until the end of the war in the late 1980s, many parts of large cities were challenged with marginalisation, poverty and a clear class divide.

Shiites and Sunnis, Kurds and Turks

During Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign, the government system was based on an ideology of nationalism, which subdued religious conflicts. He sometimes referred to himself as 'the Shah of the Shiites', but this was merely a political tool to support his regional policies. His contributions were also significant in fostering and supporting movements like Amal in southern Lebanon. Mohammad Reza Shah continued the path initiated by his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, focusing on Iranian nationalism based on historical figures such as Cyrus the Great, and aiming to revive and highlight Iran's ancient past. Religion was intertwined with traditions and everyday life, but the emphasis was on Iranian identity rather than religious symbolism.

While Iranian nationalism may not have been created in this era, it was certainly strengthened. The emphasis on Aryan race superiority and Farsi as the sole language of Iran led to the neglect and suppression of other ethnic groups and their languages. The regimes of both father and son shared a disregard for ethnic diversity and a striving to homogenise identities to a Farsi-centric model.[1]

The Shah's modernisation project, had it continued, might have brought state infrastructure and social welfare to smaller cities sooner, and my generation might have encountered modernity earlier. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the prevailing traditional systems and social norms resisted certain changes and advancements. Gender roles, traditions, customs and the status of women were areas where people did not easily accept modernisation or the Western lifestyle.

1 The rift and disruption that occurred after the Revolution were a direct result of the Government's policies. Some Kurds had nationalist tendencies, while a faction of Turks exhibited a kind of infatuation with Shia ideals and, to a lesser extent, ethnocentrism. These differences did not have many opportunities to surface, as the monarchy was not inclined to exacerbate them. Many locals in our region now believe that the Islamic regime ignited discord between Kurds and Turks, as well as between Shias and Sunnis, thereby undermining the tolerance and coexistence that had existed between these groups. The regime's aim was to prevent the formation and growth of any ethnic power that might oppose it. Among these, the Kurds, who were frequently accused of seeking independence and freedom, were seen as a threat to the regime. By fostering division, the regime aimed to obstruct the realisation of such ethnic power. I will discuss later the conflicts and events in Naqadeh and what transpired.

I still remember some men's prejudiced views toward women. Radical movements within the traditional culture were often fuelled by these men's fears of cultural change and societal shifts. They seemed to believe that social mobility, driven by modernisation, would eventually reach their private spheres and disrupt the internal order. However, the resistance to change did not achieve much; it merely slowed the progress.

History has shown that dynamic and adaptable societies pave the way for change, even if the pace is slow. Years after these transformations, border regions like Kurdistan continue to grapple with economic, social and political issues, lagging in terms of the urban progress and social welfare seen in the capital and other major cities. This disparity reflects the discrimination and the inequality with other areas that is faced by Kurdistan. The regime's mechanisms of marginalisation also maintain Kurdistan's current state. The Republic of Iran has always viewed Kurds as a threat and harboured baseless fears of their quest for independence.

Childhood Memories

For me, writing this autobiography also means personal reflection – a revisit of the days, the people and everything that shaped my life, both the bitter and the sweet, the humorous and the sorrowful. Revisiting one's childhood in adulthood can be challenging. It feels as if one must become a miner, exploring deep into the mind to unearth memories. In that mine I can strike a wide range of experiences: laughter, tears . . . numerous joys and sorrows. However, it seems worth the effort, even if it means confronting the bitter moments and firmly embracing the whole of it.

One must first be able to converse with oneself and resolve many things, which is, perhaps, a worthwhile task for all of us, if we wish to improve our present and future.

During the 1970s, the prosperity associated with urbanisation had not yet reached the peripheral and border Kurdish towns. Nonetheless, compared to my peers in a small town like Naqadeh, I lived in relative comfort. A few years later, political events overshadowed our lives, and I constantly yearned for the better days of the past. In the pre-revolutionary years of the late Pahlavi era, my father was engaged in carpentry. As I mentioned before, we were relatively well-off financially. My memories

from those days are somewhat hazy, and much of what I recount here is based on family stories.

At that time, we had just bought a new house. My father's frequent travels for work brought us clothes and toys that were rare for children in Naqadeh. He also brought fabrics for my mother and aunts, which they used to make beautiful Kurdish garments. He compensated for his weekly absences in this way, and we knew he would return with plenty of gifts. His trips to Mazandaran and Gilan were particularly delightful, as they introduced fruits to our home that were not grown in our region or available in our local market. Imagine living in a town where tangerines, oranges and bananas are unavailable! When these fruits arrived, anyone fortunate enough to receive them would proudly display them to friends, boasting that their father had brought them. I, too, took great pride in showing off to my playmates and felt a sense of distinction. Regrettably, I did not share the actual fruits with the other children. I kept them for myself at home and only showed the peels. I know this was not good behaviour, but I was a child and, like many, made mistakes that are common in childhood.

My father's gifts had an effect beyond simply delighting us; they brought elements of modern urban life into our home. Over time, these out-of-town visits began to alter the lifestyle in small places like Naqadeh. People like my father played significant roles in introducing modernity. Radios, tape recorders and electronic devices reached us through such individuals. Their arrivals transformed various aspects of life, from entertainment to diet, and their effects cannot be easily summarised as good or bad.

Nursery School, and The King and Queen in Kurdistan

Before I turned five, I was sent to nursery school or, as it was called back then, *koodakestan*. It was 1977, and I was the first child in my family to attend. Our town had only this one nursery school, which served both Turkish and Kurdish children. It was located near the Sunni Grand Mosque in what is now the Cultural District. This institution was relatively new in Iran, having been established only two decades earlier, and wasn't very crowded, though it was free of charge. This is quite different from today,

when thousands of nursery schools across Iran operate for a fee and are widely welcomed by families.

I sometimes wonder why my sisters were not sent to preschool. Perhaps there were no preschools in the city during my older sister's time, but even my cousin Habibeh, who is my age, did not attend. Reflecting on the traditions of that era, it seems the reason might have been gender-based: girls were expected to stay with their mothers, while boys were perhaps considered more suited for preschool. I am not entirely sure how accurate this explanation is, as there were girls in the preschool, although boys were in the majority. Another reason could be that, at the time, only certain families from specific social classes sent their daughters to preschool. My aunt Maryam played a significant role in persuading the family to enrol me, as she was more modern and urban compared to the other women in the family.

Between 1971 and 1975, the Shah and Queen visited the Kurdish regions. The Queen visited Mahabad and inaugurated the first leprosy hospital, along with several small- and medium-sized projects in Urmia and Mahabad.[1] She also visited Naqadeh, Piranshahr and other cities.

During this period, Naqadeh acquired a cinema, and the introduction of television was another major development.

Local celebrations flourished. I remember the city's multicultural nature led to grand and noisy Newruz (New Year) celebrations. We children played with painted eggs and participated in egg-cracking games in the town square.[2]

Preschool arrived in the city around that same time and altered the imaginative world of some children, including me. In my memories of this

1 In this context, a few years earlier, in 1968, the Piranshahr Sugar Factory was established in the region by the Belgians, which can be considered one of the significant developments of that time. The raw materials for this factory were sourced from the high-quality sugar beets of the Sandos and Lajan areas, positively impacting the local economy. The Piranshahr Sugar Factory, like many other successful factories, has now been transferred to the private sector.

2 Egg-cracking, known as *Tokhmeh Murg-Bazi*, is a traditional game played during the Newruz celebrations with boiled and dyed eggs. In this game, popular among various age groups, especially children and teenagers, a player taps the pointed or rounded end of their egg against that of another player, who holds their egg in their fist. The player whose egg cracks loses, and the cracked egg becomes the property of the winning player (Blookbashi, A., 1380 and Jean-Baptiste, 1336).

period, my mother is prominent, likely due to her calm and kind demeanour. I attended preschool with Ali, whose mother was my maternal cousin and whose father, Mameh Qader, was my father's cousin. Each day, one of our mothers would take us to preschool, where they would meet at the corner and exchange pleasantries: '*Amoza choni*?' ('How are you, cousin?') While they caught up on what had happened since the previous day, Ali and I would hold hands and slowly make our way to preschool. The preschool was close to our house, in the Cultural District, and across from the home of Gholi Khan Bozjalu, one of Naqadeh's landowners. Once we entered the yard, we would quickly be lined up to recite the royal anthem.

We spent a lot of time playing games. Boys and girls, lined up neatly, held hands while reciting the Farsi nursery rhyme 'Uncle Zanjirbaf'. The popularity of certain games and folk songs varied from city to city in Iran. With the advent of mainstream media like television, similarities between cities increased, but local traditions remained distinct due to geography, climate, lifestyle and subsistence. Sometimes, even if the title of a game was the same in another city, its content would be quite different.

We Kurdish children knew no Farsi, yet we had to sing in that language. Preschool played a crucial role in learning the language, and when we started school, we were ahead of those who had not attended preschool. The teacher spoke in Farsi, and I saw many children who, when they entered the first grade, did not understand anything for several months. They struggled to comprehend and respond. This was completely natural, as we spoke Kurdish and Turkish at home and in the streets, and everything we had heard until then was in one of those two languages.

Our preschool education was based on the French system. The walls were adorned with large portraits of the Shah, the Queen and the Crown Prince, as well as photos of the Shah playing with his children – playing ball with the Crown Prince or riding bicycles. These images were not merely decorative but conveyed a certain lifestyle. The photos in our books were similar. Seeing these images, we realised that *our* parents never played with us like that, nor did we play with our siblings in such ways. They played ball, while we had none. (It was years before plastic balls appeared in our area.) Their clothing also differed from ours, and everything depicted in the photos was new and unfamiliar.

We had uniforms, too: girls wore blouses and skirts, while boys wore jackets and trousers. The teachers were very stylish, and young. Their clothes were ironed; they wore bow ties or short skirts and long, painted nails. At preschool, we tasted packaged foods for the first time: triangular milk cartons, Penguin cheese, foreign bread and more. These differences caught our attention the moment we entered preschool and stayed with us when we returned to the outside world. Whoever designed this experience understood that, to prepare people for future changes, they needed to start by altering the children's lives.

The sophisticated and sweet world of preschool ended quickly, and we returned to traditional life, with its familiar clothes, foods and household items. But it felt as if the idealised world the preschool had created for us was only one door away from our real lives. That elegant building with its tiled roof and glossy mosaics was gone, and we were thrown back onto the dusty streets where people spoke familiar languages and wore Kurdish clothes including large, puffed skirts, and where cart drivers shouted in Turkish and Kurdish, 'Vegetables! Fresh vegetables!' We returned to our games of hopscotch, seven stones and hide-and-seek, distracting ourselves from thoughts of ball games, book illustrations and the nursery school walls.



Image 27: Nursery school during the Shah's era. Early 1970s.

Governance with the Magic Box

That nursery was my gateway to the modern world. It was there that I first encountered television, and I instantly fell in love with it – so much so, I even dreamt at night that my beloved television had come to visit our home. As all children of that era, I had a limited world with few entertainments, so it was only natural that I became enamoured with this magic box and wanted it to stay with us forever. Television was our escape from the tangible restrictions on us. It showed us a way of life we didn't have in our environment, making that small screen a vast new world for us. My father's cousin, Mame Hamdamin, who lived in the caravanserai, had bought a large brown television, and perhaps that event fuelled my dreams and my persistence in asking my father to buy one. He had promised to do so, but the circumstances hadn't aligned yet, and he had to answer the same question every day: 'Kaka, what happened to the television? When are you going to buy it?' I kept persisting until the long-awaited day arrived and a cart stopped at our doorstep carrying a large wooden cabinet that bore the English letters 'RTA'.

I was over the moon with excitement and couldn't keep away from it. When my father wasn't home and the children's programmes were on, I was the undisputed ruler of the neighbourhood. In the afternoons, mothers would send their children to our house at a specific time to watch them. Having already experienced this magic in preschool, I could exert some authority and be the boss! I would line up the children, seating the shorter ones in the front and the taller ones behind. Then, I would turn on the television and, like a military commander, perch on the window ledge or atop the *dast-nohin* (a high pile of bedding), from where I could survey everyone. I even held a stick, like a teacher, and gave orders for everyone to sit still! I was constantly commanding them not to move or make noise and adjusting the volume to my liking. If they got too rowdy, I would turn off the television. They would gather around me, begging and swearing to stay quiet, so I would turn it back on. I genuinely believed that I owned all the cartoons in the world, from *Tennessee Tuxedo* to *The Pink Panther* and *Pinocchio*. They were all mine! I had every right to be in charge!

Once the children's programmes ended, the adult shows would begin, marking the end of my reign. Music programmes featuring performances by artists like Hayedeh and Mahasti, films and other shows weren't of

much interest to children, so my father, along with neighbours and his friends, would sit and enjoy them.

The amusing thing about those days was how my grandmother struggled to come to terms with television. In Naqadeh, the arrival of televisions in homes was like the first film screenings in cinema halls. There are accounts of how, in the early days of cinema, people would stand up and run when they saw a train approaching on the screen. Later, everyone laughed at those reactions. Perhaps we needed a camera in Naqadeh back then to capture people's reactions to television. They said that, in the early days, some women would turn their backs to the television while eating, so the strangers in the magic box wouldn't see them. They would sit askew and eat. Later, we would laugh at these stories and the women's sense of modesty. In their simple world, abounding with values like modesty and decorum, the television was a watcher, observing everything! So, they believed it was necessary to maintain propriety and modesty in front of it, just as they would in any other aspect of their lives.

This behaviour of sitting askew has roots in the cultural practices of some Kurdish women in the region, and I had seen these practices when some of my aunts were around my father. Even Aunt Kulthum, who lived in the village, would sit at an angle when eating or drinking in front of my father or her father-in-law, Mine Qazi.[1] This sense of modesty was so deeply ingrained in some of these women that it became part of their identities, influencing even common actions like eating or drinking in the presence of men. How could you possibly convince these women that the people inside the magic box weren't staring at them, eager to call out their lack of decorum during meals?!

From Behind the Veils of Lace and Wool

Today, when I look back on my life, I realise that I have often been a fortunate man, having experienced pure and genuine love. This sense of happiness is almost sacred, and I believe it has little to do with material

1 My aunts Khadijeh, Zeynab and Maryam did not have these habits, although they also lived in the village. Kulthum had been influenced by the geography and culture of the Lajan region and had adopted the customs of its people.

circumstances. The first and most enduring feeling of being loved came from my grandmother, Amine.

As I mentioned earlier, this remarkable woman was unlike any other woman around her. She had an extraordinary strength, and her words held such power that they commanded obedience from everyone, even my father, who was quite a stern man. She was a lioness, with unmatched authority.

She dressed well, usually in a women's *aba* over her Kurdish dress, a garment specific to the Mokrian region, along with a traditional headscarf known as a *charuqeshan*.

She loved me so unconditionally and truly that, whenever life becomes overwhelming, I retreat to my childhood memories, hiding under her imaginary skirt and secretly watching the world from behind those veils of lace and wool, finding solace as I did when I was a child.

I was a rambunctious and mischievous child, often clashing with my father. There was a constant power struggle between us. In this silent battle, my grandmother always sided with me, allowing me to get my way. She moulded me into a strong, albeit somewhat spoiled, boy whom no one dared to challenge.

The stories of her indulgence and support are long and numerous. Every summer, she would gather all her grandchildren around her, setting a table at which she would seat me by her side, giving me the best part of the meal and, often, the choicest cuts of meat. During our time in Naqadeh, she would take me and my cousin Habibeh on outings from morning till night, using her financial means to ensure I could buy the books and magazines I loved.



Image 28: My grandmother and me. Piranshahr, autumn 1981.

At bedtime, all the children would lie down with her, and I would tell her which story to narrate. Although we knew her stories by heart, we never tired of hearing them again. Sometimes she would get tired and say, '*chanam*

shel buweh,' meaning that her jaw was too tired to continue, but I would insist she finish the story. She never could (or, rather, never wanted to) say no to me, so she would carry on until the end.

My grandmother's powerful presence in my life even overshadowed my mother's. Everything a child might typically receive from a mother, my grandmother provided for me with an unbounded love.

Grandmother's Tales

Grandmothers' stories depicted worlds of wonder. Tales of young men who left and never returned, of unfulfilled loves . . . my childhood nights were filled with stories handed down orally from generation to generation, each generation adding its own twist.

One of the beauties of traditional societies is storytelling, particularly by women. Through history, women have often been the keepers of oral traditions, preserving myths, quasi-historical accounts and legends. It's no exaggeration to say that most children's first lessons were not learned in schools from teachers, but at very young ages from storytelling mothers and grandmothers. Those who tell stories to children play significant roles in shaping their mental landscapes, characters, identities and outlooks on the future. Today, the media, particularly cinema, has taken on this responsibility, albeit with entirely different objectives and results.

My grandmother was both a master storyteller and a gifted teacher. Her stories were my first school. Without even realising it, I was learning. She with her tales was a haven for me; whenever I faced danger or opposition as a child, I would retreat to them in my imagination. This sense of security is only meaningful when the grandmother or the person you turn to is a powerful figure. My grandmother had this power, and popularity, which doubled the safety of her lap. Sometimes I think I felt so secure in her support that I lived in her stories, like one of those mythical creatures or mischievous children who could not be harmed by any malevolent force.

My grandmother knew exactly how to make every little occasion unforgettable in the minds of those involved. One memory that remains with the family is the way she put me to sleep during my childhood. I resisted sleep so much that it became a ritual, and the only person who could manage it was my grandmother. This goes back to the days of the Shah, when we were still in Naqadeh. She would carry me on her shoulders

to the end of our street, insisting that I stare at the streetlight until I got sleepy. But this wasn't just about staring. I had to listen to her stories of Amir Arsalan of Rumi, Sultan Mahmoud of Ghazni, and the Shah and his three sons. It was impossible for me to get tired or fall asleep before she had done this. This story is still a source of family jokes. Everyone says that I stared at streetlights so much, I ruined my eyesight and ended up wearing glasses.

Grandmother's stories were incredibly varied. She claimed she heard them all from her father. Today, folklorists and experts classify stories into categories, but Amine had organised them in her mind without any formal knowledge of folklore. Perhaps she had learned this skill through experience. Her stories were sometimes frightening and thrilling, filled with demons and jinn, while others were imaginative tales filled with deep wisdom. For instance, she would tell a story about a giant chain descending from the sky, dragging a wailing serpent with it to torment evil people in hell. She would say that her grandfather had seen this with his own eyes in the area known as the ruined city of Mahabad and had told her about it.

This style of storytelling is common in various places, where the teller makes the story their own and attributes it to the people of their village or region. Villagers would recreate and redefine stories to fit the realities of their own lives, making them easier to understand and more enjoyable. At the same time, these tales often did more to provoke moral reflection than to spark vivid fantasy. Sometimes, to make a story more believable, it was attributed to a famous king, especially the Ghaznavid kings like Sultan Mahmoud.

Many of the common stories in the region, including those my grandmother remembered, were connected to the Ghaznavid dynasty. In history, certain kings became more famous, and many tales were created and passed down about them. Among the Turkish dynasties, the Ghaznavids and Sultan Mahmoud were particularly well-known by both the common people and the elite.[1]

1 The widespread renown of the Ghaznavids in history and among the general populace across various parts of Iran is perhaps attributable to their occupation of lands where the culture and language were Persian. Additionally, the Ghaznavid leaders were once Turkic slaves under the Samanids, who were committed to preserving Farsi language and pre-Islamic Iranian culture. It is said that the Ghaznavids were ethnically Oghuz Turks and did not possess a strong linguistic or literary tradition of their own to develop a cultural

Farrokhlaqa, Salahuddin, Sultan Mahmoud and His Vizier Ayaz

Let us return to the stories my grandmother told, some of which were romantic tales tinged with elements of sexuality, described candidly and without reserve, when we were too young to fully grasp them. In a society so traditional and closed, it is a phenomenon worthy of study that a father would narrate such tales to his daughter!

One such explicit story was that of Farrokhlaqa and Salahuddin of Rum.[1] In this tale, Salahuddin, who was also known as Amir Arsalan of Rumi, pursued Farrokhlaqa, but no matter the version of the story – whenever they were about to unite or in the midst of lovemaking – a demoness would intervene and separate them.

In most folklore, romantic relationships were complicated by a third party, typically referred to in poetry as 'the rival'. The lover and his beloved are entangled in a struggle with the rival, who is usually powerful enough to thwart their love. This is a recurring motif in many folk tales.

Another story I frequently heard from my grandmother was the tale of Sultan Mahmoud of Ghazni and his vizier, Ayaz.[2] Their relationship is well known in Persian literature. Many consider it to extend beyond that of a

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bias. Moreover, during their service in the Samanid court, they adopted the Farsi language. Consequently, the Ghaznavid court was home to many Persian poets who composed panegyrics. Poets like Farrukhi, Unsuri and Asjadi, who were prominent in Farsi eulogistic poetry, found safety in the court of Mahmoud of Ghazni. After their coup and rise to power, the Ghaznavids created an environment in which the Farsi language became widely prevalent. Some believe that Farsi nationalist poets, with extensive experience in resisting the culture of Arab occupiers, endeavoured to linguistically Persianise the Turks and instil in them an affinity for the Farsi language.

1 The tale of Amir Arsalan of Rumi is a popular folk story imbued with romance. It narrates the passionate love between two individuals who have never met. In a quest for love and devotion, one renounces his kingdom and endures immense hardships to reach his beloved. However, the journey is fraught with challenges, and the devoted lover falls prey to the deceit of malevolent magic, ultimately preventing him from uniting with his beloved.

2 Abu al-Najm Ayaz (died 1057 CE) was a Turkic slave in the Ghaznavid court, to whom Sultan Mahmoud of Ghazni had a special attachment. This affection became widely known and later served as an inspiration for mystical poets and Sufi poets, who expanded and transformed the story, viewing the two figures as symbols of the mystical lover and beloved, as well as the seeker and the sought, in spiritual terms.

king and his minister, instead portraying it as a deep romantic connection. In Kurdish, Ayaz is known as Hayasi-Khas, the intelligent and shrewd vizier of Sultan Mahmoud. However, the Sultan sometimes found Ayaz's cunning unbearable, leading Ayaz to leave the court in anger, only to be persuaded to return by the Sultan, who would always seek reconciliation. As a child, these stories made me ponder the role of a vizier, although I now know that the historical realities of Mahmoud and Ayaz differ greatly from these popular tales, which have merely used them as a basis.

Among the many stories my grandmother told about Sultan Mahmoud and Ayaz, one in particular had a lasting impression on me. The tale goes that, one day, the Sultan became furious with Ayaz during an argument. Ayaz had offered the Sultan advice on a matter, but the Sultan refused to listen. As Ayaz persisted and the Sultan continued to reject his counsel, the Sultan's anger flared.

Ayaz finally declared, 'I can no longer remain in your court if you never heed my words and constantly rebuke me.'

The Sultan, in his fit of rage, retorted, 'Go to hell! I do not want you to return.'

Ayaz then left Ghazni on foot, eventually reaching a village on the outskirts of the city, where he found an elderly couple living alone. Seeing that they had no one to help them, Ayaz offered to serve them in exchange for food. The elderly couple, no longer able to work, gratefully accepted, entrusting all their tasks to Ayaz.

Despite being a vizier, Ayaz knew little about manual labour, but the old man gradually taught him how to tend the animals and perform farm work.

Meanwhile, back at the court, Sultan Mahmoud struggled to manage the kingdom with the advice of his other ministers, finding that none possessed the wisdom and insight of Ayaz. Ayaz's absence became increasingly apparent, and the Sultan finally relented. He ordered the city's police chief to search for Ayaz, but instructed him not to offer any apology or consolation. The chief searched the city, but Ayaz seemed to have vanished without a trace.

On the first day of his exile, Ayaz had made an agreement with the old man that, if ever anyone asked whether someone lived with them, they would deny it. Thus, the police chief found nothing, even after combing the city and surrounding areas with armed men.

Eventually, a council was convened at the court, and they decided to use Ayaz's own ingenuity to find him. They announced that every household in the city must raise a lamb and ensure its weight remained exactly ten kilograms. The police chief would weigh the lambs each month, and anyone whose lamb weighed more or less would be punished.

The courtiers were certain that Ayaz would find a way to keep his lamb's weight at exactly ten kilograms. Ayaz, upon hearing this order, realised it was a ruse to locate him and, as always, found the perfect solution. At the end of the month, the police chief and his men visited every house, finding that only in the elderly couple's home had the lamb's weight remained unchanged. Ayaz's clever trick had been to fatten the lamb but then, the day before the weighing, show it a wolf cub from a distance. The frightened lamb lost all its fat and returned to its original weight.

The police chief reported back to the Sultan, saying, 'Only one house had a lamb whose weight remained the same, but it is in a poor, remote village, unfit for someone like Ayaz, and only an elderly couple lives there.'

After several months, during which the weight of the lamb from that house remained unchanged, the Sultan declared, 'Ayaz is there! Go and bring him back.'

The police chief and his men stormed the elderly couple's house at night and found Ayaz in bed. They told him Sultan Mahmoud had ordered his return.

Ayaz refused, saying, 'I will not come. The Sultan cast me out in disgrace, and now only the police chief has come for me.'

The next day, the Sultan sent several ministers to persuade Ayaz, but, again, he refused to return, insisting that only the Sultan himself could bring him back.

Sultan Mahmoud wrestled with his pride for several weeks, unable to bear the thought of personally seeking out Ayaz, but, in the end, he could not resist. One day, he went to the elderly couple's house with his entire court, astonishing the townspeople. There, he apologised to Ayaz and brought him back to the court.

This tale has become a Kurdish proverb: 'You've made us into Ayaz's lamb,' which implies being kept on edge, never able to relax or settle.

Grandmother also told me the story of Sultan Mahmoud and the carpenter, a tale she would recount when she wanted to comfort me, reminding me that nothing in life is permanent and that every situation

eventually changes. She used this story to instil in me a sense of hope, ensuring that despair never fully took hold of me.

The story goes that, one day, while riding through the city, Sultan Mahmoud passed by a carpenter's shop. He saw the carpenter had crafted a beautiful cradle from fine wood. The Sultan asked the carpenter if he had made the cradle, and when the carpenter confirmed it, the Sultan commanded him to craft a royal throne by the next morning – one with decorations even more splendid than those on the cradle and bearing the seal of the Ghaznavid dynasty. The Sultan stressed that the throne was needed for a grand banquet he was hosting for other kings the next morning. He threatened that, if the throne was not ready by dawn, the carpenter would be executed and his body hung at the city gate for a month.

The unfortunate carpenter spent the night pacing in anxiety, knowing it was impossible to craft such a throne overnight. He was certain that the ruthless Sultan would have him executed at dawn, and his distress grew. His wife tried to calm him, saying, 'Rest easy and sleep. God is greater than Sultan Mahmoud.' The carpenter, filled with despair and anger, scoffed at her.

At the break of dawn, there was a knock on the door. The carpenter, resigned to his fate, opened the door, trembling, and confessed to the police chief that he had been unable to make the throne.

To his surprise, the police chief, with a stern expression, said, 'What are you talking about, man? The Sultan is dead. Hurry and make a coffin for him!'

The carpenter's wife whispered in his ear, 'Didn't I tell you not to worry? God is greater than Sultan Mahmoud.'

The message of this story is that God is above all things and all people. His presence instils peace, hope and security within us, dispelling fear, despair, sorrow and all other negative emotions.

I had heard these stories from my grandmother countless times, though I later read that they were passed down in two different, but closely related, versions.

I now realise how deeply I was influenced by these tales my grandmother passed down to me from our ancestors. They often made me wonder what kind of people kings were and how they behaved. One other aspect that always caught my attention was the figure of the wise elder, a

self-possessed individual who I still think about. The wise elder has become, in my mind, someone who never contemplates despairing or severing ties. It may seem contradictory, given the focus on departures earlier in this autobiography, but that reflects a shift in my own worldview. I no longer think of endings or separations as the default approach. Instead, I focus on maintaining connections and resolving conflicts. I would say this is because of fear and a realisation of the repercussions of ineffective human relationships. However, the worldview and knowledge I have gained over the years, including skills in lobbying, negotiation and modern communication techniques, have helped shape and reinforce this perspective. This outlook is now an inseparable part of my character, guiding me toward inner peace and reminding me that self-control, a mastery of discourse, hope and positivity are the most essential tools for navigating this challenging and complex world.

The Hunt for Mice and the Iron Tub

Courtyard homes are far more memorable than apartments. For children, having a courtyard offers a way of life that simply cannot be experienced in an apartment. Our house on Mulla Saleh Street (Sonnat Street) had one, and that courtyard became the source of countless memories we still laugh over today – although sometimes we also find ourselves saddened or deep in thought. After all, that courtyard was a big part of our lives.

Back then, there were plenty of mice and cats. The mice would raid the pantry, and the cats would catch them. Uncle Ahmad, in Naqadeh, had a fat orange cat that one day caught an unfortunate mouse in the courtyard. When cats catch mice, they play with them first, tossing them in the air and rolling them in the dirt. Just when the poor mouse thinks it's time to escape, the cat sinks its claws into its body. It takes a long time before the exhausted mouse is finally eaten.

The orange cat hunted mice in the same way, and Uncle Ahmad took great delight in its cleverness. The women in the family felt sorry for the mice, but were ultimately glad that this sadistic cat rid them of the rodents, keeping the pantry and food supplies safe.

Watching these scenes in our courtyard felt like experiencing a wildlife documentary, and it often made me wonder, 'When will Tom finally eat Jerry?' The relationship of the cat and mouse in the cartoon *Tom and Jerry*

always puzzled me. I couldn't understand why the reality of the wild was so different from the cartoon. Later, I realised that such cartoons have purposes beyond entertainment – one of the simplest being to highlight what adults consider 'cute violence' and slapstick for children.

In those days, bathing was an ordeal. When it was cold, we went to the public bathhouse, but in the summers the red, iron tub in the corner of the courtyard became our bath.[1] My mother would fill the tub halfway with water, and we knew it was time to bathe. We didn't have much choice when it came to washing supplies. There was only one kind of foul-smelling soap, which made you regret bathing at all. Later, Paaveh shampoo was added to the mix. Sometimes, when I compare the variety of cleansing products available today with that smelly soap and egg-based shampoo, I can't help but laugh. We would sit and wash ourselves in that iron tub, but that odour was nothing compared to the burning in our eyes from the highly alkaline soap and shampoo.

One day, after bathing and emptying the tub, I decided to roll it around the courtyard like a car tire. I kept pushing it from side to side, playing with it. The tub was made of iron and had sharp edges where it had been welded. As my brother Rasul and I were horsing around and spinning the tub, I fell onto it. The sharp edge cut into my chin, and the situation quickly escalated – the bleeding was so severe that it wouldn't stop.

My father, who was sensitive to the sight of blood, ran toward the courtyard as soon as he heard the commotion. But when he saw me with a bloodied face, he fainted! Everyone left me to attend to my father, trying to revive him. In that moment, I felt abandoned. It took a while before my mother and grandmother remembered me and we headed to the hospital.

Despite all the blood, the pain and the few stitches I received on my chin – the scars from which remain to this day – what I remember most is how much I liked the hospital environment and didn't want to go home. I even said, 'Let me stay here.' Probably, the two young nurses with their special

1 Until about six decades ago, unlike today, there were no baths in the rural areas of Kurdistan or even in the cities, and there was no designated space for them in the architecture of homes. One likely reason for the absence of baths in houses was the challenge of supplying water. In cities, there were public baths, but during the warmer seasons people used large clay and copper basins for bathing at home. Typically, a place called *shurtgah* was created in the back of the house or in the stables, under which water flowed. Women were responsible for heating and bringing water for bathing.

nursing caps and white skirts who took care of me and stitched my chin had won my heart. As a psychologist I saw in London once said, physical marks on the body and certain smells are two very powerful elements that forever imprint on our psyches and memories.

The Ritual of Women's Baths and Aunt Maryam's Obsessive Scrubbing

Bathing was a weekly ritual, particularly on Fridays, and it came with its own set of customs. It wasn't as simple as deciding to bathe whenever you felt like it. No, Friday was the ideal day for bathing, especially for those of us born into Muslim families. There were two reasons for this: firstly, in Islam, performing *ghusl* (ritual cleansing of the body) on Fridays is recommended, particularly for men who attend the Friday Prayer at the mosque. They are expected to enter the mosque clean and fragrant. Secondly, Fridays were a day off, providing more time for thorough cleaning and bathing.

One of the more peculiar experiences of my life is tied to these bathing rituals. There was a period when my father, working as a foreman, had moved from Naqadeh to Ardabil to work at a brick kiln. I believe it was around 1976. I would accompany him to the public bathhouse at the end of the week, where he would buy me a bowl of *ash doogh* ('yogurt soup') from a large urn at the bathhouse entrance. I loved standing there, watching as they ladled the soup into my bowl.

The work at the brick kiln was gruelling, and although some of my father's cousins joined him, he couldn't continue for long. The workday started at four or five in the morning and lasted until evening, which was exhausting. So, we



Image 29: Public bathrooms in Naqadeh.

soon returned to Naqadeh, although some relatives stayed behind.

In Naqadeh, it was common for families to go to the bathhouse together. We would join my aunts, my uncle's wife, and the children of the extended family at the public bathhouse called Morteza. The Kurds pronounced it 'Mortaza', and it was located across from Anushiravan School, a bit farther down from Vahdat Square. Because there were so many children, the women would hide a few of us under their Kurdish skirts to save money on the entrance fee. I would sometimes hide under the skirts of one of the women, clinging to her legs as we moved together to avoid being seen. It was a strange and amusing experience, one that became a favourite pastime of mine because it was not only funny, but also exciting.

After sneaking in, we would enter the public bathhouse, where the Kurdish women would begin undressing – a process that was itself a ritual. They would remove layer after layer: hats, headscarves, vests, main garments and sometimes multiple pairs of trousers. In contrast, the Turkish women wore far fewer clothes and could undress in the blink of an eye.

It took me a long time to come to terms with the sight of naked women, especially the elderly ones. Some women would wear many layers of clothing, and when they finally undressed, small, elderly women with wrinkled breasts would emerge from the mountain of discarded clothes. It was impossible to maintain one's modesty, and eventually we would sneak glances at the girls, who were just as curious about the boys.

The old women usually sat in a corner, unable to move, while the younger ones poured water over them, and they would constantly complain that the water was either too hot or too cold. I couldn't understand why they were never satisfied with the water temperature.

The steam and noise in the bathhouse created an eerie atmosphere. The echo of voices amplified the strangeness, and it was even more unsettling in the women's bathhouse, where the noise level was higher and everyone spoke loudly, without regard for others.

The naked girls were different from the older women, and all of them were different from the boys in the bathhouse. Seeing these women and the differences between their bodies and ours raised many questions in my mind – questions I could only contemplate in private.

My cousins Sabir, Aunt Maryam's eldest son, and Amir, Aunt Zeynab's eldest son, often played with me in the alley. Aunt Maryam was sometimes assigned the task of washing us, and we knew that, on those days, we were

in for a rough time. She was obsessively thorough with her scrubbing, never satisfied, no matter how much she washed us! As we grew older, it became increasingly uncomfortable to be naked in front of her and each other. I recall how we would awkwardly cover our private parts with one hand and our buttocks with the other, trying to avoid being completely exposed while she and our mothers scrubbed us. It was a real ordeal! I've never understood the logic behind taking us all to the bathhouse together and undressing us completely.

Sometimes, Aunt Maryam would wash us in her own bathhouse. It wasn't just washing; it felt like a form of torture. She would scrub us with *safta* (a type of exfoliating soap) on our bodies and faces. It felt like every stroke removed a layer of skin. When she poured hot water over us, it was like salt on a wound. She would use a pumice stone on our hands and feet, and I often thought that she could smooth the hardest surface imaginable with that stone – let alone human skin!

Amir had darker skin than I, and Aunt Maryam focused more on scrubbing him. He would cry out, 'I swear, I'm so dark! I'm not getting clean! I'm not getting white!' We would laugh, but Aunt Maryam believed that, with more scrubbing, he would become lighter. She claimed the dirt was from the alley's mud. Of course, Amir lived in a village and was somewhat removed from urban hygiene standards. Perhaps Aunt Maryam wanted to ensure that none of the village grime remained on him.

Because of these harsh bathing experiences in childhood, I sometimes resist bathing to this day. It's only natural – if you had an obsessive Aunt Maryam, the memories of bathing would likely make you resist this otherwise simple task for the rest of your life!

Childhood Games and Shooting

Every region and climate has its own unique games, but some of the games from my childhood were quite peculiar. Occasionally, we children became the playthings and entertainment for the older folks, who would amuse themselves at our expense. I remember, for example, when Uncle Qader was absent from his grocery store at the caravanserai, the young men in the family would secretly encourage the children to eat raw onions. They would hand each of us a piece of onion and wager on which child could eat it fastest. The prize for those who managed was a biscuit or something

similar. Beyond the initial sharpness of the onion burning our throats and eyes, the lingering bad breath was unbearable for those around us.

Another game that still strikes me as odd is the memory of stealing chives from the local grocers. On the corner of Mulla Saleh Street was a Turkish man named Mr Arab, who owned a large grocery store and sold vegetables. My friend and cousin Habibeh and I would sometimes steal a bunch of chives when passing by his shop and then laugh about it. One person would keep watch to ensure Mr Arab didn't see us, while the other grabbed the chives and ran off. Sometimes, we would get caught and receive a slap or a reprimand, along with a torrent of abuse from Mr Arab, who was known for his heavy hand. I still wonder why we only stole chives, what sort of game or amusement it was and from whom we learned it!

Newruz had its own games. Eggs were boiled in onion skins the night before to turn them red and prepare them for the egg-cracking contest. Another Newruz game for children involved going door to door, reciting nursery rhymes to receive sweets and chocolates. This was a tradition participated in by both Turks and Kurds. It had a particular vibrancy in the villages.

The most engaging games took place in the alleyways and courtyards with other children. Boys played exclusively male games like football, in which the adults had no role, while mixed-gender games such as hide-and-seek, hopscotch and seven stones – played in their Kurdish variants – were accompanied by Kurdish songs and poems.

As I grew older, I realised there were also traditional games that were exclusively for boys and were more akin to roughhousing than actual play. For instance, during the long winter nights, we would gather and play a game called 'King and Minister', which resembled a mock trial. The Minister, under the King's orders, would beat the culprit severely with a mace fashioned from intertwined Kurdish shawls. Another game was 'Saddlebag', in which two players would ride on the back of another, clinging to their hands, and the one who fell off would be punished. Our games were often of this nature, and sometimes painful!

Our most advanced recreational activity involved visiting the Turkish Quarter, where the only cinema in town was located. There was an elderly man there with an air gun. For a small fee, we could shoot at powder targets five times. I usually played two rounds, winning the first and using

the second for my prize. Since childhood, I had been an excellent marksman, and the old man would comment, 'Kurds are excellent shots.' When firearms were more accessible in the area, I honed my shooting skills, and, during my military service, buying smuggled ammunition from the armoury and special forces made shooting in the mountains one of my hobbies.

When I was a student in London, I missed shooting. I found a shooting club and furthered my skills professionally. Registering involved lengthy questioning about my shooting history and firearm experience. Unaware of the scrutiny, I shared my experience with various weapons. Shortly after, the police interviewed me to inquire about the firearms I used and my familiarity with explosives. After a considerable wait, I was granted a temporary permit and shot at the club for years, eventually earning a permanent card and permission to participate in local and regional competitions – a fascinating and almost exclusively male pastime. I came close to second and third places and participated in inter-seasonal competitions in Germany and the Czech Republic. Upon returning to Iran, I chose a club in Sadeghiyeh, Tehran to continue shooting for a while. Even now, I often take my son to practise with an air rifle I've had since I was in England the first time.

Shooting demands a unique focus on a small target; arm and torso endurance; and the ability to freeze your mind and emotions, for precision. As I increasingly find myself philosophically opposed to firearms, I question whether shooting can be a healthy sport. It's a question that naturally divides opinions and, thus, lacks a definitive answer.

It might be interesting to share a bit about the games we played in my grandfather's village. Back then, everyone wore plastic-and-suede shoes in the villages, and we played together. The games were rough, and the village children were stronger than those from the towns. For instance, a game I couldn't keep up with was Kurdish polo – *halukin*[1] (which also

1 The game of *halukin*, dating back to approximately 600 BC, was played during the Achaemenid era in Iran, particularly within the royal court. It was introduced to India during Darius I's conquests, where it also gained popularity. During the Sassanid period, it became an integral part of the cultural games of the time. Initially, the game had a military and combative nature, showcasing the prowess of Iranian horsemen and their warhorses. The name *chogan* is derived from the wooden stick used in the game. Although modern polo originates from Iranian *chogan*, it is important to note that this sport was also prevalent in Iran's neighbouring countries, such as Azerbaijan and

exists among Persians, although I'm not sure of their exact name for it. Perhaps it's the same as the game of *alak-dolak*.) The *haluk* is a piece of wood, straight and about twenty centimetres long. To strike the haluk and send it to one's opponent, a short polo stick is used.

Village children weren't much into football but had their own thrilling games. Initially, I struggled to keep up with most of their games, as I wasn't accustomed to them. They were also quite rough fighters, sometimes using slingshots against each other. I got beaten up several times – I was stubborn and cheeky, and the results were inevitable!

Rituals and Ta'ziyeh of Muharram, Qama Cutting, and Bloody Heads

Before the Revolution and urban conflict, Naqadeh was a beautiful town where Kurds and Turks lived side by side. They had no significant problems with each other, and the two groups interacted harmoniously in their daily lives and commerce. This cultural hybridity and mutual respect were particularly evident during special times, such as Muharram and Newruz. In Muharram, Turks would come to our area with mourning processions, performing various customs and rituals.

The large and imposing drums were the most striking feature of the Turkish mourning processions. Each beat seemed to threaten one's eardrums. Along with the drumming, they chanted in Turkish, often a dialogue between Abu al-Fadl and his brother Imam Hussein. The noise was so overwhelming that younger children would become frightened and sometimes cry.

The tradition of self-flagellation with swords, known as qama cutting,[1] terrified the children. Despite my fear of this ritual, I would visit an empty

Georgia. Scenes depicting polo matches in social gatherings and hunts of that era can be found in miniatures and even carpets. On 3 December 2013, Azerbaijan attempted to register polo as its own with UNESCO, but the request was not accepted during the eighth session of the UNESCO Heritage Committee in Baku. Ultimately, Azerbaijan succeeded in registering the local game of *karabakh* as Azerbaijani polo.

1 A *qameh* is a cold weapon similar to a sword, but straighter, shorter and wider. *Qameh-zani*, or *Tatbir*, is a type of religious ceremony practised by some Shia Muslims, during which participants strike their heads with a qameh, causing wounds and bleeding. This form of mourning is observed by some Shia communities during the Muharram



Image 30: Ta'ziyeh Ritual. Naqadeh, 1979.

field near the current hospital in the Turkish area each Muharram to watch it. People of all ages, from infants to the elderly, gathered there, and I would see knives or swords striking even the heads of babies, causing blood to flow. This was followed by a cacophony of crying, shouting and blessings, all lost in the cries of 'Ya Hussein' and 'Ya Abu al-Fadl'.

For years, performing this ritual publicly has been banned, but it still occurs secretly in Turkey's regions of Iran. The practice of qama cutting involves selecting a time and place in advance. Typically, early in the morning, they gather at the home of a local elder. Participants shave and wrap a white cloth around their heads, leaving the middle exposed. All present form a circle around the courtyard, holding hands. An elder, known as the qama cutter and a devotee of Imam Hussein, stands in the middle of the circle with the sword and spins around. All the men in the circle chant 'Ya Hussein' together. The sword descends on their heads in turn, causing them to bleed. Sometimes, the heads of very young children are also cut with the sword in hopes of them receiving healing.

mourning ceremonies to express devotion to Imam Hussein and to foster a spirit of courage and a declaration of jihad in the pursuit of their beliefs.

Those who are experienced and skilled may seek permission from the qama cutter to perform the act themselves. They take the sword and strike their own heads. Sometimes, a person might strike with the sword multiple times on behalf of relatives or friends who have requests or issues. In some cases, an individual falls into a trance-like state, losing control due to the collective excitement, and others must forcibly take the sword away from them.

Women are not allowed to participate directly in this ritual. They watch secretly from the corners of windows, weeping, while preparing breakfast for the qama cutters to eat together at the end of the ceremony.

During Muharram, a type of theatrical performance called Ta'ziyeh is enacted. This involves people on horseback setting up tents and setting them ablaze. This aspect was fascinating to us as children, but local Kurds did not appreciate it, believing it insulted Muawiyah and Yazid. Interestingly, Muawiyah, being a cousin and brother-in-law of the Prophet, is considered a respected and significant figure for Sunnis.

As the processions arrived, Kurdish women would sit in the middle of the path. The procession would stop and pray for them. Turks who spoke Kurdish would recite parts of the prayers in Kurdish, creating a sense of solidarity and religious empathy.

I enjoyed these events, and, even after moving from Naqadeh to Piranshahr and returning, I continued to participate in Muharram ceremonies. Although they had become much more subdued and qama cutting was forbidden, they were still of some interest. Young people attended for various reasons unrelated to faith, while religious zealots were upset that traditional mourning customs had been forgotten.

The Man in the Ajam Trousers, and the Red Skirt

During the summer, the courtyard was my playground. I was about five-and-a-half years old, playing in the yard, when someone knocked at the door. My mother and grandmother went to greet the guest, who was someone they clearly knew well.

The man was dressed unusually. He wore Ajami trousers,[1] carried a beautiful leather bag and had a hat on his head. In Naqadeh, Turks were often referred to as *Ajams*, so I assumed this man was one of the city's Ajams.

Not long after the man arrived, my mother called out to me, saying, 'Kameel, come and have some sweets.' This invitation seemed unusual; she usually called me quietly if she wanted to give me something. However, the temptation of sweets made me overcome my hesitation and enter the room.

As soon as I saw the knife and other tools the stranger had, I realised something was wrong. I jumped out of the window and hid in the toilet at the edge of the courtyard. The toilet door had no lock. It was secured with a piece of wood or string. I held the wood tightly while they tried to pull it from the outside and I pushed from the inside. It took a long time, but, eventually, they managed to trick me and pull me out.

My grandmother, mother and the stranger, who had a rather imposing presence (I wasn't sure if he was Kurdish or Ajam, but he spoke Kurdish very well), were in the room with my aunts. I didn't know exactly what they were going to do until someone said, 'Kameel, it's nothing; we're just circumcising you.' I had heard of circumcision, and it terrified me! But I had no idea what was going to happen to me. There were no explanations, kind words or even anaesthetics.

They pulled down my trousers. They laid me on a plastic sheet and began the procedure. I resisted, and the rustling of the plastic mixed with my cries.

In local parlance, those who performed circumcision were called *kirbors*, meaning 'penis cutters'. To scare children, the kirbor was mentioned alongside needles and teacher punishments, with warnings like, 'The kirbor is coming to cut your penis.' I realised that the threat of an approaching *kirbor* was coming true. I thought it was a punishment and didn't understand what bad thing I had done to deserve it. I imagined they would cut off my penis entirely, and I was utterly horrified.

The procedure was quick, but extremely painful. It took a long time before I could hold my penis to urinate or defecate, because it hurt so much.

1 If someone wore non-Kurdish trousers, they would say he was wearing 'Ajami', which in that region often meant 'Turk'.

I would brace myself with my hands on my hips and urinate while standing. Later, when my brother was circumcised, I could fully empathise with his pain.

Throughout the years of researching female genital cutting, that pain accompanied me, and perhaps this personal experience, among other things, contributed to my extensive research on both female and male circumcision in Iran. My research on male circumcision, which was among the first scientific studies in this field in Iran, was recently unveiled and well received by many men. It seemed there was much to say, and the opportunity had not previously existed. Raising awareness about circumcision, its harmful effects and the reduced sexual pleasure for circumcised men was among the achievements of this research. This awareness now leaves many men regretful and angry about what happened to them, with the only solution being to ensure their own sons are not circumcised. This is exactly what I have done for my son.

That day, only I was circumcised, and nothing happened to my brother. It was common to circumcise boys between the ages of five and six, a time when the procedure is physically and emotionally more painful than at any other age. No anaesthetic was used, and after the procedure they sprinkled some ash from the family oven on my wound. Afterward, it was just me, the pain and a red skirt that had a symbolic meaning. The circumcised boy, wearing this red skirt, was supposed to signal to everyone to be careful and not touch his wound, but the red skirt also symbolised a greater pain: scorn and humiliation from society.

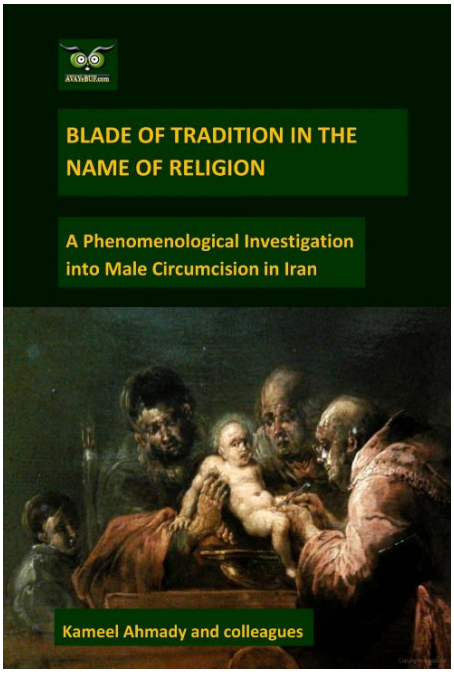


Image 31: Blade of Tradition in the Name of Religion

In a society where even crying was considered a girl's behaviour, wearing this girl's skirt was very painful for a boy. It was a mark of shame. The shame of circumcision itself was exacerbated by performing it in front of others, and this marker

further intensified it. Moreover, it meant humiliation and helplessness. You had no control over this act. They had circumcised you, dressed you in a red skirt and expected others not to mock you!

Tradition can be remarkably contradictory. It inflicts harm and then mocks the victim. Girls were often the ones who mocked, and whenever they saw a boy in a red skirt, they would shout, 'They've cut your penis! They've cut your penis!'

Oddly enough, for a long time, I also mocked other circumcised boys who wore skirts. This cycle of recurring violence is nothing more than an outlet and retaliation for what was done to our bodies without our consent. No boy has the opportunity to vent his anger, and so he ridicules and takes revenge on the next boy he sees. All boys in this cycle of violence are victims, and, unfortunately, the adults had no awareness of this issue from which to help their children.

Sexual Curiosities

My earliest sexual curiosities emerged after my circumcision – simple and strange ones. During my childhood games, at around the age of six, we would examine and touch each other's genitals. We wondered why our genitals were different. Were theirs uncircumcised? One day, while out visiting, without understanding why, we took a bicycle pump that was there and applied it to each other's genitalia, inflating them! It was a meaningless game, but it thrilled us, and the cool breeze in the summer tickled us.

One of the older girls in the family saw us. She was furious and called all the adults. Suddenly, everyone swarmed us. Each person grabbed their own child and pulled up their trousers. We were met with slaps and kicks. That day, we were visiting a relative's house in a neighbourhood adjacent to Mohammad Oraz's paternal home, located on the street in front of the city's main mosque. The catastrophe was that we had done this right in the middle of the street, in front of the house's entrance and directly across from the mosque!

We didn't understand why the adults were so enraged and came after us, but for a long time we were afraid to even gather together. Later, the adults recounted the incident and laughed! We couldn't comprehend

whether what we had done was so bad that it deserved a severe beating, or so amusing that it was worth recounting and laughing about.

Perhaps, at that young age, the act was more about the tickling sensation it provided rather than having any sexual meaning, but the adults' reactions provoked both anger and shame, making us more focused on the sexual aspect.

A year later, while we were homeless and staying in my grandfather's village, we engaged in more serious games. The village children had more sophisticated and organised games. For example, they built houses with large and small stones. Each of these houses belonged to a boy and a girl, who were married in the game. I had a house with the neighbour's daughter, and my cousin had one with a boy. We would visit each other's houses and experience family life. The girls, acting as the homemakers, would make tea with pebbles and serve it, and after the parties each couple would return to their own house. We would lie down together and even 'have children'. We made babies out of pieces of cloth, held them in our arms and kissed them. This game, known as 'playing auntie' in many parts of the country, seemed like an early experiment with adult life.

This type of play has a long history, particularly in rural areas. In my view, rural games, compared to those in urban settings, are more aligned with self-awareness of the body and gender. They engage tactile sensations and elemental forces such as earth, water and fire, and are generally more organised.

In rural life, sexual matters are expressed more openly. This might be due to the unique characteristics of village life, such as large courtyards, smaller and fewer rooms, numerous children and close proximity to nature. All aspects of rural life, from agriculture and harvest to reproduction and animal birthing, are intertwined with human existence.

In contrast, urban lifestyles, which epitomise 'civilised' living, often suppress and taboo many of the open and unrestrained aspects of traditional rural life.

In the culture of rural living, many everyday customs are considered normal, but these same customs are seen as vulgar and disrespectful in urban life, leading to their prohibition and restriction. Thus, self-censorship in modern urban lifestyles is far greater than in traditional rural lifestyles. As a result, rural people tend to be more transparent in their daily behaviours than urban dwellers.

Prohibition significantly reduces opportunities for experience and transparency, consequently stimulating the individual's needs. Perhaps this is exactly the outcome that power structures and dynamics are designed to achieve.

In the village there was a plant called *nan-e-haji laqlaq* ('the bread of Haji Stork'), which children were forbidden to touch. The reasoning was that, if you plucked it, your mother's breasts would hurt, and she would stop lactating. This is a good example of how sexual matters were discussed more freely in the village, and curses were much more vulgar and obscene. There was little censorship of naming female and male genitalia. This open culture provided children greater opportunities for exploration. When we grew older, we would swim with girls in rivers, springs and natural pools formed by rainfall. Girls and boys would undress and jump into the pools called *golav*, and curiosities would arise. The girls would shy away from these curiosities, but we would gather again in some remote spot. Nudity in the village setting was a different experience for me than in the urban system.

Grandmother's Underpants in the Wind

Children often engage in mischief that annoys others or leads to situations that, in Eastern culture, might make adults feel embarrassed. I, like all children, caused my elders no end of embarrassment. In my childhood, I used to let the air out of the tyres of cars and tractors parked by the roadside. Sometimes alone, and other times with my cousin Sabir and my brother Rasul, we would target parked vehicles. It was an easy task, and stealing a matchstick from the kitchen would do the trick.

I took this task very seriously. During quiet times of the day, we would sneak out. Firstly, we would check to ensure no one was around. Then I would place the matchstick on the tyre valve and listen closely to the sound of air escaping. The sound and smell of the escaping air fascinated and pleased me. I would continue until the tyre was flat, then move on to the next one. Everyone knew that it was Kameel, the son of Kak Karim, and I always had a few complainants. The problem was that many cars at that time did not have jacks or spare tyres. Hence, they had to place stones and blocks under the car, remove the tyre, take it to a puncture-repair shop, inflate it and return it. Without exception, after each complainant returned,

I was met with a slap or a scolding, but I did not stop. I even set a record for myself by deflating the tyre of my grandfather's large tractor that had come from Gerdashavan to Naqadeh!

When we were five, Habibeh and I undertook a peculiar adventure: we wanted to parade through the city under the shadow of grandmother's underpants! I do not remember why or how we planned this, but the result was that grandmother would blush with embarrassment whenever she recalled it for the rest of her life.

From the clothesline we took one of grandmother's underpants, known as a *darpe*, which is worn under a skirt. Each of us held a corner. We dragged the red garment behind us as we walked through the streets, as if we were sharing a giant kite.

Kurdish women avoid talking about these underpants, which are essentially loose and puffy underwear. Now, imagine us in the 1970s, taking this patched-up garment and parading it down the main street of the city. Everyone laughed, especially the Turkish women. Under the curious eyes of men and women, we went from our street to Gendarmerie Street and then to Pahlavi Street, and eventually along the sidewalk until we reached the vicinity of the Gadar River. Eventually, one of my father's friends recognised us and brought us back home, where I faced my parents, who had to wrap the underpants in a newspaper while red with embarrassment.

That day we were thoroughly scolded.

Years later, when family members recalled this, they would ask what our motivation was. We had no answer and could only laugh. Reflecting now, perhaps it was the red colour and the puffiness of the garment, along with the patches, that tempted us into this childish mischief.

Grandmother avoided facing my father's friend for years. Whenever he visited, she would hide in a corner. Grandmother's reaction, along with our childish antics, provided plenty of amusement.

Imaginary and Real Friends, Real Fantasies

A significant part of my childhood in Naqadeh was spent playing in the caravanserai. My friends, Ali, Mansour and Mohsen, and the other children of the family were of the same generation, all with one or two

years' difference in age, and we had a close bond. Our happy days continued until the caravanserai was divided as a family inheritance.

While Kuykha-Khalil was alive, the caravanserai belonged to everyone and was a unified space, but later, Uncle Qader, due to his sensitivities, enclosed his share with a wall. He was the only family member who did not join the timber trade. He owned one of the caravanserai's shops and remained a shopkeeper until his death. Even when we were displaced from Naqadeh, he continued his business in Piranshahr and was known for owning one of the city's most prominent appliance shops until his later years.

In our own neighbourhood, there were many playmates, but I spent most of my time with the two sons of Atlas Khanom and Mohammad Nallband, whose father was Kurdish and mother Turkish; also, with the sons and daughters of the Kurdish Iraqi family from the Barzan region, whose father had fled to Iran and Naqadeh with Mulla Mustafa Barzani after the Algiers Agreement and the Shah's pact with Saddam Hussein. The father of this family was a commander of the Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (the 'KDP'), but, due to changing circumstances, he sold broad beans from a cart or collected seasonal plants such as wild asparagus and thistle from the mountains in spring.

I used to draw imaginary friends from stories and novels into my world. They were with me everywhere, in the streets and at home, and sometimes I was so absorbed in my fantasies that others noticed and laughed at me. I would talk to characters that did not exist – in their view! I placed myself in the shoes of story characters and created new narratives. These friends, born of childhood imagination, are as real to some children as they are illusions to others.

I also contemplated the future. I imagined travelling to distant lands. I would go to Shiraz, a place I had never seen and only heard about. Every night before sleep, I visualised this journey. I saw myself in Shiraz, living in a hotel and falling in love. In the Indian novels I read, a boy always fell in love with a girl from an aristocratic family.

I loved Jack London's stories and imagined myself in London. My fascination with the city was largely influenced by a poem my grandmother used to recite. The idea that I would be in the best position and highest job in London later encouraged me to pursue life in that city. Perhaps this dream was created by my grandmother, and her constant

mentions of London led me to know the city well. Thus, childhood fantasies can indeed become a part of one's future life.

I still do not understand how my illiterate grandmother knew so much about London and loved it so. She used to say,

In foreign lands, see you in London, see you as an engineer . . .

Amir Arsalan of Rome; may I never see your death.

May I see you on your own car; may I see you abroad, in London . . .

The result of all grandmother's readings and Jack London's novels, of the Shiraz hotel and the detective stories, was that I, one of Jack London's characters, ended up strolling along in the misty night by the Thames River.

This same grandmother, who wished to see me in London, cried continuously when I left Iran. She gathered her daughters and told them, 'Come see what has become of me. Kameel has gone.' My aunts told me that, at mealtimes, she would lament that they could eat when Kameel was not there. Aunt Zeynab, known for her humour, would respond, 'You invited us here and now complain that we are eating? Well, now that Kameel has gone, should we not eat? And you kept saying London, London . . . . In the end, he went to London and is now having fun there.'

I read most of Jack London's books up until my teenage years. In one of the detective novels, the main character was a police detective with whom I felt a

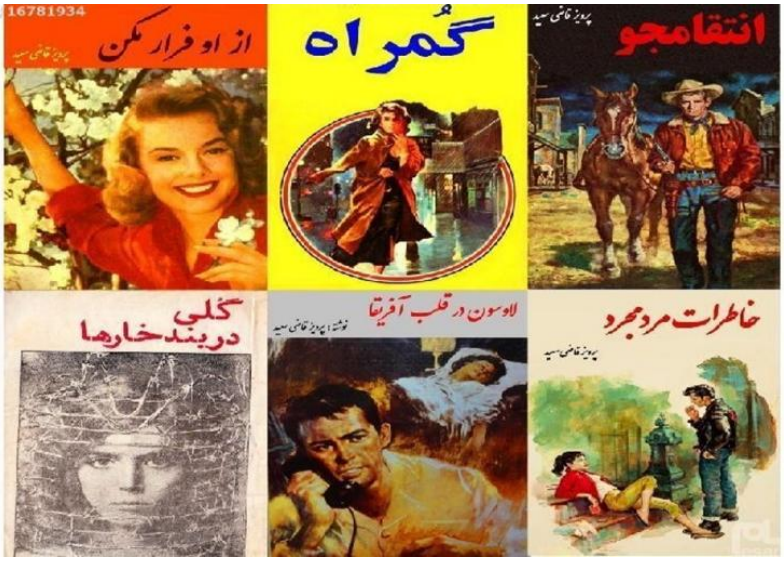


Image 32: Some of Qazi Saeed's books that have been well received by readers in Iran and Afghanistan

unique sense of identification. I had become enamoured with the dangers and events described in the book, particularly the heists that typically took place at midnight, with the detective seeking to uncover them and embarking on adventures. Another hero of mine was Mike Hammer, the American detective who had a romantic relationship with his secretary, Velda. Later, I followed other detective and espionage books, such as those by Mickey Spillane and Parviz Qazi Saeed, who recently passed away, with heroes like Lawson, Samson and Richard. Instead of these three, I saw my school friends Ibrahim Ghorbani, myself and Ali Khaziri in their roles.

How beautiful it is to live among stories in childhood. There are no boundaries or limitations. Without experiencing failure, you achieve everything you want and desire. You live without constraints of time or place, enjoying every moment.

As I grew older, my characters changed, and I began to identify with political and civil figures. Gradually, I related to Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Marx, Martin Luther King and Napoleon. In a local context, I became interested in figures like Dr Ghassemlou, Noureddin Kianouri, Yasser Arafat, Abdullah Öcalan, Jalal Talabani and Mulla Mustafa Barzani. As I moved past adolescence, my world took on a different colour, and my concerns evolved.

The Caravanserai Courtyard

The large courtyard of the caravanserai served as a stage for observing the clash between tradition and modernity. I used to visit there to see my cousins and play, and with Ali and Mohsen, the sons of my father's cousin, we would go to Anushirvan School next to the caravanserai.

The school uniform for girls consisted of skirts and stockings, while boys wore suits. I remember one day, Halimeh, my cousin's daughter who limped due to polio, was wearing her school uniform. Enthusiastically, she bent over the pool to polish her shiny black shoes. Her uncle, Mam Hamadamin, saw Halimeh in her uniform and kicked her, shouting, 'You're shining your shoes to attract the boys!' The female relatives half-seriously referred to Uncle Hamadamin as the 'gendarme of the caravanserai'.

In every clan, there were both conservative and traditional individuals who resisted changes stubbornly, and those who adapted to and

understood contemporary transformations. It was as if the family structure and the members' inclinations were a microcosm of society during its transition from tradition to modernity – a period of uncertainty and ambiguity. This illustrates Durkheim's sociological view that the family mirrors society.

My father was part of the latter group – those who were able to transform. He was a balanced man with little prejudice. My uncle has recently become more conservative and religious, going to the village mosque and even making a pilgrimage to Mecca, but in his youth he was not observant of prayers and fasting and was quite tolerant in his behaviour.

Due to the traditional characteristics of the city, the dress of women was accepted in its local forms at that time, and most families preferred the traditional styles. By the 1980s, following societal changes, the issue of *hijab* had diminished in significance for families and the younger generation.

The hijab of most Kurdish women was more cultural than Islamic. A thin, triangular scarf was draped over the shoulder, with one corner placed on the head – different from the formal hijab we know today in Iran. In Kurdish clans, some hair was left exposed at the front. Women with long hair would let their braids fall outside the scarf, over their shoulders and chests.[1] Nowadays, young girls and women mostly go without hijab at weddings. In our family, this form of hijab was accepted and customary. I sometimes saw women, especially younger ones, pulling their thin scarves back and exposing more hair, and you could see the hair at the front. Wearing and maintaining Kurdish dress and covering are crucial to Kurdish identity. Despite all the efforts to modernise attire in Iran, wearing Kurdish clothes remains popular and is always the choice for formal

1 The unveiling controversy in Iran's past century of authoritarian rule highlights that the issue of hijab transcends religious and legal boundaries, becoming a tool of power. Reza Shah's unveiling campaign aimed to demonstrate power through the implementation of modernity. Conversely, the Islamic Republic's insistence on mandatory hijab reflects its desire to exert control over half the population, emphasising gender regulation and religious policies. Despite appearing to be opposites, both Reza Shah and the Islamic Republic have, in essence, wielded the hijab as a means of gender-based suppression. While their methods and mechanisms differ – one through the removal of the hijab and the other through its enforcement – their underlying intents align. This reflects a common trait of totalitarian regimes: the attempt to control society by regulating individuals' bodies.

occasions. Not only in Kurdistan, but also globally, wearing Kurdish clothing is a way for Kurds to express their identities.

Today, hijab is commonly worn in a uniform manner. Some young girls and the new generation wear scarves in the presence of men and even older women. This should be considered a symbolic, formal sign of respect, rooted in tradition. However, this tradition and respect for elders and attention to hijab have faded, compared to the past. Considering recent developments in Iran, predicting the future of mandatory hijab is not easy, but it is certain that many rules and aspects will change in the future.

Kurdish Customs, Clothing and Dance

In the early days of the Revolution, when the Kurdish regions were controlled by Kurdish political groups, young women discarded their veils. My sisters' attire during those days was not markedly different from what it had been during the Shah's era. Occasionally, girls would wear traditional men's Kurdish clothing, known as *kawaopatul*, at school or gatherings. At the time, many young women also wore a distinctive Kurdish shal, or the Arab *keffiyeh*, which they called *aghabano* or *jamadani*. This garment became a symbol of nationalism, giving them a militant, guerrilla-like appearance.

It's worth noting the diversity in Kurdish women's attire and the names associated with it, some of which may no longer be in use.

- ***Golvani***: a decorative headscarf popular among southern and Sorani Kurds, also widely used in Lorestan. Golvani is a fabric with unique patterns.
- ***Kelaw***: a key element of Kurdish women's clothing, consisting of a cap and a headband known as *sarvin*. These caps are often adorned with beads, coins and decorative trinkets, worn during special occasions.
- ***Lachak***: a thin, triangular scarf pinned to the cap, with its two ends draped over the shoulders and back.
- ***Rashti***: a bright red, striped scarf, about two metres long, worn like a cape over clothing and often tied asymmetrically for added flair.
- ***Hawri/kalati***: a square silk scarf in red and white, worn in the *Larpech* style, particularly by brides.

- ***Shada***: another headscarf made of thick brown or burgundy silk, measuring two-by-two metres.

In the same traditional society where these headscarves were common among women, the female Peshmerga fighters generally did not wear the veil, and teachers who were Peshmerga were also unveiled.

The practice of unveiling continued in areas under Kurdish Party control until 1982. However, when we returned to the cities and entered the state school system, girls were required to wear a *manteau* and *maghnaeh*. The Revolutionary uniform became mandatory for students, teachers and female employees. The Islamic Republic's enforcement of the veil was not only for religious reasons, but also for homogenisation and to combat diversity, as evidenced by the compulsory uniform.

During the brief period when the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran ('the KDPI', or 'the Party') and Komala ruled, particularly in rural areas, they managed to free the Kurdish people from some of the social and cultural constraints of tradition. They even carried out democratic actions in land reforms to benefit the landless peasants, such as redistributing lands owned by those affiliated with the former regime, later endorsed by the new Government.

These changes occurred outside the home, where traditions remained strong and two factors – gender and age – dominated practices. Gender was enforced through power, typically by authoritative, traditional men, and age by strict elder women. This occurred in a region that, for various reasons, had become highly politicised and was traditionally influenced by Sunni Islam. The intersection of politics and religion gave it a non-secular structure. It resisted the ideological teachings of the Government. Most Kurds resisted assimilation into the Government's ways, seeing them as a threat to their Kurdish identities. As a result, some families, feeling their identities were at risk, clung to traditional forms of resistance and quickly realised that the Central Government's promises of Sunni-Shiite equality were largely rhetorical. The Government's plans for 'Shia-isation' became apparent in urban areas, through propaganda and education content, but Kurds resisted this and eventually caused these plans to fail.

Resistance to the Government's ideological hegemony in Kurdistan began in the early days of the Revolution. Political and religious figures in Kurdistan soon comprehended that the Revolutionary Government's promises were empty slogans, which led to the boycott of the April 1979

referendum. The educated and aware segments of the Kurdish population, particularly in urban areas, supported this boycott. Kurdistan's unified stance against the Revolutionary Government led to increased animosity toward Kurdish parties from the Islamic Republic's leaders. They quickly found their aims of homogenisation and exclusion were being met with strong resistance in Kurdistan, a region where the Government could not exert significant influence.

The Government's problems with the Kurds extended beyond politics to cultural matters, as it attempted to intervene in Kurdish society, including trying to eliminate or conform wedding ceremonies, music and dance to its ideological standards. The practice of mixed-gender Kurdish dance has long faced opposition not only from the Islamic Republic but also from certain Sunni clerics. Despite their efforts, none have succeeded in diminishing this aspect of Kurdish life, let alone eradicating it.

Kurdish music and dance, along with clothing and language, are essential, irreplaceable elements of Kurdish identity. Even during Iran's religious renaissance, Kurds continued to dance together at weddings. This becomes clear when one attends weddings in other cities and witnesses the atmosphere firsthand. A crucial point not to forget is that these mixed



Image 33: Kurdish women's demands from Taleghani and his delegation at the Sanandaj meeting on 23 April 1979. Photo by Jahangir Razmi.

dances, or *rashbalak*, serve important social and ritualistic functions beyond mere celebration. Collective dance is a complex, non-verbal communication tool that promotes social cohesion and mental wellbeing. The synchronised movements of all participants symbolise social unity and provide a shared practice, reminding individuals that group cooperation can create beautiful outcomes. Kurdish dance is inherently collective, teaching participants to trust each other while recognising the importance of individual contributions to collective harmony, a lesson applicable to broader society. Collective dances emotionally connect people, offering a means to express feelings and excitement. Kurds dance in both joy and mourning. Kurdish dance, being a collective act, allows dancers to release emotions, grief and sorrow in a communal setting. It's now proven that dance reduces stress by releasing endorphins. All that aside, it fosters family bonding and hospitality.

There used to be an unspoken code in Kurdish dance, evident in the symbolic social exchanges between dancers and spectators. For instance, if your sister danced with my brother, I would dance with your brother. If a stranger girl danced with you, it meant she liked you, and an unmarried guest shouldn't be left alone – a duty often shouldered by the groom's sisters and female relatives, who would dance with the male guests. These rules and symbols in dance reflect the social ethos of Kurds, which is rooted in friendship and interaction, while also demonstrating their collective effort to integrate individuals into the group and foster acceptance.

No matter how hard the Government tried, it could not stop these traditions and beliefs. Radical religious governments often forget that deeply rooted traditions in culturally rich regions are integral to people's identities and cannot be eradicated by force.[1] Societies show strong resistance to efforts to eliminate such customs.

Weddings, being private and traditional events, were protected from the cultural onslaught of the Government. During weddings, the veil was often less strictly observed, and even strict fathers would turn blind eyes to their daughters dancing with unfamiliar boys. Traditional weddings

1 It should be noted that, in recent years, extremist Sunni religious groups, which have grown due to regional rivalries, have been attempting to restrict and alter some of the people's authentic customs and cultures.

lasted seven days and nights, with people dancing at every opportunity, as dancing was part of their lives – a language with its own semiotics.[1]

There were customs known as *dasmal badan*, *pich badan* and *shada badan* in the Mokrian region. Men wore a type of cap called a *pich*, with hanging tassels. These caps, usually worn by men from a young age, took days to weave. *Dasmal pich*, or *shada* in Farsi, means 'turban'. They are still worn by elderly men in some Kurdish villages and towns, particularly in Saqqez and Uramanat. The women's turban, in Kurdish, is called *gelgela* or *dasmal*. The caps were unique to Kurdish women, decorated with silver or sometimes gold coins, beads and sequins, with a thin dasmal worn underneath.

The tradition of dasmal, pich or shada badan is mainly from the time of the masters, where women and girls from the village would be invited, ostensibly to weave a pich, but actually to dance with the man who had bought the fabric. The tradition of *dasmal badan* has since faded. In villages, when someone wanted to make a cap or turban, all the girls would gather at their house. The boys would wait for the girls to finish, and, after they frayed and twisted the fabric, they would dance together until late into the night. Sometimes the village cleric would object, but even then people might dance in the barn, out of sight, and wouldn't give up the practice.

Dancing would break out in the last days of harvest or whenever there was a mood for celebration. It's fascinating that, among Kurds, joy seems inextricably linked to dancing, highlighting its role in their psyches and its significance in the sociology of emotions.

In places like Sandos (Solduz) or Naqadeh, many Qarapapaq Turks wore Kurdish clothing and pich until the early days of the Revolution. It's

1 As religion becomes increasingly politicised within society, it simultaneously turns away from traditional religious customs. Currently, there are significant debates between religious modernists and traditionalists over ceremonies such as memorial recitations and celebrations of the Prophet's birth. Political Islam is striving to challenge established traditions in Kurdistan and has achieved some success. Notably, in the past couple of years, with the rise of COVID-19, joyous and mourning gatherings have become more family-orientated, particularly funeral ceremonies, due to restrictions on public gatherings. People now rely more on expressing condolences over the phone, as the global impact of COVID-19 has cast a shadow over many social interactions, altering the ways in which people celebrate and mourn. The phenomenon of COVID-19 has had a profound impact on people's emotional experiences, creating new emotions and significantly transforming existing behaviours.

said that, after the 1979 Naqadeh conflict, this clothing was verbally banned for Turks by Mulla Hassani, but some still wear the pich and are occasionally seen riding bicycles. The bicycle has long been a symbol of Naqadeh and Miandoab, due to the flat terrain.

In traditional systems, a certain order is established that is widely accepted. That reduces sensitivities around issues of honour and dignity, on a larger scale. For a time, red cards are lowered, green lights are lit, and everyone is given permission to, for example, dance for several days. Afterward, the usual family and tribal order resumes and the cycle continues. The structures that have evolved over centuries within tribal societies, becoming entrenched social layers with specific functions, do not easily fade or get forgotten with change and innovation.

This issue is not limited to Kurdistan or other regions of Iran; it is a global phenomenon. In areas with deep-rooted cultures, changes typically occur at a gradual pace. Practices such as marriage and other customs that have become traditions among the people require more time for change.

If force is the agent of change and it alters the culture of a region in a short time, without a doubt, when that force diminishes, people will return to their previous traditions. However, sometimes these changes take root. I believe that cultural changes should start from childhood, with practical changes in lifestyles creating a tangible and concrete foundation for them.

The story of Aunt Zeynab's marriage proposal and the incident with the ewer exemplify the dos and don'ts and the conventional nature of Kurdish society. Kak Bayazid, under the watchful eyes of the family elders, had the opportunity to see his future wife from a distance. If Bayazid had been a relative or neighbour, he could have met his aunt in a corner or danced together at an event.

When surveillance increases, conflicts arise. In the social system of that time, most villagers were related to each other. If they were not relatives, they were still not strangers, and whatever happened in the traditional system was based on trust. Perhaps if, for example, a Farsi or Turk had attended that event, the situation would have been different because an outsider had entered a private gathering, creating an insider/outsider dynamic.

In the clan system, merely being distantly related to people creates a sense of trust. Social capital is, in fact, formed through kinship ties,

especially if you are related to the paternal ancestor, which gives you a special importance and role.

The most significant change, which was well-received by the people of Iran, was the shift from traditional to modern lifestyles and from rural to urban living. Values within these lifestyles differ. A concept like 'neighbour' changes to 'citizen', and, as a citizen, instead of relying on customs or sometimes religious law, your standard of judgement becomes the law, and this is where civility replaces custom. This situation continues to some extent in smaller and more peripheral communities. In a city like Mahabad, today, you no longer know most of the people; the family and tribal order has changed or even disappeared. Attendance at family gatherings is limited, and events like weddings, funerals or religious ceremonies have diminished in frequency. The role of religion has also diminished, and families act more independently, with only close family members maintaining regular contact. However, in rural systems, some traditions have been better preserved than in cities. Most elders nostalgically recall the past with sighs and regret, longing for those days. Tradition still battles modernity and, in some places, is successful. Sometimes, in social gatherings, we see that traditions still lead, and tribal and kinship ways persist with stubborn determination.

The Caravanserai of Kuykha in the Heart of the City

As I mentioned earlier, Kuykha-Khalil gathered his family together and settled them in the caravanserai. Kuykha's actions were motivated by traditional and tribal ways of living. Perhaps if this had happened a hundred years earlier, it would have lasted longer, but Kuykha did this during the period of transition from tribal to urban life. Consequently, it did not endure the social change, as political, social and economic factors influenced its function.

I vividly remember the caravanserai. It was adjacent to the fortress in Naqadeh, a fortress known as *Qalabashi* or *Teppebashi* by the Turks and *Sarqala* ('Head Fortress') by the Kurds. Qalat, a historic mound in the

middle of Naqadeh,[1] dominates the city, and in the 1970s a museum was built on its southern side.[2]

The caravanserai that Kuykha-Khalil purchased was large, with about twelve shops facing the street, which he rented out. At that time, he was a wealthy man who owned the city's largest caravanserai, which he later divided among his children.

It was customary for caravans with loads carried by camels and animals, and more recently by trucks, to arrive, settle in the caravanserai, and take their animals to the stables, while the travellers slept in small rooms on the other side of the courtyard.

For me, who played in the caravanserai daily, seeing people from various trades was commonplace. People came from different cities and regions, setting up their goods in the nearby shops and engaging in trade. At that time, most transactions were bartered, as there wasn't much cash in circulation. Clothes, food and goods from other cities and countries would arrive, and these comings and goings, along with the trade interactions, influenced the cultural exchanges and the multicultural nature of Naqadeh. Naqadeh, which had long been home to various peoples – Jews, Assyrians, Kurds and later Turks – has today become a small bi-cultural city of Kurds and Turks. Unfortunately, in recent decades, divisive policies of the regime and ethnic prejudices have sometimes pitted Kurdish and Turkish residents against each other, leading to a division that has split the city into separate Kurdish and Turkish areas.[3]

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1 Archaeological investigations at the site have confirmed the presence of pottery dating back to the Bronze Age, specifically to the third millennium BC, approximately five thousand years ago. The earliest aerial photographs of the Qalabashi mound date back to 1937, over 75 years ago, when Eric Schmidt flew his light aircraft over various parts of northern, north-western, central and other regions of Iran, capturing aerial images. These photographs clearly reveal the defensive walls of a large polygonal structure, complete with eight watchtowers.

2 The Qalabashi Naqadeh Museum was established in 2000 on the historic Qalabashi mound. This museum houses two thousand historical artefacts discovered in the archaeological sites of West Azerbaijan. The collection includes grey pottery from the Hasanlu mound, coins from various historical periods, glazed bricks from the historic mounds of Qalaychi Bukan and Rabat Sardasht, as well as metal artefacts unearthed from the Hasanlu mound.

3 In the chapters that follow, we will explore this subject and the atmosphere it has fostered in the city. It is noteworthy that the Islamic Republic, amid recent social protests in Iranian society, has capitalised on the dualistic and confrontational dynamic between

Life in the caravanserai was freer than in the village. Some of the family's more traditional or conservative members opposed the younger generation's newfound freedom. Some of my father's paternal cousins restricted the women and young girls, not allowing them to leave the caravanserai easily. The young girls of the clan would make holes in the walls and doors to catch glimpses of the outside world. These small peepholes were quickly discovered and sealed with clay. The girls sought opportunities to slip out of the caravanserai, and when the men of the family went to the markets in surrounding areas, Tehran or northern Iran for business, they would seize these opportunities.

Kuykha-Khalil's caravanserai was located across from what is now Unity Square. Near sunset, young people would gather in the square. We were a large family with many girls, which was enough to attract the young men of the town to the vicinity of the caravanserai. Some of the more conservative men in the family would become agitated and create a commotion.

The caravanserai still stands today, although it is now half-ruined, serving as a storage place for plastic and dried bread. A few of its shops remain intact, although many were sold off cheaply after the urban conflict in Naqadeh.

I have heard that the family name, Ahmady, was assigned to our family in that caravanserai, suggesting it happened in the 1940s. With the onset of the Shah's land reforms, civil registry officials and village headmen, with the family's approval, assigned a surname to each clan based on its reputation, which was then recorded in the civil registry.[1] In Kurdish areas, there were people so involved in the process of obtaining identity documents and assigning surnames that they became known as *Kadkhoda*

Kurdish and Turkic communities. This divide has been leveraged as a strategic opportunity to suppress Kurdish dissenters, and the regime continues to exploit it to its fullest.

1 It seems that in January 1919, toward the end of the Qajar era, with the establishment of the first official civil registration office as part of the municipality, the first birth certificate, or identification document, was issued in Iran.



Image 34: Aerial photo of Naqadeh Castle, about 1960

Sejil ('Registry Headman'). Of course, as I mentioned, some people never obtained identity documents out of fear of military conscription. Before identity documents and family names became common, people were typically known by their occupation or skill or by their father's name. For instance, Kuykha-Khalil's eldest son was named Abdullah, and he was called Abdullah/Hola Mam Khalil (Abdullah, Son of Mam Khalil).

My father lived in the caravanserai until he got married. My mother also lived there for a while, but, later, as the eldest son of his family, my father took my mother, his own mother and his sisters to a nearby place to start their independent life.

Kuykha's caravanserai shared some features with other historic caravanserais. Due to the constant comings and goings of various people, it truly deserved the name 'caravanserai'. Even today, it is common for people to say, when a place becomes crowded, 'Is this a caravanserai or what?'

Timber Trade and My Father's Perpetual Journeys

After living as a tenant for some time, my father, along with my uncle, jointly purchased a house on today's Sonnat Street, previously known as Mulla Saleh Street. Many of the negotiations related to the war and turmoil in Naqadeh, which I will elaborate on later, took place on this street, in the house on Mulla Saleh Street. The renaming of streets following governmental changes is a topic that easily allows a researcher to trace religious, ideological, political and patriotic tendencies. In Iran, most cities experienced this phenomenon after changes in governance. The most significant alterations occurred in places whose names were associated with the Shah, which were then renamed to 'Imam'.

Although my father and uncle became independent of their family and cousins and from Kuykha-Khalil, they continued to collaborate in business. During that time, my father, along with his cousins and some other relatives and acquaintances, entered a profession known as timber trading. Through his influence, his brother Ahmad also joined this trade. The timber traders would travel to various villages, purchase large herds of cattle, calves and sheep, and sell them in the local markets, such as the Friday Market and the Saturday Market. Occasionally, they even transported these animals to Kurdistan, Iraq for sale.

My father and his associates regularly engaged in this business, earning a substantial amount of money, so much so that they eventually began renting out the local markets. From then on, they were no longer just timber traders but market owners, collecting commissions for every transaction in those markets. Gradually, a shrewd member of the family identified a vast sheep- and goat-meat market in northern Iran, and soon they gained control of the livestock and meat markets in the cities of Amol, Babol and parts of Ramsar, supplying the meat for those areas from Kurdistan.

My father and his associates would purchase livestock from the villages around Naqadeh and transport them to the northern markets. This business accumulated significant wealth for the family, until February 1979. When the Revolution occurred, Uncle Ahmad was stranded in the city of Babol due to the unrest and road closures, and it took him a long time to return to Naqadeh through backroads. Afterward, because of the conflicts and the political and religious tensions involving Kurds, these



Image 35: (From the right) Mam Hawla, Mameh Qader, Mameh Hamad Amin, my father. Standing is Uncle Ahmad. 1983.

connections and trade relations were severed. That is, the ruling authority used religious sentiments to create division, exclusion and rejection, suppressing the Kurds' desire for power and independence, which had always been a threat to the governing structures. My father and his relatives lost a great deal of money, and, at one point, thanks to road closures, they were unable to settle all their accounts.

Economic prosperity and social stability are closely linked. In all periods when Iran experienced political and social stability, the cities also enjoyed economic prosperity. My paternal family was able to take advantage of the stable economic growth of the 1970s and amass wealth. But revolutions are accompanied by instability and fundamental changes in political and social infrastructures, and the first impacts are felt on the economic structures of both urban and rural communities.

During the period when my father and the men of the family were traveling to the north, we children enjoyed very good days. They would bring back fruits like oranges, tangerines, bananas and garlic from the

north, and various pickles and fruits that were rare or non-existent in our region. Occasionally, my father and uncle would wear suits paired with the local Mokriani headscarves. The combination of the headscarf with the suit created an interesting blend of tradition and modernity, which was very appealing – so much so, that in the Farsi-speaking cities, people would frequently ask my father to have his photograph taken for display in studio windows. Perhaps in some western regions of the country, you may come across these photos or see Kurdish men with this combination up close.

The men of the family also learned Farsi, and this cultural exchange was fascinating for the children.[1] During this period, one could clearly observe a northern and Farsi influence, from clothing styles to food and dress, on our families. The ecological, biological and cultural diversity in Iran led to a situation where people living in big cities, especially those involved in trade, encountered various ethnic groups with different attires, accents, and even manners and behaviours. This also arose for the Kurds in their interactions with other nationalities and ethnic groups. Over time, they introduced their cultural characteristics to the new cities, but quickly came under the influence of the modernity and progress of the larger cities.

Another Restriction for Girls in a Politically Influenced Clan

The migration of Kuykha-Khalil from Shinabad Piranshahr to Naqadeh brought about a fundamental transformation in my paternal family, the effects of which can still be observed two or three generations later. The Kuykha-Khalil family had once experienced a class decline due to forced migration from the Mokrian region to the outskirts of Naqadeh and then to the Lajan area, which apparently was of a lower status than Mokrian and Mahal. However, at some point, Kuykha-Khalil returned to his urban roots. Though he never returned to the Mahabad region, he settled in Naqadeh, and this move significantly transformed the lives of his children and close relatives, including my father.

1 Cultural acquisition, cultural exchange, cultural interaction and cultural selection are among the topics of anthropology. Those interested can refer to books on the fundamentals of anthropology for further understanding. Cultural exchange is opposed to cultural invasion. Cultural exchange is a necessary process for keeping knowledge and cultural life vibrant throughout the world.

Although they themselves never had the opportunity to gain much education and did not attend school, they managed to find a way for the family's children to enter the new world.

Naqadeh introduced the children of Kuykha-Khalil and my father to the outside world, but the timber trade played a crucial role in the men's understanding of it and other cities, opening their way to Tehran and the northern cities of Iran.

Although I was still very young, the men never left anything out of their stories or censored them, so I heard many tales of visits to cabarets on Lalehzar Street, drunken brawls afterward and even robberies they had fallen victim to. They would recount their memories of attending concerts by Hayedeh, Mahasti and Homeira, and, interestingly, they always attended women's concerts. I never heard them mention going to a concert by a popular male singer of that time, such as Iraj or Sattar. For me, growing up during the Revolution, when listening to cassette tapes of singers from the Shah's era was forbidden, these tales from the older



Image 36: Sons of Mam Hawla and Mameh Hamadamin. From the right: Kak Jasim, Ghafoor, Morad, Mustafa. Sitting: Naser and Taha

generation, heard away from the prying ears of the Government, were sweet and intriguing. Some parts of these stories, particularly those involving women and their relationships, were especially exciting and captivating for me during my adolescence.



Image 37: Kak Fattah. Paris, 1991.

Urbanisation and the introduction of all that was absent from villages and small towns also disrupted the balance of tradition in those areas. Perhaps one of the reasons for the resistance of traditional men and women in small towns and villages is the sense of insecurity they experience, as it challenges their social capital, such as trust and security.

The urbanisation of the Khalil family provided an opportunity for the children to attend school, starting with the elder sons, who continued their educations up to high school. The first three were sons of my father's cousins: Kak Morad, the son of Mam Hawla; Kak Ibrahim, the first son of Uncle Qader; and Kak Mustafa, the son of Uncle Mohammad Amin. Then Kak Fattah, the eldest son of Hajar – my father's cousin – also went to school, and, gradually, education became more prevalent in the family. Kak Morad, who now lives in the United States, later became one of the military commanders of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and the commander of the military division in the Oshnaviyeh region. His presence, along with my father's, the cousins' and other family members', in the Party had a significant impact on me and my peers, and we owe much of our early political awareness to them and the prevailing conditions in the region.

Kak Ibrahim, too, was among the first educated members of the family. He is now retired and was previously the family's scribe. He attended school, learned to read and write, and obtained a high-school diploma, which was considered a significant achievement during the Shah's era. Let us not forget that among all the symbols of modernity and their emergence in small towns and villages, literacy and schooling were the most

important, leading to new awareness. The younger generation, armed with knowledge, began to challenge the dominant traditions of their society. Awareness, after all, paves the way for change and transformation.

As I mentioned earlier, Kak Fattah Abdoli joined political movements at the same time as Kak Morad Ahmady and later became a member of the Central Committee of the Democratic Party of Iran. He was the same individual who was assassinated in the Mykonos restaurant (on 17 September 1992, or 26 Shahrivar 1371, in Berlin, Germany) alongside Dr Sadegh Sharafkandi, the secretary-general of the Party.[1] With the arrest of their assassins and the court ruling in Germany, the then leaders of the Islamic Republic, including Ali Khamenei, were convicted, and an international arrest warrant was issued against them. At that time, Kak Fattah was the Party's representative in Europe and a shrewd and intelligent diplomat.

Returning to the topic of education in the villages and cities of Kurdistan, it's important to note that Kurdish girls, like their male counterparts, eventually gained access to schooling, albeit later. However, Mam Hawla, who was now the head of the clan, did not allow my aunts and other girls of their age to attend school. My aunts always regretted not having the opportunity to study. This regret may have been compounded by their status as orphans.

As for my generation, which followed Kak Morad and Kak Fattah, my uncle Mohammad Amin, Mam Hawla's brother, who had a relatively radical personality, imposed restrictions on the girls and did not allow them to venture much beyond the household. He was against girls attending school and, like others, preferred that they marry early.

Mam Hawla arranged marriages for most of the family's girls at young ages, which was a common practice at that time. Many girls had to submit to arranged marriages that were often contracted between clans and families, leading to considerable harm in their lives. As a result, women and girls of my aunts' generation do not have fond memories of that

1 On 17 September 1992 (Shahrivar 1371), several opponents of the Islamic Republic were murdered in a restaurant named Mykonos on Prager Strasse in the city of Berlin. According to the detailed court ruling, shortly before 11 pm on 17 September 1992, four people were killed by a total of thirty bullets from an automatic machine gun and a handgun. The assassins, who were agents sent by Iranian security forces, were arrested, tried and imprisoned.

period. Despite Mam Hawla's popularity, some secretly criticise him for causing pain to many girls and women and destroying their love lives. My aunt Maryam often recounted how Mam Hawla once sent a message saying, 'I heard that Maryam wants to attend literacy classes – equivalent to post-revolutionary literacy programmes – to learn how to write letters to boys!'

Back then, there was a negative perception of girls attending school and acquiring literacy. It was equated with immorality and entering a world that conflicted with male dominance. The patriarchal system clearly understood that if girls were educated and their awareness increased, they would be less likely to conform to the traditional and religious structures that stemmed from outdated cultural practices like forced and child marriages. My father, who belonged to a younger generation, wished for his sisters to attend school, but lacked the power to stand against the elders.

The mandatory school uniforms, consisting of skirts, short-sleeved shirts and loose hair, provoked reactions from the community. These aspects heightened the traditional and reactionary elements of society's sensitivity toward girls' education. The unveiling and wearing of school uniforms during the reign of the Shahs, who focused solely on modernisation and globalisation, without considering the local and traditional cultural structures of many regions like Kurdistan, caused significant harm to the girls in these areas, turning them into victims who were deprived of the opportunity for education and awareness.

The rapid cultural and social changes from the Constitutional period, when girls' schools were established, indicate that women played a valuable and significant role in these transformations. At certain points in history, when they were given the opportunity for literacy and awareness, they were highly active and influential. However, the sad part of the story is that the power to deprive women of education was exercised by fanatical men who travelled to big cities and even visited cabarets. In the next generation, only a few families continued to educate their sons and daughters, with the belief that girls should not study still prevailing. Among these families were my uncle Qader's family, whose wife was also my mother's cousin, and our family. However, my brother and I dropped out after middle school, and I turned to self-study, later resuming formal education outside of Iran.

Farewell to the Oil Lamp

The villages in Iran were late to experience the signs of civilisation – electricity, water, gas pipelines, telephones and, now, the internet. All these first benefited the cities, and it often took decades before they reached the villages. Even today, there are still villages that lack access to these amenities. This is why life in the villages, until about forty years ago, was completely different from urban life.

If we only consider the gap between the lighting of the first lamp in Iran and the first lamp in Gerdashavan, we realise the depth of this divide. The first lamp in Iran was lit in 1885, while it reached my grandfather's village in 1987, a gap of 102 years! I remember the first major transformation in Gerdashavan was the arrival of electricity, which permanently changed people's lives and was considered a significant event.

The light from each lamp distanced us from the nostalgic feelings associated with the smoky oil lamps. Electricity brightened lives and allowed people to see all the hidden corners of the house and village at night, something that had previously been impossible with the dominance of the dark. I was young then, and I was fascinated by the fact that I could now see at night every nook and cranny of the large stables and barns and every corner of Mine Qazi's house. In my grandfather's house, the lamp and the television were turned on simultaneously. Of course, Mine Qazi had already owned a 14-inch television that ran on a tractor battery.

After electricity arrived in the 1990s, many aspects of village life soon became similar to those of urban life. Later, the telephone also arrived, making life easier, but nothing felt the same as before. For me, who had felt the light from the oil lamps in the kitchen with my heart and soul, the arrival of electricity completely changed things. The women in the village no longer cooked their own homegrown meat and poultry, and I felt that the food no longer tasted the same. The ovens in the houses were turned off. The pleasant smell of bread no longer filled the air. The taste of store-bought bread replaced the delicious flavour of oven-baked Kurdish bread on the villagers' tables.

Now that I think about it, I realise that, despite the nostalgia we feel today for these pleasures of rural life, they were a great hardship for the men and women of the village. These people led challenging lifestyles, and now, with these amenities, their lives have become easier. Despite missing

the flavours, colours and scents of the old village life with all my heart, I do not feel entitled to criticise the village and its people for saying goodbye to their old way of life. After enduring the hardships, they also deserve to enjoy comfort and live in ease.

Rahim, the son of Uncle Ali, who studied traditional jurisprudence for a few years in Gerdashavan and frequented the mosque, said, 'Kak Kameel, the number of worshipers has now dwindled to four or five.' In contrast, during our childhood, the mosque was not just a place for prayer; it also hosted gatherings and discussions on village matters and fostered a sense of community among the people.

Now the atmosphere has changed, and the influence of the media must be seen as a significant factor in creating this new environment. Families have moved beyond just watching television and political satellite channels and are now watching Turkish series and Western romantic films. Many people are active on social media and spend parts of their days on Telegram and Instagram.

These changes have altered the face and culture of the villages, making everyone more urbanised, and most of the residents now have second homes in the city. In my opinion, in the rural way of life, the sense of living and connection with life's realities was stronger. The city, as a nameless society, has not only severed the bonds between people, but also has stripped them of the sense of life that was expressed in communion with nature. Through immersion in the unreal spaces of media and social networks, they have become disconnected from reality. However, I believe that the essence of the city and the village, regardless of the cultural and religious issues, which have now significantly faded, lies solely in the rural mode of production.

Urban and rural cultures have converged. The vast gap between the city and the village no longer exists. Some changes in Iran and the Kurdish regions, such as paved roads, water pipelines, electricity in the villages, primary schools, expanded secondary education and the growth of university centres in towns – some of which are now attended by educated villagers – have been ongoing since the 1960s, continuously bringing village life closer to urban life.

The reality is that the 1979 Revolution also accelerated these transformations. Undoubtedly, global and regional technological advances have transformed people's lives in all aspects, from the economy to the culture. Under the influence of what we now know as globalisation, the boundary between city and village has faded.

Part Two: Revolution, War and Displacement

Introduction

Childhood should be a vibrant painting of carefree joy and laughter. But when a child lives under the shadows of war and insecurity, it is like a dark blotch spilled in the centre of the painting that begins to spread and blot out the colours. Many such blotches took over my childhood painting. Each time one appeared, I fled to a corner, waiting for the darkness to catch up with me and cover all the colours with death.

The fall of the Pahlavi regime and the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the internal conflicts, the invasion of Iran's borders by the Ba'athist regime of Iraq, the ethnic and national struggles, and the repressive atmosphere following the war plundered our childhoods.

We, tender saplings meant to establish strong roots in our homeland, spent days, nights, months and years relentlessly running from pursuit. Each of us was broken in a different way, and we never understood that childhood could be joyful and beautiful. In the brief refuges between assaults, we thought the spent shells were toys. We believed that our lot in life was to struggle mightily just to survive.

Sometimes, the boundaries between the individual and the collective, and between the private and the public, become so blurred that a personal narrative takes on a universal nature, while a collective story is best told from an individual's perspective. In this Part Two, I will recount the Naqadeh conflict, the Kurdish parties and movements, the Barzani temporary leadership, and each of their roles in the history of Eastern Kurdistan, along with the fates of my family and I during those challenging and eventful times. I cannot separate my childhood and early adolescence from this significant part of Kurdistan's history – or, more precisely, Eastern Kurdistan's.

Chapter Four:
Childhood in the Shadows of War

In the final days of February 1979, as I was about to turn seven, the Iranian Revolution against the Pahlavi regime triumphed.

Thus, the dawning of my seventh year also marked the beginning of a new era. The Revolution, with its promises of freedom, prosperity, independence, welfare and equality, ignited an unprecedented fervour among the people and nations of Iran. This new hope was especially invigorating for the people of my homeland, Kurdistan, who had long yearned for justice, equality, development and their rightful national and ethnic places.

This new-found political and social dynamism, however, was short-lived. Soon, our town and region were engulfed by a revolutionary atmosphere, dominated by zealous Shiite clerics and their followers. Instead of the promised freedom, what we received was war and displacement and the smell of smoke, gunpowder and blood. The Revolution's wrath inflicted wounds so deep that they bleed to this day. Thus, before I even had the chance to create sweet childhood memories, war and its devastation took over, narrating my life instead. The story of my childhood in the shadow of war is not that of the war itself, but a story of loss – a childhood stolen by the nightmarish shadow of a grim and unequal conflict.

I cannot deny some of the positive impacts that certain political parties and local governments had on regions like Kurdistan. Still, my exposure to the shortcomings and flaws of these parties and political systems led me to distance myself from politics as I grew older. Once I left Kurdistan, I realised that my interests no longer lay in politics, especially party politics,

which in the Eastern world are often ruthless and lacking in morality. I have always been, and still am, someone who values straightforwardness in speech and writing, and I believe in the independence of analysis — qualities that are incompatible with party politics.

I have always strived to ensure that my research work remains independent and free from political bias. However, the political has been inextricable from my life. I cannot ignore its strong presence. I experienced its harms in those early years in the form of revolution, war, massacre, internal conflict and the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. But even when I managed to distance myself geographically from it and its destructive consequences, it remained a significant part of my lived experience.

If we define 'politics' as the analysis and critique of power relations in society and the relationships between governments and social and cultural institutions, it encompasses a vast swathe of human life. Those who engage in social activities and social and cultural criticism inevitably confront and critique politics and the mechanisms of power. Today, even if one is not involved in Iran's political and party movements, it is impossible to completely distance oneself from politics. This seems to be an inherent aspect of living in the Middle East.

Naqadeh: An Old, Deep Wound

First, let me explain where Naqadeh[1] is on the map of Iran and describe its socio-political climate. This town in West Azerbaijan province, 87 kilometres from the city of Urmia and 52 kilometres from Mahabad. In the past, it was known by the Azeri Turks as Solduz[2] and by the Kurds as Sandos or the Sandos Plain. However, for many years now, everyone has referred to it as Naqadeh.

1 Until the era of Reza Shah, when Iran was not divided into provincial regions and there was no province called West Azerbaijan, there was no city called Naqadeh. On the orders of Abbas Mirza, the Crown Prince of Tabriz, several hundred Turkic Qarapapaq households were settled in Sandos and the villages of Deh Naqi or Naqi Deh, Radaneh and one or two other villages (Isci, 2012).

2 Given that the use of the term *Solduz* (in Kurdish, *Sandos*) for the Naqadeh region is a sensitive issue, which I have provided an explanation for, the term *Naqadeh* has been used more frequently in the text.



Image 38: (from right) Hassan Ali Zargarzadeh, then MP; Governor Naqi Khan Bozjalu; Sadegh Zia, deputy director of the hospital; Mayor Ali Khalkhali. Naqadeh, spring 1966.

There are not many towns like Naqadeh in Iran, where people of different cultures coexist. Due to the presence of the Kurdish Mokriani and the Qarapapaq Turks, both Kurdish and Turkish languages are spoken. With some exploration, one can also find traces of Assyrians, Jews and even Christians, making it a region rich in cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

Naqadeh is bordered to the north by Urmia, to the south by the counties of Piranshahr and Mahabad, to the east by Miandoab, and to the west by Oshnaviyeh. One of Naqadeh's natural beauties is the Seven Springs, located in the eastern part of Sultan Yaghoub and known for its unique mineral properties. Hasanlu Hill and its golden bowl, frequently referenced in ancient Iranian history, add to the town's renown, and its springs and mountainous areas are familiar to many.

The region formed after the third geological period. There is evidence, such as animal and plant fossils discovered in the foothills of the Lavashli Mountains (south-west of Naqadeh), that this area was submerged under water 500 million years ago. Additionally, the presence of Hajji Firuz Tepe, located eight kilometres to the north-east of Naqadeh, and the archaeological excavations conducted there, suggest that this region was

inhabited by early human societies and marked the beginning of the Stone Age. It is considered one of the oldest archaeological sites in Iran.

Political History of Naqadeh (Sandos or Solduz?)

According to available sources, the Solduz Plain was influenced by various powers in ancient times, including the Mannaeans, Urartians, Assyrians, Lullubians, Gilzans, Hurrians, Scythians, Medes and, later, the Parthians, Sassanids and Arabs.

After the advent of Islam, other Turkic-speaking groups, such as the Ghaznavids, Seljuks and Khwarazmians, settled in the area. Later, the region came under Mongol rule, after which the Eilkhalar, Aq Qoyunlu and Afshar tribes of Urmia and Moqaddam of Maragheh established villages in Naqadeh.

During the reign of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, the Qarapapaq tribe returned from the Caucasus to the area and settled there.

In 1240 AH, Gogjeh, the residence of Naqi Beyg, a respected elder of the tribe, was occupied by Russian forces during their expansion into the region. After facing considerable conflict, Naqi Khan – likely the son and successor of Naqi Beyg – led his tribe toward the safer territories of Khoy and Salmas. Recognizing the clan's strategic importance due to their knowledge of the terrain, in 1245 AH, Abbas Mirza, the crown prince of Iran, granted the tribe the Solduz region as a new settlement. This grant was officially documented in a royal decree, which specifically awarded the village of Nowcheh Deh (also known as Naqdai/Naqadeh) to Naqi Khan as the clan's leader. This document served as official recognition of their right to settle and govern the region. Another document states that the Qarapapaq tribe came to Iran from Turkey in 1244 AH and settled in the Shapur district (now Salmas). However, since that area was already inhabited and not suitable for them, they were relocated to the Solduz region, and the village of 'Nowcheh Deh' or 'Nauqaday' was given to Naqi Khan Bozcheloo. It later gradually came to be known as Naqadeh.

At that time, Naqadeh was part of Abbas Mirza's estate. He transferred portions of it to the Qarapapaqs; thus, some areas of Sandos were reclaimed by the Government. Until then, the region had been under the control of powerful Kurdish tribes, including the Mamesh and Mangur clans. Naqadeh and its surroundings were predominantly Kurdish, but

with the arrival of the Qarapapaq tribe, the region's homogeneity and hierarchy changed. Abbas Mirza, partly because the Qarapapaq were Shiites and aligned with the Central Government's religion, assisted the clan's leaders in settling and strengthening their influence in the area.

Abbas Mirza resided in Tabriz and occasionally in Tehran. However, the reason he held land in Naqadeh, or its surrounding villages, relates to specific land-tenure practices prevalent in Iran. These practices have left their mark on Iran's current economic policies. Unlike European feudalism, which Karl Marx described as a form of private ownership that transitioned into capitalism, private ownership was not officially recognised in Iran, where the Shah and princes effectively owned all the land. This phenomenon has been widely observed in Iran's political economy, in which a prince from Tehran could own estates in the Fars province.

This issue can be extended to Maragheh as well. At the beginning of the Safavid dynasty, the Moqaddam tribe was brought to Maragheh, a wealthy Turkic city. Toward the end of the Safavid period, the Afshar tribe moved to Urmia to resist the Kurds. Moreover, Marhamatabad (Miandoab) was established as a barrier against the Kurdish tribes to prevent their occasional plundering of Maragheh. Later, Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar exiled residents from Sirjan and Kerman (compatriots of Karim Khan Zand) to Marhamatabad.

These violent geopolitical changes have consistently occurred in the Mokrian (sometimes spelled 'Mukrian') regions, and they are among the factors contributing to Kurdish resistance and nationalistic movements in the area. This geopolitical alteration has fuelled unrest, not just in Iranian Kurdistan but across the four parts of Kurdistan,[1] including Ottoman Kurdistan, where Sunni Mokrian became the most vibrant region due to its dissonance with the Central Government's religion.

An ideological historiography that asserts Turks and Kurds have always been in conflict would be false. Before these events, relations between Kurds and Turks, or between the Kurds of Naqadeh and the Qarapapaq Turks, were not strained, and there were few disputes between them. However, modern ideologies (whether political Islam, Marxism or

1 The east, west, south and north of Kurdistan (Rojhilat, Rojava, Bakur and Başûr Kurdistan).

nationalism) emerged, and, by inciting nations to redefine their identities, caused tensions between the two groups.

During the Islamic Republic era, the geography of other cities also underwent changes, including Miandoab. Some believe that, during these changes, part of Mahabad was annexed to Miandoab, making it adjacent to Naqadeh in the north-east. However, Naqadeh and Miandoab are quite far apart, with Mahabad serving as a transit point for travellers between Miandoab and Naqadeh. Although a bypass road has been constructed, it is not well maintained, and villages are gradually approaching this road. In reality, there is no direct border between Miandoab and Naqadeh. The Turks of Naqadeh are like a small island surrounded by larger Kurdish islands, including Mahabad, Piranshahr, Oshnaviyeh and the northern areas of Margawar and Targawar.

Until Reza Shah's era, Naqadeh was part of the Mokrian province, but, following a sudden decision, it became part of West Azerbaijan province in the national division. Before this, Azerbaijan had a defined boundary centred around Tabriz. However, in the new division, Reza Shah also



Image 39: A historical document related to the unveiling (Kashf-e-Hijab).

included West Azerbaijan in Iran. It is unclear what his intentions were in making these new divisions – whether he aimed to curb the influence of Iran's neighbours, like the Soviet Union or Turkey, pursue a nation-building-and-homogenisation policy in the region, or directly monitor the activities of Azerbaijanis/Turks and Kurds. Whatever the reason, he continued the Qajar Government's policy by relocating some Turks to Sandos.

In a historical document dated 11 May 1972, related to the unveiling (*Kashf-e-Hijab*), it is noted:[1]

> Referring to the coded directive number 157 – one-quarter of the villages in Solduz are Kurdish, and the rest are from the Qarapapaq[2] tribe and others gathered from surrounding areas. The Kurdish villagers have not worn veils from the beginning and dress in traditional Kurdish women's clothing, while the Qarapapaqs wear veils and their tribal attire. It has been repeatedly reported that efforts to modernise the women of the Solduz villages have led to the removal of veils, but they are unable to adopt new clothing. The issue of removing the headscarf (charqad) with caution will not be successful. The Kurdish villagers see the removal of the headscarf and the unveiling of hair as disgraceful acts. It should be noted that in the Lajan, Mangur, Zarza, and Mokri regions, men have not completely adopted uniform attire and changed their traditional clothing. Each village landowner prepares a set of clothing for himself and his servant to wear when traveling to the city or towns where government officials are present, but in their local areas, they continue to wear their traditional Kurdish attire. Thus, if headscarf removal is enforced among the Kurdish women

1 Political Department of the Ministry of Interior. Copy of the report from the Solduz Government. Number 272, dated 11 May 1936.

2 The tribes of West Azerbaijan (Urmia) include the tribes of the Maku, Khoy, Shahpur (Salmas), Mahabad and Solduz regions. The Qarapapaq tribe, referred to as 'Qara Papag' in the document, is in the Solduz area. The mountains in this region belong to the Kurds. (See Yazdi, 1999, p.400 and Mofakham, 1982, p.339.)

> villagers, the entire Kurdish population of Solduz will migrate to the aforementioned Kurdish regions.[1]

Sadegh Zibakalam, a political-science professor at the University of Tehran, believes that Reza Shah, by naming a large portion of Iran's Kurdish cities 'West Azerbaijan', aimed to eliminate the issue of the Kurdistan crisis.[2] This trend continued after the 1979 Revolution in various forms with political and ethnic objectives.

Although not without controversy, a look at the book *History of the Qarapapaq Tribe*[3] tells us that the migration of the well-known Qarapapaq tribe began in 1948, reached its peak in 1951 and almost ended by late 1953, though sporadic migrations continued until 1959. Most of those migrants were poor people. The Qarapapaqs, like the Kurds, have a tribal structure, which made them quickly adapt to local laws and customs, and the local Kurds accepted them, establishing a relatively good relationship between them.

In the second wave of migration, they came from Azerbaijan to Solduz/Sandos, and the Shahsavand clan entered the region. They were pastoralists and came to the area for this purpose. Among the Kurds, they became known as peaceful people.

The third group of migrants, the newest and last, were known as the Hashtroodis. They migrated from distant areas like Hashtrood and Miyaneh to the Solduz/Sandos region. Among these were some Kurds from surrounding areas (including my paternal grandfather), who migrated from Mahabad to this region and its Kurdish villages over the years for farming and settlement. Although these migrations were internal, they were common and perhaps inevitable in the feudal system of that time.

Naqadeh has always been a strategically important region for governments because of its special geographical position. In contemporary times, this city is mostly known for the Hasanlu golden bowl and the war that engulfed the city in April 1979. That war had many consequences,

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1 Department of Research, Publication, and Education of the National Archives of Iran. 1990, p.350.

2 Azariha, 2016.

3 Razavi, 1991, p.225.

pushing the Sunni-Shiite and Kurdish-Turkish conflicts into new phases. Several factors played roles in creating these conditions, but the most influential was the series of appointments after the Revolution. The new Government assigned important provincial positions to figures such as the Friday Prayer leaders of Urmia, some local Turkish officials, and individuals from the former regime, fuelling the Kurdish-Turkish disputes.

Some leaders of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, who had recently returned from Europe and Iraqi Kurdistan, lacked an updated understanding of the culture and society of Naqadeh and its people, and their actions unintentionally fuelled the tensions. They held a rally in the heart of the city, raising sensitivities among the Turks. Their justification was that, if the Party's leadership had ill intentions toward their Turkish-speaking neighbours, they would not have chosen a stadium[1] in the heart of Turkish-speaking Naqadeh for a large rally, gathering the main leaders and commanders of the Party in such a vulnerable position.

The Democratic Party and Komala had become the unchallenged rulers of the vast Kurdish region from the southern half of West Azerbaijan province, to Kurdistan province and, to some extent, to Kermanshah.[2] The parties aimed to build trust between Kurds and Turks and to assert their influence, but some individuals within both Turkish and Kurdish factions, fuelled by the emotional atmosphere, steered the region toward ethnic and religious confrontation. In such an environment, the people were unconsciously driven toward a civil war.

1 In the context of a series of political meetings held by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, which predominantly featured the presence and speeches of the party leader Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou in major cities of Kurdistan, a meeting was held on 20 April 1979 at the sports stadium in Naqadeh, which quickly descended into chaos following several gunshots in the initial moments. Many consider this incident to have triggered the Naqadeh conflict and a widespread war in other regions of Kurdistan.

2 The Kurdish province of Ilam did not witness significant political activity or Kurdish-orientated movements during the 1960s and 1970s. The Kurdish movement attracted large parts of Kermanshah province, particularly the northern areas bordering Kurdistan, including the Uramanat (Hawraman) region and the western areas of Kermanshah province, such as Sarpol-e Zahab, as well as some of the Yarsan Kurds (and the Qalkhani Kurds and Ahl-e Haq). However, this movement did not significantly attract the Shia Kurds. In West Azerbaijan province, apart from the southern and western areas like Margawar and Targawar, extending to near Salmas and the Shekak tribes, we observed Kurdish nationalist movements; however, at that time, for example, in Maku, this movement was weak.

Naqadeh's multicultural society needed tolerance, but confrontation replaced it. On one side were the Kurdish parties, supported by the local Kurds, and on the other were some Turks who had aligned with the Government. The Government sought to suppress the Kurds, using the Turks in the war that erupted.

This approach continues, and the extent of oppression, discrimination and the Government's double standards still plagues the Kurds of Naqadeh to this day. It is clear that some Turks in the region, due to their closeness to the Government, have better resources, which has deepened the ethnic divide, disputes and conflicts.

Gholamreza Hassani, the then Friday Prayer leader of Urmia and Khomeini's representative in the province (who held this position until the end of his life) had close ties with the Kurds before the 1979 Revolution, even collaborating with Kurdish landlords in the village of Balanish in 1945 and 1946. During the Revolution's victory, he coordinated his revolutionary activities with Kurdish clan leaders in Urmia, but, after the Revolution, he adopted a harsh stance toward the Kurds and the Kurdish Democratic Party, aligning himself with the Government and Khomeini.

The unwanted war in Naqadeh was the result of conspiracies by individuals in Urmia and Naqadeh, coupled with the naivety and superficial, non-sociological assessments of one or two members of the Kurdish Democratic Party committee – individuals who should have acted with greater awareness, understanding the sensitivities of multicultural regions and considering the potential for sedition, provocation and targeted rumours but, due to the excitement of the revolutionary atmosphere of those days, inadvertently set the stage for ethnic and nationalist conflicts.

The sad reality that persists to this day is that neither side involved in starting and continuing the bloody Naqadeh War has taken responsibility, nor shown the courage to apologise and make amends. Without a doubt, the primary responsibility for this event falls first on the Government and then on the institutions, parties and individuals affiliated with them who were involved in shaping the incident. However, the legal responsibility weighs most heavily on the Government, which is responsible for ensuring the security of its citizens.

Many believe that the Naqadeh War provided the Government with a convenient excuse to tactically make a 'mistake' and implement its security

intentions. The initiation of internal conflicts, the exacerbation of religious-ethnic differences, and favouring one group by giving them more government positions in the province while overlooking another, created conditions in which the Government could focus on marginalising the Kurds throughout the province, with Naqadeh as a security belt.

In the following sections, I will detail how and why the Naqadeh war developed.

Naqadeh After the Revolution

During the Pahlavi era, Mohammad Reza Shah enjoyed a certain degree of acceptance among the older and more traditional segments of society. For instance, those in my grandmother's generation had a fondness for the monarchy, or at least for its symbols, photographs and glittering displays. However, the younger generation was far more critical, often taking to the streets to protest him. Overall, the Kurds had little affection for the Pahlavi regime. Both Reza Shah and his son, each in their own way, had caused them considerable distress.

When the uprising against the Shah and the monarchy spread to the Kurdish cities, only four decades had passed since the collapse of the Republic of Kurdistan and the execution of Qazi Muhammad and his associates by direct order of Mohammad Reza. Moreover, it had been just over a decade since the suppression of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran in the years 1967 and 1968, when some of its members were executed in summary trials at the Jaldian military base near Piranshahr and



Image 40: Khomeini's promise of free water and electricity services to the people. Early 1979 Revolution.

elsewhere. Additionally, only a few years had passed since the Shah's betrayal of the Barzani movement and the subsequent displacement of Barzani supporters to Naqadeh and Karaj, following the Algiers Accord.

Overall, the Pahlavis were not well-regarded among the political and revolutionary leftists or the Islamic activists in the region. Given these circumstances, it was natural for the youth to be stirred up against Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his government. Apart from a few who sympathised with the regime – mostly those linked to SAVAK (the secret police) and the military, local informants and some village landlords – the majority of the population took to the streets to protest it. The Kurds were determined to participate in the nationwide uprising in Iran, hoping that, with the rise of Khomeini, whom everyone referred to as 'the Imam' and 'Ayatollah', they would experience greater freedom and an improved quality of life – a hope that they soon realised was misguided.

My memories from 1978 are sparse, but I do recall the increasing fervour with which people sought political news. On the nights when my father was home and not away for lumber work in other cities, our relatives and neighbours would gather at our house. We were among the few families in our neighbourhood with a television, so these nightly gatherings took on a serious tone. Rumours and analyses were rife, and everyone spoke in hushed tones, fearful that SAVAK might be eavesdropping. A secret police force had emerged similar to those in totalitarian regimes, instilling a sense of internal surveillance rather than overt control. Most conversations revolved around the Imam, who they believed would improve everything upon his arrival.

I was too young to understand what they meant by 'everything', but I often heard people claiming they had seen his image on the moon, or that, when he came, oil would flow from our taps, and water and electricity would be free. I remember thinking that, if oil did come out of the taps, I wouldn't know what to do with it! Today, these populist slogans seem laughable, but they reflect how simplistic and shallow the promises of the early Revolution were.

Even more distressing is the realisation that the political and social illiteracy of the time was so profound that people were moved to action by such hollow promises. It's important to note that the literacy rate in Iran at the time was only about 30%, and the intellectuals of that era played significant roles in amplifying Khomeini's populist appeal.

Apart from a few revolutionary leaders – who, incidentally, were either imprisoned, assassinated or fled the country within the first few years – the country's mid-level managers were not politically astute. Their selection and appointment were based primarily on their loyalty to the Revolution and religion, rather than any political acumen.

In those days, a well-organised psychological campaign was in place to ensure united support for the new Government. There was little distinction between young and old, man and woman, Kurd and Turk. Khomeini's messages from Paris reached Iran and Naqadeh quickly, and people became increasingly swayed by his words and promises.

I can't help but wonder: if, during those days, sociologists and analysts had pointed out the baselessness of these slogans and warned that merely relying on national wealth couldn't sustain such lofty promises, would the outcome have been different?

The idea of seeing the Ayatollah's image on the moon and the promise of oil coming from taps, which indicated the dominance of a supernatural, unrealistic and superstitious mindset, became sources of amusement and games for us children. We would go into the yard and stare at the moon for ages, trying to see his image, but even in my wildest childish imagination I couldn't conceive of a person's image being on the moon. I had seen his picture. He wore a black turban, and they said he was a Mulla. I would ask the grown-ups how he differed from our neighbour, Mulla Saleh, who was the local Friday Prayer leader for the Kurds, and they would tell me that Khomeini was a *seyyed* ('lord' or 'master') and a good man. I would think to myself, 'Well, Mulla Saleh is a good man, too. He plays with the kids, plants flowers in his yard and always gives me one of his flowers.' I couldn't find any difference between Mulla Saleh and Khomeini, except for the colour of their turbans and the size and colour of their beards.

Sometimes my curiosity got the better of me, and I would turn on the tap to see if oil would come out. I would smell the water and find that it had no scent. Then I would smell the barrel of oil in the corner of the yard . . . I was caught in a strange, childish confusion, unable to make sense of what was happening. Perhaps many other children my age experienced this same confusion.

The promises were numerous. I recall that, early in the Revolution, people's judgements about many things were heavily influenced by

propaganda and rumours. As children, we would hear that all our travels would be free, and we wouldn't have to pay for buses any more.

Adults often talk in front of children, assuming they're not paying attention, but kids do think about – or at least imagine – what they hear. Thus, these discussions, which might take place at family gatherings, in the marketplace, on street corners, in schools and universities, or pretty much anywhere, do impact children. This is something I observe in my son Alan's behaviour today.

In the winter of 1978, as the Islamic Revolution in Iran was drawing to a close, I would wonder why my father's trips to the north and Tehran were longer than usual. When I heard them say there were clashes and demonstrations, that the cities were chaotic and the roads were blocked, I would worry. Each time my father left to settle accounts, my mother and grandmother would choke back tears, and I would have nightmares at night.

Ten days before the 22nd of Bahman (11 February 1979), Khomeini returned to Iran from France and took a significant step for himself and his inner circle by adding the term 'Islamic' to a revolution that had been achieved through the participation and unity of all – Muslims, Communists, Tudeh Party members, Democrats, Liberals and others. This move quickly revealed that the outcome had been appropriated and that other groups would not have a share in it.[1]

On the 2nd of Bahman (22 January 1979), exactly twenty days before the Revolution's victory, a small group of veteran members of the Democratic Party gathered at the Kurdish Grand Mosque in Naqadeh to mark the anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan. Seyyed

1 They viewed all developments through the lens of Islam, and, undoubtedly, the reference was to Shia Islam, not Sunni. The leader of the Revolution was a Shia cleric. Traditionally, since the time when Ismail Safavi crowned himself in Tabriz in 907 AH (1501 AD), Shia Islam was the official religion of Iran, and Sunni opponents were eliminated by the sword of the Qizilbash. This issue seemed to have been accepted by Sunnis, who had always lived on the margins and were accustomed to this situation. However, the Sunnis, who had lost their power during the Safavid era, expected that, through the Revolution in which they had participated, they would have a presence and role in the political future of Iran. One of the significant reasons for group and party conflicts, often referred to as internal disputes among revolutionary forces, was that the Shia clergy appropriated the Revolution, systematically eliminating and marginalising the participating groups.



Image 41: Demonstrations in Naqadeh. Pahlavi Street, 1979.

Rasul Dehghan, known as Seyyed Rasul Babi Gewra,[1] was living in hiding in Naqadeh at the home of Abdullah Pak-Sarresht. He, who had always sought to revive the Democratic Party's organisation in the region, proposed holding this meeting. Mulla Seyyed Ahmad Sa'deh-i, Mulla Mohammad Rasuli, Abdullah Pak-Sarresht, Mirza Abdullah Hassanzadeh, Seyyed Yousef Sa'deh-i, Esmaeil Ahangari and others were among the Party members in Naqadeh who surprised the public by attending the gathering at the Grand Mosque that day. Some others were preparing the ground for leftist groups to operate, although they had not yet gained much recognition. At that event, Omar Ilkhani-Zadeh[2] indirectly criticised

1 Seyyed Rasul Babi Gewra was a senior official of the Party responsible for the security of the meeting. He was one of the military commanders of the Party who had spent years in Iraq and was also close to Barzani. After being accused of exhuming Mulla Mustafa's grave in Oshnaviyeh and causing significant clashes between the Democratic Parties of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan, he left the Party and was assassinated on 10 January 1988 in Sulaymaniyah.

2 Omar Ilkhani-Zadeh, Abdullah Mohtadi, Foad Mustafa Soltani, Sadiq Kamangar and others were among the founders of the Komala Party, influenced by the revolutionary organisation of the Tudeh Party. The Komala Party was established in the autumn of 1969.

the Democratic Party, but it is likely that many people did not fully grasp the implications of his remarks.

The Fall of the Gendarmerie in a Statue-Less Town

A few weeks before the 22nd of Bahman (11 February 1979),[1] events unfolded across various parts of the country, the remnants of which reached Naqadeh in the final days leading up to the Revolution's victory. Smaller towns were easier to control, and the gendarmerie and SAVAK still held power in Naqadeh.

The first anti-government demonstrations involving both Kurds and Turks began on Shah and Esmail-Abad Streets and progressed toward the gendarmerie square near the caravanserai. People marched forward with placards in hand, chanting slogans.

At the time, I could barely speak Farsi, but I was quite vocal. The older boys in the family, such as Kak Morad, Mustafa, Ebrahim and Kak Fattah, gathered the younger ones, including Ali, Mohsen, Mansour, Taha and me. They said, 'We'll say something, and you repeat it loudly.' We did as they instructed, and it became apparent that my voice was louder and sharper than the others. They said, 'You come forward. You're smaller, so we can lift you on our shoulders, and you have a sharp voice.' I felt a sense of pride. Out of all the boys, they had chosen me to lead the chants! I didn't understand the slogans or why the protest was happening, but I repeated everything they told me at the top of my voice.

A little farther away, a Turkish boy was perched on a man's shoulders, and, without prior coordination, we instinctively knew to alternate the slogans. I would shout one slogan, then he would follow with another, and the crowd would echo our words. I don't remember the slogans exactly, but they had a heroic and nationalist tone. A few phrases do linger in my

1 22 Bahman, the day on which the Islamic Revolution triumphed, saw the collapse of most manifestations of the monarchy, from the armed forces to the Government, to propaganda and to cultural institutions. A transitional provisional council (Revolutionary Council) prepared the ground for handing over state affairs to the Provisional Government of Engineer Bazargan, and Khomeini also rose to the top of the new power structure as a religious authority.

memory: 'Naqadeh is awake.' 'The Shah must fall.' 'We will die.' 'Kurds and Turks are brothers.' I had no grasp of what these words meant; I simply repeated them into the microphone. Hearing my voice amplified with such force while perched on my tall, young cousins' shoulders, looking down at the crowd, gave me an indescribable feeling of power. The crowd echoed our chants, making it seem as if we children had suddenly grown up and were commanding the masses.

The protests in Naqadeh didn't end with that memorable day but continued in the following days. One day, the people pulled down the Shah's statue from the town's main square, and on another they marched toward the gendarmerie.[1] Larger towns nearby had already fallen, and the gendarmerie forces in Naqadeh became more serious and irritable. On the day the people marched toward the gendarmerie, I was in the crowd with my father, aunt, cousin Habibeh and Uncle Mohammad Amin. The Kurds and Turks were chanting, and someone was giving a speech. Suddenly, shots were fired at the crowd from the gendarmerie's rooftop. A few people fell to the ground. We didn't know whether they were killed or wounded, but the gunfire caused everyone to flee. The sound of gunfire and the screams of the crowd echoed everywhere. My father was almost shouting, but his voice was hard to hear.

The gendarmerie was in the Kurdish part of town, directly across from the terminal for intercity minibuses to Piranshahr and nearby villages. The terminal's iron gate was closed. My father and uncle lifted Habibeh and me over the gate, passing us hand to hand, and we climbed onto the roof of a kebab shop overlooking the terminal's yard. They then helped us

1 The gendarmerie was in the centre of the city on the western side of a square that separated the Kurdish and Turkish regions. It was the only police station in the city, and the square and main centre of the city were known as Gendarmerie Square. This station still exists and is designated Police Station No. 2 of the Law Enforcement Force. In addition to the gendarmerie station, the city police had a station in the Turkish region, which established the Turkish Committee and quickly became dependent on the Government. The gendarmerie, established in 1911 in Iran, is one of the security and military institutions that has operated from the Qajar era to the Islamic Republic. This institution was founded at the request of the Iranian Government by the Swedish Government and was responsible for the security of roads and rural areas. In the early 1990s, it was merged with the city police and revolutionary committees following the approval of the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the confirmation of Seyyed Ali Khamenei, and the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran replaced it.

down onto the roof of a minibus before jumping down themselves. Others followed suit. It took some time before they brought a ladder, and we finally climbed down from the minibus roof. I was very anxious, as the poor minibus roof kept sinking lower and was on the verge of caving in. I feared that the dent would grow into a gaping hole and swallow us all, but, thankfully, the ladder arrived and we made it down safely.

It wasn't long before the head of the Naqadeh gendarmerie surrendered to the people's forces and everyone rushed into the gendarmerie building. Rumours spread that Tehran had also fallen, and people were saying that, like in other towns, we should seize the armoury. Later, I learned that day was the 23rd of Bahman, 1357 (12 February 1979).

A City Armed!

After the gendarmerie surrendered, the soldiers descended with white cloths and flowers. The people kissed them and cheered. They opened the armoury's doors and went inside. It was like a scene from a film. We were action-film starts who had effortlessly, without anyone stopping us, reached the thick iron door of that large room filled with weapons.

The weapons were neatly lined up, with their specifications written in Farsi beneath each one. Most of those who entered the gendarmerie were Kurds, though a few Turks also took weapons from the police station in their area. Everyone took as much as they could carry. Some people stuffed guns and ammunition into sacks to take with them. Our family's share of the gendarmerie's spoils included several weapons; my father took one, and my uncle and cousins each took one or two. Among the weapons brought home was a bayonet, which I sometimes played with. They said the tip was poisoned, and my grandmother always forbade me from touching its sharp point.

After the weapons, we turned to the vehicles and trucks. Those who knew how to drive took the vehicles. Even the gendarmerie's beds were taken. I'm not sure if the term 'looting' is appropriate for such actions during the throes of a revolution. Perhaps people thought these were spoils of war – their rightful share from the Pahlavi regime.

The city was almost fully armed, and there was no choice but to find a way to control the situation. A few days later, a local committee was formed, composed of Turks and Kurds. Some of the vehicles and trucks



Image 42: Armed Turkic residents of Naqadeh, 1979.

were reclaimed, but they could never recover all the weapons, especially since, at the same time as the gendarmerie was taken over in the Kurdish area, the police station in the Turkish area was also seized, and hundreds of weapons fell into the hands of the people. This soon became a significant threat to the city's security.

Interestingly, even the decor of homes changed after that. Instead of paintings and photographs, weapons were hung on the walls. During the day, in the absence of men, the weapons were hidden under the bedding, but at night, on the men's return, they would be brought out and displayed on the walls – symbols of those days.

Fear and apprehension ruled the households. Parents, especially fathers, constantly warned their children to stay away from the guns. We had heard about something called a 'safety catch', which could disengage in an instant, leading to terrible consequences . . . and sometimes they did. Some people died while fiddling with guns they didn't even know how to use, and others accidentally killed their own family members. They said there was a pin in the guns, which, if removed, would render the weapon inoperative, but no matter how much I looked, I could never find such a pin.

It wasn't just the homes that changed; the face of the city was transformed, too. Kurds wore guns strapped to their backs over their traditional clothes, while Turks tucked them into their belts. They became a symbol of pride. People boasted about the type of weapon they owned.

Short, stockless guns were more popular and considered more beautiful. It was like the rivalries people have over their cars.

A large arms market sprang up around Gendarmerie Square, where all sorts of weapons were bought and sold at low prices. A few times, people even drew guns on each other to settle old scores. The situation was insecure and dangerous.

The Fall of the Barracks

As I mentioned, after the Revolution, two committees were formed in Naqadeh, one Kurdish and one Turkish. Committee No. 1, in charge of the police station on Shah Street, was run by the Turks, while Committee No. 2, housed in the gendarmerie building, was Kurdish. These two committees took over the administration of the city. Other parties and groups had their offices and meeting places in the city, and, occasionally, tensions arose among them.

The differences between the two committees were steadily increasing. The Kurdish committee had somewhat nationalist tendencies, and most of its members supported the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran. Mulla Saleh Rahimi, the Kurdish Friday Prayer leader, was a man of reason and thought, although he was sometimes accused of collaborating with SAVAK and, despite the considerable support for him from the city's people, his sons leaned left, often affiliating with the Komala party. The Democratic Party and Komala did not fully endorse each other, creating a sort of division within the Kurds, although the region was mostly under the Democratic Party's influence. Mulla Saleh tried to maintain a balance, but the Kurds in the area were more inclined to follow the Party members than an imam accused of collaborating with the Shah's regime, whose family members were also Komala members!

Two days after 22 Bahman, a delegation of Kurdish and Turkish representatives went to Piranshahr to take control of the military barracks there and hand them over to a joint committee of Kurds and Turks. The Kurdish delegation included Mulla Saleh Rahimi and leaders of the Democratic Party, such as Mirza Abdullah Pak-Seresht, Mulla Seyyed Ahmad Sa'daie, and Seyyed Rasul Dehghan (Babi Gewra). The Turkish delegation included Mulla Ibrahim Moḥarrer, the Shiite Friday Prayer leader of the city and Ali Khalkhali.

Everything was ready for the handover, and a Party representative had even been stationed at the barracks' checkpoint to ensure that no officers took weapons out of the barracks. Some villagers and people from Naqadeh and Piranshahr had surrounded the barracks. Those present recount that, suddenly, an argument broke out between Mulla Saleh and Seyyed Rasul over how to manage the barracks, and the plan fell apart. This happened just as the barracks commander had come out to surrender. Mulla Saleh insisted that the people enter the barracks, but Seyyed Rasul argued that no one should enter except the committee appointed by the Democratic Party.

Seyyed Rasul had considerable influence and status among the people, due to his family background, his longstanding presence in the Democratic Party and his direct connection with the people, unlike some Party leaders, who had returned from abroad after years away and had had little direct contact with the local populace. Without exaggeration, Seyyed Rasul played a crucial role in equipping and recruiting for the Party in the Mokrian regions, and he was successful. This gave him a special place among the people, and for a long time, the local population identified the Party with him. He also helped relocate the Party's radio station to the remote region of Sar Shakhān. It had initially been based at the Mahabad barracks and played a role in the urban warfare in Naqadeh. Until the exhumation incident of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Seyyed Rasul remained a significant figure in the Piranshahr region and a key figure in the Party.

It's worth noting that, after the fall of the Shah's regime, the Democratic Party quickly revived and resumed its activities. Kurdish people flocked to the Party's offices to renew their allegiance. Although the official resumption of activities was to be announced at a political rally in Naqadeh, the Party's first office was publicly reopened on Baleqi Street.

All these events took place between 12 February 1979 and late April 1979. In those sixty days, while peace and security prevailed in the city, no one could have predicted that Naqadeh would soon turn into a battlefield, bringing nothing but displacement and misery to its people.

The subsequent conflicts caused numerous problems for the residents, disrupting their daily lives and eroding the first and foremost elements of their social capital – trust and security.

To better understand what transpired over the years between the various parties and governments, a brief overview of each formation, rise

and fall is necessary, before we return to Naqadeh and what happened to our lives there.

Revolution in Iran and the Revival of Kurdish Parties

Calling Kurdistan 'the most politicised region in Iran' is no exaggeration. In contemporary Iranian history, there is scarcely a region where the social and cultural life is so intertwined with politics, witnessing so many political movements and uprisings. From the early twentieth-century tribal and ethnic revolts to nationalist movements asserting the right to self-determination, Kurdish history in Iran is inseparable from the political and daily lives of its people, from the educated to the illiterate. This is why it is often said that every Kurd is an unwilling politician.

In this political experience, parties and movements have always played significant roles, from the Kurdistan Revival Society and the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, which founded the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad in 1946, to leftist movements, peasant-worker movements and religious movements. Kurdistan, despite all its infrastructural shortcomings, has always been fertile ground for the development of political movements.

With the 1979 Revolution and the emergence of a new political freedom in the country, Kurdistan became a region where multiple political parties and movements organised, revived and strengthened their activities. They sought to mould the new political landscape in line with their ideological and discursive goals. The volatile and fragile political environment fostered the presence of various political groups, mainly divided into three factions: ethnic nationalists, leftists and Islamists. Notably, the key players were the Democratic Party, with its Kurdish-nationalist and social-democratic leanings under the leadership of Dr



Image 43: The corpse of Soleiman Moeini in front of Piranshahr Gendarmerie on public display. 15 May 1968.

Ghassemlou; the Komala Party (Kurdistan Organisation of the Communist Party of Iran), with its Marxist-Leninist/leftist orientation; and the Quranic School led by Ahmad Moftizadeh, with its religious inclinations. These groups played crucial roles in shaping the political fate of Kurdistan during the Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War.

The Democratic Party: Autonomy for Kurdistan and Democracy for Iran

In 1971, following its Third Congress, the Democratic Party officially adopted the slogan 'Democracy for Iran and Autonomy for Kurdistan', which was partly inspired by the socialist and populist ideals of the Tudeh Party and other communist factions. This slogan became a strategic message for Kurdish parties in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria for several decades and was widely used until the collapse of the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Soviet Union, most Kurdish factions abandoned it, replacing it with a vaguely defined federalism,[1] considering the multinational composition of their respective countries. After half a century of struggle, the Democratic Party has now updated its slogan and strategy to 'Securing the national rights of the Kurdish people within a democratic Iran.'[2]

Over time, there were splits within the Party. A rival faction emerged with a different slogan, but recently the factions have merged once again.[3]

The Republic of Kurdistan, before its downfall and the execution of Qazi Muhammad, exhibited clear aspirations for Kurdish independence in certain quarters. However, after its collapse and the resumption of the Democratic Party's activities, such demands were downgraded to a vague and tenuous autonomy. It is important to distinguish between the policies of the Democratic Party and Komala (Komele), and those of smaller Kurdish groups that advocate for independence and sometimes even question the Kurdish identity within the Iranian context.

1 The same slogan has been modernised, and the term 'federalism' has been introduced, which essentially emphasises the sovereignty of a decentralised government.

2 The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran changed its slogan at its 13th Congress in 2004.

3 The Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan merged after approximately 16 years of separation on 22 August 2022.

In 1967, the Revolutionary Committee of the Democratic Party dispatched over two hundred of its armed fighters to Iran to initiate an armed movement. However, they lasted no more than eighteen months. Most fighters were either killed or retreated to Iraqi Kurdistan, where they went into hiding to evade SAVAK. During this critical period, Dr Ghassemlou – who had either left or, as some suggest, been expelled from the Tudeh Party – came to their aid.

In 1971, he was elected a member of the Party's Central Committee. Over the next two years, he gradually assumed effective leadership, laying the groundwork for revising its programme and statutes. At the Party's Third Congress in 1973, he was officially appointed secretary-general. One of his first initiatives was to steer the Party's independence toward alignment with European social democratic parties, a course that continued until the 1979 Revolution.

The Importance of Dr Ghassemlou in Kurdish Parties

In 1968, Dr Ghassemlou permanently parted ways with the Tudeh Party of Iran due to ideological differences and his opposition to the Soviet Union's expansionist policies and the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Despite facing political and military challenges, the Democratic Party maintained a certain organisational unity with the Tudeh Party and even mirrored its factional splits. For instance, when Ahmad Ghasemi, Gholam-Hussein Foroutan and Abbas Sokhayi, all leaders of the Tudeh Party, broke away in 1967 to form the Revolutionary Organisation of the Tudeh Party, Soleiman Moeini[1] and his likeminded associates followed suit. After the Second Congress of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan in 1963, they established the Revolutionary Committee of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, deciding to engage in armed struggle against the Shah's regime.

1 Sulaiman Moieni was born in 1932 in Mahabad. His father, Mohammad Amin Moieni, was the minister of interior of the Mahabad Republic during Qazi Muhammad's time. Moieni continued his studies in the cities of Tabriz and Tehran, in addition to Mahabad. According to some accounts and documents, he was killed in May 1968 by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, and his body was handed over to SAVAK and the Pahlavi Government of Iran. Moieni's corpse was displayed in the cities of Oshnaviyeh, Piranshahr and Mahabad in front of the public, and, ultimately, SAVAK hung it on the wall of the large mosque in Mahabad. After a few days, his body was buried in the Boudagh Sultan cemetery in Mahabad.



Image 44: Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou with his wife Helen Krulich. Czechoslovakia, early 1950s.

The faction, led by Seyyed Abdullah Es'haqi, who still considered himself the Party's secretary-general, maintained supporters and kept ties with Mulla Mustafa Barzani. Barzani opposed the Revolutionary Committee and accused Soleiman Moeini of falling into a trap set by the Tudeh Party dissidents and by Ibrahim Ahmed[1] and Jalal Talabani.[2]

In 1968, Moeini and one of his comrades were captured by Barzani forces near Sulaymaniyah and brought to Mulla Mustafa Barzani's stronghold at Haji Omran on the Iranian border. According to reports, they were executed on Barzani's orders, and their bodies were handed over to SAVAK in Piranshahr.

1 Ibrahim Ahmed, born in 1914 in Sulaymaniyah, was a Kurdish writer and a leader of the Kurdish movement in Iraq. He was the father of Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, the wife of Jalal Talabani, the former president of Iraq, and Shahnaz Talabani. Ibrahim Ahmed passed away on 8 April 2000 in London.

2 Jalal Talabani was one of the founders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which was a splinter group from the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq. He became the President of Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Kurdistan's Firm 'No' to the Islamic Republic and the Lack of Unity Among Parties

After the Revolution, in February 1979, several significant developments unfolded on the political scene in Kurdistan. The first was that the Kurdish Democratic Party came out of hiding after years of clandestine activity. The second notable event was the return of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the Party's secretary-general, first to Iraq and then to Iran. Ghassemlou, who had been studying and later teaching at Prague University, returned to Iran and participated in the Assembly of Experts election, securing a majority of the votes in West Azerbaijan province. At the time, the Democratic Party virtually controlled the entirety of Kurdistan, encompassing the southern areas of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and parts of Kermanshah and Uramanat, posing a potential threat to the nascent Islamic Revolution in Iran. Particularly, Ghassemlou and other political leaders of the Party held mass meetings in various Kurdish cities, addressing the demands and rights of the Kurdish people.



Image 45: Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini speaking at Azadi Square. Sanandaj, 1979.

During the April 1979 referendum,[1] the people of Kurdistan and the Kurdish-populated regions rejected the Islamic Republic or abstained from participating altogether. The Government has always claimed that these parties prevented ballot boxes from reaching all areas and cities. This referendum, which aimed to establish a system chosen by the people, became the first significant battleground of the Democratic Party and other Kurdish parties against the new rulers. Some leaders of the Kurdish parties argued that, while they did not support the monarchy, they were also unaware of the nature of the Islamic Republic and, therefore, could not endorse it.

In August 1979, only six months after the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini issued a jihad against the Kurds.[2] Not only in Kurdish regions, but also across Iran, catastrophes unfolded, revealing the inefficacy of the fledgling Islamic Republic, especially for the Kurds.

In Kurdistan, three main factions were active: the Democratic Party, Komala and the Maktabi followers of Ahmad Moftizadeh.[3] These factions

1 At the suggestion of Khomeini, two months after the Revolution, a referendum on the Islamic Republic system was held across Iran and at Iranian embassies abroad on 29 and 30 March 1979 to determine the new governmental system. Despite all the doubts and accusations of ballot tampering, based on official reports, Islamists close to Khomeini participated in the referendum by about 98% and voted 'yes' for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2 On 19 August 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini issued a military order against the forces in the Kurdish regions of Iran. His order, known as the 'Fatwa of Jihad', led to a bloody incident in these areas. Part of this order states, 'I strictly instruct the chief of staff of the army, the chief of the Islamic Gendarmerie, and the chief of the Revolutionary Guards to order the dispatched forces to the Kurdistan region to pursue the outlaws and attackers who are fleeing, capture them, and urgently submit them to the competent courts. All borders of the region must be closed quickly to prevent the outlaws from escaping, and I strictly instruct that the leaders of the outlaws be captured with full force and handed over. Any negligence in this matter will be considered a violation of duty and will be severely punished.'

3 Ahmad Moftizadeh was born in 1934 in Sanandaj. He was a Muslim thinker and Kurdish Islamic scholar who primarily operated in the Kurdistan province. He had many followers during his time and was known among his supporters as the Kurdish Ali Shariati. He is one of the religious-political leaders who spent a long time in the prisons of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's Government and the Islamic Republic, passing away on 9 February 1993 in Tehran. One of his most prominent demands was for reform in the constitution and the revival of a council-based government in Islamic societies and Iranian society. After he realised that non-Islamic groups were not fulfilling their commitments and were exploiting the people, he announced that, as of 29 November

had little unity, and each had a strong influence in different parts of Kurdistan. Each of these three factions adopted a different approach toward the Islamic Republic. Komala declared its enmity toward the Islamic Republic from the outset. Moftizadeh initially sought cooperation with the regime under the pretext of being Muslim. The leaders of the Democratic Party adopted a moderate approach, seeking to coexist and interact with the Islamic Republic.

As previously mentioned, after the 1979 Revolution, the people of the Kurdish regions took control of security centres, creating a power vacuum. The Democratic Party, which had also participated in disarming gendarmeries and security centres, took advantage of the situation and established an undeclared autonomous rule within its sphere of influence.

Many believe that if the leaders of the Democratic Party, the ruling party in the region, had sought to align with Komala and Moftizadeh's faction – both of which had some degree of influence – by establishing a joint committee to govern Kurdistan and defend its interests, a favourable environment would have been created for securing the Kurdish people's rights in Iran. At the very least, it could have led to the reestablishment of the Republic of Kurdistan. Some believe that if the Kurdish parties had supported each other and established the Republic of Kurdistan over forty years ago, they would have been more successful in resisting the Islamic

1978, he would separate his political struggles from them. It seems that figures such as Sayyid Qutb, Abul A'la Maududi, and Ali Shariati had an influence on Moftizadeh's thought process. One of Moftizadeh's specific and methodological approaches was the use of the Kurdish language and literature in creating poetry, aimed at influencing the teachings of religious ethics among thousands of his followers and students. With the onset of the Iranian Revolution's struggles and his alignment of Sunni Muslims in Iran with the Revolution – which he described as 'premature' – Moftizadeh navigated a complex political landscape. Despite spending a decade in prison, his intellectual framework remained intact, and he continued to advocate for his ideals without compromising his core principles. (Despite the challenges of imprisonment and political upheaval, Moftizadeh's intellectual and ideological framework remained resilient, allowing him to continue his advocacy for reform and religious ethics.) In recognising and following his path, a council called the Management of the Quranic School was established among his followers. This council discusses and implements parts of its general principles regarding important doctrinal, intellectual, ethical and practical issues, elucidating the general principles of religious movement and responsibilities related to each stage from Moftizadeh's perspective.

Republic. If these parties had supported one another, Kurdistan's weight against the Central Government could have increased.

For many analysts, it remains unclear why Dr Ghassemlou, with his political knowledge and acumen, did not fully exploit the opportunities presented. Instead, he became embroiled in a cold war with Komala, which later escalated into a bloody and prolonged conflict.

Komala should be examined with a more precise lens. This party never presented itself as a Kurdish organisation. It never joined the Tudeh Party of Iran, maintaining its own structure. Komala always emphasised that it was an *Iranian* organisation. For instance, in 1962, when it joined the Communist Party of Iran, Komala had its own members. The initial discussions within Komala, held during sessions and its First Congress, were only recently published. This congress was held at Mulla Saleh's house in Naqadeh, attended by Kak Omar Ilkhani-Zadeh, Kak Abdullah Mohtadi, Foad Mustafa Soltani, Saeed/Sa'ad Vatandoost, Mulla Saleh's eldest son Mohsen Rahimi, and several others. In the Second Congress, held in 1960, Kurdish nationalism was explicitly condemned. Therefore, the creation of a Kurdish national front at that time was unlikely.

One must also remember that, within the ranks of the Democratic Party, there were elements of the Tudeh Party of Iran. They openly challenged the leadership of Ghassemlou, who had previously been a member of the Tudeh Party, weakening his position. These elements not only opposed the Democratic Party, but also harboured hostility toward Komala. In the view of some within the Tudeh Party and their agents in the Democratic Party, the Islamic Republic was an anti-imperialist government, and the Revolutionary Guard was considered a revolutionary force that needed to be supported.

Some believe that framing Iran's issues and dynamics in terms of ethnicity and nationality is incorrect. Today, some Kurds outside Kurdistan perceive Iran's problems as being divided along ethnic and national lines (Kurd, Fars, Turk, etc.), with complex details embedded in the superstructure and infrastructure of society. However, this was not the case back then. For example, leftists saw themselves as part of a united front, even though there were divisions and factions among the leftists themselves. The first faction was the Tudeh Party, the second included the Democratic Party and the Fedayeen Guerrillas, and the third comprised Komala, Maoists and Ranjbaran. Most political parties of that era were not

based on national or ethnic identity, but on ideology. Therefore, it is believed that the success of a united front among the three main factions was unlikely, and, from a military and strategic perspective, it was also unfeasible.

Additionally, the Ba'athist regime in Iraq had agents within Iranian Kurdistan and even within some Kurdish parties, openly supporting certain factions at times. The Iranian Government was not indifferent, either, launching attacks in the region whenever possible.

In these sensitive circumstances, a group of senior figures caused the biggest split within the Democratic Party, separating their ranks. This group, calling themselves 'the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan – Following the Fourth Congress', attracted and took with them hundreds of Party cadres and Peshmerga.

Various elements exploited every opportunity to pit the Democratic Party against Kurdish refugees from Iraq and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (the 'KDP') of Iraq, which had recently elected a temporary leadership (Qiyada Muwaqqat)[1] to continue its struggle against Iraq.

The issues of the expulsion of Barzanis from Iran and the inclusion of Article 8[2] in the text of the negotiations with the Government caused concern among the Barzani leaders and the Qiyada. Additionally, issues such as the exhumation of Mulla Mustafa Barzani in Oshnaviyeh, which was attributed to the Democratic Party and its military commander Seyyed Rasul Dehghan (Babi Gewra) and several instances of mine-laying against the Barzanis in border areas pushed relations between the two Democratic Parties – both founded in Mahabad – to the brink of military conflict.

Eventually, a devastating clash ensued, involving both the Revolutionary Guard and a splinter group known as the Seven-Person Group, who joined the Barzanis in their war against the Kurdish

1 *Qiyada Muwaqqat*, or 'temporary leadership', refers to the provisional and transitional leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which is commonly referred to as *Parti* in Kurdistan, Iraq. I will elaborate on the temporary leadership/Qiyada Muwaqqat shortly.

2 Article No. 8 of Mahabad: Article 8 states that Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the group known as 'temporary leadership' are agents of the CIA, SAVAK of Iran, and MIT of Turkey, and are despised by all Kurdish people. Therefore, it calls on the Revolutionary Government to 'sever all connections and communications with this gang and expel their treacherous leaders from Iran, without harming the situation of impoverished refugee families.'

Democratic Party of Iran. The Barzanis capitalised on the Revolution and subsequent Kurdish conflicts to revive their organisation and military, even at the cost of fighting against Kurdish Iranian forces. This cooperation with Tehran escalated to a strategic level a year later, when Saddam Hussein launched his attack on Iran.

The armed forces of the Islamic Republic, with the assistance of the Muslim Kurdish Peshmerga – referred to by the Kurds as *jash*, meaning mercenaries employed and equipped by the Revolutionary Guard – and later with the help of the Kurdish forces of the *Qiyada Muwaqqat*, attacked the forces of the Democratic Party and Komala in Kurdistan. This assault continued for years, escalating into a widespread civil war. Ultimately, the Revolutionary Guard, with the guidance and support of the Qiyada Muwaqqat, first 'cleansed' the routes of Oshnaviyeh, Piranshahr and Sardasht, then forced the Democratic Party and other parties to retreat to Iraqi territory under Ba'athist control, where they continued their activities from the Qandil Mountains. Later, the leaders of these parties, like other opposition groups, moved abroad, relocating their headquarters outside Iran, particularly to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Fruitless, Unproductive and Bloody Negotiations

High-level representatives of the Kurdish parties, including the Democratic Party, engaged in several rounds of talks with the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ultimately, Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the secretary-general of the Democratic Party, was assassinated by agents of the Iranian Government during a negotiation session. The Democratic Party had demanded the implementation and negotiation of Articles 15 and 19 of the Iranian Constitution, which pertain to the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

In 2015, Party officials met with representatives of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council in Erbil, Kurdistan, Iraq. In the final statement of its 16th Congress on 15 February 2016, the Party emphasised 'utilising all platforms and methods of struggle to promote the national discourse on Iranian Kurdistan, relying on unity and solidarity' and called for 'enhancing the struggle and activities both inside and outside the country, across all fields and platforms, and strengthening the national discourse and the spirit of unity and solidarity in Iranian Kurdistan.'



Image 46: Gholamreza Hassani, then Friday Prayer leader of Urumia and representative of the Supreme Leader in the province.

In recent years, it has been reported that four Kurdish parties – Komala, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, the Revolutionary Komala and the Kurdistan Democratic Party – have engaged in limited and confidential negotiations with representatives of the Islamic Republic.[1] The preliminary discussions between the Kurdish parties and Iran were initially facilitated by the Belgian non-governmental organisation Noref, which sent delegations for separate talks in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran. All these efforts have so far been fruitless. The Iranian Government was so apprehensive about influential members of the Democratic Party that it exerted all its efforts to eliminate them. The assassination of many cadre members and Peshmerga fighters from Kurdish parties (especially Komala and the Democratic Party) in neighbouring countries and the Kurdistan Region was part of this effort.

How We Became Displaced

Many have spoken about the conflict in Naqadeh, yet few have detailed this significant event, leaving no reliable and substantiated archive for reference. In my quest to write about the events that profoundly affected my life, my family and many residents of the city, I delved deeply into

1 Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, n.d.; Alavi, 2019a&b; Badawi, 2019; Kurdistan Democratic Party, n.d.

various sources. I interviewed several Turkish and Kurdish residents of Naqadeh from that period and consulted knowledgeable individuals. I thoroughly examined written records and, to the extent possible, reviewed archives of government newspapers from that era, publications from various political parties, and memoirs of relevant individuals to gather information that was as accurate as possible. I am aware that my account may have limitations, and, naturally, part of what I write is influenced by my own experiences of those days.

I possess a fairly good visual memory, and thus some parts of that tumultuous war remain vivid in my mind. However, as I was a child at the time, my focus was on the sudden upheaval. Consequently, I have endeavoured to merge the perspective of my childhood experiences with my analytical insights as a researcher, to present a reasonably comprehensive account of those days.

I wrestled with the question of how, as a Kurd who was directly involved, I should approach this topic. I understand that my fellow townspeople and other Kurds expect me to detail the suffering of the people of Naqadeh, including their displacements, their losses and the bloodshed.

The lack of independent information made this task challenging. I had to employ every available research tool and method. Thus, I turned to qualitative, field-based research, relying on interviews and conversations with Kurdish and Turkish acquaintances from Naqadeh and its surroundings to provide a more grassroots and potentially accurate version of the events.

Unfortunately, what is often missing from official reports and statistics is the psychological trauma inflicted by such wars and conflicts. The fear and terror, the anxiety over losing loved ones and the confrontations with bloodied corpses, alongside countless unanswered questions that particularly haunt children, are profoundly distressing. Yet, in such circumstances, and even afterward, there is often little consideration given to addressing these psychological wounds. The prevalence of violence and the ongoing crisis tend to normalise brutality. Typically, traditional communities respond with silence and efforts to forget. In this account, I have attempted not only to present the core events, but also to highlight some of the resulting trauma and suffering.

The leaders of the Islamic Republic, particularly Ruhollah Khomeini, had promised before the Revolution to respect the rights of all Iranian citizens and recognise their rights to self-determination. This promising statement motivated the Kurdish people to support the Revolution. However, once the Central Government's foundations began to solidify, many things changed.

Given the prevailing atmosphere and the promises made, the Democratic Party made its clandestine activities public after the Revolution and held gatherings in various Kurdish cities. Dr Ghassemlou and the Party leaders addressed these meetings to discuss the Party's objectives and plans. The initial gatherings took place in Mahabad and Sanandaj, attracting Kurds from various cities. Plans were underway for a similar meeting in Naqadeh, with suggestions to use the city's sports stadium, located in the Turkish-inhabited area of Naqadeh. After considerable negotiation, it was announced that the Democratic Party's meeting would occur in Naqadeh on 20 April 1979.

Some claimed that the Kurds intended to seize the city and displace the Turks from their homes, igniting the first sparks of overt division between Turks and Kurds. This perception, combined with provocations from figures like Gholamreza Hassani (the then imam of Urmia) and influential Turks in Naqadeh, eventually led to Mulla Hassani and certain notorious individuals presenting themselves as saviours of the Turkish community. That culminated in a bloody conflict.

The battle in Naqadeh was a full-scale urban war that peaked on the third day and, after four days of bloodshed and the deaths of hundreds of Kurdish and Turkish men, women and children, caused many residents to flee to surrounding villages and towns.

Accurate statistics on the casualties remain elusive, with no neutral body yet having investigated the matter. However, unofficial and oral estimates suggest that around three hundred people from each side were killed during those days. It is important to note that the figures may be somewhat exaggerated due to the lack of precise information.

The conflict did not end after much material loss and the deaths of innocent people – after the Kurds were expelled from the city, the fighting and hostage-taking continued in the villages among the displaced and homeless. The horrifying sounds of gunfire and the sight of blood and

corpses will never be erased from the memories of myself and the other children who played in the streets of Naqadeh during those days.

The Excitement of the First Meeting with Dr Ghassemlou

In mid-April 1979, my father, uncle and I went to the city's Grand Mosque, having learned that an important meeting was to be held. The house of Mulla Saleh, which had previously been the venue for significant gatherings, no longer had the same atmosphere and had nearly transformed into a military base, with armed individuals patrolling its courtyard. My visits to his house, previously frequent with my grandmother and cousin Habibeh for play, had ceased. The once-beautiful garden, filled with flowers, had been replaced by a space crowded with benches and unfamiliar, serious and angry people.

That day, Mulla Saleh came to the mosque to lead the prayers, but everyone was anticipating a discussion on a different subject. The political meeting of the Democratic Party had captured everyone's attention. Ordinary people, having never even heard the term 'meeting' before, were intrigued by the modern and exciting prospect of attending. It was explained that the meeting was an important political event to be held with the presence and speech of Dr Ghassemlou, the secretary-general of the Democratic Party. It was stated that he would speak in Naqadeh just as he had in Mahabad, and that a Party office would be established in our city.



Image 47: Ms Maliheh Amini, wife of Mulla Saleh. Naqadeh, 1971. (Courtesy of Mulla Saleh's son.)

Upon learning about the meeting, the public faced a significant question: 'Where should it be held?' The only suitable venue in Naqadeh was the city's stadium, located in the Turkish-inhabited area. Mulla Saleh opposed the stadium as the venue, but younger, left-leaning individuals, including his own two sons, who were members of the Komala Party, confronted him. Some



Image 48: (from right) Massoud Barzani, Idris Barzani, Mulla Saleh, Mulla Zahid. Naqadeh, Mulla Saleh's residence, 1979.

even shouted accusations, calling him a 'religious reactionary and an agent of SAVAK!'

Sheikh Moḥarrer, the Shiite Imam of the city, along with several Turkish and Kurdish elders, was also opposed to holding the meeting in the Turkish area, fearing it might provoke conflict. On the other side of town, at the Shiite Grand Mosque, radical Turkish youth were attacking Sheikh Moḥarrer politically, accusing him of colluding with Mulla Saleh and compromising on Kurdish demands.

The leftist and revolutionary Kurdish youth of the Democratic Party and Komala had previously clashed with Mulla Saleh over similar issues. They had wanted to hold speeches in the mosque, but Mulla Saleh had denied them, even locking the doors on several occasions. This had enraged them to the point of staging protests and chanting slogans against him and the Democratic Party, such as 'Democrat and Barzani, the Kurdish suffering they have scattered'.

Some members of this group were influenced by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (the 'PUK'), led by Mam Jalal Talabani and his father-in-law, Ibrahim Ahmed, who was a writer and intellectual. Talabani used these leftist groups to undermine the popular base of his rival, the temporary Barzani leadership.

Some of those responsible for the Democratic Party office in Naqadeh were in favour of holding the meeting at the football stadium.[1] Abdul Rahman Haji-Ahmadi, the head of the Executive Committee for the surrounding districts, including Naqadeh, and one of the main decision-makers regarding the meeting's location, supported this choice. Dr Ghassemlou had personally selected him for organising the meeting in Naqadeh, and his opinion was highly significant. This individual later became the secretary-general of the PJAK.[2] I am unsure whether



Image 49: Ghassemlou and Sheikh Ezaddin at Mulla Saleh's residence. 5 April 1979.

1 Naqadeh was a political city, and the Kurds had active political concerns and intentions. The secretary-general of the Democratic Party and one of the leaders of the PJAK at that time were from this city.

2 Abdul Rahman Haji-Ahmadi was initially a member of the Democratic Party and served as the head of the Executive Committee for the counties of Piranshahr, Oshnaviyeh and Naqadeh. He was one of the key decision-makers regarding the location of the Naqadeh rally. He hailed from the village of Qareh Qassab Sandos. Due to his father, the late Kuykhak Karim, being connected with influential families of the landlords in the town of Viran [Sharviran], he travelled to Germany with their sons to continue his education. After graduating, he married a German woman and became acquainted with members of the Party in Germany, including Dr Ghassemlou and Karim Hisami, who was from his hometown and a close associate of his father. He then joined the Party and returned to Iran after the Revolution. Known for his sense of humour and sociability, he quickly gained attention. Given his background abroad and his close ties with Dr Ghassemlou, he was entrusted with the responsibility of organising the rally, a task requiring great sensitivity and caution.

After 1980, when the Democratic Party held its Fourth Congress in Mahabad, the issue of the Naqadeh conflict and its causes became a significant topic of discussion and scrutiny, during which Engineer Haji-Ahmadi faced considerable criticism. As a result, he was not elected to the Central Committee, while Kak Mustafa Hijri, who had no prior Party experience and had only been involved for less than a year, was elected to the Central Committee. This outcome led to Engineer Haji-Ahmadi's dissatisfaction. Gradually, he joined the ranks of Dr Ghassemlou's critics and eventually returned to Germany. There, he became affiliated with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), and, after the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, one of the leaders of that party, he was appointed as the secretary-general of PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), which is essentially a branch operating in Iranian Kurdistan. Following the dismissal of one of the members, he became a member of the Kurdistan National Congress (the 'KNK'). PJAK was

Mustafa Hijri,[1] our neighbour at the time, shared Haji-Ahmadi's views on the meeting's location, but the city's revolutionary youth considered the large Naqadeh stadium a good place to showcase the Party's strength.

Conversely, some city elders deemed the empty lands in the Kurdish area near the village of Balagchi more suitable and believed that the gathering was potentially hazardous. They feared that a large assembly of armed individuals would be akin to a powder keg that, with the slightest provocation, would ignite a catastrophe.

Given the serious disagreements, joint meetings were held with the Turks and Kurds, and Mulla Saleh and Mulla Moḥarrer suggested various locations, including the open space between Naqadeh and Balagchi village, for the meeting. They expressed concerns that some were seeking to exploit the situation and advised caution. Ultimately, the opposing side remained steadfast in their decision.

About two weeks before the meeting, my grandmother, Habibeh and I went to Mulla Saleh's house. In the courtyard, my grandmother and Mulla Saleh's wife conversed with concern. Mulla Saleh, looking distressed and tired, mentioned that he had guests and asked my grandmother to stay and help with dinner. He then told me, 'Kameel, go tell your father and uncle to come here tonight.' Dr Ghassemlou; Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini;[2] the sons

established on 4 April 2003, the birthday of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, in the Qandil Mountains.

1 Mustafa Hijri, the third secretary-general of the Democratic Party, was born in the Mokrian region in 1953 in Naqadeh. He holds a degree in Farsi Language and Literature from the University of Tehran. Initially drawn to leftist ideologies, Hijri joined the Democratic Party and later became a member of its Central Committee. After the assassination of Dr Sadegh Sharafkandi, Hijri was elected secretary-general during the Party's 13th Congress, a position he continues to hold. Under his leadership, the Party entered a new phase, shifting its slogan from 'autonomy' to 'federalism'. A month after his election, the Party split into two factions, with Hijri leading the Democratic Party. This split marked the third and most enduring division within the Party since the 1979 Revolution. Unlike the previous two splits, which either reconciled with the parent party or dissipated into other movements, this division has had a lasting impact on the Party's history.

2 Mamosta Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini (1922–2010), who served as the Friday Prayer leader of Mahabad before the Revolution, was a Sunni scholar and a supporter of the Republic of Kurdistan (Mahabad). After the Revolution, he maintained close ties with the Democratic Party, which had a nationalist orientation, and especially with Komala, which held leftist views. He was known for his progressive ideas, advocating for the separation of religion from state, and was one of the Kurdish leaders involved in

of Mulla Mustafa Barzani,[1] Kak Idris[2] and Kak Masoud;[3] and many others were to arrive for an important visit.

For some time, I had been hearing the names of Dr Ghassemlou, Sheikh Ezaddin and the Barzanis (and, by extension, the temporary Barzani leadership) almost daily. The anticipation of attending this meeting was thrilling. I boasted to the local children that I would be among such important figures that evening.

That night, the atmosphere felt as if the army had taken over the street. Neighbours were peeking out to see what was happening, creating a tense environment. My father, uncle and I made our way through armed men and military vehicles equipped with semi-heavy weapons and ascended to the second floor of Mulla Saleh's house.

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negotiations with the Islamic Republic for Kurdish autonomy. Mamosta Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini believed that some of the Quranic rulings were subject to conditions of time and place and that the laws from 1,400 years ago could not be applied in today's context.

1 Mustafa Barzani was born in the village of Barzan in Iraqi Kurdistan (then part of the Ottoman Empire). In 1931 and 1932, he, along with his elder brother, Sheikh Ahmed Barzani, led the Kurdish independence movement. After the movement was suppressed in 1935, he was exiled to Sulaymaniyah with his brother. In 1942, Mulla Mustafa escaped from Sulaymaniyah and initiated a new uprising against Baghdad, which ultimately failed. He then migrated to Iran with a thousand of his supporters and their families.

In December 1945, when the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, with the support of the Soviet Union, declared the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in north-western Iran, Mulla Mustafa was one of the generals of the Republic and the commander-in-chief of Kurdistan's forces at that time. During these 11 months, on 16 August 1946, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan Iraq was also founded in Baghdad, with Barzani (in absentia) being elected as its first president.

After the Soviet forces withdrew from Iran in May 1946, the Republic of Mahabad weakened and was eventually suppressed by Iranian forces in December 1946, leading to the execution and imprisonment of its leaders. However, Mulla Mustafa Barzani managed to return to the Iraqi borders. Facing further difficulties there, he eventually led around five hundred of his best peshmerga fighters through Turkey and Iran to Azerbaijan in the Soviet Union, where they were disarmed and granted asylum.

2 Idris Barzani, born in 1944, was the eldest son of Mulla Mustafa Barzani. After his father's death, he led the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq until his own death from a heart attack in 1987. His son, Nechirvan, is currently the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. At the time, there were discussions and family disputes regarding the circumstances and cause of his death, which were never fully clarified.

3 Massoud Barzani, born in 1946 in Mahabad, Iranian Kurdistan, has led the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq since 1979, following the death of his brother Idris. He also served as the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq from 2005 to 2017.

We sat in a room in which Mulla Saleh had read stories to us. It seemed very large to us as children, but as guests continued to arrive and sit closely together, it seemed to shrink.

Gradually, everyone assembled. For the first time, I saw Dr Ghassemlou and other key figures who were to shape the destiny of Kurdistan in those days.

A notable aspect was that, when someone spoke, everyone else remained silent. Then, in a specific order, another person would take over the conversation, with everyone listening attentively.

I could gradually distinguish three groups by their attire. The first group included Mulla Saleh, Sheikh Ezaddin and a few others. They wore white turbans and long robes. They were unarmed, but all had beards and sat at the head of the gathering. The second group consisted of individuals like Dr Ghassemlou and Rahman Haji-Ahmadi. They were armed, wore suits or Kurdish clothing in dusty colours, and had black-and-white Kurdish headdresses.[1] The third group included people like Kak Idris and Kak Masoud Barzani, who wore weapons at their waists and white-and-red headdresses that locals referred to as *sarsor*, which literally means 'red headed'. They also displayed a photo of their recently deceased father, Mulla Mustafa.

After dinner, the main individuals sat around a table and began the crucial negotiations about Naqadeh and the surrounding region. Others stood around them and listened.

The meeting had its ups and downs; at times it was tense, other times it relaxed, and at moments voices rose to shouts. Disputes escalated when some leftist youth questioned the Barzani brothers about the fate of several Peshmerga of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, who had apparently been massacred by the Barzani forces in the Hakkari Province of Turkey's Kurdistan.[2]

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1 This black-and-white headscarf, known as *aghabano* or *jemadani*, is considered a symbol of nationalism among the Kurds and is also commonly referred to as the Palestinian *keffiyeh*.

2 In the summer of 1978, a group of peshmerga fighters from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, who were moving weapons from Syria and crossing the Turkey-Iran-Iraq border, clashed with local Kurdish tribes and forces. Many peshmerga fighters and several of their leaders were killed, and those who were captured were executed. Historical documents and records refer to an order from Barzani for this attack. This event, which caused considerable controversy at the time, is known in PUK political

Each group had its own scribe, who recorded their statements. During dinner, I sat near one of the scribes, a young Peshmerga. I tried to read what he was writing. The alphabet was familiar, but the words were not very meaningful to me. I had learned to read and write in Farsi at school but could not read Kurdish texts.

Apart from that, no other significant details remain in my memory, but after that the promotion for the upcoming meeting intensified.

Red Rain, The Bloodied Stadium

The day before the meeting, a red dust storm[1] descended on the city. This redness was always a harbinger of misfortune. Its ominous occurrence was therefore a cause of concern for the locals, and everyone hurried to clean up its remnants.[2] Not just my mother and aunt, but the entire city was scrubbing windows and courtyards while discussing the unsettling occurrence.

By the next day, 21 April 1979, the city had lost its red hue but had taken on the appearance of a massive military base. After weeks of propaganda, people from other cities and provinces had come to Naqadeh to attend the Party's meeting.

Early in the morning, my cousin Habibeh and I donned traditional Kurdish attire, and my father tucked a revolver under my sash. I felt like one of the Kurdish fighters – like those I had seen at the meeting in Mulla Saleh's house.

We set out into the city. The prevalence of distinct Kurdish outfits signified that many from other cities had arrived in Naqadeh. Journalists snapped pictures of the crowd, especially of children in Kurdish garb. The city was charged with a nationalist fervour. Loudspeakers broadcast stirring anthems and promoted the meeting. The atmosphere was akin to a political festival for the Kurds.

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literature as the 'Hakkari Tragedy' and was a catalyst for the resumption of a protracted and extensive conflict between Kurdish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan.

1 In Kurdish, *baranî qorewsor*, which means 'red rain'.

2 In some cultures, the colour red is considered ominous and inauspicious, signifying adverse and deadly events such as wars and violent conflicts. In these cultures, red is often associated with the planet Mars, which is also red and symbolises war.



Image 50: Democratic Party meeting, Mahabad, 1979

We marched in an orderly fashion into the stadium, holding placards. Looking around, I was struck with excitement. The expansive area was packed with people, all chanting in unison.

After a speech by Mohammad Amin Seraji,[1] Dr Ghassemlou began his address. A few minutes in, amid the chanting, gunshots were heard from a rooftop overlooking the stadium. Some claimed it was from the roof of the famous Khani Agha Majid petrol station, while others believed the shooter was a man named Gholam Banavand Naqadeh, a member of Committee No. 1 – the Turks' committee in the city – who had used a loudspeaker to incite the Turks. According to available reports, the initial shots were fired by a person named Suleiman, associated with the Maboudi gang. First, there were a few single shots, which were met with a barrage of indiscriminate gunfire from the other side.

The crowd, seemingly expecting such an event, panicked and surged toward the exits. The doors were half-closed, and the rush to escape was frantic. The immense crowd and the partially closed doors created significant pressure, anxiety and fear among those in the stadium. Many

1 Mohammad Amin Seraji was a member of the Political Bureau of the Democratic Party and headed the delegation negotiating with the Iranian Government. After meeting with Khomeini, he also had a meeting with Mehdi Bazargan. Seraji remained a member of the Political Bureau until 1980. Four months after the Fourth Congress of the Democratic Party, he, along with Ghani Bolourian and several others, split from the Party and, through a statement, founded the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan – Followers of the Fourth Congress. Ultimately, he joined the Tudeh Party of Iran.

were trampled as they desperately tried to save themselves. My father and uncle made their way to the centre of the stadium, where they grabbed me and Habibeh. With difficulty, we escaped through the southern side, using a section of the wall that the crowd had damaged to flee. We wandered fearfully through the city's dead-end streets until we finally navigated our way behind the hospital and near the police station, eventually making it home through the narrow alleys of Qalat and behind the old caravanserai.

There are few written reports about that day, but, according to local Turks and Kurds who were present, several people were killed in the early hours, and the death toll continued to rise throughout the day.[1] If the Turks had truly intended to massacre the meeting attendees, hundreds could have lost their lives. Most of the rooftops overlooking the stadium were fortified, and armed Turks took refuge there. They could have easily killed those present in the stadium, but no shots were fired in that direction.

It appears that, apart from the fortifications, some houses had also been penetrated by the gunfire. One of the Turks, who considered himself a defender in the Naqadeh conflict, recounted in an interview, 'As people



Image 51: Some of the bodies from the Naqadeh conflict. Photo from *Ettela'at* newspaper, 22 April 1979.

1 Ettela'at Newspaper, 1979, p.2.

fled, an old man with a revolver shot one of the meeting's security personnel dead. Later, he and his son were also killed.'[1]

Along our escape route, we saw armed but empathic Turks advising fleeing people – who were mostly not from Naqadeh and unfamiliar with the city – 'Kaka get! Kaka bordan get!' ('Brother, go! Brother, get out of here!') We too were lost in an alley. An armed acquaintance of my father's guided us to safety. In the confusion, some people even took refuge in Turkish homes and returned to Kurdish areas only after some semblance of calm was restored.

Mulla Saleh's prediction proved accurate. Some Turks had spread rumours that Kurds intended to expel them from their city. They feared that Kurds might massacre them, plunder the garrisons of Jaldian and Pasweh, block access to Mahabad and Urmia, and declare autonomy. The Kurds continually assured them that nothing would happen, but the conspiracy theory reached a point where many Turks sent their families out of the city and took up positions on rooftops to protect their homes. Gholamreza Hassani, the imam of Urmia, recorded in his memoirs that he had been in constant telephone contact with prominent Turks in Naqadeh. Many, including the secretary-general of the Democratic Party, believed he had incited the Turks against the Kurds.

Thousands from distant and nearby Kurdish provinces were invited to the meeting, and a show of military might by members and supporters of the Democratic Party had heightened Turkish sensitivities. The weapons and military equipment acquired by the Party and the people from the Mahabad garrison, Sardasht regiment and numerous gendarmerie stations naturally intensified Turkish fears. Even the council composed of Kurds and Turks, established at the start of the Revolution to manage the city, had lost its effectiveness. Before the Naqadeh conflict, this council managed city affairs, including fuel distribution, the administration of departments and the municipality, and the monitoring of checkpoints. In my view, this council was one of the best (brief) representations of democracy and unity between Turks and Kurds, which was lost during the Naqadeh conflict.

1 Benevand, Q. (2010) The Naqadeh War – Said and Unsaid, Part Two [Blog], 23 December. Available at: http://jangenagade.blogfa.com/post/18 (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Mulla Saleh's home, Haj Azim Maboudi's residence[1] and the Shiite cleric Imam Mirza Ibrahim Moḥarrer's house had all been safe and peaceful before the Revolution, but this changed afterward. Mulla Saleh's house became a centre for coordinating and managing political affairs. The large home of Haj Azim Maboudi, located behind the police station and near the tobacco office, and the influential Shiite cleric Imam Mirza Ibrahim Moḥarrer's house on Shir Khorshid Street (now the hospital) were transformed into the command and supply centres for the Turks of Naqadeh.

Sniper Rifles and Human Hunters

The ordeal did not end there. The following day, street clashes began and continued in the days that followed. The city's inhabitants faced off against each other, no one truly understanding the reasons behind this confrontation. The city council, already on its last legs, made several attempts to calm the situation. Military jeeps patrolled the streets. A few council representatives used loudspeakers to remind people that just a few days ago they had been friends and neighbours . . . but the situation had deteriorated into urban warfare. A makeshift barricade of sandbags divided the Turkish and Kurdish areas,



Image 52: Our house in Naqadeh – white door at the end of the alley located on Sonnat Street (Mulla Saleh Street).

1 Haj Azim Maboudi Hassanaloui was an influential figure in the city and one of the first heads of the Naqadeh City Committee. He was close to the Friday Prayer leader of Urmia, Mulla Hassani, and to Brigadier General Zahirzadeh, the commander of the 64th Division in Urmia. He was one of the wealthiest individuals in Naqadeh and the sole distributor of Universal tractors in the cities of Naqadeh, Piranshahr and Oshnaviyeh, as well as their surrounding areas. It is also said that, during the Shah's regime, he cooperated with SAVAK (the Iranian secret police).

turning the city streets into front lines, with ordinary citizens on either side.

Turkish snipers, armed with advanced weaponry and military experience superior to that of the Peshmerga, had set up their scopes on the water reservoir and atop Qalat Hill.[1] Our street was directly in the line of fire from the reservoir above the castle, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the highest number of casualties among Kurds were civilians living on streets like Sonnat, Marufi and Balagchi.

From the second day onward, all movement was halted, and even birds did not flit through the alleys. As soon as someone ventured outside, the snipers targeted them. We were completely besieged for three days. On the fourth day, armed forces from Urmia and Mohammad Yar encircled the city. People were trapped in their homes, lacking enough bread, food and fuel. By the second and third days, there was no bread left; people were even breaking holes in their walls to borrow bread and other necessities from one another.

In this dire situation, it felt like we were living in a film. A woman in our neighbourhood was about to give birth and encountered complications. She could not reach the hospital. Neighbouring women, passing pots of hot water through holes they had made in the walls, managed to save her. When someone was killed in the street, others dared not retrieve the body.

As a child, I could not comprehend what was happening. I was told it was a war between the Kurds and the Turks, which seemed very strange. In our dead-end alley, I had always played with the sons of Atlas Khanum, who was Turkish, and Usta Mohammad Nalband, who was Kurdish. We learned from each other, shared games and spoke freely – it was a small world in which Kurds and Turks coexisted peacefully. I had learned Turkish from them and other Turkish children at the kindergarten and on the street, and we had never had even a single quarrel. Were my parents

1 Qalat was an area where a significant portion of the city's Jewish population traditionally lived. At the top of the hill, there was a cylindrical water reservoir. From this location, a few snipers with scoped rifles controlled the Kurdish neighbourhoods, targeting and shooting at any movement in the streets. This had a considerable impact on the course of the conflict, significantly slowing the Kurds' advance. The name of Captain Golshan became widely known from the second day of the clashes, as it was said that the sniper attacks were his doing.

and everyone around us not friends with the Turks? Didn't they speak to them? What had suddenly changed?

The spent bullet casings from my father, uncle and the neighbouring men had turned the street, where we had once played marbles, into a frightening place. I longed to return to the past and play with the children in the alley again. Initially, I did not even fully grasp the horror of the situation; I would cry and plead with my mother to drag herself to the street to collect bullet casings for me.[1]

It was not long before I understood the true meaning of fear. For the first time, I saw a corpse, and the terror of that day lingers for me. An elderly man, whom we called Hajji, lived in our neighbourhood. On the third day of the Naqadeh conflict, seeing that he had no bread or food left at home, he went out to borrow some from his sister or brother living nearby. The snipers did not care that he was an old man and unarmed; they shot him in the head and put another bullet in his arm.

Haji had been kind to the children. Whenever we saw him in the street, he would pat us on the head and give us dates and dried fruit from his pocket. In an instant, he became a corpse, his face disfigured by blood and bullets.

Witnessing this blood-stained scene and the cries and wails of the women was terrifying. It took a long time to fashion a hook from the sticks used for the ovens and drag his body into our alley. As they dragged the body, my father knelt by the wall and, in a fit of anger, fired at the water reservoir to distract the snipers. A few other men joined him until the neighbours managed to pull Hajji's body into the alley. It took a long time to transport Hajji's body to Mulla Saleh's house at night, clean it and bury it that same night.

In Mulla Saleh's courtyard, there were several other bodies, their blood staining everything red. The house, once known for its colourful flowers, had first become a place for political meetings and now was used for washing corpses. Politics had turned a home that was once full of joy and play into a place where we had to stand and fearfully observe the dead.

I do not know where Hajji and the other corpses were buried, but I know that no memorial service was held for them or for the other victims of the

1 We used these empty bullet casings as markers for marbles; thus, the tools of violence and defence for adults became our playthings.

Naqadeh conflict. During those days, no one could mourn their loved ones. Every utterance required permission, and all our existence was suppressed.

The sound of gunfire was incessant. The men were all occupied with guarding duties. My uncle, the neighbours and the guests who had come from other cities for the meeting took turns manning the rooftops or keeping watch. Social life went underground: our contact with the outside world and our neighbours was through the same holes we had made in the walls to share bread.

No one knew what was going to happen next. At night, we huddled together in one room to feel somewhat secure. I had nightmares. The electricity was out. There were no provisions or fuel left; almost everything in the house was gone.

We children were the most helpless and uninformed. We lacked the ability to analyse the situation and were so frightened that we did not move from our spots. We were told that even making a sound was dangerous, and we should not be seen, as we could be killed. Throughout the Shah's reign, we had only seen guns on television and in military parades and had no conception of encountering them in our city, let alone right above our heads. Our once-safe city had taken on the smell of blood and gunpowder. The heavy silence of the people was suffocating. Although we were children, we understood the possibility of death and knew that, at any moment, a single shot could mean a final farewell to the world. We had come to realise that war and destruction spared no one – not children nor adults.

Later, as an adult, I came to understand that these events marked the beginning of the conflicts in Iran – conflicts that certain individuals stoked, as their interests dictated that people should not live in harmony. These politics and ideologies served the powerful at the expense of those living in multi-ethnic and multi-national regions. History continually repeats itself. Those with power and wealth wage wars to protect their interests, seizing economic resources and perpetuating deprivation and inequality. When you live in a society with ethnic, cultural and other diversities, where one group is closer to the ideology of those in power, the situation becomes even more complex. The divisive tactics of governments can incite tensions between groups that previously lived peacefully together. The people of Naqadeh experienced this ominous reality in their own flesh and blood.

Autonomy or Sectarianism?

The atmosphere of those days was revolutionary. The rule of law was absent. Those seeking power were busy garnering support from specific groups or nationalities, often through shared religious affiliations. The Central Government operated in Tehran, while various factions were active across Iran. The Turkmen to the east of the Caspian Sea, the Arabs in south-western Khuzestan, and the Mojahedin-e Khalq and other guerrillas in various regions were each pursuing their own agendas. Kurdistan, which had a longstanding history of autonomy and demands for rights, continued on its traditional path, with the Democratic Party and Komala both striving to achieve their goals.

During that time, none of the Kurdish party leaders advocated for the establishment of an independent Kurdistan or separation from Iran. They consistently sought autonomy and federal independence for the region. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou's slogan was 'Democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan', and he would often say in interviews, 'Is there anyone more Iranian than I, a Kurd?' However, the politicians of that era always believed that Kurdistan sought independence and intended to join other parts of Kurdistan in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. While it cannot be denied that some Kurds harboured such a longstanding dream, Ghassemlou, by his own statements, was not among them.

The beliefs that politicians of that era had about Kurdistan and its demands were based on misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Historical precedents and the fear of rulers on the one hand, and the Kurds' propensity for demanding independence on the other had created concerns for both the Central Government during the Shah's time and the fledgling Islamic Republic. These concerns were exacerbated by actions such as political rallies in cities like Naqadeh that had tragic consequences.

On the other side, there were individuals in Naqadeh and the province who held radical revolutionary views and fanned the flames of underlying tensions. For example, two weeks before the Naqadeh conflict, armed forces forcibly evacuated dozens of Kurdish villages in the Somai and Bradost regions, displacing residents to rural areas in the Ghassemlou Valley in Oshnaviyeh and Rajan near Urmia. In Naqadeh itself, according to witnesses, individuals like Haj Azim Maboudi and Morad Ghatari played roles in the Naqadeh clashes and subsequent events, such as the

September 1979 massacre in the village of Qarna. Not far away, in other villages like Kani Mam Seyydeh, Sarukani, Sofian and Qalat, civilian villagers were also massacred. To date, no independent investigations have been conducted into these events, and no official individuals or groups have been identified or prosecuted. I will later delve into the details of the massacres in those villages.

In the charged and revolutionary atmosphere of the time, many weapons fell into the hands of untrained Turks and Kurds. After years of identity-seeking, a sudden opportunity arose for everyone to assert themselves and their rights. The people of Naqadeh had little political knowledge. They were influenced by the revolutionary fervour, and the combination of armed civilians and a lack of oversight led to many mistakes being made.

If we view that period from the logical perspective of an ordinary Turkish or Kurdish citizen, it becomes clear that anyone in a vulnerable position facing those conditions would have felt threatened. The widespread possession of weapons, coupled with rampant rumours and provocations, constantly heightened feelings of insecurity, undermining social capital such as trust and public safety.

During this period, due to political changes, the vacuum of central power and the rapid succession of events, the Turks perceived signs of Kurdish identity and autonomy as threats and were fearful. On the other hand, the conditions gave the Kurds a sense of confidence, pride and power, which, combined with the Kurdish parties' histories of identity-seeking and independence, and perhaps their audacity and unity, exacerbated others' fears. The Revolution and the promises of its leaders created a historic opportunity for peoples and movements in Kurdistan, making them more hopeful and daring than ever before, as if they felt their long-cherished dreams were within reach.

The Government, by fuelling rumours and supporting the Turks, pitted the two sides against each other. Frightened by the cohesion it had itself fostered, the regime resorted to weakening the Kurds by inflaming conflicts and provoking the Turks to turn the situation in its favour.

This cycle is the typical power play – structures of authority always pursue their internal interests. When they needed the Kurds' support to gain power, they fostered hopes for independence. After coming to power, they sought to weaken the Kurds by sowing discord between Kurds and

Turks. Both the Kurdish and Turkish peoples were crushed in the gears of this power game. The Islamic Republic at that time acted exactly like a totalitarian regime. All these events bear the hallmarks of mechanisms of power in totalitarian regimes, and history has recorded them all.

The result was that many Kurdish and Turkish residents of the city were displaced and sought refuge in surrounding villages. While the displacement of the Turks was temporary and they returned home after a short time, the Kurds were subjected to a long-term forced migration. Their properties were looted and confiscated. The entire episode brought nothing but homelessness to thousands of Kurdish residents of Naqadeh and its surrounding areas.

On the second day of May, the street and house-to-house fighting reached its peak, shifting between Kurdish and Turkish neighbourhoods. On that day and in the days that followed, several innocent and unarmed Kurdish and Turkish residents were killed in their homes. Kurds living in Turkish villages, or vice versa, and Kurds in neighbourhoods like Qalabashi and Gendarmerie, as well as in villages near the Qader River and areas leading to the Chianeh and Piranshahr roads, were massacred. In just a few days, the city was left with a terrifyingly large number of dead, wounded and captive.

Hatred and vengeance replaced any sense of humanity and logic. Some killed or were killed without reason. In villages where Kurds and Turks had lived together for years, people suddenly drew weapons and began attacking each other. In the days following the war, many bloated bodies surfaced in the Qader River – both Turks and Kurds. The bodies of about ten people were never found.

On the second day of the war, a team of Peshmerga led by Rahman Karimi,[1] a party commander from my father's village in Jaldian and a

1 Rahman Karimi, the commander of the Awara Division (Qandil) in the Piranshahr region, was later accused by the Democratic Party of collaborating with the army and the Revolutionary Guards. According to the Party, during an attack on the Piranshahr garrison, which was under artillery fire from the Ba'athists, Karimi delayed the assault and facilitated the passage of army forces to Sargorde (a hill overlooking the city) to block the Iraqi advance. At a time when the Democratic Party was at war with the Government and the Iran-Iraq War was intensifying, these rumours were strengthened, suggesting that Rahman Karimi had betrayed the Party and sold Sargorde to the army. In his defence, Rahman Karimi claimed that if he had not opened the way for the army, the Iraqi military would have occupied Piranshahr and committed even worse atrocities

childhood friend of Uncle Ahmad, attempted to silence the sniper rifles positioned on top of Qalat. However, their efforts were unsuccessful.

On the fourth and fifth days, a large number of elderly people were killed. Having stayed behind in their homes, thinking no one would harm them, they were unaware they were living their final hours. Near the home of Khaleh Min Barzanji, who lived on the street behind us, an old man named Mam Rahman was brutally thrown off a rooftop. He died from a broken back. It was said that, on one of those days, after clashes in the Turkish neighbourhoods, Aziz, the son of Yadollah Badali, a wealthy man in the city, sought refuge in the home of his Kurdish classmate. As he was being taken to the mosque with other captives, someone named Qader Rabati (Qaderi Hama Sala) shot him with a revolver. Years later, in an act of revenge, the Badali family killed the shooter on the street.

At one point, several members of the Revolutionary Guard entered the city by night to support the Turkish residents. They were led by Gholamreza Hassani, the Friday Prayer leader of Urmia. This group had affixed a photo of Sheikh Ezaddin to an armoured vehicle to deter attacks from the Peshmerga along the way. They entered part of the city via the village of Barani Ajam, but Hassani left Naqadeh for Urmia the next day. He later exaggerated his one-day presence and turned it into a heroic tale to present himself as the unparalleled champion of radical Turks.[1] In his autobiography, he devoted several pages to this single night, embellishing it with details of his so-called bravery.

According to reports, on the last day of the war, when tanks entered the city, Seyyed Rasul Babi Gewra was apparently the only one who could fire an RPG. However, he mistakenly targeted the city's civil registry building instead of a tank, causing hundreds of people's records to burn and leaving the residents struggling to obtain replacement ID cards for years.

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against the Kurds than those inflicted on the Arabs of Khorramshahr. Later, he, along with some cadres and peshmerga loyal to him, including Senar Mamedi and Jahangir Esmaeelzadeh – both of whom were also party leaders with hundreds of followers – joined the group led by Ghani Bolourian known as the Seven-Member Faction, and were armed by the Government. At one point, Rahman Karimi served as a close advisor to Idris and Massoud Barzani. Ultimately, he was tried in a field court and executed by Senar Mamadi, a prominent figure of the Mamadi tribe, on charges of treason and collaboration with the regime.

1 Ettela'at Newspaper, 1979b.


اسامی ۳۰۰ گروگان نقده

خروج مردم از نقده ممنوع شد

Image 53: Additional report from *Ettela'at* newspaper on the third day of the Naqadeh conflict. The title says people are prohibited to exit Naqadeh.

The main conflict in Naqadeh was, in fact, between two small, armed and trained groups on either side: the Turks, consisting of army officers and police and Revolutionary Guard personnel, and the Kurds, who were experienced Peshmerga fighters. Both sides fought fiercely, leading to the deaths of several townspeople. Aside from these two groups, the rest were untrained and inexperienced, especially in guerrilla and urban warfare.

A Peace Agreement to Halt the Massacre

On the 22 April, a group of clerics and notables from Naqadeh, Mahabad and Urmia, including Mulla Saleh and representatives of various parties, along with the governor, first convened in Urmia and then in the town of Mohammad Yar as part of a goodwill committee. They negotiated and signed a seven-point ceasefire agreement. It was agreed that the army would enter the city the next day, maintaining neutrality. The *Ettela'at* newspaper reported[1] the details of this meeting under the headline

1 Ettela'at Newspaper. 1979c., p.2.



Image 54: Burial of tens of bodies. Naqadeh Cemetery, 24 April 1979.

'Carrying Weapons in Naqadeh Prohibited'. The explanation stated, 'This decision was made by the goodwill committee.'

The detailed news reported,

> The goodwill committee, composed of clerics and notables from West Azerbaijan, tasked with restoring peace, calm, and compensating for the damages of the bloody events in Naqadeh, issued a statement at the end of its first session. The statement read as follows:
>
> 'The goodwill committee, comprising clerics and notables from the cities of Naqadeh, Mahabad, Urmia, Oshnaviyeh, and Miandoab, convened in the presence of Mehdi Abbasi, the governor of West Azerbaijan, and the commander of the

Revolutionary Guard stationed in Naqadeh. In this meeting, as the first positive step, the following decisions were made:

1. The unconditional release of all hostages from both sides.
2. The return of displaced persons to their homes.
3. The prohibition of carrying weapons in the city of Naqadeh for civilians, except for the Revolutionary Guard of the Hedayat group.
4. Ensuring security on the Naqadeh road by responsible authorities and the religious and legal pursuit and punishment of anyone who attempts to create unrest.
5. Preparation and organisation of a report on the families affected in Naqadeh and its surrounding villages.
6. The strict religious and legal punishment of those spreading rumours and engaging in sabotage, including those distributing unsigned, inflammatory leaflets that sow discord among Muslim brothers.
7. Investigating and identifying the perpetrators of the tragic incident in Naqadeh and presenting them to competent authorities for legal punishment by a committee dispatched from the central headquarters of Imam.'

However, neither on Sunday nor the following day, which marked the fourth and final day of the Naqadeh conflict, were the ceasefire agreements of the goodwill committee implemented by the warring parties. Some of the combatants, especially the general populace, were entirely unaware of these events and were not informed about the Mohammad Yar ceasefire. Turks and Kurds continued their relentless fighting until the last day, before the army entered the city. This was not a conflict that could be ended simply by writing a few lines on paper. The goodwill committee members should have made the necessary arrangements beforehand and, with the required resources and presence on the front lines, actively enforced the terms of the agreement.

According to the terms of the agreement, the Peshmerga forces withdrew from the front lines by official Party orders. When army tanks entered, the Kurdish forces, led by Seyyed Rasul Babi Gewra and Rahman Karimi, retreated toward Balagchi, Qarna and Galvan. Naqadeh was almost entirely cleared of its Kurdish residents.

Dr Ghassemlou, the secretary-general of the Democratic Party, who had left Naqadeh a day after the rally and returned to Mahabad, wrote a letter[1] to the Government, stating,

> We went to Naqadeh on April 20 for a peaceful rally. Some criticised us for having armed individuals among the demonstrators. This is true, but I heard on the radio today that there was an armed demonstration in Ahvaz, where celebratory gunfire was even exchanged. Those who criticise the presence of armed participants in our rally want to suggest that we started the shooting. However, the shooting began from outside when the rally started. Things began to calm down a bit, but half an hour later, the shooting resumed, and people dispersed, returning to the Kurdish district of Naqadeh. The return was such that they had to pass through the Turkish district. During the passage, it became clear that all the rooftops were fortified, and some people were firing shots. It was later revealed that the walls of a nearby house had already been perforated and fortified. The person who tried to find out where the shooting was coming from was captured by people inside the house and killed, along with two members of the security forces, who were also killed, and their weapons were taken. We contacted Committee No. 1, and our only request was to open the road to Mahabad so that we could leave the city, but this request was not heeded. The army decided to intervene on Sunday morning when the ceasefire was almost in place. With the army's intervention, we made contact with the government in Mahabad, the governor's office in Urmia, and Ayatollah Taleghani's office. We also sent a telegram to

1 Ayandegan Newspaper, 1979. Also: Ghassemlou, 1973.

> Ayatollah Khomeini, expressing our concerns that sending the army to this area might escalate the situation because we were not confident that the army could maintain its neutrality. Unfortunately, our request was not accepted, and the army was dispatched to Naqadeh. We have no quarrel with the army and have always declared our support for Mr Bazargan's revolutionary government. When the army was dispatched, we sent a representative to meet the commander in Naqadeh to ensure that none of our forces fired on them. But when our friend encountered the army at the Naqadeh junction, he noticed that some of Urmia's Mojahedin were leading the army toward Naqadeh. Our friend was arrested there, and had it not been for the intervention of some military personnel, the members of the committees would have killed him. The army advanced toward Naqadeh, and contrary to what the division commander claims, they did intervene in Naqadeh and even left Naqadeh, advancing ten to fifteen kilometres toward the Kurdish villages, which they shelled with helicopters and tanks.
>
> During the Naqadeh conflict and the army's involvement, our comrades have testified that the army soldiers did not directly shoot at the Kurds and that tanks and armoured vehicles were under the control of the committees, which led the military operations inside Naqadeh. After these clashes, the governor and the Government proposed that we call back our armed forces so that the other side would do the same, and a ceasefire would be established. We did this, witnessed by everyone, but the other side did not comply, advanced toward us, and looted and destroyed many houses.

To this day, no accurate statistics on the casualties of the Naqadeh War have been published, and no institution has investigated the matter. Some reports put the death toll at three hundred, while others suggest higher or lower numbers. When precise information is lacking, all statistics are politically motivated and spread by word of mouth. The Government's reporting of the Naqadeh War was biased. The number of Turkish

casualties, along with the exact dates of their deaths, was officially announced, they were listed as martyrs in the cemetery and with the Martyrs Foundation, and their expenses were covered. Their photos were also published in newspapers and news outlets affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard under the title 'Martyred by the Counter-Revolution'.

On the other hand, the Kurdish casualties, some of whom were guests at the rally and from nearby towns, were returned to their homes, but were never mentioned in the news. They were quickly buried out of fear of the Government. The aftermath prevented a list of Kurdish casualties from being compiled, and no blood money was ever given to their families.

All of this indicates that the Naqadeh War had two distinct characteristics: firstly, a mechanism of denial that has always been in place, because of which no official or unofficial institution ever investigated the causes of the war or the number of casualties and no entity took responsibility for this tragedy; and, secondly, a clear value bias. The Islamic Republic took the Turkish side, using denial mechanisms and value biases to advance its fundamental goals through the Naqadeh conflict. Over the years, the Government and its media have reopened this old wound on the anniversaries of the Naqadeh War, sprinkling salt on it.

Today, I reflect on the possibility that, if people had not looted the armouries of institutions like the gendarmerie and police, the likelihood of these bloody wars would have been reduced. The Naqadeh War was a blind conflict that had the potential to escalate into a larger war. Had it not been for the intervention of forces sent from Tehran and Isfahan (mostly Fars, who were said to be affiliated with Ayatollah Tâleghâni), the war could have spread to villages and other areas. Before the Naqadeh War, the clashes were between party forces and government soldiers, with no involvement from the people. However, after these events, the angered and affected people from both sides began to support their respective factions. Despite the passage of forty years since this event, the resentment and hatred still linger in the toxic atmosphere of Naqadeh and its surroundings, occasionally flaring up. Whatever may happen, it is hard to envision a positive future for Naqadeh.

Children's Shoes Stuck in the Mud

It seemed that the war would never end. Its flames would consume the entire region. News arrived from Mulla Saleh's house that, despite a ceasefire agreement, we had to leave the city or we would be killed – the tanks were heading toward Naqadeh. Conflicting reports spread, and every announcement from the mosques and Mahabad radio only increased the fear among the people. Ultimately, the decision was made: the elderly would stay to protect their homes, while the men, women and children would flee.

Our destination was unclear at first, but we finally decided to head to my maternal grandfather's house in the village of Gerdashavan. There was no time to pack, and we could only take small bundles of clothes with us. Everything happened so quickly, in a state of panic.

We set out early one rainy morning, under a sky covered by black clouds. That day was so dark and gloomy that I still find no comfort in rainy days. Although the gunfire had subsided, snipers lurked above the cliffs. We had to leave the city by sneaking through holes we dug in garden walls or sticking close to the walls of alleys and streets. The Battle of Naqadeh was one of the most terrifying periods of my life – I feared for my life and my home, which was no longer mine. Although I had been fearful



Image 55: Tanks of the 64th Urmia Division in Naqadeh. April 1979.

during the rallies and clashes in front of the gendarmerie, the bitterness of the Naqadeh War was something else entirely.[1]

We set off on foot, without hope, along the muddy village road. Some carried cradles on their backs; others cradled their children in their arms. We, the older ones, had to walk and carry the bread and small bundles of clothes. Some women had tied large portions of bread onto their Kurdish belts.[2] We had some bread, a little local cheese,[3] yogurt and dried whey.

We weren't alone; my uncle's family and a few other neighbours were with us. Relatives who had been staying at the caravanserai had gone their own way. Their situation was worse and more dangerous than ours. The caravanserai was close to the cliffs, where the snipers were. Several times, the caravanserai had been attacked because some official Peshmerga, like Kak Morad, Jesim, Mustafa and Fattah, who were members of the Democratic Party's youth wing, lived there and were in danger. It is said that one or two people who had taken refuge in the caravanserai were later killed. For this reason, some relatives never returned to the caravanserai after fleeing, and part of their property was lost.

Like most Kurds, we first headed toward the village of Balagchi, which was near Naqadeh. At the edge of the city was Aunt Maryam's house. She initially joined us, but then her husband's family decided to go to Mahabad[4] in an army truck. At that time, the army trucks and hundreds of military jeeps belonging to the Mahabad garrison were under the control of the Democratic Party's Peshmerga, who used them to transport people

1 The psychoanalyst and sociologist Erich Fromm, a member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory in Germany, considers the primal fear and anxiety of human beings to stem from the initial separation that a foetus experiences when it exits the mother's womb at birth. He views this anxiety as a fundamental, existential issue for humans, with later experiences being a continuation of it. The fear and anxiety I experienced during the Naqadeh incident in my childhood represent for me that same primal anxiety. The later experiences in my life, which I will recount to you in due course, are in some way influenced by this initial separation. This anxiety is an existential issue for me and for all the children who endured those painful circumstances.

2 In Kurdish, it is called *peshtînd*.

3 It is also known as Kurdish cheese.

4 Naghadeh History (2023) Photographic report by Associated Press on the Naqadeh refugees at the Red Lion and Sun Youth Camp in Mahabad, 27 June 1979 [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/Naqadeh.history/reel/CrzGBS9oQob/ (Accessed: 1 Septemb.

and Peshmerga after the Battle of Naqadeh. Aunt Maryam later recounted that some of the armed Kurdish forces, who were mostly young and radical, had blocked their way, saying they shouldn't leave because, if they did, Naqadeh would fall to the Turks. They insisted we resist.

To ordinary people, this was ideological and revolutionary rhetoric, and their resources and equipment were in no way comparable to the other side's. Some women, including Aunt Maryam, said something to the effect of 'Do you want to get us killed? The tanks are everywhere, destroying everything. We have no choice but to leave! We will all be sacrificed.' In addition, it seemed the news of peace in Mohammad Yar had not yet reached everyone. In those days, getting accurate information was difficult. Both the Government's interests and the politicians fuelled the rumour mill, and misinterpretation was common.

The few kilometres between Naqadeh and Balagchi felt like thousands. No matter how far we walked, we didn't seem to get any closer. People sought refuge wherever they had relatives. Those whose relatives had tractors or had seized military vehicles came to get them, but there was no one to take us. Even my father and uncle weren't with us; they had stayed behind with the armed men on the outskirts of Naqadeh to return to the city – or, more precisely, the Kurdish areas of the city and our homes, to defend them if necessary. Even now, when I think back to those days, my heart fills with pain.

We finally reached Balagchi.[1] The terrifying roar of the tanks was now behind us. On the first night, a villager took us into his home. Besides us, there were several other families, and our feet barely fit under the single *korsi*, the traditional Iranian heated table.[2] We had walked a long way, and we were hungry and tired. Along the way, my grandmother had pulled bread from under her shawl, wrapped it around some cheese, and gave us each a sandwich, but she was mindful to use the cheese and bread

1 *Balgchi* in Turkish means 'fisherman'.

2 A *korsi* is a traditional Iranian heating device used during the winter. It consists of a low, square table with a brazier or heater placed underneath. The table is covered with a thick quilt or blanket, which extends over the sides, allowing those seated around it to pull the cover over their legs. The heat from the brazier warms the space beneath the blanket, creating a cozy and communal environment. The korsi has been a central element of winter gatherings in many Iranian homes, particularly before the widespread use of modern heating systems.

sparingly. We had no idea what tomorrow would bring and couldn't guess what awaited us. After dinner, we all huddled together, while my grandmother, mother and Aunt Asmar kept praying for my father and uncle's safety.

In the house we stayed in, we knew no one. We were all displaced from Naqadeh and had been given shelter only for the night. We would have to set out again the next day. That night, seeing the homeowner's children, I felt sorry for myself – they had a home, and I did not. I didn't realise that they, too, would have to leave the village the next morning.

Early the next day, we heard that tanks had reached Balagchi and were advancing. We hastily packed our bundles and moved on to a group of villages farther away. Along the way, we overheard disputes and arguments between some women and armed men, who said, 'These guns on your shoulders have ruined us and left us homeless.' I imagined my father with his gun and wondered if he had played a role in the misfortunes that had befallen us.

The village roads were filled with sticky red mud that the Kurds call *qory soor*. It stuck so much to our shoes that we couldn't go on. We had to take off our shoes and continue barefoot. The qory soor was littered with shoes, indicating that others had passed the same way before us.

On the second night, we reached a relative's house. They were from my father's side of the family and lived in a village called Shawaleh,[1] located in the mountains between Piranshahr and Naqadeh. When we arrived at this village, our mood changed. They welcomed us with open arms and respect. After a few difficult days, we had warm food and slept in soft beds. They were our 'family behind', meaning they were descended from our paternal ancestor: they were from the Rasuali branch, and we were from the Hamadali branch. In the traditional society of those days, the 'family behind' was very important.

With our arrival there, everything changed, and our sense of displacement faded. In the following days, other families, including my

1 Shawaleh is in a valley that starts from that village and extends westward, separating Wallajan and Sandos from each other. Shawaleh is famous for the abundant spring in the middle of the village (the spring of Shawaleh – 'Your chest is like the Shawaleh spring' – where girls and boys go to meet each other).

father's cousins, arrived. All the relatives gathered in places where they had the closest kinship and blood ties.

My grandfather's family in Gerdashavan had heard that the people of Naqadeh had fled the city. I don't know how they figured out we might have gone to Shawaleh, but they sent a tractor to fetch us.

It took some time for my uncles and other relatives to find us – perhaps two or three days, maybe more – because they had to keep changing their route. There were rumours that you shouldn't go in certain directions because the Turks and Pasdars would kill you, so everyone would change their routes and go in other directions. I remember Uncle Ali, who could drive, came with Uncle Qader, Uncle Mohammad and the sons of Mam Rasu to fetch us. Their tractors were like angels of salvation. How wonderful it was to be hugged and kissed by them! It felt good to know we had people who cared for us and that we hadn't been abandoned to the misery of displacement.

I had been to Gerdashavan a few times before, but I was very young and more familiar with my father's side of the family, so I didn't realise the importance of my mother's family. From this point on, as our lives changed forever, my mother's family became more prominent in my life. When we reached Gerdashavan, they gave us a room in the large courtyard of my maternal grandfather's house. Aside from a brief stay in the city of Piranshahr, we lived there for two-and-a-half years and never returned to Naqadeh permanently.

As for my father and uncle, they and the other men and Peshmerga initially resisted in our neighbourhood and then farther into the city. But with the tanks advancing, they were forced to retreat and leave Naqadeh. They went as far as the village of Qarna, but there decided to abandon the city because the army had taken over.

The plan was for the Tâleghâni Mojahedin and their aid to arrive in Naqadeh the next day, which would have changed the situation significantly.[1] However, although it was hard for them to accept, the peace agreement stipulated that both sides had to withdraw their weapons and forces from the city. Most of the Turks did not leave the town, which caused concern among the Kurdish residents about their homes and possessions. As we lived next door to Mulla Saleh, we had the fortune that

1 Ettela'at Newspaper. 1979d., p.2.

our house was not looted while he remained in the city. He stayed with his family and a few armed men, stating, 'If the imam of the Kurds leaves the city, no Kurd will dare return, and more Kurdish homes will be looted.'

Mulla Saleh also faced difficult times. After being disarmed, he was placed under house arrest, with several armed guards stationed outside and one Revolutionary Guard inside his home. Suddenly, his name was announced on national news as a counter-revolutionary, a term that, in those days, had only one meaning: inevitably, facing the judgement of Khalkhali!

On the day of Eid al-Fitr, Mulla Saleh contacted Ibrahim Moḥarrer, who had now become the de facto ruler of the town, and protested the presence of the armed guard around his women and children on Eid. Moḥarrer temporarily ordered the removal of the guard from his home. Mulla Saleh seized this opportunity and escaped overnight across the rooftops. He rode a horse to the village of Shawaleh and then on to Mahabad, which was still held by Kurdish forces. Eventually, after living for some time in Mirabad Sardasht, he accepted an invitation from the imam of Sulaymaniya and went to Iraqi Kurdistan, then under Ba'athist control, where he stayed until his death in 1983. Afterward, most of his family members sought refuge in Europe.

A few days after the Battle of Naqadeh, the death toll became clearer. On both sides, Turk and Kurd, unarmed men, women and even some teenagers and children were killed, some brutally murdered in their own homes. Both sides took civilians hostage, and through mediation by the Tâleghâni forces and local elders, exchanged them for their own captives. During the evacuation of the town, some (mainly) Kurdish residents, mostly elderly men and women, hung white cloths at their doorways and remained in the city, hoping that their age would spare them from harm. However, after the people fled, despite the peace agreement being signed, armed forces stormed homes, killed several elderly individuals, took others hostage, and transferred them to the Naqadeh municipal hall. Among these hostages was the mother of one of our close relatives, known as Haji Taha Yekav. After eight days, she was released in exchange for a Turkish hostage.

A New Way of Life

Gerdashavan . . . our new lives began here, under the shelter of the same mountain range to which my parents once fled together. It seemed that every chapter of their lives had to begin near this mountain range. Once, they had fled from Gerdashavan to Naqadeh to pursue their love; now, they fled from Naqadeh to Gerdashavan for safety. This time, however, they were not alone – we children were with them, as well as my grandmother and my uncle's family.

We all settled in the village, occupying a corner of the house belonging to my grandfather Mine Qazi, and turning a new page on our lives.

The way of life in Gerdashavan was naturally quite different from the city. The entire population was less than a hundred families, living in mud-brick houses. Few homes had a *divakhan*, a large living room. My grandfather, Mam Rasu and Haji Saeed were among the wealthy of the village, and their homes had large living rooms. At night, villagers would sometimes gather in these rooms to talk. The divakhan was a symbol of the owner's wealth and served as a place for leisure, consultation and discussion of significant decisions.



Image 56: Me during displacement. 1983.

There were no asphalt roads or televisions. There were no electricity poles, meaning there was no electricity. At night, we had to carry lanterns to find our way, and even going to the toilet, far from the main house, was an adventure. The night was filled with the constant barking of dogs. Before dawn, the roosters would start crowing, raising a ruckus. We would wake up at the crack of dawn to the crowing and the shouts of cowherds, who would drive the cows and buffaloes out to graze between five and six in the morning.

My grandfather owned many flat, fragmented plots of land. The house had different sections, from the hayloft to Uncle Qader's dwelling and to the large

courtyard and gardens by the river. Our share during those days was a small room in the large house.

Adjusting to all these changes was difficult, sometimes overwhelming. We had to change our habits and lifestyle and accept our new way of life. Life in the village was particularly challenging in terms of hygiene. Insects constantly crawled on our clothes, and, strangely enough, they seemed to prefer biting newcomers. My grandfather joked that our blood was sweeter for them. It was as if the villagers' blood had become too familiar and the insects needed a change! Perhaps the locals were simply accustomed to the bites of these noble creatures and didn't complain about the inherent mischief of mosquitoes, bedbugs and ticks. But we newcomers were constantly scratching ourselves and occasionally fumigating our living spaces and bedding. However, for days afterward, we struggled to breathe while sleeping. I won't even describe the smell of a fumigated pillow – let's just move on from that!

I didn't like this way of life. The village felt small. I was often bored. The courtyard was filled with the strong smells of animal waste. Early in the morning, as the cows began their rounds before heading to the fields to graze, they would thoroughly decorate the yard. Then, my aunts would collect the dung with shovels or their hands, put it into wooden baskets or wheelbarrows, and take it outside the house to make dung cakes, which they dried under the sun. The compacted and hardened manure under the animals' feet was called *kamreh*, which they would dig up with shovels and use, alongside the dung cakes, to fuel the oven when baking bread.

These daily early-morning activities were the unpleasant side of rural life, but there was also a delicious and fragrant side. A few hours after these chores, my grandmother and one or two of my aunts would sit by the oven and bake bread. The delightful aroma would fill the house, and my mood would improve from the early morning annoyance and anger at being forced to wake up so early. Even now, I still long for the smell of the freshly baked bread my grandmother made, although perhaps it's strange to feel nostalgic for days I didn't particularly enjoy.

Of course, there were some enjoyable moments during those days, which I can now appreciate. Besides the smell of fresh bread, one pleasure I took time to appreciate was herding cows with my cousin. Just a little way down from the village, with a slight distance, flowed the famous Zab River,

which locals called Lawin. The nearby villages were known as Sarchum.[1] The river had several ponds that became a summer hangout for my cousin Fattah and me. The cows and buffaloes would lounge in the water while we splashed around in the deep spot known as Qumi Garan. My cousin Fattah, with whom I had many strange quarrels, was two years older than me. Contrary to the norms of the time, his mother, who belonged to the Mangur tribe, had divorced early and married another man.

Aside from the usual hardships of village life, I faced another challenge. For a long time, the other children called me 'the refugee', evoking the feeling that we were pitiable people, exiled from our home and city. This word, 'refugee', deeply pained me, as it reminded me of all the bitterness we had endured. Years later, I would empathise with the refugees who came to Iran from Iraqi Kurdistan after the Kuwait War,[2] and later with Afghan migrants.

My appearance also set me apart from the other children. I was blonde, fair-skinned and from the city. I felt superior to the village children. Don't worry about my childish arrogance, though – the other children made sure to put me in my place. They excluded me from their games and found ways to make me feel lonely. So, loneliness was added to bitterness.

However, this problem was soon resolved, thanks to the village lifestyle. I became like them: my skin tanned under the sun, my clothes and shoes gradually wore out and I had to wear whatever was available and join in the games like everyone else.

One of my most vivid memories of that time was seeing my father's face. On it was a combination of helplessness, anger and sadness. He had lost his job and spent most of his time at home. Sometimes he would go up the hill with other men from the family, who were also refugees from Naqadeh, and chain-smoke. None of us were in a good place during those

1 That is, in proximity to a river or to people who live by the river.

2 On 2 August 1990, Iraqi forces under the command of Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and declared war on the country, aiming to occupy it. This led to the deaths of tens of thousands and caused substantial financial damage. It also prompted the international community and the Arab world to intervene in the crisis between the two neighbouring countries, which further intensified the conflict. Eventually, President George HW Bush officially announced the end of the war and the liberation of Kuwait on 27 February 1991. This period is considered one of the most difficult chapters in the history of Arab countries. During this conflict, Iraqi forces targeted and destroyed 800 oil wells in Kuwait (Jafari-Veldani, A. and Kashani, N. H. 1991, p.93.)

days. Mahbubeh and Tabibeh were much more affected than Rasul and me. My paternal grandmother, Amine, felt burdened and constantly ashamed, and my mother, being in her father's house, felt she had to work even harder to contribute to the household. She was, after all, her father's darling, and everyone looked after us, but in such circumstances, it was natural for the elders to feel terrible shame. Despite everything, however, we had escaped a bad situation and the village was a safe and peaceful haven for us.

The civil war in the region was at its peak during those years, and various military forces were on the move: the convoys of Peshmerga on one side and the Government's military vehicles on the other. We saw many Peshmerga in those days, some of whom were family and acquaintances. They would eat and then move on, and while they were there they constantly talked about the conflicts. We heard many real stories about the civil war and the ongoing battles, and this is how we got the latest news. They said the region was to be 'cleansed', but we didn't know what that meant or what was to be cleansed.

There was no television in the village for many years, and the news of the day could only be transmitted through radio and word of mouth. Listening to the Peshmerga's conversations only increased anxieties, especially in those who had escaped the city. I was constantly worried that Gerdashavan would end up like Naqadeh, and the weight of all that tension was too heavy for a child to bear.

Return to Urban Life

In early summer of that year, some of the residents of Naqadeh, accompanied by armed Mojahedin, returned to their homes to assess the situation. My Uncle Ahmad and his cousin Mame Qader did the same. They walked from Gerdashavan to the village of Galvan, near Naqadeh, and entered the city with the Mojahedin for a short time.

When they returned, Uncle told my father, 'Brother, nothing is left! The doors of the houses have been broken, and people's belongings have been looted. From some homes, only a broom and a dustpan remain.' He recounted how kerosene and gasoline were poured on food supplies and the belongings of some houses were stolen or destroyed. Uncle and Mameh Qader mentioned that people were taken to the hilltop in the city to search



Image 57: (from right) Tabibeh, Mahbubeh, Rasul and, seated, me. Autumn 1979, Piranshahr.

for their belongings in the Shiite mosque. Hundreds of handwoven Kurdish carpets were piled up, and people tried to find their own. This was just the portion of the people's belongings that the Tâleghâni Mojahedin had managed to discover and seize. Many other things were never recovered.

My uncle spoke of the city's devastation, while my father and other men in the tribe discussed the problems in their business dealings. They had trade relations in Amol and Babol, but faced issues with their counterparts, leading to the loss of their capital. The road to those places was also blocked, making it too risky to attempt the journey.

We had lost everything. We only had our house in Naqadeh, which was of no use in those conditions.

After some time, my mother insisted that we go to Naqadeh to retrieve whatever belongings we had left. She insisted so much that Uncle Ali started the tractor and they set out. My mother was brave. Some of our relatives, who had taken refuge in the large house of Mam Rasu, also set

out to bring their belongings from the caravanserai to the village. With the escort of the Tâleghâni Mojahedin they entered Naqadeh and, within a few hours, had loaded whatever was left – although it wasn't much – onto the tractors. They returned victoriously to Gerdashavan that night.

After some time in the village, all the family members unanimously said they could no longer endure living in those small rooms. They decided to migrate again, this time to the nearest city, Piranshahr, which locals called Khani. At that time, Piranshahr was under the control of the Democratic Party, and my sisters and Masoumeh, Mameh Qader's daughter, sometimes went to this city to take their exams. The Party had revitalised Piranshahr; the border with Iraq was practically open, and various goods and merchandise were flowing from there to other cities in Iran.

Mam Hawla and his brothers Mohammad Amin and Qader, along with my father and Uncle Ahmad, all went to Piranshahr and rented houses. Our new home was near Azadi Square, which is now the city centre. My father and his cousin, Uncle Mohammad Amin, borrowed money to buy a yellow minibus. Since neither of them knew how to drive, they hired a relative to drive it and shared the profits. The sweet part of the story was, when the driver returned in the evening to clean and park the bus, we kids would climb aboard and ask him to take us around the city.

With only a little time left before school closed, we were enrolled. I attended Mohammad Qaderi School for a short period, catching up on what was left of the first-grade lessons. After all that had happened, it was difficult to adapt to the new school, even though the books were the same. The school system had changed, though – no more pictures of the Shah and his family, no morning anthem and no snacks or milk. I didn't know anyone, and, just like in the village, the behaviour of the kids toward war-displaced people was harsh.

Some time later, we moved to a house on Mulla Reza Street. I have a few vivid memories of this small house. This is where I contracted chickenpox. They kept me in bed for several days, covered with a red cloth, as it was believed that seeing red would cause the pox to retreat and speed up recovery. I also remember another day when my father dressed us in Kurdish clothing and put a Kurdish turban – usually worn by Peshmerga – on Tabibeh's head so we could take our first family photo at the studio on this street. It was a sweet and thrilling experience for us.

Another important thing was that the men in the family wanted to live close to each other, and almost all of us rented houses in the same street and neighbourhood. Mahbubeh and the girls in the family, like Esmer, Mohammad Amin's daughter, and Masoumeh, Mameh Qader's daughter, went to school wearing men's Kurdish clothes, like the Peshmerga women, as if they were no longer allowed to wear the uniform of the Shah's era, which consisted of a skirt and stockings. The revolutionary atmosphere was prevalent.

The love of my childhood also blossomed on this street – a small feeling that was nonetheless bigger than my little heart. At that time, most houses had flat, earthen roofs, and if you saw a building with a sloping roof, it was either an office or owned by a wealthy person who was likely not Kurdish. The building across from our house had a sloping roof, and it wasn't an office. The residents were Armenians from Urmia, and they owned a large store in Piranshahr. They were a good family, speaking both Turkish and Kurdish fluently, and we quickly became close with them. We children spent most of our time together. My sisters became friends with the daughters of the family, and the youngest daughter, who was a bit older than me, became my playmate. We enjoyed each other's company. We could watch television in our wealthy neighbours' home and sometimes experience things we had lost in the Naqadeh War. But, like all good things, this happiness came to an end. Once again, an external event took it from us.

The region became more insecure, with frequent armed clashes between the Peshmerga and the Revolutionary Guard, and the sound of gunfire was often heard. Our neighbours decided to return to Urmia, leaving only the men to stay and sleep in the store. We went to their house on the last night to say goodbye. The experience of separation was sad, and seeing an empty house with all its belongings packed up made everything more depressing. I was too young to dwell on this sadness, and I soon started playing in the yard with my friend. But she was different from usual. She held my hand, sat me beside her, took out one of her family photos from an album and gave it to me as a gift! Then she hugged me and gently stroked my hand.

Having a connection with a different, non-Kurdish neighbour was pleasant, but even more pleasant was this – something I hadn't experienced before in a friendship. I was very young, but I knew and had seen that when people liked someone and fell in love with them, they dried flowers

for them, wrote letters or gave them a photo of themselves, and now the neighbour girl had given me her photo! I kept it secretly for a long time, until we were displaced from Piranshahr again due to the war. I had to leave it behind, never to be found again.

I was discovering something unknown called 'love', but I was too naive and young to even know what to do. This feeling didn't end that night; sometimes in my teenage years, it would come to me, stirring a sense of pride. Now I know that in those days I was neither better nor more attractive than the other boys, and the girls didn't have many options, either: we were living in a small, limited circle of friends and peers. However, this memory always reminds me that neither war, nor conflict, nor insecurity, nor anything else can overcome our delicate human emotions. Love is everywhere.

Displacement Again

There came a rumour that the Revolutionary Guard was planning an attack on Piranshahr to 'cleanse' it, but the Party's forces assured the people that such a thing would not happen. They told us, 'We have blocked the Guard forces near the Jaldian garrison; there is nothing to worry about!'

However, the situation didn't remain stable, and artillery, tanks and helicopters overcame Kalashnikovs and old Brno rifles. As the sound of artillery intensified and the Peshmerga made a tactical retreat to nearby villages, the people realised the city would soon fall, and we were once again on the move.

Piranshahr, emptied of its inhabitants, fell to government forces on 9 October 1979, just a few days after the start of the Iran-Iraq War. Before the city fell, amid the thunderous artillery fire, we hastily gathered a few belongings and set out again toward Gerdashavan. We had barely distanced ourselves from Piranshahr when we reached the village of Gazgazak. Sheikh Kak Seyyed Taha, known as Baba Sheikh,[1] a prominent

1 Haji Seyyed Taha Kamalizadeh Naqshbandi (1924–2016). Baba Sheikh, as he was known, initially sought asylum in Germany for various reasons. After a few years, he returned to Iran at the country's invitation and established a grand khanqah on the Alwaj Road near Urmia. He passed away in 2016, and his son Yahya succeeded him.

sheikh of the Naqshbandi Order,[1] lived there. He had a large estate, a *khanqah* (Sufi lodge) and a vast garden, where he had sheltered a group of people. The khanqah was decorated by miniature paintings and somewhat blurry images of Prophet Muhammad, the Rashidun Caliphs, Imam Ali, dervishes and Sufis. The walls of a large room were adorned with swords and similar decorations. The people were given bread, cheese and yogurt at the khanqah, and the Sheikh allowed us to sleep there for the night. The men spent the night on the roof, while the women and children stayed in a large room.

The next day, we resumed our journey toward Gerdashavan. Once again, my father stayed behind to protect our home in the city, while we continued our journey from village to village, asking for directions along the way. I don't remember exactly how, but we crossed the swollen Lawin River and returned to the same house where we had lived during our first displacement a few months earlier.

The shelling of Piranshahr left casualties, a few of whom were from Gerdashavan. Feqi Hassan, a close relative and my father's best friend,[2]

1 The Naqshbandi Order, founded by Khwāja Buzurg Mullāna Bahā' al-Dīn Muḥammad Naqshband in Bukhara, began to spread to other regions from the 9th century Hijri (15th century CE). In the early 13th century Hijri (19th century CE), the Naqshbandi Order spread to Kurdish regions in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the Levant through Ḍiyā' al-Dīn Abū al-Bahāʾ Mullāna Khālid, known as Dhū al-Janāḥayn. He was born in the village of Qara Dagh in the Sulaymaniyah region. His father, Mullāna Aḥmad Ḥusaynī, was a descendant of Pīr Mīkāʾīl Shish Angosht Jāf, and, as a result, their clan is known as Pīr Mīkāʾīlī. His mother was of the lineage of Pīr Khuḍr Shahūʾī. He studied under Kurdish scholars and later went to Sulaymaniyah to teach. After a while, he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca and then travelled from Tehran to Khorasan, Afghanistan and eventually India. After several travels, he finally returned to Sulaymaniyah and dedicated himself to spreading the Naqshbandi Order among the Kurds. At that time, tensions arose between the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders, and the Qadiri sheikhs accused him of rebelling against the Government. Consequently, he fled to Baghdad, where he found favour with the ruling authority and began promoting the Naqshbandi Order. However, he did not settle there permanently but ultimately passed away in the Levant. In Kurdistan, Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband is honoured with the title Khwāja Mushkil Gushā ('The Resolver of Difficulties'). After him, his successors and Naqshbandi sheikhs spread throughout Kurdistan, establishing tekkes and khanqahs. The Naqshbandi dervishes in Kurdistan are known as Sufis; they do not shave their beards and show great respect for their spiritual guide (Tabibī & Sanandaji, 1987, pp.66–68).

2 The son of Fatemeh, my father's cousin, and Mam Rasu.

was one of those who died. He had been the intermediary during my parents' courtship, helping my mother escape and marry my father. He was buried on 12 October amid the tears and wails of the villagers. My father accompanied the bodies of the deceased to Gerdashavan and remained depressed for a long time. This time, it wasn't just our home, livelihood and work that were lost, but his closest friend from his youth. He didn't speak much, but it seemed that finding Feqi Hassan's lifeless body, sitting beside it and bringing it back to the village had formed a lingering knot in his throat that he couldn't untangle. He was stuck in a state of shock.

We were once again caught in limbo, unsure if we could return to the city. Every day brought news. Some said the city hadn't been completely evacuated and that the Revolutionary Guard and the army were fighting with Peshmerga forces and even Iraqis on the borders and outside the city. Whatever the truth was, these displacements and transitory periods, lasting months or even years, became so numerous that I lost count.

Education in Kurdish

We settled again in Gerdashavan, and it was the same routine every day. One autumn morning, however, my mother woke me up and said, 'You must go to school.' I can't recall if we had talked about it before, but I do remember that, a few days earlier, my aunt and some women had been making small bags out of burlap, decorating them with embroidery. Unlike previous years, there were no new uniforms, school supplies, or proper school bags. For my second year of primary school, I was to attend classes dressed in Kurdish attire, carrying one of these handmade bags.

There was no school in our village, but arrangements had been made for us to study in a small mud-brick house with two rooms. The elderly woman who owned the house lived in one room, and the other had been converted into a classroom by laying down a reed mat and hanging a small blackboard on the wall. Her son, a Peshmerga fighter for the Democratic Party, had requested that his mother offer one of their rooms for the village children's education. Classes were held in shifts – two hours for the younger children and then the older ones.

I longed for a proper urban school. This rural house didn't feel like a school to me. It lacked the typical features: no large building, stairs, tiled corridors, cafeteria or desks. None of the local village children were in the class, and I didn't know anyone. The children who did attend were either displaced like us or from other villages.

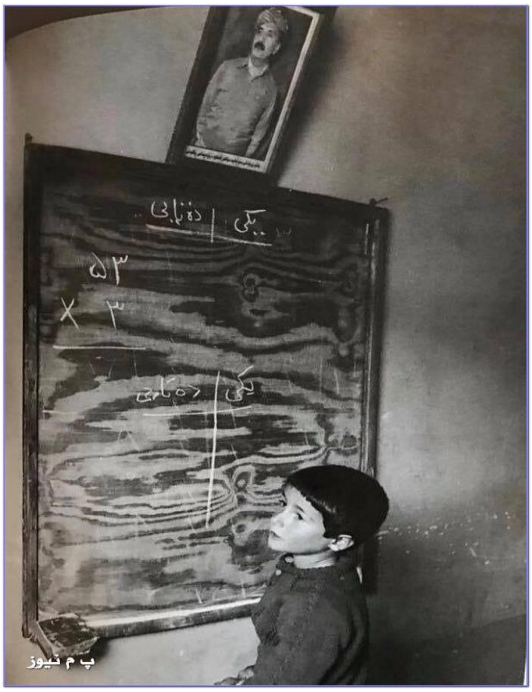


Image 58: Schools of the Party in the city and villages.

It wasn't until the teacher arrived that I realised we were genuinely going to study there. However, both the school and the teacher were different. Ms Sufizadeh, a distant relative of ours, wore men's Kurdish clothes, a clear sign she was a Peshmerga. Sometimes she donned a Kurdish turban and had a pistol strapped to her waist. She also always wore a picture of Dr Ghassemlou on her chest. Seeing a young woman dressed in men's clothing, with a gun at her waist, was something strange, clashing with the conventional beliefs of that time.

On the first day, Ms Sufizadeh gathered us in the yard for a speech by a representative of the Democratic Party. His words echoed the slogans we had heard during the protests in Naqadeh: 'You must forget the royal anthem you used to sing in the morning at school and learn new slogans and songs.' He then played the Kurdish national anthem, 'Ey Reqîb', on a tape recorder.[1] This heroic anthem became the music for our morning

1 The song 'Ey Reqîb' (known in Farsi as 'Ey Doshman', meaning 'O Enemy') is a Kurdish nationalist anthem and currently serves as the official anthem of the Kurdistan Regional Government. It was written in 1938 by Kurdish poet and political activist Younis Rauf Dildar (1918–1948) while imprisoned by the then Iraqi Government. The lyrics refer to the prison guards in the jail where Dildar was detained and tortured and symbolise the countries occupying Kurdish lands. Originally written in Central Kurdish (Sorani), the anthem has since been translated into all Kurdish dialects, including Southern Kurdish (Kermashani and Lakki), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), and

routine. It took us a while to learn it, as we had to repeat it daily with the tape recorder. For a long time, we didn't fully understand its true meaning.

A few days after school started, most of our textbooks were replaced. The old ones were thrown into the yard and set on fire. We were told, 'These books are royalist and promote a system of oppression. You must study in Kurdish.' I was confused, as just a few months earlier in Piranshahr we had been studying with these same royalist books, and no one had said anything was wrong with them.

The new books were completely different from what we had seen in the royalist education system. They were brought from Iraqi Kurdistan. Initially, there weren't enough for everyone, so we had to share. The Kurds in Iraq, under Saddam Hussein's regime, were allowed to study in their mother tongue up to a certain level. The pictures, language and even dialect in these books were different from our own.

I couldn't understand much of the content, nor could I decipher the script and font used. Other children were in the same situation. I had only just started learning Farsi, and now I had to study in Kurdish – a different Kurdish from our own. We were given books in Sorani Kurdish, the dialect spoken in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, while our dialect was Sorani of the Mokrian region. The accents and sentence structures between the two differed slightly, and some words and expressions were entirely different. It took us a long time to learn the new words, which were often mixed with Arabic. For instance, they used the word *shaqarte* for 'matches', which had an Arabic influence, whereas we said *shamche*.

It seemed that the Democratic Party, like other factions during the Iran-Iraq War, was receiving support from the Iraqi Government, and these books were part of that support.[1] It was clear that the parties had significant goals, including changing the style of education to align with their ideologies. The Democratic Party's initiative to establish Kurdish-language

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Zazaki and Hawrami. 'Ey Reqîb' was first officially used as the national anthem during the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad. The anthem holds such significance that, over the past few decades, most Kurdish nationalist parties across the four parts of Kurdistan in Turkey, Iraq and Syria have adopted it as their national anthems. However, Kurdish Islamic parties continue to resist its adoption.

1 However, unlike the approach of the People's Mojahedin Organisation, which became an ally of the Ba'ath in the battlefield against Iran, the Democratic Party maintained its independent stance and refusal to ally with the Ba'ath until the end of the war.

education in such turbulent times, where there was always a threat of government attack, was remarkable and unforgettable. Later, when the Party had to leave the area, the state education system was forced to recognise the Party-issued report cards for students to advance to higher grades.

Throughout my childhood, I experienced several different education systems, each with its distinct differences. Before the Revolution, I attended one year of kindergarten and one year of primary school in the royalist education system. After the Revolution, a new education system took over. But studying in a Kurdish school was an experience that only a few children of my generation went through. This time, in addition to a new education system, the language of instruction changed, and we had to adapt to these changes. It was really difficult and caused us, as students, significant harm.

Language is the most crucial cultural element that shapes a person's mental and social world. I spoke my mother tongue fluently, but I was just beginning to learn Farsi when the introduction of Kurdish education, often in a dialect different from our own, confused my mind and even disrupted my everyday conversations. But interestingly, after a short while, I realised how much easier it was to read and write in Kurdish. It was more in tune with our linguistic knowledge and understanding. The structure of Kurdish sentences fit naturally in our minds, as it aligned with our dialect, and allowed us to speak without the fear of mispronouncing a word. Despite being forced to use some of the so-called royalist Farsi textbooks, our teachers didn't openly acknowledge this, and we were too young to understand why it was happening.

At the time, I didn't grasp it, but now I find the change in the pictures on the walls and above the blackboard interesting. When I attended kindergarten and primary school in Naqadeh, the walls were adorned with pictures of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Queen Farah and the Crown Prince. But in the village school, the pictures were different: Qazi Muhammad, the founder of the Republic of Mahabad, Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Iraqi Kurds, in a military parade, and Dr Ghassemlou, who was then the secretary-general of the Party. After a while, however, the photo of Mustafa Barzani disappeared, and no one knew why. The people in the pictures were all older and wore turbans, except for Ghassemlou, who appeared younger and was always smiling. Ms Sufizadeh resembled these

figures in her attire, from her clothes to her pistol belt to her revolver and the badge on her chest.

During the Party's control, its cultural wing organised a nascent local democratic system in the villages, centred around rural Kurdish schools. In that short period of trial and error, the village's young generation learned a great deal, and some even joined the ranks of the Peshmerga. This demonstrated the success and profound impact of the Party's cultural programmes in educating children and adolescents.

In these schools, discussions about topics such as democracy were gradually added to the curricula, so that children could learn about the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran. Undoubtedly, like any political system, the Democratic Party aimed to instil concepts in its education programmes that supported its ideology and discourse. Therefore, the key concept of democracy, heavily emphasised by the Party, was part of classroom discussions. Beyond direct instruction, the Party used tools like songs and anthems to reinforce its teachings and embed them in the children's minds.

After a short time, classes were moved to the mosque, which had its own set of challenges. Various interruptions, like prayer times and people coming to resolve disputes with the village elders and the Mulla, often disrupted our classes. In both cases, the mosque would become noisy, making it difficult for us to concentrate, and we were often eager to escape. Additionally, the visits by Peshmerga members from the legal and cultural committees, who held educational sessions for the villagers, also disrupted our routine.

The most troubling part was that the thick smoke from villagers' pipes and cigarettes often made it hard for us to breathe! But at least the mosque was large and had windows.

Sometimes the instructors would line up all the children, from first graders to fifth graders, to teach them together. These young instructors would explain the Party's principles, why they sought autonomy and how it would benefit children if it were achieved. They introduced us to the adult world and its demands, hoping that, by understanding the benefits of the Democratic Party's autonomy, we would be more motivated to support it in the future. Back then, no one paid attention to children's rights; every group tried to impose its ideology on us in the name of education, ignoring the fact that children have the right to simply be children.

They told us that, if their efforts succeeded, we would continue to study in our mother tongue and maintain our identity. This was reassuring, as reading and writing in Farsi had been quite difficult for us, and we had endured a lot of punishment for struggling with it and being forced to speak it. We would be able to wear our Kurdish clothing, which was part of our identity, and we would be our own masters. Sometimes we listened, sometimes we were influenced and other times we were just playful.

I found the military-training aspect of these lessons particularly interesting. We had a short military-training course near the village cemetery to learn how to hide during conflicts and reach the nearest bunkers and shelters in case of air raids. This training proved quite useful later on. At that time, they had dug several bunkers at the base of the village's historic hill. There we practised shooting with real weapons. When I grew older, I saw that military training had been incorporated into the education system of the Islamic Republic as a two-hour weekly course for students.

The history of the Party and the political history of Kurdistan were lessons for older students, which I occasionally listened to. My focus on and interest in these subjects may have stemmed from my childhood curiosity about history and politics and their relationships to concepts such as personality, nationality, ethnicity and society.

Luxury Egg Thieves

In my second year of primary school, I was studying under the Democratic Party's education system. Our classes were held in the village mosque, which was adjacent to my grandfather's house. Across from the mosque were my grandfather's haystacks, and behind them were the sheepfolds. My grandparents kept various laying hens and birds in one of the haystack rooms. Raising chickens and poultry alongside agricultural and pastoral work has always been common in rural areas. The chickens, geese, turkeys and ducks roamed outside during the day and returned to their nests at night. Although the doors were shut at night, a dog was always present. The dogs knew me and left me alone.

I used to visit the haystacks with my cousin Fattah and had discovered where they kept the eggs. I didn't understand that the eggs under the hens were not meant for eating but were intended to hatch into chicks. At that

time, eggs were highly valued; one could only have a fried egg under the right conditions, since hens do not lay eggs in every season. When a hen goes broody (*korch*), its laying period is over, and it must incubate the eggs to produce chicks. The eggs under the birds get warmed and hatch into chicks, meaning they are not edible.

During our school days, we briefly moved from the mosque to a house where a young couple lived in one of the rooms. They had recently married and were not from the village. The young man brought and took away smuggled goods from Iraqi Kurdistan by horse. At night, he would bring several baskets of tea, sometimes soap, and other items, trading with Iraqi Kurds in the local market. One day, his wife told a neighbour she did not know what food to prepare for her husband, who spent most of the night on foot or horseback. It would be better for him to have a warm meal on the road. She was searching for eggs to make him a *babuleh* (sandwich) but couldn't find any.

When I heard this, I told my friend Jalal, who was a bit older than me and the village landlord's son,[1] that I knew where to find eggs. We decided to go and fetch some for the woman. I can't recall if it was entirely my idea or Jalal's, but it was a joint scheme. We asked the woman if she wanted us to bring eggs the next day. She said the caravan was leaving that night, so she needed them immediately, and offered to trade each egg for a cake and a soft drink. The woman had set up a small kiosk in one of the rooms of the house, selling cakes and soft drinks, which was a luxury treat for Kurdish children at the time. This made the egg theft seem worthwhile.

Usually, in the evenings, the village men would sit in front of the mosque, and they were seated there that morning, too. The weather was pleasant. They chatted, cracked seed and twirled their prayer beads. The haystacks were directly opposite the mosque, so we couldn't simply walk past and steal. However, the woman's tempting offer was too enticing to ignore. The haystacks and sheepfolds had no proper windows, to prevent thieves, but there was a small hole, or vent, at the back. I told Jalal that if he lifted me up I could enter through this hole and retrieve the eggs. He agreed. I struggled to get through, half my body stuck inside and half outside. I nearly suffocated in the dusty opening! I told him to push me,

1 After the White Revolution, the landowners effectively had no power; they merely retained the title of *agha*, and some of them were armed by the Government.

and Jalal pushed hard enough that I finally fell into a haystack, with many scratches on my hands and face as a testament to my dedication to acquiring a luxury treat.

Despite the hardships, I threw myself into the chicken coop, drove the birds away, and collected several eggs. I wanted to hand the eggs to Jalal, but he did not respond when I called him. It turned out that several men had come to his side and he had fled in fear, leaving me stranded. I called out for him repeatedly, but he didn't answer. By noon, the call to prayer sounded. Trembling with fear and caution to avoid being seen, I emerged from the haystack. I found Jalal and scolded him for leaving me alone, declaring he was no longer my partner! Jalal, who was older than me, managed to pacify me with his smooth talk.

We delivered the eggs to the young woman and received the cake and soft drink in return, promising to return the bottles. We went up to the village's ancient hill, sat down and enjoyed our luxury treat.

On and around the hill, the Democratic Party, with the help of residents, had constructed several bunkers for people to take refuge during air raids or conflicts. We consumed the cakes and drinks there and returned the bottles a few days later, as it was the weekend. The woman was very angry. She asked where we had gotten the eggs. I told her they were from our house, but she replied, 'These eggs are not from your house!' I started to explain, but it was futile. She said, 'I boiled the eggs for my husband, wrapped them and did not peel them. In the darkness of the mountains, he peeled the eggs and found a dead chick inside.' She then furiously demanded, 'Tell your mother to come.'

I knew I had messed up and, out of fear, said nothing. The next day, she saw my mother and told her that her husband had been hungry all night and upset about finding a dead chick in his egg. She said it was a sin and would affect our livelihood. She questioned why we had given her stolen goods. My mother, aunts and grandmothers tried to resolve the issue, saying they were unaware and that I had taken the eggs from under the hens without permission. The matter escalated and reached my grandfather. He wanted to discipline me by throwing his cane and a shoe, and Jalal also received a beating from his father, the village landlord.

The trouble didn't end there. It reached the school. When Ms Sufizadeh learned of it, the truly dreadful part of the story began. In public, she punished us with a wet stick on our hands and lectured us extensively on

the immorality of theft. Afterward, we were branded egg thieves and called by that name for months.

The Success of the Party in Local Governance

The Democratic Party briefly succeeded in presenting the model of governance it envisioned. Despite its short lifespan, it proved to be a successful experiment that demonstrated how devolving education and social matters to the people, without reliance on the Central Government, could address many issues faced by the border regions and create a degree of relative prosperity. It is undeniable that the strengthening of the Democratic Party's governance was also linked to external assistance; nonetheless, the Party showed that it could manage the regions under its control while maintaining relative independence and self-sufficiency.

During this period, the Party was also supported by non-local specialists. Many of these were left-leaning individuals who had diverged from the Islamic Republic and lived in the Party-controlled area. Their presence naturally altered the region's atmosphere, steering it toward greater awareness. The plans arising from local capacities and potentials were deeper and more sustainable because they stemmed from the local community and were achieved through the people's own efforts. It was not superficial or transient but aligned with the needs, priorities and concerns of the environment.

The Central Government in Iran, for various reasons, did not pay attention to the potential or existing local capacities and failed to develop policies to harness them. This situation stemmed from the Government's fear of recognising linguistic and identity diversity and its efforts toward

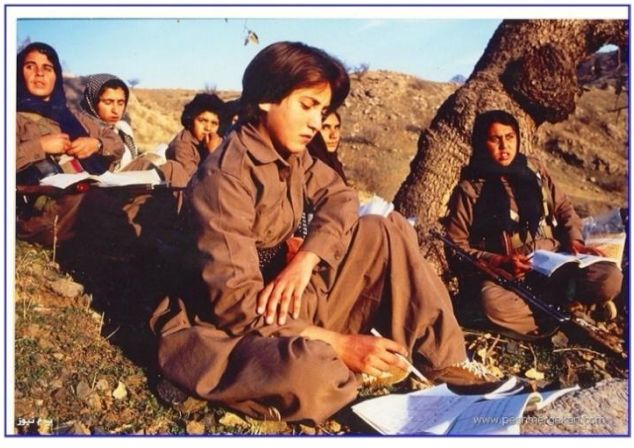


Image 59: Education in the mother tongue and gender education. Early 1980s.

cultural homogenisation – as well as its ineptitude and inefficiency. Additionally, it showed the Government's fear of the empowerment and awareness of these regions. Essentially, the regime did not want to decentralise its power, and this is a significant barrier to endogenous development in Iran, which successive governments have consistently upheld.

Some officials of that time, educated in the best universities in Iran and abroad, assisted from their areas of expertise. Additionally, non-local individuals came to Kurdistan to aid in training the Peshmerga forces, providing medical and engineering services. We often heard these individuals speaking in Turkish, Farsi or even foreign languages.

Thus, the Democratic Party advanced based on specialisation and meritocracy, and effectively utilised non-local experts to complement its local capacities. What if this situation had continued? There is no need for speculation; we can observe a similar model in Southern Kurdistan or the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which bear a significant resemblance culturally, politically, geographically and economically to Eastern Kurdistan or Iranian Kurdistan. Experience has shown that, since the Kurdistan Region of Iraq became autonomous in 2003, despite ongoing issues and undeniable corruption, it has developed into a relatively successful and emerging democratic experience.

One might argue that the Iranian Democratic Party had traditional views closer to those of the Democratic Party of Iraq, while the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Iraq bore similarities to Iran's Komala Party. Komala was secular, whereas the Democratic Party engaged with traditional Islam. Both parties' leaders had leftist views and had studied abroad, influencing the region's civil liberties. The potential specialisation and outlook of the leaders of both parties, alongside Komala's secular tendencies and the Democratic Party's acceptance of Islam as the dominant religion and its governance approach in Iran, created strengths that could have offered a comprehensive model of democratisation in Iranian Kurdistan and contributed to its dynamism, all of which is far from the existing situation.

An important issue to consider is whether the Democratic Party or any other local government without resources like oil has the economic capability to manage a vast region. The answer is not straightforward. Unlike the Kurdistan Region, Iranian Kurdistan lacks significant income-generating and underground resources such as oil and gas – though there

are notable oil and gas reserves in Ilam province, the exploitation of which has been delayed and has yet to reach its peak. For years, the region has faced negative development, with few production factories; prolonged economic deprivation; unequal wealth and power distribution; and marginalisation leading to severe deprivation. While a local government could potentially bring political openings, it might also face serious economic challenges.

In the period following the Revolution, Iranian Kurdistan might have managed itself without tapping into the Central Government's oil resources, but it would have been very a rudimentary society, relying on limited agricultural resources. Even agricultural prosperity in parts of Kurdistan like Oramanat is challenging due to its mountainous nature. There is no economic infrastructure, living conditions are harsh and many young people migrate to larger cities in search of jobs or engage in smuggling, manual labour and other informal occupations. I believe that if the local government had continued, it might have established a basic economic life for the region, but political and social advancement would likely have been limited.

It is also crucial to note that Iranian Kurdistan is not a predominantly religious or conservative society. Therefore, the emergence of religious fundamentalism[1] and fascism,[2] which could hinder development and democracy, has not been a significant issue in that region.

1 The term 'religious fundamentalism' refers to closed religious groups that accuse the mainstream (from which they emerged) of forgetting fundamental religious principles due to compromise or negligence, and they do not accept it. They consider themselves the true representatives of the religion in question. Key characteristics include: (1) they are a global phenomenon; (2) they believe in the absolute authority of sacred texts, but adopt a selective approach toward them; (3) they seek a return to and reinterpretation of religious foundations and principles according to their own ideologies; (4) they have a specific political orientation and stand against the existing political order; (5) they criticise secularism and represent an extreme reaction to anti-religious trends in the modern era; and (6) most are influenced by millenarian beliefs (Zahhedani, 2012).

2 The core principles of fascism, as articulated by Mussolini in the 1932 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Italiana*, include the following: disbelief in the usefulness of peace, opposition to socialist ideas, opposition to liberalism, the subordination of all groups to the state (totalitarianism), the sanctification of the leader to the utmost extent, opposition to democracy (viewing it as whimsical and self-indulgent), a strong belief in hero-worship, the promotion of a militant spirit, and a single-party system.

Iranian Kurdistan differs from Iraqi Kurdistan in terms of cultural and linguistic health and its lesser adherence to restrictive religious traditions. The compatibility and relationship between the Kurdish and Farsi languages may contribute to this linguistic and cultural health. Moreover, the presence of several Islamic parties and other groups in Iraqi Kurdistan has blended part of their culture with religious fundamentalism or subjugated it through such influences, constraining democracy and secularism. In contrast, in Iranian Kurdistan, religious scholars and clerics once formed the backbone of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, and, currently, Kurdish nationalism is strongly supported by a segment of Sunni clerics.

Social Reform with the Party

In their education efforts, the Democratic Party and Komala paid particular attention to gender justice and women's presence in society. In this regard, they can be considered progressive and up-to-date, relative to the prevailing conditions of that era. They held public meetings in mosques and discussed civil liberties. They banned practices like polygamy and the tradition of exchanging women. Educated urban youth worked in the parties' cultural units. The cultural committees of the parties had suitable cultural structures, unlike the cultural centres in the rest of Iran, where the staff and organisational rules were often misaligned with genuine cultural work. Most of the educators in these sessions were young women who spoke to the villagers about not violating women's rights, and we listened to them.

The mosque meetings were primarily for men, women's committees held meetings for women in their homes, and men and women attended large public sessions together. This demonstrated that the Kurdish parties genuinely valued gender equality, which is a hallmark of an open-minded and socially just space. I'm not sure why villagers listened to these discussions. Perhaps it was novel and interesting to them, or maybe it was out of fear of consequences. The village cleric had always spoken to them, and, usually, the community didn't refuse him.

In those days, the situation was different. Unveiled girls and young men, who spoke with a different demeanour from the village clerics, introduced new ideas. I suspect many of them didn't fully understand the

discussions, especially since they sometimes spoke a mix of Kurdish and Farsi and appeared to be urban and educated. Some people, particularly the elderly, were afraid of the Party's new laws, thinking they might face local courts and fines for violations. The Democratic Party had enacted laws countering old, harmful traditions like the exchange of women. It monitored and enforced these laws in villages and established penalties for violations, so people tried to follow them. These laws and lessons gradually became ingrained, teaching people new, humane behaviours.

My grandfather was stopped by the Democratic Party's cultural committee when he wanted to exchange my uncle Ahmad. One day, my cousin Fattah and I were at my grandfather's farm, located in a place called Gurg Awi, where a group of Peshmerga had camped. One of them asked, 'Are you the grandson of Mine Qazi?' I said yes.

The young Peshmerga, who had an office and desk, wrote a letter, sealed it with tape and said, 'Give this to your grandfather tonight.'

When I delivered the letter, my grandfather asked me to read it. With my limited literacy and help from another person, I read, 'We heard you intend to exchange your son Ahmad. According to the current laws of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, this practice is illegal and prohibited. If you proceed with this arrangement, you will face financial penalties and possibly a prison sentence after a trial.'[1]

My grandfather, who had previously exchanged two daughters and two sons according to the same tradition, was dissuaded by the threat. He likely abandoned the idea due to fear of the threats and public pressure. However, his decision was not based on a shift in cultural perspective. My grandfather wanted a wife for his son who could be trusted and whose wedding expenses and dowry would be less. Essentially, he wanted to exchange one daughter for another. For him, trust was crucial in selecting a wife for his son, but everything also involved a form of financial and credibility exchange. For some of the younger generation at the time, including my uncle, finding a wife was the goal, regardless of who she was, although we knew my uncle had a relationship with one of the village landlord's daughters. He also knew that, according to the local custom,

1 These enforced changes and reforms ultimately benefited everyone to some extent, including women. However, there was still a long way to go before women could fully exercise agency in their lives.



Image 60: Performance of a song by the Union of Youth of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran. 1980s.

they wouldn't give their daughters to peasants. The practice of exchanging women was beneficial to some, but it also harmed those who were unwilling to marry. The Party decided to eliminate this harmful practice from Kurdish social life, which indicates their planning for a more humane society.

The women's group in the Democratic Party was active, producing some cultural products like magazines and books. Young female Peshmerga went to villages and held counselling sessions for women. This group initiated positive actions that, if continued, might have significantly modified harmful traditions and changed attitudes toward women in families and communities.

The view that women were weak and passive beings, unable to make decisions even in the most private aspects of their lives, was prevalent. The practice of exchanging women embodied this notion. The Party's cultural committee worked deeply on family and women's rights, as well as children's issues, and had some influence on people. Its goal seemed to be transforming women from passive, subordinate beings into proactive individuals capable of participating in their own lives and having significant roles in societal change.

Some harmful traditions were criminalised. Besides banning the exchange of women, if a girl eloped with a boy without family consent, the

Party facilitated their marriage. The Party's work on women and gender attracted some criticism and led to subsequent studies.[1]

The Democratic Party had both an intellectual and a governmental dimension, making its efforts on women's rights a double-edged sword. It positively impacted the status of some women but exacerbated issues of women's participation and political exclusion.

Due to the political, organisational and cultural activities of the parties, not only men, but also women in Kurdistan became aware of their relative rights. The acceptance of women and girls into the parties, especially in the ranks of the Democratic Party as Peshmerga, was a bold break from tradition. Although it faced resistance from conservative families, it gradually became a more conventional and accepted practice. Some women gained access to social-action and decision-making spheres, and these experiences increased their individual and social awareness.

This type of anti-gender-discrimination and equality-demanding policy contradicted the discourse that previously dominated Kurdish family and social life. A high percentage of Peshmerga, especially in the Komala party, were women, and the influx of women into the parties was so significant that separate military-training sessions were held for them. In essence, it initiated a new discourse on gender among the Kurds.

Girls became more conscious and better understood their civil rights. Their dress changed somewhat, and they participated in village political meetings. During anniversary events of the parties, more villagers attended, gathering from several different villages to participate in dances and other programmes, which particularly affected the younger generation and provided educational and recreational benefits. These events included learning traditions and enjoying collective activities, which were valuable for releasing youthful emotions. However, for the generation of my uncles,

1 The Democratic Party has played a dual and contradictory role in women's political participation. On the one hand, a group of the Party's intellectuals aligned with the demands of the women's movement, leveraging the Party's extensive resources to create cultural and social groundwork for political participation. This effort helped to promote a culture of women's activities, ultimately leading to their increased political participation. On the other hand, as a state-affiliated party, the Democratic Party neutralised the combative role of active women in the women's movement and provoked hostility from religiously conservative groups, which heightened public sensitivities and suspicions toward women's issues, thereby reducing women's political participation. (See Fasihi and Amirabadi, 2010.)

who were in their thirties and had ingrained fears, there was always concern about what would happen after the parties were gone.

Multidimensional Structure of the Democratic Party

The structure of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran comprised various sections, including the Democratic Youth Organisation, the Cultural Committee, the Democratic Women's Organisation and general organisations in each city and district, as well as several finance, judiciary and education commissions. Despite the constraints and challenges of war and conflict, each section managed its duties relatively well. The emotional and political bond between the parties and the people of Kurdistan was such that many considered the graves and blood of the martyrs to be part of their existence. This bond significantly contributed to the cohesion and social identity of the Kurdish people.

My lived experience and limited political knowledge suggest that the Democratic Party was traditional in its approach but had a modern leadership style. The Party successfully juggled tradition and modernity, creating a synergy between the two, which was likely the main reason for its appeal and credibility among the people. The Democratic Party established a structure that yielded positive results. It also attempted to implement actions in the region based on experiences from other parties, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.[1] It quickly established schools in the villages, set up customs posts in the region and established checkpoints, particularly in the border mountains.

When the region was vacated by the Democratic Party, it took years to reestablish schools in villages like Gerdashavan, despite the Party's use of

1 An interesting point about the Democratic Party of Iraq and the Democratic Party of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War is that both were, in some way, supported by the opposing government. In reality, they were fighting against their central governments in rural and open areas, controlling and holding large sections of territory near the borders, particularly in the Qandil Mountains, Sardasht, Baneh, Mariwan and the Biara region in Oramanat, toward Halabja. The Democratic Party of Iran functioned as a local government, with a structure that combined elements of the previous administrative system, the lived experiences of its leaders and the modern, leftist political outlook, alongside lessons learned from regional guerrilla movements. These factors laid the foundations for a successful local governance system.

all its limited resources and facilities for children's education. In the health sector, I recall it provided good but limited services. It created a structure with order and functionality, addressing the various needs of the people, including education, health and security, and strove to create relative peace and wellbeing.

Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, who had connections with François Mitterrand's government, was a charismatic and popular figure among European leftists. He utilised all his capacities to improve the conditions in the Democratic Party's governed region. As a result, Médecins Sans Frontières and even some Turkish-speaking members of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan were involved in medical work, constructing field hospitals in the region. A military hospital was also established, open to ordinary people. It provided services to the Democratic Party's Peshmerga who were injured or ill in conflicts, and mobile teams visited villages. At that time, areas of Kurdistan under the Democratic Party's control were moving toward self-sufficiency in health services, marking a significant transformation and reducing the need for villagers to travel to cities for healthcare.

Mocking the Clergy

During that period, notable developments occurred in the fields of art and culture. Theatre productions adopted an oral style that was comprehensible to the society of that time. I remember the Democratic Party used local talent with creativity and skill. Even the actors' makeup was very 'local' – they used goat hair to create the beards, moustaches and turbans worn by the actors.

Although many plays had political themes, they were a popular form of art in the region, and the public welcomed them.

One of the plays that gained significant popularity was *Jarjal*.[1] In Kurdish, *Jarjal* connotes a swarm of locusts attacking fields. The play depicted a large group of clerics attacking Kurdistan, likening Gargeal of the story to Ruhollah Khomeini and the clerics and suggesting that their

1 The Kurdish term *Jarjal* is a form of the Arabic *Dajjal*. It refers to a polytheistic and conquering people whose emergence is considered a sign of the end of the world. After their appearance, this group shows no mercy and engages in the massacre of Muslims.

arrival had led to widespread devastation, famine and the ruination of crops. The organisers of the play viewed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard and Basij's attacks on the Kurds as a manifestation of the Antichrist's appearance in the end times.

The comparisons and metaphors used in the Democratic Party's plays resonated with reality and were both engaging and intriguing.

Interestingly, these plays were mostly performed in mosques, and the traditional community, which was fond of mosques and clerics and held strong religious beliefs, accepted the mockery of clerics within a political theatrical framework. I cannot say this reception was due to the conflict of interest between Shiite and Sunni, as people were not yet well-acquainted with the ideological views of the regime, and the Shia-Sunni debate was not yet prominent. In my view, the enthusiasm for the play indicated that people had quickly decided Khomeini and the Islamic regime were the root cause of the region's troubles, having failed to fulfil their promises and brought war and bloodshed. People, based on their experiences and the available evidence, concluded that faith was one thing, but the actions of those clerics were another. Thus, despite their religious beliefs, they enjoyed the satire of the clerics in Kurdish theatre. They saw no connection between their religion and the clerics and managed to separate the two – unlike in today's Iran, where clerical policies are conflated with religion, casting doubt on the legitimacy of religion for the people.

I remember this play was performed once in a village near my grandfather's house and later in Gerdashavan. Even when it was scheduled to be performed in other villages, we tried to attend. Men and women sat together in mosques to watch the play, removing gender barriers. One or two of the directors of these plays were our relatives, one of whom was Mohammad Ali Sufizadeh,[1] a relative of my father's and a member of my elementary-school teacher's family.

In the field of music, the Democratic Party also made a significant transformation. Traditional Kurdish music was mainly associated with celebrations like weddings, but the Democratic Party promoted a type of

1 The Sufizadeh family is well-known in Piranshahr. Most of them were affiliated with the Democratic Party, the most prominent being Rahman Sufizadeh, a distinguished cadre member. He lost his life in 1984 during a clash with Revolutionary Guards in the Jandaran region of Mahabad. Mohammad Ali Sufizadeh passed away from cancer in the winter of 2022 in the United States.

'epic' music aligned with its political and social goals, evoking a strong sense of nationalism. The Party's military jeeps played military songs or Kurdish songs by artists like Hassan Zirak, Nasser Rezaei, Najmuddin Gholami and Mohammad Jazaa, which mainly had nationalist themes. Music transitioned from mere celebration to a social space. Groups of girls and boys performed songs, and I was one of them. This activity provided a platform for children to participate in gatherings and festivals, significantly boosting their self-confidence and offering opportunities for them to interact with adults, be seen and model social behaviours. The performances by girls and boys had multiple social functions.

Most of the Democratic Party's cultural and artistic activities were planned and executed by the organised and professional groups of the Union of Youth of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran.[1] Kak Morad and Kak Fattah Abdoli, my father's cousins, were among the first members of this union. The main mission of the Union of Youth was cultural and artistic activities, alongside educational classes, self-awareness, individual and social skills and counselling sessions. All this reflected the Democratic Party's multidimensional approach, which emphasised the development of individuals and the self-awareness of the people, while addressing their social needs, security, peace and leisure.

In the social sector, local courts were held, to which people came to resolve disagreements ranging from personal conflicts to land and pasture disputes. These courts had lawyers and judges who were mostly educated and working in the Democratic Party's legal unit. In the absence of national courts, people could turn to these local courts to file complaints without fear of facing the Central Government. Visiting law-enforcement bodies, like gendarmeries, often brought violence, humiliation and conscription for the youth, making people trust the local courts more and have greater hope in them for justice. The structure of these courts, based on meritocratic principles, was more reliable and could effectively implement social justice, increasing public trust through their practical approaches.

1 Union of Youth of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran: The Democratic Youth Union was originally named the Democratic Youth Organisation, but the Party changed the name due to its similarity with the Democratic Youth Organisation affiliated with the Group of Seven.

Unwelcome Guests

After my family was expelled from Piranshahr, we, like many others, found ourselves once again displaced in Gerdashavan, never to return to Naqadeh.

Some factions, including the Mojahedin-e-Tâleghâni, attempted to persuade those in Mahabad and its surrounding towns to return to Naqadeh. Initially, many families did not return out of fear for their lives. Of those who did, several were arrested and tried on charges of having killed someone. Such events instilled a widespread fear, convincing my father, who was hesitant about returning, that his relatives were right. Returning would have meant being killed, arrested or, at the very least, harassed. He resolved to heed his relatives' advice: say farewell to Naqadeh and remain in Gerdashavan for the time being.

Later, there was no longer any insistence on returning to Naqadeh, and the decision was left to the people themselves. Tâleghâni's forces were still willing to ensure the safety of those returning to the city, but the Kurds had little trust. I believe some people of Naqadeh displayed admirable courage in returning, enduring pressures to preserve their homes and city.

After the flight and displacement of the Naqadeh residents, Mulla Saleh, in contact with Idris and Masoud Barzani, who were then under the protection of the government in Urmia and Oshnaviyeh, accepted a proposal to house the Barzani families in the vacant homes of displaced people. In 1974, following the Algiers Agreement between the Shah and Saddam Hussein, the Barzanis had been driven from Iraqi Kurdistan and scattered across several Iranian cities. They were mostly unemployed or working as labourers. Initially, this was Mulla Saleh's idea, based on the belief that, if the armed Barzanis, who had a good relationship with Iranian military institutions at the time, settled in Kurdish homes in Naqadeh, the Turks would cease their plundering and would not dare to approach Kurdish areas. Mulla Saleh chose, or perhaps felt compelled, to disregard the rights of Naqadeh's residents, handing over our homes to the Barzanis without obtaining consent, in exchange for their protection and security.

When my uncle later dared to return to Naqadeh with a few neighbours, he encountered three heavily armed Barzani families in our home. A month later, my aunt joined him, but for another two months, they had to

sleep in the storage room of our own house, as the Barzanis refused to vacate or return the rooms.

At that time, there were disputes between the Democratic Party and the interim leadership, namely the Barzanis (herein referred to as the 'interim leadership' or the 'temporary leadership'). The Barzanis, with the help of the Revolutionary Guard, were in constant conflict with Kurdish forces, committing massacres in some villages. The Barzanis themselves, being Kurdish and displaced, had many children and needed shelter. They had addressed this need on one side, while seeking to meet their other needs in collaboration with the Iranian Government. The support of the Revolutionary Guard for the Barzanis indicated that the Islamic Republic aimed to create divisions among the Kurds and achieve its own selfish goals through their conflicts.

Constant reports came in about the Revolutionary Guard, guided by the interim forces, cleansing this village or that, taking control of various villages, and doing terrible things to people. Everyone, especially the villagers, was worried. On the one hand, they did not want to, and could not, oppose the Democratic Party, while on the other they feared the

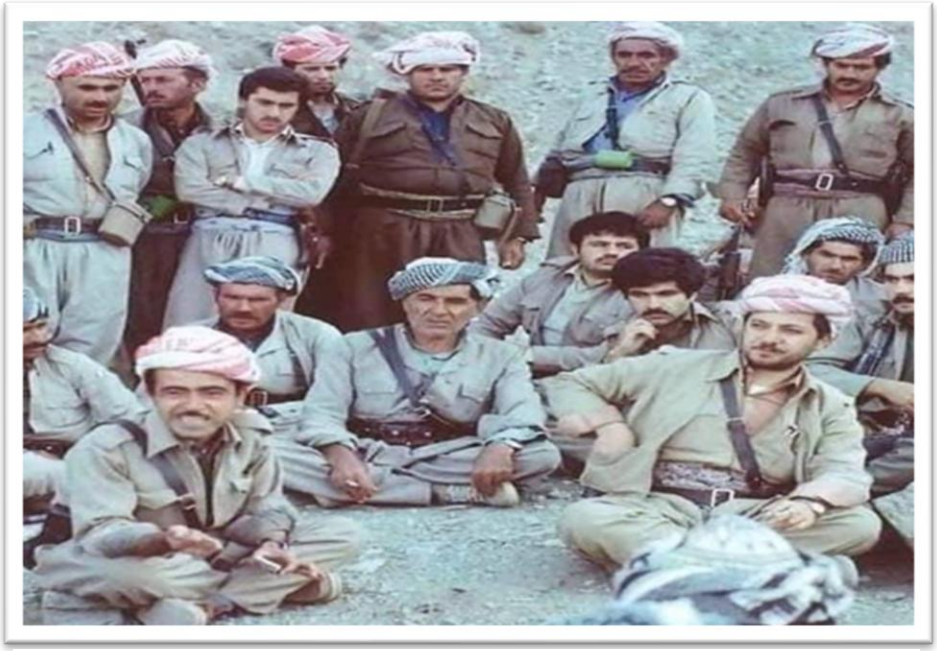


Image 61: Idris and Massoud Barzani and the Peshmerga of the temporary leadership.

Central Government. They faced an uncertain future, unsure of what to do. Everything was temporary. Although the Democratic Party had its own mechanisms, such as local courts, administrative systems, checkpoints and limited medical care, it was still a nascent and fragile local government. With the ongoing war, forces kept arriving and leaving, and people saw the changes and grew more anxious.

Eventually, the inevitable happened: the region was cleansed, and Piranshahr fell under Government control. Later, men were given amnesty certificates, allowing those who had not committed murders to return, while those who had been members of parties had to repent. After repentance, individuals were given the label of *tawab* ('penitent'). The regime, by labelling and marking these individuals – one of its longstanding practices – attempted to marginalise Party members and exclude them from social movements. These repentant individuals were not well-received by the public. At that time, Government propaganda intensified to reduce the influence of Kurdish parties and attract these individuals as *tawab* and Muslim Peshmerga.

Since we could not – or, rather, our relatives did not allow us to – return to Naqadeh, we came to Piranshahr to start a new life. From those years, what remains most vivid in my memory is the image of my father. Due to his job, he was constantly traveling and was considered a modern man. After the war in Naqadeh and our displacement, he was forced to live once more in a room in a village without electricity or amenities. Everything was uncertain for him. Like many others, he feared being arrested and having a case fabricated against him. He endured many hardships – perhaps more than any of us. Our home and belongings in Naqadeh had been looted and seized. There was no way back. My father could not do much in the village. As far as I remember, he tried a few times to engage in transactions but was not very successful. During those years, he suffered emotionally. I often saw him sitting in a corner, talking to himself about the hardships and the future. He had changed; he was not the person he once was: no longer shaving regularly or joking, lacking his previous vitality and losing touch with his friends.

The memory of those days with my father still evokes a mix of compassion and anger in me. No matter how fast he ran, he always found himself back at square one. He had to start over again. Another zero . . . another new beginning . . .

The Eight-Point Statement and Kurdish Demands from the Islamic Republic

With the onset of the 1979 Revolution, Kurdistan began to organise its political space. It happened quickly, due to its history of political activity, the presence of organised parties, its dynamic levels of experience, and the clear ethnic demands. The most explicit form of those demands during the early days of the Revolution was the issuance of the Eight-Point Resolution from Mahabad, which emphasised the right to self-determination and the rectification of various forms of economic, social and cultural discrimination. Proposed mechanisms for future negotiations and discussions were also included in the Resolution.

The eight points of the Resolution were as follows:

1. The Kurdish people, in solidarity with other peoples of Iran, affirm the Iranian Revolution and intend to play a crucial role in establishing a free and prosperous future society by strengthening the bonds of struggle with other Iranian peoples. *(Emphasis on freedom and prosperity)*
2. The Kurdish people, like other peoples of Iran, seek the elimination of national oppression and the provision of the right to self-determination in a federative framework within Iran, rejecting any accusations of separatism, and request the interim government led by Mr Bazargan officially state its position on this demand. *(Acknowledgement of autonomy and rejection of separatism)*
3. We believe that the working people of Iran have made a fundamental contribution to the Revolution, and thus it is the legitimate right of workers and peasants to participate in the Revolutionary Government. *(Achieving social justice by addressing the needs of the marginalised who played a significant role in the Revolution)*

4. Iranian Kurdistan, despite having abundant untapped resources, remains one of the most underdeveloped regions of Iran, making the eradication of economic oppression a fundamental demand. *(Utilisation of the resources and potential of Kurdistan and economic dynamism in the region)*

5. All military barracks in Kurdistan should be managed under the supervision of the Revolutionary Council, and a joint military committee of patriotic officers and representatives of the Revolutionary Council should be



Image 62: (a) and (b): Series of negotiations in Mahabad and Biyuran village, Sardasht. Photo of the building and house where negotiations took place. November 1979.

established for this purpose. *(Military cohesion through the Revolutionary Council)*

6. Criminal officers who have issued orders leading to the martyrdom of the people's children must be handed over to the Revolutionary Court, and to transform the reactionary army into a people's army, the army should be purged of counter-revolutionary elements. *(Judicial cohesion and accountability through the Revolutionary Court and army purification)*

7. All present representatives from Kurdish-majority counties declare that Ayatollah Seyyed Ezaddin Husseini is qualified to lead any delegation and negotiate with the Central Government on behalf of the Kurdish people and warn the revolutionary leadership and interim government against negotiating or contacting reactionary Kurdish elements. *(Designation of a Kurdish representative for Kurdish-majority areas for reciprocal and coherent interactions and credible negotiations with the Government and leadership)*

8. Since Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the group known as the 'interim leadership' have been agents of the CIA, SAVAK and the MIT and are despised by all Kurds, we request that the Revolutionary Government cut all connections with this faction and expel their treacherous leaders from Iran, without harming the status of impoverished refugee families. *(Expulsion of Barzani leaders as agents of the US and the Shah's regime from Iranian society)*

The negotiating team of the interim government, led by Dariush Forouhar, Ibrahim Younesi, Ismail Ardalan and Mohammad Mokri, was joined by Kurdish representatives including Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini, Dr Ghassemlou, Ghani Bolourian, Salah Mohtadi, and Foad Mustafa Soltani, who drafted the Resolution. This team later read the Resolution in a larger gathering that included Sheikh Jalal Husseini from Baneh, Mulla Khidr Sardaki from Sardasht, and Senar Mamedi from Shapur Azerbaijan,

making amendments to the eighth point. The eight points were unanimously approved and submitted to the government representatives.

As noted in the seventh point, this team represented Kurdish-majority counties, not political parties or organisations, meaning they were representatives emerging from the people themselves, not merely party representatives or advocates of a party's demands.

As highlighted above, alongside each clause of the Eight-Point Resolution, the text emphasised freedom and prosperity. The authors sought to show that the Kurds desired autonomy within Iran, not separation; they also called for social justice by addressing the needs of those who played significant roles in the Revolution, for strategic planning to utilise the resources and potential of Kurdistan, and for military and judicial cohesion through the Revolutionary Council and the Revolutionary Court, respectively. Ultimately, they sought the designation of a Kurdish representative for Kurdish-majority areas to ensure reciprocal, coherent interactions and credible negotiations with governments and leadership, and requested the expulsion of Barzani leaders, as proxies of the US and the Shah's regime, from Iranian society.

Tensions Between the Barzanis and Kurdish Iranian Parties

The day after the 1979 Revolution, Iranian Kurdistan, alongside its resurgent and newly established political parties, became the stage for a significant number of Iraqi Kurdish forces. Following the Algiers Agreement and the defeat of the September Movement in 1975, approximately 300,000 people, including Peshmerga and their families, sought refuge in Iran under the leadership of the Barzanis. With the Revolution in Iran and shifts in domestic and regional political dynamics, the leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, led by Idris and Masoud Barzani (the sons of Mulla Mustafa Barzani), endeavoured to adapt to the new political landscape in Iran and Kurdistan. They sought to overcome the constraints and limitations they faced in Iran after the Algiers Agreement. For the Barzanis, who still felt the sting of the Shah's betrayal, the emerging Iranian regime presented a promising opportunity to revive their waning movement. Consequently, in the absence of a party congress, the interim leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, known as 'the Peshmerga', was formed under Idris Barzani to temporarily manage

the party's political and military affairs and restructure and reorganise its forces.

The involvement and actions of the Barzanis, aligned with the new Islamic Republic in the complex, tense and volatile political environment of Iranian Kurdistan during the early days after the Revolution, when various Kurdish nationalist, Marxist-leftist and Islamic groups and local forces loyal to the Islamic Republic (known as the 'Muslim Kurdish Peshmerga') were active, was not merely a change in the number of forces present, but also led to a hostile confrontation between the Barzanis and the Kurdish parties in Iran. This had a profound impact on the fate of the people and parties of Eastern Kurdistan and left lasting scars on contemporary Kurdish politics.

With the Revolution's success, the Barzani forces, in the absence of the charismatic leadership of Mulla Mustafa, who had died of lung cancer at Georgetown Hospital in Washington in March 1979, faced confusion in their political stance and party strategy. Due to their connections with the Pahlavi regime, they were apprehensive about the new conditions. One of their concerns was the rise of Kurdish parties in Iran, as many left-leaning Kurdish parties viewed the Barzani forces unfavourably, considering them to be pawns of the Shah and the CIA.

The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, established a year apart in August 1945 and 1946, respectively, originated from similar conditions. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran is a year older than its counterpart, and the leaders of both parties shared nearly identical experiences in establishing the Kurdish Republic. However, while Qazi Muhammad surrendered in hopes of negotiation and peace, but was immediately executed in a military trial, Mulla Mustafa, with greater experience of broken promises and betrayals, chose survival. Despite attacks from Iran, Iraq and even Turkey, he crossed the border mountains between the three countries and entered Soviet territory.

Despite the claims of that time, relations between Qazi Muhammad and Barzani were not extremely strained until years later. Political and regional factors imposed conditions on the two parties that were justified by

survival, but negatively impacted their relationship.[1] The longstanding approach of the governing system in Iran and the region toward ethnic groups and their relationships, especially Kurds, has been to prevent their unity by sowing division. An example of this is the accusation against the Barzani forces of killing Soleiman Moeini and his associates in 1968 at Haji Omran, and handing over his body to the Iranian army, which led to its display and humiliation in various Kurdish cities by SAVAK; seeking support and cooperation with countries at war with these two parties is another.

Until 1981, relations between the Kurdish parties and the Democratic Parties of Iran and Iraq were neither friendly nor hostile, although there were criticisms at various times. The first serious conflict between the parties and generally between the Peshmerga and the Kurdish parties in Iran emerged with the issuance of the Eight-Point Resolution from Mahabad. On the last day of Bahman 1357 (February 1979), some Kurdish representatives in Mahabad negotiated with the representatives of the interim Bazargan Government and submitted the Eight-Point Resolution, which became known as the Mahabad Resolution and elicited widespread reactions. According to the eighth point of this Resolution, the Barzanis were considered agents of SAVAK and the CIA and should be expelled from Iran. The eighth point specifically states:

1 Despite Mulla Mustafa Barzani being the commander-in-chief of the Kurdish Government's army and one of its four generals, with a close and special relationship with Qazi Muhammad, there were reports of mistrust, rivalry and discord between the two. This indicated a lack of unity and coordination among the high-ranking officials of the Kurdish Government. The situation was such that they suspected each other of having ties with the British and even of espionage. Dr Jahanshahlu, deputy to Pishevari, who also oversaw relations between the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan Governments, writes in his memoirs: 'Mulla Mustafa, rightly or wrongly, believed Qazi Muhammad was an agent of British intelligence.' Abolhassan Tafreshian also notes the disputes between Mulla Mustafa and Qazi Muhammad in his memoirs, stating, 'Mulla Mustafa was displeased with Qazi Muhammad, claiming that Qazi feared I would replace him. To weaken us, he divided the Barzan tribe into very small groups and resettled them across Kurdistan, from the shores of Lake Rezaiyeh (Urmia) to Shahin Dezh in Miandoab, ensuring that no more than five or six families were in any one village. Finally, the Soviets came to our aid, and on their recommendation, the National Government of Azerbaijan paid us a monthly stipend of 60,000 tomans for the expenses of the Barzan tribe and provided us with clothing and equipment.' (Alef News, 2017).

> Since Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the group known as the interim leadership are agents of the CIA, SAVAK and MIT, and are despised by all Kurds, we request that the Revolutionary Government cut all connections with this group and expel their treacherous leaders from Iran, without harming the status of impoverished refugee families. *(Expulsion of the Barzani leaders as US and the Shah's regime proxies from Iranian society)*

Some believe that Jalal Talabani, who, after splitting from the Peshmerga and founding the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in 1975, had always maintained a hostile relationship with the Barzanis, played a destructive role in inflaming the tensions by urging the inclusion of the eighth point. The eighth point of this Resolution remains a significant document for subsequent conflicts and for the implementation of what the governing system attempted to enforce.

After that, the Barzanis were labelled as SAVAK and CIA spies who should be expelled from Iranian society, thus promoting a conspiracy theory related to the Barzanis and creating the division desired by the Government. Although the Democratic Party later attempted to justify its representatives' drafting of and voting for this point, it was too late, and no justification was accepted.

From Mulla Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini to individuals like Salah Mohtadi, Ghani Bolourian, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, Abdullah Hassanzadeh, Jalil Gadani, Ibrahim Younesi, Newshirwan Mustafa Amin, Rahim Kharazi and Senar Mamedi, many have spoken about this Resolution. Even in the writings of Chris Kutschera,[1] David McDowall[2] and others, there are discussions about this, particularly the eighth point related to Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the interim leadership. Curiously, no one is willing to take responsibility for drafting and proposing this point.

Aside from the Mahabad Resolution, other instances of tension and hostile positioning, as well as attempts to calm the situation between the Peshmerga (the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq) and the Kurdish

1 Kutchera, 2008.

2 McDowall, 1996, p.262.

parties in Iran, occurred during that period, significantly influencing the relationships between these parties.

Chronology of Events Surrounding Eight-Point Resolution in 1979

11 February 1979: Victory of the uprising and the fall of the Shah's regime.

13 February 1979: *Ettela'at Daily* reports that, by Khomeini's order, Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini, the Friday Prayer leader of Mahabad, is to form a Revolutionary Council in Mahabad to control the city.

16 February 1979: A ceremony is held in Saqqez to honour Mohammad-Hussein Karimi, an early member of Komala, who lost his life in the city. In this context, Komala declared 15 February as the day of the public announcement of the organisation's activities.

17 February 1979: The prime minister's office in Tehran contacts Sheikh Ezaddin Husseini's residence to inform him that a delegation is coming to Kurdistan. *Ettela'at* reports that Dariush Forouhar, the minister of labour, has left Tehran for Kurdistan with a delegation.

18 February 1979: A meeting is held with representatives from the Kurdish cities and the visiting delegation at the home of Mr Rahim Kharazi, a trusted person in Mahabad.

19 February 1979: The Eight-Point (Mahabad) Resolution is submitted to the government delegation.

Late February 1979: The 'Defenders of Freedom and Revolution' is established in Sanandaj.

20 February 1979: The Mahabad garrison falls under the control of the Democratic Party.

21 February 1979: *The Ettela'at Daily* reports that, according to

anecdotes, Jalal Talabani and 60 Peshmerga have entered the city of Marivan. Subsequently, the Military Committee of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan issues a telegram to Ayatollah Khomeini, declaring the report to be false and part of an imperialist conspiracy.

24 February 1979: Mr Ghani Bolourian, deputy of the Mahabad Revolutionary Council and member of the Kurdish Democratic Party, comments on Mulla Mustafa Barzani.

25 February 1979: *Keyhan Daily* reports that Phantom aircraft flights over Kurdistan have been halted. The Kurdish Democratic Party, after thirty-two years of covert activity, officially becomes public on Friday, 2 March. On the same day, *Ettela'at* reports that Heiman, the revolutionary Kurdish poet, returns to Kurdistan amid a grand reception after years of exile.

1 March 1979: Mulla Mustafa Barzani dies in the United States.

3 March 1979: *Keyhan* reports, reacting to Mulla Mustafa's death two days prior, that, according to a Democratic Party spokesperson, 'The Kurdish people will be relieved by the news of the death of someone who had sold the Kurdish movement in Iraq to the Shah and the CIA in recent years. Barzani is known as a traitor and self-serving individual who destroyed the Peshmerga forces for his own ambitions.'[1]

3 March 1979: A group invited by the Kurdish Resident Association in Tehran gathers at the fifth assembly of the association at Sharif University and supports the Eight-Point Resolution of the representatives of the people of Kurdistan.

6 March 1979: During Mulla Mustafa's funeral in Oshnaviyeh, Masoud Barzani refers to Imam Khomeini as the

1 Keyhan Newspaper, 1979, p.7.

great Islamic leader and adds, 'Imam Khomeini said that he would bring Iranian Kurds to their rights. I promise you that this great leader will grant you autonomy under the Islamic banner of Iran and within the framework of the Islamic Republic.' Mulla Karim Sharikandi, the representative of the Kurds in Mahabad, also announces that the eighth point regarding Mulla Mustafa Barzani will be removed from the Kurdish demands.

8 March 1979: The secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, in a statement on 8 March, denies the claims regarding Mulla Mustafa Barzani that have appeared in the press, stating, 'The central committee feels it necessary to inform that the mentioned statements do not reflect our party's opinion. Our party's view on Mulla Mustafa Barzani is as published in our official press and will continue to be published in the future.'[1]

In essence, these events explicitly stated that the Barzanis recognised the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and Khomeini and assured the Kurdish parties in Iran that their aspirations for independence and autonomy would be realised with the support of the Islamic Republic. At the same time, the parties believed that the Barzanis were traitors and spies for the CIA and the Shah, who had diverted the Kurdish movement and destroyed the Peshmerga forces for their own ambitions.

Exhumation of Mulla Mustafa and the Barzani Alliance with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

Ten days after the issuance of the Mahabad Resolution, Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, died in the United States. His body was transported, with the consent of the interim government, to Tehran and then to Oshnaviyeh for burial. At that time, Oshnaviyeh was under the control of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (the KDPI), and

1 Ettela'at Newspaper. 1979e, p.8.

thousands of Kurds from across the Region attended the ceremony. However, the Party leaders did not attend the funeral, nor did they extend condolences to the Iraqi Kurdish leaders.

Following Barzani's death, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq had established a temporary leadership to resume its struggle. This new leadership began gradually deploying its forces to along the border with Iranian Kurdistan, independent of the KDPI. This development alarmed the KDPI and, to some extent, Komala, whose actions were limited by political and strategic ties to the Iraqi Government. From 1979 to 1981, as tension rose, several bombings targeted the PUK's transit routes along the borders. Each time, the PUK demanded explanations from the KDPI, which consistently denied involvement.

In late 1979 and 1980, the conflict between the KDPI and the PUK escalated into a full-scale military confrontation. While the KDPI controlled Oshnaviyeh, the exhumation of Barzani's grave took place. According to accounts of the Barzani family, one of the prominent KDPI commanders, Seyyed Rasul Dehghan (Babi Gewra), ordered the grave's caretaker, Karim Miran to leave the site. When Miran returned, he found the grave opened, Mulla Mustafa's shrouded body moved a few metres away and a grenade exploded in the empty grave.

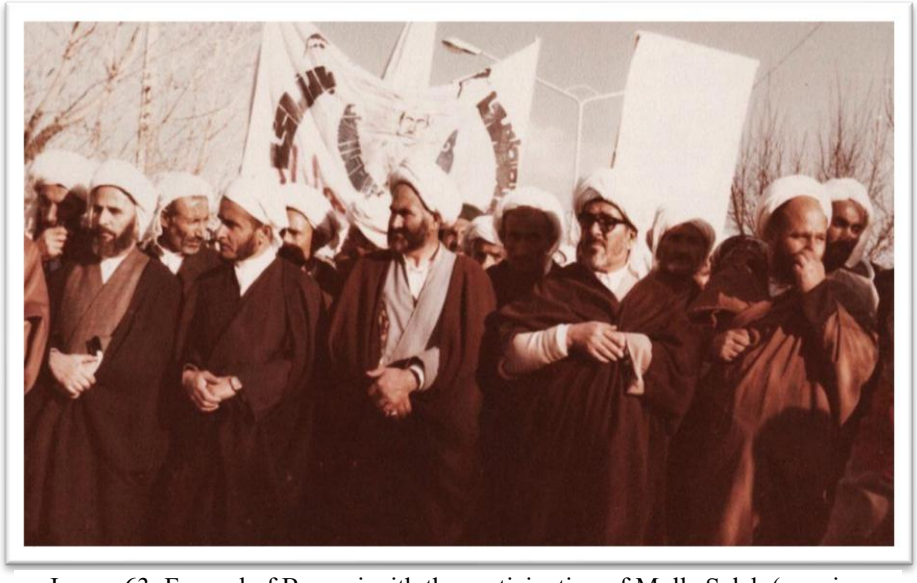


Image 63: Funeral of Barzani with the participation of Mulla Saleh (wearing sunglasses). Oshnaviyeh, 6 March 1979.

In response, Idris and Masoud Barzani demanded that the KDPI hand over Seyyed Rasul Dehghan, but the KDPI denied any involvement and refused to comply. It later proposed forming an investigative committee, but the Barzanis rejected the offer. Seyyed Rasul eventually left the Party and returned to Iraq, where he had previously lived as a refugee. A few years later, he was assassinated in Sulaymaniyah, which was under the control of the Iraqi Government and Saddam Hussein.[1]

The second issue involved the PUK's confrontation with a splinter group of the KDPI. On 19 February 1980, the First Congress of the free KDPI was held in Mahabad. The result was that Ghani Bolourian and six other prominent Party members split from the KDPI at the Fourth Congress. Bolourian narrowly lost the vote for the post of secretary to Ghassemlou and, after the split, accused Ghassemlou's Central Committee of deviating from the Congress's resolutions. The outcome of this split was the formation of the Central Committee of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan – Following the Fourth Congress.

This schism negatively impacted relations between the PUK and the KDPI. The PUK's unreserved support of the Fourth Congress splinter group, consisting of Ghani Bolourian and their allies,[2] led to their establishment in the village of Rajan, near PUK headquarters. The PUK and

1 After his departure, Seyyed Rasul attempted to establish a new party and, with the help of a few individuals, even facilitated the relocation of some expelled members of the Democratic Party to Europe. He considered the Party, or at least a significant part of it, to be his own and believed that it was due to his years of struggle that the Party had reached its peak. He challenged some of the Party leaders. When he separated from the Party (which some consider to be an expulsion), he sometimes obtained travel papers from the Komala party to move through Iraqi territory, known as 'non-conflict' papers. Even after his assassination, when the Democratic Party refused to handle his body, it was Komala that buried him in the city where his sister lived in Kurdistan, Iraq. Many are still critical of the Party's actions regarding Seyyed Rasul's departure and the handling of his body, and his family believes that his removal was aimed at benefiting the Democratic Party, the Ba'ath regime, and its leadership. The full details of this matter remain unclear.

2 Farooq Keykhosravi, Fouzia Qazi (the granddaughter of Qazi Muhammad), Rahim Saif Qazi (from the Qazi Muhammad family), Ahmad Azizi, Mohammad Amin Sheikh al-Islami Mokri (Hemin), and Navid Moeini (brother of Soleiman and Ismail Moeini) were among the cadre members who, along with Bolourian, separated from the Democratic Party.

Masoud Barzani sought to negotiate with the Government and the Revolutionary Guard on behalf of this group, rather than the KDPI.

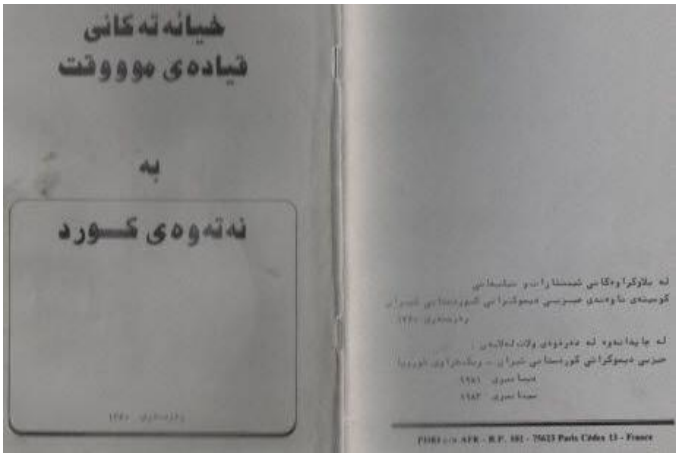


Image 64: *The Betrayals of the Temporary Leadership against the Kurdish People*, authored by Abdullah Hassanzadeh and Dr Ghassemlou.

Interestingly, after its split from the KDPI, the splinter group, with the mediation and support of the temporary leadership, opened negotiations with the Iranian Government and Revolutionary Guard, and was effectively armed by the latter. They were supported by the Barzanis and the Government, living in safe houses in Tehran and Urmia for some time. The KDPI arrested some of their supporters and detained them in the Dulehto prison near the Iran-Iraq border, close to Sardasht.

According to some regional political activists, the KDPI and Dr Ghassemlou were not in favour of this hostility and tension with Komala and the Barzanis. Ghassemlou, well-versed in political realism and power balances, knew that such issues could not be resolved merely through rhetoric. However, three factors led him to war: the Fourth Congress split group's belief that, according to the Tudeh and Communist Party definitions, the Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic were anti-imperialist regimes that needed strengthening; Ghassemlou's past association with the Tudeh Party, which, despite his lack of a contentious relationship with it, continually pressured him to conform; and the radicalism of Komala, which made the left-wing faction undesirable.

Beyond these issues, the power struggle within the Iranian Government led to the Kurdish issue being removed from the interim government's jurisdiction. This significant development placed the Kurdish issue in the hands of the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin, who, although now mostly reformist, were radical at that time and composed the Revolutionary

Guard. The Guard, being a politico-military organisation, forever closed the door to negotiation, peace and reconciliation in this context.

In the fourth volume of his memoirs, published in 2022, Masoud Barzani discusses the exhumation of his father. In Hashemi Rafsanjani's notes in his book *Crossing the Crisis*, Rafsanjani states, 'Kak Idris and Kak Masoud Barzani met with me twice, each time requesting military aid and support for their refugees.' In both meetings, Rafsanjani conditioned or deferred these requests on a serious response to the Iranian anti-revolutionary Kurds. Rafsanjani wrote near the time of the exhumation: 'They are more sincere and fight the Iranian anti-revolutionary Kurds better than the Talabani group [members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan].' Nevertheless, the exhumation of Barzani allowed the PUK to demand that the KDPI hand over those responsible for the act for trial. The KDPI's refusal led to a blind war between the two sides, with the main consequences being the collaboration of the temporary leadership's fighters with the Revolutionary Guard, training them to purge the Party from the villages.[1]

As a result of these events, ruthless massacres were carried out in villages such as Dilan Charkh, Kahrizeh Shekak, Halbe, and Koyik by the forces of the temporary leadership.

Although the leaders of the KDPI (now senior figures in the Kurdistan Regional Government) have not taken responsibility for the deaths of innocent villagers and similar incidents and have remained silent, they are accountable for these tragic events.

In the conflict between the PUK and the KDPI – in which the Revolutionary Guard supported the PUK – the PUK fought the KDPI in the road wars between Sardasht and Piranshahr. This led the KDPI to retreat from all Kurdish villages in Western Urmia, Dashtabil, Oshnaviyeh and Piranshahr, limiting its influence to the south and east.[2]

1 All the Barzani forces, from within and outside Iran, were supported by the Revolutionary forces alongside the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This included assistance in clearing Kurdish cities in Iran, then deploying Barzani forces to border areas and conflict zones alongside Islamic fighters and eventually integrating them with IRGC forces in the Kurdish cities of Iraq under the name Ramadan Headquarters. These were among the forms of support that Iran provided to Iraqi Kurdish parties in the early days of the Revolution (Mashregh News, 2021).

2 The KDP likely retreated due to the combined pressure from the PUK and the Revolutionary Guard, which created a significant military disadvantage. The PUK's

These wars continued until late 1984, when the KDPI relocated its bases and headquarters across the border to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Two and a half years after the issuance of the Mahabad Eight-Point Resolution, when the clashes between the temporary leadership's forces and the PUK and Komala were at their peak, a pamphlet was published by the Central Committee of the Democratic Party, authored by Dr Ghassemlou and Abdullah Hassanzadeh, titled 'The Betrayals of the Temporary Leadership to the Kurdish Nation.' This pamphlet, dated 15 June 1981 and written in Kurdish, outlined the antagonism of the temporary leadership toward the Kurdish fighters in Iran.[1] The pamphlet's language was harsh and sometimes insulting toward the PUK and its leaders. Reviewing the media propaganda of both parties from those years reveals that they accused each other of espionage, cooperation with intelligence agencies, and receiving money from Iran and Iraq, using derogatory terms. The KDPI referred to the temporary leadership as the 'temporary guards', while the temporary leadership labelled Ghassemlou 'Saddamlu'.

These claims reflect the failure of both parties to unite for the betterment of the Kurdish people at that time. The ideological support from the Iranian and Iraqi states, which both aimed to counter Kurdish independence, meant that they were consistently used as tools for exerting power. The principle of 'divide and conquer' is a clear example of the behaviour adopted by the Iranian and Iraqi Governments – setting the two parties against each other to control them.

The Battle of Paveh and the Order to Suppress the Infidels

Previously, I mentioned that the Battle of Naqadeh began at the end of April 1979. We left the city and moved to the village of Gerdashavan. After

support from the Revolutionary Guard likely strengthened its position, forcing the KDPI to withdraw from areas where it was outmatched. This retreat allowed the PUK to consolidate control over key regions, limiting the KDPI's influence to the south and east.

1 Eskandari, A. (n.d.) 'The 8-Article Resolution of Mahabad and The Provisional Leadership', Middle East and Kurdistan Analyst. Available at: https://ahmadeskandari.com (Accessed: 27 August 2022); Hassanzadeh, A. and Ghassemlou, A. (2014) Betrayals of the Provisional Leadership to the Kurdish Nation. Available at: https://ahmadeskandari.com (Accessed: 27 August 2022).



Image 65: Clippings from newspapers showing incidents of that time and the call for more violence.

some time, we migrated to Piranshahr but were forced to return to the village once again. The battles began one after another, with a three-month-long conflict being among the most notable.[1]

On 22 April 1979, as clashes started in the city and surrounding areas, the Government sent reinforcements to Kurdistan.

On 24 April 1979, a twenty-four-day battle erupted, resulting in hundreds of casualties and the destruction of countless homes. The army and the Revolutionary Guard, under the leadership of Mohammad Boroujerdi and other prominent commanders, were heavily engaged in the conflict. Armed civilians and Peshmerga forces in Sanandaj and its surrounding areas mounted a fierce resistance that lasted for twenty-four

1 The three-month war began in the spring of 1979. Armed forces of the parties withdrew from most cities for the safety of the people, leading to widespread conflict in the region. By September of the same year, a ceasefire was declared between the parties, and the Democratic Party triumphantly returned to some cities. People celebrated with sweets and drinks in the city squares for several days, and the youth engaged in dancing and festivities, which came to be known as the Self-Determination Festival. In cities such as Piranshahr, the Democratic Party held absolute power until autumn 1980, completely controlling the city's executive affairs.

days. During the fighting, parts of Sanandaj were subjected to aerial bombardment by the air force. Colonel Sadri, the commander of the Sanandaj garrison, acknowledged that his forces had fired hundreds of artillery shells daily into the city and at Peshmerga positions.

A few months later, the Battle of Paveh took place from 14 to 19 August 1979. In this battle, the Komala and Democratic parties fought against the gendarmerie and the Revolutionary Guard, with the latter led by Ali-Asghar Vessali. Until a day before the end of the conflict, the Kurds looked victorious. Dr Mostafa Chamran, an Iranian physicist, politician and commander who served as the first defence minister of post-revolutionary Iran, was even besieged, and there were rumours of his death, but it was later revealed that he had survived. After the Paveh conflict, Khomeini issued a jihad against the Kurdish parties and instructed the military forces to take stern action against 'the infidels' if they did not engage in battle.

Khomeini had previously stated, 'We fight against infidelity, not against the Kurds.' However, on 27 Mordad 1979, in his order to attack Kurdistan, he wrote, 'From various parts of Iran, different groups of the army, the Guards, and patriotic citizens have requested that I order them to move towards Paveh and end the unrest. I thank them and warn the Government, the army, and the gendarmerie that if they do not advance towards Paveh with their artillery, tanks and armed forces within 24 hours, I hold them all responsible.'[1]

That afternoon, Khomeini addressed the Assembly of Experts in Qom regarding the Kurds' request for autonomy:

They freed the borders, freed the pens, freed the speech, freed the parties, thinking these are just people . . . These are saboteurs; they should no longer be treated with leniency . . . These are a group of saboteurs, a corrupt population. We cannot allow them to do whatever they wish. Now they complain that you are doing these things. Like those who committed sabotage a few days ago . . . They create unrest and then blame the

1 *Keyhan* and *Ettela'at* newspapers, Sunday, 18 August 1979. Further publication details not available.



Image 66: The wave of summary executions by Khomeini's religious judge, Sadegh Khalkhali. Execution scene at Sanandaj Airport, summer 1979.

people . . . Such a people . . . We must act with severity, and we will act with severity.[1]

From Khomeini's message, it is clear that the leader of the Revolution viewed the Kurds and their parties as saboteurs and conspirators against the religion, referring to them as 'infidels'. Khomeini sought to portray the Kurds and their parties as enemies of the non-alien people, claiming they had nefarious and wicked goals and needed to be expelled. Through this,

1 Khomeini's speech was broadcast at 8 pm on the national radio and television. On 17 August 1979, the full text of his speech was published in the *Keyhan* and *Ettela'at* newspapers. A YouTube version of it is available here: https://youtu.be/TsSgqdxF9so.

he legitimised the mobilisation of all armed forces, including the Basij, the Revolutionary Guard and the army, for the suppression of the Kurds.

This message from Khomeini essentially declared total war against Kurdistan. The day after its issuance, the army and the Revolutionary Guard launched attacks on Kurdistan from land and air. The two Kurdish parties, Komala and the Democratic Party, and the Fedayeen Guerrilla Organisation, which had significant influence in Kurdistan, engaged the invaders and responded to their attacks. Lacking military balance, the Democratic Party, to ensure the safety of its citizens, eventually withdrew from the cities, shifting to guerrilla warfare against government centres.

Khomeini's ultimatum led to the Basij and volunteer Revolutionary Guard, aided by helicopter support, capturing Paveh. While news reports labelled the Naqadeh conflict as a local skirmish to undermine its legitimacy, the Paveh battle was different. With Khomeini's public edict, almost all of Kurdistan was drawn into the conflict. In the Paveh battle, all the Democratic, Komala and other active forces in the region were militarised, and the Government's actions led to widespread attacks on government centres and bases.

Following Khomeini's statements, President Bani-Sadr, as commander-in-chief, instructed the military forces not to loosen their boots until the Kurds were subdued.

The main impetus behind the attack on Kurdistan stemmed from the Central Government's policies toward the Kurdish parties. Beyond the battles, conflicts and guerrilla attacks, the future repercussions of those policies were significant. Khalkhali, Khomeini's judicial authority, travelled to Kurdistan and other regions of Iran, conducting rapid and mass executions in summary courts. All these events combined to ignite an all-encompassing war in Kurdistan, which continued for an extended period.

War Crimes in Kurdistan

Between 1979 and 1986, amid the conflicts and assaults by militia, Basij forces and the Revolutionary Guard, hundreds of civilians were massacred in the Maku region, which comprises Mahabad, Piranshahr, Sardasht, Oshnaviyeh, Naqadeh and the Kurdish villages in West Azerbaijan province. Many others were killed or injured in clashes between the

government forces and the Kurdish parties, and during the periods of temporary leadership. The majority of the massacres initially occurred in the villages of Qarna and Qalatan, followed by other villages such as Kani Mam Seyydeh, Arna, Sofian, Sarukani, Qareh Gool, Sarchenar (Kolbeh-ye Reza Khan), Gorakhaneh, Khalifehloo, Chaghal Mustafa, Sahouzi, Mohamma Shah (Mohammad Shah), Ender Qash, Dilan Charkh, Kharizeh Shekak, and Halbe and Koyik, Saruqamish and Bayzabad. Reports indicate that the number of casualties in Qarna and Qalatan was higher than elsewhere.

Such atrocities typically took place in Kurdish villages, while the Government largely protected the Turkish inhabitants of the region. However, occasionally, Turkish villages or mixed villages where Kurds and Turks lived together were also targeted. The height of these atrocities was the brutal massacre in Qarna, which caused widespread terror, leading villagers to hide in the mountains, in haylofts and in stables on sight of military forces.

Civilians often play no hostile role in conflicts but suffer the greatest harm and become the primary and most tragic victims of war.[1]

It is essential to understand that war crimes and the pursuit of justice for them are not subject to statutes of limitations. Investigations into the mass killings and atrocities that occurred during the first decade of the Iranian Revolution must be conducted independently and professionally, with the involvement of the United Nations. Only then can the victims and their families understand the causes and nature of these events. This right belongs not only to the families but to the entire Iranian society, which must be informed about the details of the repression and massacres in its history.

It is the right of the victims' families and survivors to see the perpetrators and masterminds of these crimes brought to justice. Additionally, reparations, which may include financial and restorative actions such as memorials, rehabilitation of reputations, and informing the public by providing government documents and archives, are crucial. Incorporating these truths into curricula is also vital for educating the new

1 'War crimes' refers to atrocities committed against civilians who are innocent and not involved in the conflict. These victims lack the resources and military capabilities that warring parties possess, leaving them defenceless and completely unprotected.

generations. Future generations need experiential and historical knowledge of what happened to their predecessors to gain a comprehensive understanding and a clear vision for the future of their society. We are responsible for enlightening them and, above all, for conveying historical events accurately, without bias or partisanship, as they truly occurred.

The Tragedy of the Qarna Massacre

The distressing reason that compelled all the clans to unanimously prevent my father from returning to Naqadeh was the harrowing story of the massacre of civilians in villages, especially in Qarna. Seven of the victims were related to us by marriage, intensifying the terror and anguish among my relatives.

I will recount the Qarna massacre here, but to better understand the situation in Kurdistan during those days, I will sequentially narrate other massacres from the years that followed Qarna. Some of our relatives and acquaintances also perished in these bitter and shocking events.

The media certainly failed to document these massacres in detail. To provide a more accurate account, I studied the scant documents and reports from that period and spoke with villagers and survivors. I was fortunate that some of my relatives still reside in the region and were able to assist me in gathering information.



Image 67: Burial in Qarna cemetery. 3 September 1979.


گزارش نماینده امام از کردستان و آذربایجان غربی

گزارش

گزارش : اسماعیل جمشیدی عکس‌ها : عرفانی خاکی

قتل عام در «قارنا» چگونه انجام شد؟

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Image 68: Reports of the Qarna massacre in national newspapers.

Qarna is a Kurdish village in the Naqadeh district, located seven kilometres from the city. On 2 September 1979, the village was attacked by armed forces for three hours, resulting in the deaths of sixty-eight innocent people.[1] The news only reported the number of fatalities, but behind that figure lay untold suffering and pain that, over the years, the survivors have recounted. To truly grasp the horror of that September day, one must hear the story from the villagers themselves.

After the Qarna massacre, similar bloodshed occurred in the villages of Qalatan, Kani Mam Seyydeh, Sarokani and Sufian, among others. A larger number of civilians, including men, women and children, were killed.

1 Following the Qarna incident, various estimates and speculations have emerged regarding the number of fatalities in the village. Some sources report 45 deaths, others cite 48, while some mention 68. According to a list of casualties published by the Abdul-Rahman Boroumand Foundation, there are 45 named individuals and 23 unidentified victims.

Some opposition writers and journalists compared these atrocities and the Qarna massacre to the Sabra and Shatila massacres. The Islamic Republic, however, strongly condemned such comparisons. The events in Naqadeh and the surrounding region also impacted other areas, where earlier conflicts between Kurds and Turks had been reported, leading to the evacuation of Kurdish villages in the Sumay and Beradost regions of Urmia.

Following the Revolution, bloody conflicts erupted in several Kurdish cities and villages in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces between the Kurds and the Government and its local agents. Notable among these were the battles in Sanandaj, Naqadeh and Paveh, which somewhat calmed down with the mediation of figures like Ayatollah Tâleghâni. After the Paveh conflict, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan entered the fray to defend Komala and the Democratic Party of Iran, resulting in numerous casualties. Just a day after Khomeini's decree for an assault on Kurdistan, a group of the Party's Peshmerga attacked the Naqadeh gendarmerie post with RPGs and light weapons, which apparently was a common occurrence at the time.

The people of Qarna, after several clashes and the killing of soldiers in the area, refrained from entering the city, fearing that the authorities might seek revenge for the killing. However, Azim Maboudi sent them a letter assuring them that they would not be harmed and that they could travel to nearby towns and villages for their needs. Azim Maboudi was a figure often accused of collaborating with SAVAK but was then a leader and head of the temporary city committee of Naqadeh.[1] He played a prominent role in the Naqadeh conflict and, on paper, wrote a letter – or, rather, a safe conduct note – to the trustees, headman and cleric of Qarna village, stating,

> Bohlul Golestan, Aziz Bazdar and Khalil Khosravi. After greetings, I request that you and the other brothers from the village of Qarna be allowed to travel to and from the city for provisions. Should anyone cause any trouble for you or the other Kurdish brothers, please report them immediately to

1 For example, the group of Tâleghâni's Mojahedin and others, who later came to Naqadeh and Kurdistan, played a role as intermediaries or peacekeepers. However, their presence and intentions were met with suspicion and doubt from both sides.

> the authorities or to me, so that I can have them arrested and handed over to the state officials under the pretext of counter-revolution. In summary, do not be afraid or disturbed; we are all brothers. With respect, Haji Azim Maboudi – Signed: 10/06/1979.

This safe-conduct note and similar ones reassured the villagers that they would not be attacked, so they decided not to leave the village. However, a few days later, a grim fate awaited the people of Qarna and nearby villages.

On 9 September 1979, a day before the massacre, a clash occurred near the Doab (in Kurdish, *Doavan*) gendarmerie post, which is situated above Qarna. Various accounts describe the incident. Gendarmerie troops from the Jaldian barracks, mainly Turks from Naqadeh, were ambushed by Democratic Party members, resulting in the death and injury of fifteen of them. One of the three survivors managed to reach the Jaldian barracks and alert others. Some suggest that the incident had regional provocation at its root, but this first account, although unproven, is the more commonly cited one.

It seems that this event stirred a vengeful sentiment in some, who decided to retaliate against the Kurds. Reports and various accounts suggest that the killing of these gendarmerie members and other conflicts within and around Naqadeh prompted figures like Mulla Hassani, the imam of Urmia, Azim Maboudi and Morad Qatari to incite the Turks and pave the way for the massacre of Qarna village. Some of the comrades and relatives of the deceased even sought revenge against the remaining Kurds in the city, most of whom were elderly at the time.

The following day, a group of armed men known as 'Young Men', led by a commander named Seyyed Jafar Taheri, departed from the Jaldian barracks in several vehicles and headed toward Naqadeh. According to the testimony of two survivors of the Qarna massacre,[1] upon reaching the mountainous area near the Doab post, which had been the site of the previous night's clash, they intended to enter the village of Doab, situated

1 Bordbar, B. (2010) 'Qarna massacre, an interview with an eyewitness' [YouTube video], 20 September. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eu1RRi2WUEM (Accessed: 17 March 2022).

lower in a valley. Initially, they encountered a few Democratic Peshmerga and engaged them. Due to the presence of Party forces in the area, they could not advance at first. When they eventually managed to enter the village, they found that the residents had fled, leaving only five elderly men and women, including two brothers named Haji Mina Khaland and Havla Khaland. These individuals were killed, and the group proceeded toward Naqadeh.

A few kilometres from Qarna village, seeing shepherds and farmers in the fields, the Young Men ruthlessly shot at the defenceless villagers. By the time they reached the village, they had already killed several farmers, two shepherds and even a number of the shepherds' sheep, dogs and donkeys. They killed nine members of one family who were on a tractor. They then targeted two children, who miraculously survived, despite being injured. The fifty-family village of Qarna, having trusted the safe-conduct letter, was having lunch in peace when the rest of the vehicles and armed men arrived at the village.

Mahmoud Masturzadeh, the village cleric, took the safe-conduct letter and a Quran and went to the vehicles, stating, 'You gave us a safe-conduct letter promising not to harm anyone!' However, the armed men killed him and, according to witnesses, decapitated him. His head was reportedly never found. They massacred the men on the northern side of the village and killed one woman and three children.

Amine Shal, who had used her body as a shield for her fourteen-year-old son Osman, recognised two of the attackers: Khosrow Pahlevan, who had been a circus performer in Naqadeh before the Revolution, and another named Qadari. This identification led to her death, her son's and her husband Haji Rahman's.

The attackers lured some of the village men out of their homes by claiming that Azim Maboudi was at the teahouse and wanted to speak with them. When the men left their houses, they were massacred either on the way to or behind the teahouse.[1] The remaining village men fled to the nearby mountains upon hearing the gunfire and seeing the vehicles.

1 Bordbar, 2013.

On that day, forty-eight people were killed in Qarna,[1] including three workers from other villages.

Seven of the victims from Qarna were related to us, and their surviving family members remember the details of this massacre vividly.

Decades later, there is still debate about the names of those who perpetrated this atrocity. Some of them are known locally and in Naqadeh. According to some, the person who guided the attackers was a person named Mam Aziz Qadari, from the Kurdish clan of Jaldian, or other men who have since passed away. During the process of collecting documents for this book, I spoke through an intermediary with Mam Aziz's brother about Jaldian, but he dismissed these claims as accusations, asserting that his brother was in Urmia at the time and unaware of the incident.

Due to complaints and follow-ups by the families, several fruitless meetings were held in the provincial and Tehran courts. People from that period went to the Mahabad Goodwill Committee (with Dariush Forouhar), and some families even visited Khomeini in Tehran, but the perpetrators were not identified nor apprehended.

Mehdi Bahadoran, who had been appointed by Ayatollah Montazeri (then serving as deputy leader) to investigate the Qarna massacre, published his report about a month later in *Ettela'at*.[2] He wrote,

> Extensive investigations revealed that the hired men from the gendarmerie and the so-called Mojahedin in Naqadeh, under the supervision of Maboudi and Najafi, massacred at least 45 innocent people in Qarna, a village in Naqadeh. The

1 Mulla Mahmoud Bahtarzadeh, Seyyed Rahman Taheri, Seyyed Mohammad Taheri, Seyyed Ismail Taheri, Hajj Seyyed Ali Taheri, Seyyed Karim Arvandi, Amina Sharifi Azar, Haji Rahman Sharifi Azar, Osman Sharifi Azar, Mustafa Azizi, Mohammad Azizi, Mohiuddin Abrushan, Hajj Sharif Abrushan, Rahman Abzan, Rahman Soleimani, Rahim Soleimani, Karim Soleimani, Qader Soleimani, Abdullah Ahmadpour, Omar Basi, Ja'far Basi, Mustafa Basi, Mohammad Shiro, Suleiman Hamzehpour, Ebrahim Pouya, Ebrahim Rasouli, Ali (the village shepherd), Hassan (13-year-old youth from Aliabad village), Zainab Ramin, Mrs Khatoozin Ramin, Karim Ramin, Ahmad Ramin, Rahman Ramin, Khosrow Afshin, Rasool Khosravi, Rahman Khosravi, Saeed Khosravi, Abdullah Khosravi, Morad Khosravi, Mustafa Khosravi, Abubakr Shishman, Ja'far Shishman, Ali Shishman, Aziz Marzang, Ahmad Saadatpour. (Source: Documents from the Abdolrahman Boroumand Foundation: https://www.iranrights.org/fa/library/document/3637.)

2 Exact publication details not available.

> victims were killed in their homes and later their bodies were moved to the desert to suggest they had died in battle. The villages were looted and set on fire. In Koupliko, five individuals were killed by Major Beyglari. This is due to the incompetence or treachery and conspiracy of the gendarmerie commanders on one hand, and the provocation of anti-Kurdish sentiments and the awakening of vengeful spirits against the Kurds on the other. Unfortunately, despite the identification of those responsible for this massacre, they remain unapprehended and unpunished due to the protection of Zahir Nejad (commander of the 64th Division of Urmia) for local malefactors.
>
> In Naqadeh and its surroundings, and throughout Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan, one of the factors behind the war and bloodshed is the presence of pseudo-religious SAVAK agents with anti-Kurdish bias and armed feudalists, who have been armed by the army and the gendarmerie. There is evidence suggesting that a mysterious conspiracy is underway in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan. Feudal lords and landowners, who were the Shah's executors in the past regime, have been heavily armed by figures such as Chamran, Zahir Nejad, the commander of the 64th Division of Urmia, Shahbazian, and other military and gendarmerie commanders. Meanwhile, the oppressed people, who have suffered for years at the hands of feudal lords, are under increasing pressure.

The Qarna massacre soon became a national issue, covered by newspapers across Iran. The following excerpt from *Keyhan* contains an account by the imam of the Kurds of Naqadeh and the governor of West Azerbaijan:

> Mulla Saleh Rahimi, referring to the tragic event in Qarna village, where a group of irresponsible armed individuals, in retaliation for the blood of the martyrs of the Doab pass, killed several villagers, said, 'The innocent people who were martyred in Qarna were all devoted to the Islamic

> Revolution.' Mr Haqiqi, the governor of West Azerbaijan, expressed deep sorrow over the incident and stated, 'Such actions cannot be attributed to the Government or Islam. Those who committed this crime are neither revolutionary nor true followers of Imam Khomeini. I assure you that the perpetrators of this incident will be promptly pursued and brought to justice.' Brigadier General Zahir Nejad, the commander of the 64th Division of Urmia, who was also present at the meeting, stated, 'We are not supporters of the murderers but rather supporters of the law.' He promised the Kurdish representatives of Naqadeh that a special force would be established in Naqadeh to ensure the security of all Kurdish brothers and sisters in the city.[1]

In contrast, Mulla Hassani, the imam of Urmia (Khomeini's representative at the time), when questioned by a reporter about his role in the Qarna and Qalatan incidents, said,

> No, I was not there. If I had been, I would have had no fear and would have admitted it. But while the clashes were occurring there, I was fighting in Bandar [the outskirts of Urmia], which had been attacked by the invaders. The accusations against me are slanders and lies, and this issue is completely false. I do not even know Qarna and Qalatan.

When asked, 'Are those who attacked Qarna and Qalatan to blame or not?', he responded,

> In the case of Qarna, 18 Mojahedin were martyred there, and several others were injured. The families of the martyrs went to the scene, and seven of the Mojahedin and guards were killed in a skirmish. Later, armed groups, to blame the Islamic Republic, engaged in killings themselves. As for Qalatan, since it happened recently, I have not yet investigated it . . .

1 Exact publication details not available.

A crucial point that has been overlooked until now can be observed in an interview with Brigadier General Zahir Nejad, the commander-in-chief of the country, in the *Ettela'at* newspaper. He acknowledges, without mentioning the killing of five people in the village of Doab, that gendarmerie forces and residents of Naqadeh went to Qarna and killed forty-five villagers.[1]

Some propagandists and clerics in the region compared this event to the battles of infidels in early Islam, and it was a frequent topic at political meetings, particularly the part of the story where the village cleric, armed with a Quran, went to confront the armed men and was killed. His beheading, the throwing aside of the Quran and the ruthless slaughter of innocents, particularly women and children, were among the endless sources of bitterness for the people.

The most thought-provoking aspect of the Qarna massacre is that, in the early years of a government founded on republican and Islamic principles, such a collective massacre occurred, and when the Qarna cleric came with the Quran to prevent this ruthless slaughter, he was killed. The juxtaposition of those elements coupled with the regime's failure to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the details of this incident suggest the possibility of collusion by government agents in this atrocity.

The regime, however, has attempted to present the issue differently and has repeatedly pressured the villagers to claim that their families were killed by anti-revolutionary forces. To achieve this, they even offered compensation and promises of membership in the Martyrs Foundation as a bribe. As a result of the people's resistance, this case remains open, and the Government has not shown a favourable attitude toward these villages. The lack of facilities and the absence of piped gas in these villages, such as Sufian and Sarokani, are consequences of the people's refusal to accept the demands of the military authorities. Accepting the military authorities' request to register the families of the Qarna-massacre victims as martyrs would legitimise a system that absolves the regime and the Government of any involvement in this tragedy and shifts the responsibility away from revolutionary forces. The people refuse to concede, to prevent granting legitimacy to the Government, and will not exchange the quest for justice for their loved ones with piped gas and other amenities.

1 Habilian, n.d.

Following the Naqadeh conflict and the Kurdish leaders' appeals, forces affiliated with Tâleghâni were sent to Naqadeh to curb the excesses of local armed groups. Hamid Reza Jalaipour, who was only twenty-one at the time, was appointed as the governor of Naqadeh and later as the governor of Mahabad. During his tenure as governor in Mahabad, fifty-nine young men and teenagers from the city were executed in Tabriz prison. Jalaipour is now aligned with the reformists and occasionally voices opposition to the policies of the Islamic Republic.

The Massacres of Qalatan, Sufian and Sarokani

Just a few months after the Qarna massacre, a similar tragedy struck the village of Qalatan in the Naqadeh district. On 7 April 1979 (during the Newruz holidays), armed forces attacked the village, killing sixteen people, including two children.[1] The Qalatan massacre spread a new wave of fear and hatred across the region. Contemporary accounts merely noted that, after the withdrawal of the gendarmerie and local armed groups from Piranshahr, sixteen people were killed, but the circumstances of their deaths were never clearly explained.

On 17 November 1979, a group of armed men from the Revolutionary Guard and Basij, mostly ethnic Turks from the province, raided the village of Sufian.[2] This attack resulted in the deaths of twelve villagers, including one woman.[3] Eyewitnesses reported[4] that the attackers captured some villagers but did not kill them immediately. Instead, they tortured them

1 The names of Qalatan-massacre victims include Ramazan Penhar, 11 years old; Haji Seyyed Hassan Qadami, 70 years old; Haji Mohammad Bayezidi, 75 years old; Haji Rasul Abdullah, 60 years old; Abdullah Ghorban, 50 years old; Osman Darvish Salim, 60 years old; Mohammad Kordi, 50 years old; Osman Amani, 30 years old; Mohammad Amin Abbasi, 30 years old; Hassan Hamze Koka, 22 years old; Ahmad Golabi, 21 years old; Jalal Bidokh, 18 years old; Abdullah Ah Liyani, 19 years old; Esmail Hamidi, 15 years old; Qader Kourostami, 35 years old; and Rahman Mine Mork, 35 years old.

2 Sufian is located 15 kilometres from Sarwokani, toward the city of Oshnaviyeh.

3 Sheikh Mohammad Pourkhazar, Zuleikha Touhidi, Seyyed Taha Touhidi, Haji Hossein Hosseinpour, Abdolrahman Khoshroo, Hassan Shamsi, Rahim Shavan, Mohammad Amin Shavan, Seyyed Hassan Sheikh Mohammad Amin, Abubakr Qazizadeh, Taher Qeyteran and Mulla Seyyed Hassan Hashemi.

4 Kurdistan Tribunal (2020a) 'The massacre of the villages of Sofian and Sarokhani - Part One (Kurdish)' [YouTube film], 17 November. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXEz8qatrRI (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

severely, breaking their legs with planks and iron bars, leaving them to die in their own blood.[1] Details were also relayed by survivors.

As with the Qarna massacre, the media reported on this event, documenting the names of the deceased and the wounded. Tragically, most of the victims were over fifty years old and unable to flee.

Farther east, the men of Sarokani faced dire circumstances. When clashes occurred between the Pasdaran and Peshmerga forces, military bases in Jaldian and Pasveh also became involved, turning the village into a battlefield. When the fighting subsided, villagers were still exposed to attacks, retaliation and shrapnel. Consequently, they spent most of their days in the mountains and only returned home at night.

Sarokani, a picturesque village with flowing springs along the road, sits between the prominent Pasveh and Jaldian bases, roughly in the middle of Naqadeh and Piranshahr. Some of our relatives (the Yekaw) settled in this village after relocating from the Lajan area. I have fond memories and a good understanding of this village from attending mourning and wedding ceremonies with my father and other family members.

If one travels from the Pasveh base toward the Jaldian crossroads, the large and strategic Jaldian base is on the route. There is also a well-known



Image 69: Mourning at the graves of the Qalatan victims. 28 March 1980.

1 Kurdistan Tribunal (2020b) 'The massacre of the villages of Sofian and Sarokhani - Part Two (Kurdish)' [YouTube film], 17 November. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-wGC9Npnzo (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

hill called Chel Bezna ('Forty Goats') nearby and a village called Qubeh. In early 1979, local Pasdaran and Basij forces, mainly from Naqadeh, Miandoab and Urmia, established a base on this hill and set up checkpoints on the main road to control traffic. Several times, their snipers, stationed on the hill, fired warning shots at villagers farming or ploughing near the base, resulting in the deaths of several civilians.

In the early years of the Revolution, the Peshmerga controlled most villages near Piranshahr and came to the villages at night to collect supplies, shop and visit their families. In the autumn of 1979, the Chel Bezna base forces killed a man named Mam Nasoor Fattahollahi from the village of Kolich and five others, including two children. Mam Nasoor's family and other villagers complained to the base and later to the Jaldian and Pasveh camps, seeking an explanation for the continuous killing of civilians by the base personnel, but received no response.

Shortly after, a group of Peshmerga from the Qandil division launched a night raid on the Chel Bezna base, killing all but one of the personnel and setting the base on fire. It seems that the local Pasdaran quickly re-equipped the base, which was attacked twice more by the Peshmerga. Each time, the Pasdaran fortified the base more than before to maintain control over this crucial and strategic hill.

Exactly one month later, the Pasdaran launched an assault on Sarokani with significantly more resources than during the Sufian attack, including additional troops, military vehicles and artillery. Villagers say that a Turkish neighbour named Iskander warned them


۱۶ نفر در نزدیکی اشنویه کشته‌شدند

جنازه کشته‌شدگان در گورستان اشنویه به خاک سپرده شدو

شهر نیز به عنوان اعتراض به این حادثه یکپارچه تعطیل گردیده

محمد تقی فردی ملکی

خبرنگار اعزامی اطلاعات از بیرانشهر به اشنویه گزارش داد که طی یک حمله‌برو ستای مثالانان، اشنویه بیش از ۱۶ نفر از روستائیان کشته شدند. این گزارش حاکی است که در روز ۶ فروردین یکگروه از افراد زاندارمری و افراد غیر نظامی مسلح وارد روستای مثالانان در ۱۰ کیلومتری اشنویه شدند.

ساکنان روستا در حالی که سرگرم کار روزانه بودند، به طرف کوه ها و اطراف روستا فرار کردند و ۲۶ نفر نیز در خانه های خود و طویله ها و انبار مخفی شدند.

پس از خارج شدن افراد نظامی از روستا، اعلام شد که تاکنون جنازه ۱۶ نفر از روستائیان در مقابل خانه‌هایشان بدست آمده و ۱۰ نفر نیز که بضرب گلوله مجروح شده بودند توسط مردم اشنویه به بیمارستان این شهر انتقال یافتند.

۴ نفر از مجروحان که حالشان بشدت وخیم بود به مهاباد انتقال یافتند.

علی محمودزاده

عبدالله احمدپور

عبدالله ورمزیاد

ناصر امیرزاده (سرباز وظیفه)

سلطانعلی کریمی

باباعلی آغاخانی

Image 70: Press reports on the casualties and conflicts in the region. 1979.

that the Pasdaran and Basij were preparing to attack Sarokani and advised them to flee. Iskander had relocated to Naqadeh with his family but visited his fields in Sarokani daily.

As the attack began, the armed forces killed farmers they encountered. When news reached the village, three men armed themselves to defend their homes but were killed immediately. As usual, the young men and most villagers fled to the mountains, while some elderly who could not escape remained behind. The armed forces killed twenty-two people that day, including three elderly women named Ayesha Sheikh (Rashi), Pure Rogheyeh and Kolthoum Mam Samail, as well as nineteen elderly and sick individuals.[1] Ahmad Kawmer and Darwish (Panj Baralah) were executed in their beds. A baby, whose mother was named Khatereh, was also killed.

The armed forces then set fire to homes, haystacks and animal shelters, burning the entire village, except for one house that was slightly away from the village.

As the villagers fled, they informed the officers at the Pasveh base, which was under army control. At that time, the army was not as involved in the conflict and still enjoyed some popularity among the people.

A few days later, villagers, with the army's help, gathered the bodies of their loved ones. Some officers were visibly affected upon seeing the bloodied and bloated bodies of civilians, while others, in anger, threw their insignia into the village's famous spring. This responsible and compassionate action by the army showcased a different approach to the ones taken by other military forces, such as the Pasdaran and Basij, and earned them greater trust and popularity among the people.

The villagers, given a brief reprieve, collected the remains of animals, their household belongings and the bodies of their loved ones before leaving the village.

Most of the deceased from this village were buried in a place called Daya Sheikhi, near a shrine in the village of Shalamjaran.

Sarokani faced another attack by the Pasdaran and Basij forces, resulting in additional casualties, including one of our relatives named Aziz from

1 Abdullah Ahmadnejad, Darvish Balandeh, Mahmoud Balandeh, Qader Petch Petch, Khatoon Talani, Ahmad Cheroundeh, Maryam Hassanpour, Ebrahim Souri, Haji Mostafa Shaole, Ayesha Sheikhi, Maroof Alipour, Haji Ebrahim Kalbash, Darvish Hossein Mostafa Azmoudeh, a one-year-old infant (daughter of Khatereh), Rasul . . . .

the Yekaw family (a cousin of my father's from the Rasuali branch). Kak Aziz died from his injuries after being transferred to the Jaldian camp. His family believes that the camp did not provide proper medical care, which led to his death.

Following this attack, all the villagers present, including elderly men, women, children and Aziz's mother, wife and two children, were loaded onto military trucks, kept for a day at the Jaldian camp, and then transported via Naqadeh to the central headquarters of the Pasdaran and later to Urmia Prison. About fifteen days later, the villagers were released in groups of twenty to thirty.

During those days, we were displaced in Gerdashavan, but we did everything we could to assist the Yekaw families who had taken refuge in nearby villages. Male relatives attended Kak Aziz's memorial service at the local mosque, but, due to the area's insecurity, they returned to Gerdashavan the same evening.

Like the people of Qarna, these villagers stood firm and refused to shift the blame to anti-revolutionaries, resisting any attempts to absolve the Government of responsibility. Promises and assurances to these villagers proved ineffective, and many are still waiting for a day when a thorough investigation into the deaths of their loved ones will be conducted and the truth revealed.

Deadly Moments in the Jaran War

The 25th of Dey 1359 (16 January 1981) brings back haunting memories for me. The Jaran War,[1] the most harrowing event I experienced in Gerdashavan, began on that day.

The Central Government gradually wrested control of Piranshahr from the Democratic Party, claiming to have liberated and cleansed it. The army and the Revolutionary Guard were engaged with Iraqi forces along the Haji Omran border region. The main road from Naqadeh to Piranshahr and the northern part of Piranshahr toward the border were under

1 Jaran (also this could be spelled *Jêran*) was well-known in the past, particularly during the 1960s, due to the emergence of figures like Murad Shirezh, a supporter of the Democratic Party who was assassinated in 1968. In fact, during the same road-clearing battles on the Piranshahr-Sardasht Road, Murad's other brother, Mohammad Shirezh, was also killed (Hessami, 1971).

Government control (though only a small part of it, and only during the day). The remaining areas and villages were held by the Democratic Party, and some regions were under the control of Komala forces.

About five kilometres from Piranshahr, near the sugar factory and the Darbakeh route, armed Peshmerga forces were stationed. There were four main routes from Piranshahr: one from Naqadeh to Piranshahr; one from Mahabad to Piranshahr, known as the Meydan Road, which was less frequented due to its mountainous terrain; one from Piranshahr to Oshnaviyeh; and another from Piranshahr to Sardasht. At that time, the Government controlled the main roads daily, but many sections of the mountainous and border road from Piranshahr to Sardasht were still held by the Peshmerga.

On the route from Piranshahr to Sardasht, there was a village called Jaran. It was across the Lawin River, not far from Gerdashavan. At that time, the Revolutionary Guard, with the help and guidance of the temporary leadership forces (the Barzanis), had begun clearing and advancing from Piranshahr toward Sardasht. The Democratic Party had a small number of armed forces and knew that resistance was unlikely. Therefore, they publicly announced that all men who were members of the so-called Bargari 'defence force' should be mobilised. These were the reserve volunteers of the Democratic Party, who in emergencies often fought with personal weapons. My father, uncle and most of the men in the family were part of that force.

At that time, there was a public belief in supporting the movement and the struggle. Many young men voluntarily joined the Peshmerga or assisted in other organisations. Perhaps they had no other choice, as social pressure was very strong, and if a man with a weapon did not go to war, he would be accused of cowardice and a lack of manliness, to the extent that it was said he lacked national pride. The revolutionary and nationalist atmosphere was so intense that the men of Gerdashavan either volunteered or were compelled to go to war.

It is said that most Kurds are inherently nationalistic – as if it runs in their blood – as they have suffered much injustice yet remained steadfast in their loyalty. Many believe that even a communist Kurd, who is a world citizen, or an intensely religious Kurd, who sees all Muslims as equal and

brotherly, is in reality a nationalist Kurd. However, this trait sometimes takes on an extreme aspect.[1]

During those days, the atmosphere in the village was grim and heavy. Everything seemed to move slowly, as if life had come to a standstill. The exhaust smoke of tanks gradually rose in the distance, and the roar and firing of artillery reached Gerdashavan. With every shot, it felt as if an arrow struck heart or soul.

The military superiority of the Revolutionary Guard was evident, but against the resistance of the Peshmerga, they could not advance. Ambulances, with their sirens blaring, transported military casualties to Piranshahr and the barracks, while women beat their faces and prayed fervently for the war to end soon and for their men to be saved. The elderly continually prayed, and everyone knew that their father, brother, husband or son might not return home. Every moment was filled with anxiety and anticipation for the distressing news of a loved one's death, as if the living in Gerdashavan were constantly dying and coming back to life.

The distressed women rushed from one rooftop to another, trying to see more clearly what was happening on the battlefield. Some people who had captured military cameras monitored the events in Jaran from the historical hill of the village. Everyone snatched the cameras from each other, gaining nothing but anxiety and sorrow. They lacked the ability even to focus the camera on their eyes, perhaps from anxiety; perhaps because they didn't know how. With every shot, a cry rose from the heart of a mother, wife or lover. The crowd could do nothing but wail and scream in sympathy.

1 Some Kurds believe that nationalism is a response to the occupation they've experienced and that Kurds, whether communist, religious or liberal, share an equal attachment to Kurdish nationalism. However, many Kurds struggle to define 'nationalism' accurately. As a friend put it, from the perspective of many Kurds living in Iran, the main enemy is the Islamic Republic. Because of Saddam Hussein's hostility toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, he was seen as a hero by many Kurds, particularly since he even aided Iranian Kurdish parties. Yet, his air force regularly bombed those same people, and in places like Sardasht and Halabja, chemical attacks poisoned the inhabitants. This all highlights a strange paradox, as Saddam is regarded as a hero by Iranian Kurds, but as a criminal by Iraqi Kurds. This differing view of Saddam, which reflects the distinct positions and interests of the two Kurdish groups, challenges the notion of Kurds as a single, unified, nationalist ethnic group with common goals and interests, and raises doubts about their unity and shared aspirations.

Some elderly women, like my grandmother Amine, recited *Ayat al-Kursi*. The elderly sought refuge in God, while we children were terrified. Life showed its ugly and hideous face more than ever before.

After the so-called cleansing of Piranshahr, we returned to my grandfather's village, this time living with a relative whose house was near Mam Rasu's home. Mam Rasu had a large family, and his sons were involved in the war. Feqi Hassan, who had recently been killed in the shelling of Piranshahr, was his son. Now, his three other sons, Kak Hamid, Kak Yusuf, and his eldest son Kak Hussein, had gone to the Jaran war.



Image 71: Mam Rasu and his three sons, Kak Hassan, Hamid and Hussein.

Yusuf was the younger brother and an official Peshmerga of the Democratic Party; he had been deployed to the area a few days earlier. Subsequently, the others had also gone. My father, Uncle Ahmad, Kak Hamid, and Kak Hussein were positioned in two trenches close to each other and not far from the village of Jaran. They had received minimal military training, but after the Naqadeh war they were not unfamiliar with weapons. That day, they fought for hours, retreating and advancing several times, but returned with no good news. My father said, 'The death of Mam Rasu's sons was tragic and unbelievable, and everything happened in a few minutes.'

The story goes that news came that Kak Yusuf was surrounded in one of the village houses. Upon hearing this, his brother Kak Hussein picked up his officer's uniform and crawled out of the trench, ignoring warnings and advice from his comrades, to go help Kak Yusuf. Near the village, one of the snipers struck him with two bullets.

It was said at the time that Barzani forces were assisting the Iranian Government's troops on the front lines. They reportedly used a tactic where they disguised themselves as friendly forces and waved their scarves as a sign of asking for help. That drew the enemy's attention, and the Barzani forces then targeted them. While their actual involvement in this war remains speculative, it is confirmed that the temporary leadership had a significant presence in many other regional conflicts.

When the news of Hussein's injury and possible death reached them, Kak Hamid, the younger brother, wanted to go save his brother. Despite objections from my father and others, he was resolute. Hamid ran toward his brother, discarding his weapon. He was killed just a few metres from Kak Hussein. Kak Yusef, unaware of the situation, eventually broke through the siege with a few other Peshmerga and left the village, only to find his two brothers' lifeless bodies. In a state of madness, he beat his head and face.

As night approached, the sound of artillery and tanks gradually diminished, until we heard nothing at all. That winter evening felt like the end of the world. Those who remained in the village and were still alive went with tractors to collect the wounded and dead. The tractors had to cross the Lawin River to reach the village. After the crossing, news came that Gerdashavan had lost people, although it was not yet clear who they were. Only whispers suggested that one of the deceased was named Ahmad. My world shattered. Was my uncle dead? Just like Haji, our neighbour, who had been shot in Naqadeh? Many nights I had woken from nightmares about Haji. Could it be that my uncle, who had taken my father's place for me while I filled the void of his deceased son, was no longer there? The thought was unbearable, causing me intense grief and helplessness. I hoped desperately that the Ahmad who had been killed was not my uncle.

The Romanian tractor, carrying the bodies, howled like a wounded wolf as it climbed the village's riverbank, emitting black smoke. Everyone knew it carried the dead from the Jaran battle. I chewed my nails, staring at the road, wondering which of the bodies behind the tractor were our relatives. My father or uncle? My father's cousins or his cousin's sons? We were all related – blood kin – family. I don't know how long it took for the tractor to reach the village – perhaps just a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity.

When the tractor arrived, a wailing crowd greeted it. Three from Gerdashavan had been killed: Kak Hamid and Kak Hussein, the sons of Mam Rasu, and a young man named Seyyed Ahmad, who had recently left the Komala ranks to join the Democratic Party. It was said that Kurdish casualties were relatively small compared to the enemy's, who had suffered massive losses or, more accurately, had been sacrificed by their commanders, but, for a small village like Gerdashavan, losing three from the same family – two sons – was no small pain.

On the descent, I saw my father and then my uncle, who had dropped their weapons from their shoulders. I looked at my father: his clothes were bloodstained, and his face was sorrowful. His turban, which he always wore, was askew.[1] My father loved Kak Hamid and Kak Hussein very much; they were the sons of his cousin and his friends.

They lowered the bodies in front of the mosque, which was adjacent to my grandfather's house. The sound of mothers wailing for their dead children was unending. Gerdashavan was in mourning, and I, a child, was overwhelmed with shock and awe, although I was secretly relieved that my father had returned alive and that the report of my uncle's death was not true and, instead, another Ahmad had been killed.

That day, for the first time, I saw my father and uncle crying. They had not yet come to terms with the death of Feqi Hassan, and now the deaths of Mam Rasu's two other sons had compounded their grief. My father was deeply shaken, perhaps feeling a sort of shame for having survived.

Later, I heard that he and the men who returned alive were taunted as cowards, suggesting that they should have died like the others. I cannot accept this. Does it mean that all men who fought in wars across centuries and survived were cowards? Can men who went to war be humiliated and blamed for surviving, instead of honoured? Can bravery and courage be interpreted as cowardice and fear because they survived? Such judgements are only possible when a superficial perspective limits rational action – when people are driven purely by emotions and misconceptions.

I had said that Kak Muhammad, during the establishment of the Kurdish Republic, was among the Peshmerga and loyalists of the Kurdish Government, and he was a remarkable and powerful man. Everyone was amazed at his patience and strength. Having lost one of his sons in battle

1 In the Mokrian region, men would wear turbans with hanging tassels.

just a few months prior, he now had the bodies of two more sons placed before him. He sat in front of the bodies of his young sons and kissed their foreheads. He did not allow anyone to wash the bodies, insisting, 'I must wash my children myself.' To this day, Mam Rasu is remembered as a symbol of manhood and honour. It truly required endurance beyond the capacity of an ordinary person.

The other children and I watched from between the legs of those standing in the front row as the bodies were washed and shrouded. We were faced with death in its stark reality, yet it was dignified death. This was the second time I had seen corpses, but this time was different. There were more of them. Their bodies were riddled with bullet wounds, bleeding profusely. They tried to stem the flow of blood with cloths and plastic bags, but it was futile.

I stood like a statue, just watching. These dead were my relatives, who had kissed my face and joked with me. I saw them almost every day – even early that morning when Kak Hussein, weighed down by bullets, came after my father. He pinched my cheek and kissed my face. I could still sense the smell of cigarette smoke and the roughness of his beard when he kissed me, but now they were washing his corpse in front of me.

In the darkness of the night, they buried the bodies to avoid detection by the Naqadeh garrison and prevent artillery fire on us. We had no time to mourn safely; our grief was suppressed. From that day on, Gerdashavan bore a sorrow. After the bloody Jaran incident, genuine joy never returned to the place.

Mam Rasu is one of countless fathers in this war-torn land who became a symbol of resistance. He sacrificed more than one of his beloved children for the defence of their land and beliefs and lived a life filled with grief and longing in their absence. Later, I recorded some of his memories. He was a man who, neither in his words nor in his demeanour, showed any regret for the death of his sons in the cause of Kurdistan.

Some time later, several regional commanders of the Democratic Party came to offer their condolences and comfort, but he was displeased with their visit and exclaimed, 'You should not offer me condolences! I sacrificed all three of my sons for the cause of Kurdistan, and I take pride in their martyrdom.' He later told us, as teenagers, 'The truth is, without the courage of me and fathers like me, no one would witness the Kurdish people's struggles. They have brought everything from tanks and artillery

to the most modern aircraft to suppress us, but, rest assured, they fear our bravery.' He recounted that, on the night he washed Hussein's body, he wrapped it and went to tend to Hamid. As he washed him, Hamid kept smiling at him and appeared happy.

Kak Muhammad and people like him are a clear example of the Kurdish nationalistic spirit in its fullest sense. Those who, even after losing their loved ones and pieces of themselves, never feel regret or remorse because of their sacred cause of Kurdish independence, and do not blame themselves. He often lamented that the Barzani forces fought alongside the regime's guards against the Kurdish parties, expressing disbelief that Mulla Mustafa Barzani had come to aid the Kurdish Government while his sons, Idris and Masoud, hand in hand with the enemy, were killing the survivors and younger generations of the same regime.

The Bloodstains of Khans on the Barzanis' Hands

Years earlier, the Barzanis had been involved in a peculiar massacre, which is worth revisiting before I return to my childhood days and recount the Barzanis' role in the tragedies of the early years of the Islamic Republic.

In the autumn of 1945, after suffering a defeat by the Iraqi army in the Barzan and Zibar regions, Mulla Mustafa Barzani[1] sought refuge in Eastern Kurdistan, or Iranian Kurdistan. Initially, his presence was for refuge, but with the formation of the Republic of Mahabad (/Kurdistan), he was appointed as one of the generals of the Kurdish army. When the Kurdish Government collapsed following the execution of Qazi Muhammad and his associates, Barzani and his men, primarily from the Barzan tribes, gradually left Iranian soil and sought asylum in Russia, crossing the Aras River.

On 23 January 1947, 17 Barzani gunmen visited the village of Silveh,[2] where their host was Mam Hussein, brother of Qarani Agha Pasveh and

1 Mulla Mustafa Barzani was born in 1903 and was a leader of the Kurdish nationalist movement and the first leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq. He passed away in the United States in 1979. His body was initially buried in Oshnaviyeh, but later it was returned to his birthplace in Barzan, Iraqi Kurdistan.

2 Silveh is a border village in the Lajan district, located 17 kilometres from Piranshahr in West Azerbaijan province. The Silveh Dam is an earth-fill dam constructed on the Lawin River near Silveh village. The primary purpose of the dam is to facilitate inter-basin water transfer for agricultural purposes. The project's main objective is to transfer water

chief of the Mamesh tribe. At the upper room of Agha, four brothers, the sons of Kak Rahman Dehgoorji, along with Ibrahim Agha, son of Qarani Agha, and several others, were all present and armed. According to one account, one of Mam Hussein's servants whispered in his ear, 'The head and feet they have prepared are not enough; what shall we do?' He quietly replied, 'Prepare some fried dates and halva alongside the food.' The Barzani gunmen interpreted this hushed conversation as a plot to kill them and suddenly opened fire on their hosts.

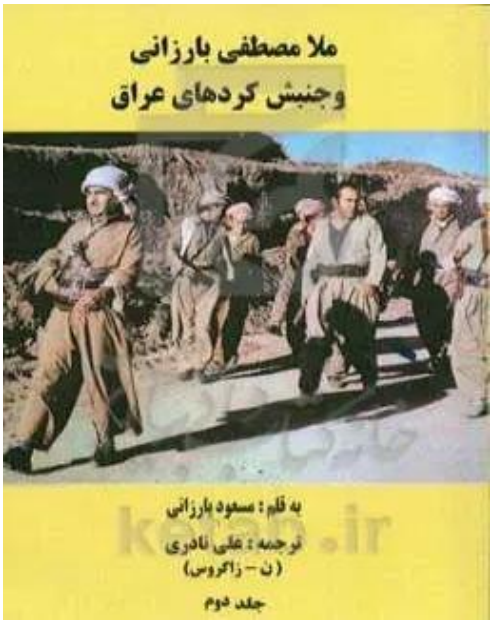


Image 72: Six-volume book authored by Massoud Barzani.

Another account suggests that Mam Hussein had participated in a previous war between the Shah's government forces and the Barzanis, during which one of the Barzanis' fathers was killed. Many believed that this massacre was an act of revenge by Khalil, the son of the murdered man, and that he was the cause of the bloodshed.

In yet another narrative, according to Masoud Barzani's memoirs,[1] the plan was to arrest and transfer some of the local khans, including those

from the Lesser Zab basin to Lake Urmia's basin to restore the lake and irrigate 9,400 hectares of farmland. Construction of the dam began in 2004, and it was expected to be operational by late 2016. After the dam was filled, Silveh village was submerged (Young Journalists Club, 2015).

1 Massoud Barzani writes, 'Mulla Mustafa embarked on a journey to the Mamesh, Piran and Mangur tribes, where he explained to their leaders that the Barzanis had agreed to remain on Iranian territory until the spring. He asked them not to assist the Iranian army in suppressing him and not to block their retreat routes. Although the leaders all gave Barzani favourable assurances, most did not keep their promises. Instead, they took arms from the Government and, like civilian mercenaries, launched military operations, effectively becoming subjects of the Iranian army.' He continues, 'A Barzani force moved from Oshnaviyeh to the village of Silveh on 24 January 1947, as the Mamesh

mentioned, because they had broken their pact with Mulla Mustafa.[1] Instead, they were all killed, with only Abbas, the youngest son of Kak Rahman, surviving. One of Mam Hussein's gunmen also killed a Barzani member. The locals initially buried the Barzani dead and then twelve others.[2] After looting a substantial amount of food and horse gear from the warehouse, the Barzanis took Abbas prisoner, but he miraculously escaped, supposedly under the pretext of praying while on the way.

After the defeat of the Aylul Uprising[3] in 1974 and the Barzanis' subsequent flight to the Iranian Shah and the Kurdistan Region around Naqadeh, the eldest son of Mulla Mustafa, Idris Barzani, along with prominent local khans, including Guli Khan of Bozjalu, met with Fattah, son of Mam Hussein (who had witnessed the massacre but survived because of his youth) to negotiate peace with the Mamesh tribe. Through mediation and diplomacy, this case of murders and revenge was closed.

The event shook the entire region. For a long time, people recounted stories about it. I had heard many versions of this story from my grandmother, Amine, who had baked bread for Qarani Agha and his son during those days and had memories of that time. Others also spoke extensively about the bloody details of the event. During this period, the Mamesh khans were weakened, and Mam Aziz, who had recently

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tribe leaders from the Qarani Agha clan were holding a meeting there. The force was instructed only to arrest them and bring them back to Oshnaviyeh . . . Gunfire erupted from all sides, resulting in the deaths of 12 tribal leaders, while on the Barzani side, Mohammad Mirza Kakshar was killed, and Baqi Kaniboti and Darwish Khanoubidoudi were wounded. Those tribal leaders who survived were captured, along with several others from the villages of Shawele, Nalus, and Pasveh, and they were taken to Oshnaviyeh . . . The impact of this action was widespread, leaving all the other tribal leaders intimidated (Barzani, 1997, Vol. 2, p.116).'

1 Barzani forces arrested Mam Qadir Shawele, Ali Agha Pasveh, and Haji Aziz Badaqi, taking them to Oshnaviyeh for punishment, but they escaped from prison during the night.

2 Including Mam Hossein, Ibrahim Agha, Abbas, Bayazid, Mam Qadir, and Ismail, Ahmad and Kaka Sawar.

3 The Aylul Uprising (1961–1975): The Barzani Uprising, also known as the Aylul Uprising, was a conflict that began on 11 September 1961 between the Iraqi Government, led by Abdul Karim Qasim, and the Kurds of the country, led by Mustafa Barzani. The conflict continued until 1970, culminating in an agreement between Saddam Hussein and Mustafa Barzani to grant autonomy to the Kurds, which was then enshrined in the Iraqi constitution (Fondation Institut Kurde de Paris, n.d.)

succeeded his father, was deeply distressed and depressed by the loss of his uncle, his brother and other family members. He remained in his residence for a long time.

The Leadership's Service to the Islamic Republic

For some time, the forces of the temporary leadership,[1] led by Idris and Masoud Barzani, fought against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard and the Democratic Party. The situation was that a group from the temporary leadership, in alliance with Iranian forces, launched an attack on the Peshmerga forces of the Party and moved to the villages of Halbe and Koyik, part of the Naqadeh region. On the morning of 10 March 1983, the two sides clashed there, resulting in several deaths near the village of Karezai Shkak. The fighting continued, and more Barzani were killed.

The forces of the temporary leadership were engaged in a prolonged battle with the Democratic Party, and there were continual casualties. The ongoing conflict and the high number of casualties, coupled with allegations against the Party for exhuming Mulla Mustafa and desecrating his grave, had deeply angered the Barzani family and their supporters. These grievances led, after the conflict in Karezai Shkak, to the execution of the villagers of Karezai Shkak and Dilan Charkh under the pretext of villagers sheltering Democratic Peshmerga. The residents of Karezai Shkak fled to Dilan Charkh, near Naqadeh, but the forces pursued them.

Dilan Charkh was familiar to us, and the massacre of its people added to our grief. Karim Yekav, a relative on my father's side and the prospective husband of my aunt Asmar, lived in this village. It was a place we frequently visited for family gatherings and events such as weddings and funerals.

1 *Qiyadah* means 'provisional leadership' or 'temporary leadership'. After the defeat of the Kurdish movement in Iraq following the 1975 Algiers Agreement between the Shah and Saddam Hussein, the activities of the Kurdistan Democratic Party were halted. In 1976, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan began its political and military activities. Shortly after, the KDP also resumed its activities under a provisional leadership. This name was officially dropped after nearly two years, and the party continued to operate as the KDP.

Around ten in the morning, the villagers became aware of the attack by the temporary leadership's forces. Kak Karim, like other men, returned from the fields to seek refuge at his home. Seeing the attackers approaching, he fled to the nearest place and hid in the house of a neighbour, Khidr Mohammadi. Some members of the temporary leadership found them, dragged them into the yard and, using the Badini dialect, insulted them with the phrase *sayi kura sa* ('son of a dog'), a well-known slur among them. They then beat both men with wooden sticks and shot them in front of their families.

Several others were also shot along the path to the village mosque, which was adjacent to Kak Karim Yekav's home. Nine men from Karezai Shkak were dragged out of the mosque, from among women and children, and executed beside a thicket.

Another group of the Barzani armed men, disregarding the cries and pleas of women, children and the village cleric, pinned several detainees against the back wall of the mosque and executed them.

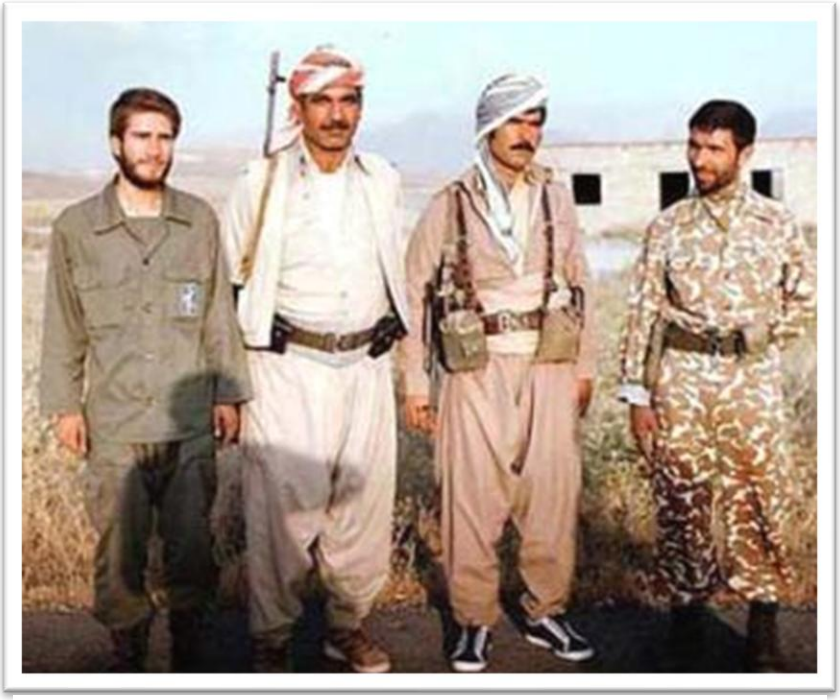


Image 73: Collaboration between the temporary leadership and the Revolutionary Guard in the early days of the Revolution.

The attackers' actions did not end with killings; sometimes they mutilated the dead. For instance, they severed the ears of two victims from Karezai Shkak, who were later found in a pit. This atrocity remained a topic of discussion among the villagers for a long time and became a nightmare for children.

As the massacre in Dilan Charkh reached its peak, the remaining villagers from Karezai Shkak fled to the main Naqadeh-Oshnaviyeh road, but the forces of the temporary leadership and the IRGC detained them and took them to the IRGC headquarters in Naqadeh. The IRGC interrogated them while they were still grieving and imprisoned all of them. The next morning, some prisoners were released to bury the dead, and they returned to the village. They were faced with the bodies of seventeen from Karezai Shkak and twelve[1] from Dilan Charkh, all gathered in the mosque. The governor, district chief and military personnel from the IRGC visited the village, saw the devastation and the bodies left behind, and left without comment.

A day or two later, we and the family learned of Kak Karim Yekav's death. On the insistence of my family, I went to Dilan Charkh with them to attend the memorial service. The village was still under military blockade, and men had to show identification to enter. Bloodstains were visible on the ground and in the alleys, and bullet marks on the mosque walls were prominent.

We were astonished that Kak Karim and these twenty-nine others were brutally killed when the conflict had occurred several villages away and the villagers were completely unaware of the presence of the Democratic forces and the temporary leadership in the region. They were simply living their daily lives.

After the memorial service, we went to the village cemetery, where all the bodies were buried side by side. Two of the twelve killed in Dilan Charkh were fourteen- and sixteen-year-old teenagers who had been killed with their fathers. Several children were among the dead in Karezai Shkak, and women were also among the innocent victims of these battles.

1 Khizr Mohammadi, Abdulkarim Yekaw, Rasul Yousufi (father), Abu Bakr Yousufi (son), Abu Bakr Maroufi Nejad, Mulla Mustafa Bariki, Omar Nasiri (father), Rahman Nasiri (14-year-old son), Bayezid Soroush, Ali Kak Rash (16-year-old), Musa Jalaei and Mohammad Sultanpur.

Kurds, when they enter a cemetery, know which grave belongs to a young person or teenager. Red cloths are draped over the graves of those who died young or in childhood. That day, the red cloths on the graves of these children and the sizes of their graves spoke more than any words.

An unanswered question for the people of Kurdistan remains: why did the forces of the temporary leadership, who had an official military presence in the area, not take responsibility for these massacres?

When Saddam's regime weakened after the invasion of Kuwait, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (the same temporary leadership that later changed its name) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, with international assistance, established the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Barzani family and their sons and grandsons became that party's leaders. Masoud Barzani became the president of the Federal Government of Kurdistan.[1] They have still not acknowledged their involvement in these killings, and, on the other side, the IRGC and the Government have refused to accept any responsibility, leaving the case of these shocking events still open.

The Massacres at Gorkhane, Qaraqasab and Khalifehlu

On the morning of 5 April 1983, the men of Khalifehlu knew they would need to leave their village for an indefinite period and seek refuge in the surrounding mountains and plains. The night before, Peshmerga forces had briefly arrived in the area to secure supplies. Early in the morning, informants alerted the government forces, who soon appeared, using the pretext to arrest and assault the men.

Kak Bayazid, the husband of Aunt Zeynab had left the village, like the other men. It was Newruz, and my cousins Amir and Monira had come to our home in Naqadeh. Aunt, who was there, told us what had transpired in the village. I later spoke with several villagers to document this tragedy more accurately.

It wasn't long before gunfire was heard from the villages above, Gorkhane and Qaraqasab, signalling the arrival of the military and Basij forces. The inhabitants of those villages, panicked by the gunfire, fled to Khalifehlu and reported the deaths of their fellow villagers. In disbelief,

1 Massoud Barzani is currently the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

everyone rushed to the mosque, seeking refuge under its shadow, hoping for safety amid the Quran and the prayer niche.

Shortly after, military and Basij forces began searching house to house, discovering and dragging out women and children who had been hiding. Most of the soldiers were local Turks from nearby villages and the Naqadeh-Mohammad Yar crossroads, many of whom had switched from their previous jobs as labourers and shepherds to become guards and Basij members after the Revolution. They were well-acquainted with the Kurdish-speaking villagers.

Aunt and the other women pleaded for mercy, but they were met with insults and accusations: 'Where are your men? Why don't they have the courage to stay in the village? Why do they host Peshmerga at night and then abandon their homes and women in the morning?'

The forces gathered most of the women and children in the village mosque, coercing them to chant slogans against Ghassemlou and the counter-revolutionaries. The commander warned and threatened the villagers, stating that Peshmerga should not be allowed into the village and, if they did come, they should not be assisted. Villagers were instructed to fight and expose the Peshmerga. The military held them in the mosque until evening before leaving the village.



Image 74: Kurdistan conflicts. Photo by Jahangir Razmi.



Image 75: The grave of Kak Karim Yekaw and his image in his son's hands.

When the women and children emerged, they were confronted with horrifying scenes. The men of the village had been killed by the river and in front of their homes – an appalling massacre.

The villagers went to the site of the killings and discovered that most of the victims were from Chaqal Mustafa village. Some villagers from Gorkhane had also been captured and executed, alongside six from Khalifehlu, in multiple rows by the village bridge. The bodies of some victims were thrown into the river upstream and were later discovered in the shallow parts.

In Gorkhane, six villagers sought refuge in the home of Hamzaollah Khani, a kind and beloved local Turk. The military arrived, but Hamzaollah did not surrender the refugees. He and six Kurdish villagers were executed.

Several children from Chaqal Mustafa and Gorkhane were also killed or wounded.

The day after the massacre, the residents of the three villages searched along the river for the missing bodies. When they were found, all were buried in a single day.

Subsequently, the villagers, fearing further reprisals, abandoned their homes and became displaced. Aunt Zeynab and Kak Bayazid came to our home in distress. Aunt suffered from nightmares for many nights, waking up in terror. The elders said she was haunted by the smell of blood.


Image 76: Boroujerdi alongside Ali Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran.

Some time later, we returned Aunt's family to Khalifehlu and went to offer condolences at the homes of two of the victims. Sufi Hama-Sultan and Sufi Aziz, who were neighbours of my aunt's, were among the deceased. The traces of bullets and the aftermath of the massacre were evident in the village, on the walls and on the concrete skeleton of the village bridge. Unfortunately, seeing bullet marks and explosion scars on buildings in Kurdish cities and villages remained a common sight for years. These marks spoke volumes, revealing the painful and unimaginable atrocities that had occurred. What the people of Gorkhane witnessed after leaving the mosque was a disaster beyond their own comprehensions, let alone the comprehensions of those who merely heard of it.

Not long after, Aunt's family became displaced again. This time, it was during the killing of Mohammad Boroujerdi, the commander of the Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Corps and the Kurdish Revolutionary Guard, whom the Government had dubbed 'the Saviour of Kurdistan'. Boroujerdi was the force behind the military campaigns into regions such as Urmia, Sanandaj and Maku. He was killed by a mine explosion near a roadside restaurant on the main road from Miandoab to Urmia. Hassani, the radical Friday Prayer leader of Urmia, threatened in a sermon to plough all the villages in the area and plant onions and potatoes, implying that no one should live there any more. Terrified by the massacres, the people fled after



Image 77: Mohammad Boroujerdi, one of the founders of the Muslim Peshmerga.

Boroujerdi's death, and it took a long time before they dared to return to their villages. Many even viewed the execution of fifty-nine young men and adolescents from Mahabad in Tabriz prison as retribution for Boroujerdi's death.[1]

1 On 12 Khordad 1362 (2 June 1983), 12 days after the killing of Mohammad Boroujerdi, and with the notification of Hamid Reza Jalaipour, the 23-year-old governor of Mahabad and in the presence of Gholamreza Hassani, the imam of Urmia, along with the commander of the Hamzeh Headquarters and with the support of Natiq Nouri, the minister of the interior, an order was issued for the execution of 59 young men and teenagers from the city, some of whom were very young and even students. These 59 were transferred to the city of Tabriz, where, in a brief trial, without any evidence of charges against them, they were condemned to death and handed over to the execution squads. The families of these victims never learned the location of their loved ones' burials. The names of those executed are: Ibrahim Amini, Abu Bakr Shukri, Ahmad Khorrami, Ahmad Mahmoud Kandoo, Anshalah Naderi, Hassan Jahanbin, Hassan Rahimian, Hassan Lajwardi, Hossein Kallehri, Khaled Rahimi Azar, Khaled Safai, Khalek Barzani, Khizr Rangin, Rahman Khizrpour, Rahman Rahimi, Suleiman Hassan Zadeh, Siamak Saqzi, Seyyed Ibrahim Seyyed Ahmadi, Seyyed Mahmoud Seyyed Mohammadi, Shukri Naderi, Saleh Farhudi, Saleh Mam Ebrahimi, Abbas Hosseinpour, Abbas Yousufi, Abdullah Tahiriyan, Ali Abadeh, Ali Bazian, Ali Baniyan, Ali Salehi, Ali Ghawareh, Ali Golparast, Ali Mazneh, Gholam Reza Barzi, Fereydoun Shengeh, Kazem Khatooni, Kamran Zaerehjazi, Karim Rahimian, Karim Kaveh, Kamal Chavoshini, Kamal Karimi, Mohammad Abu Bakri, Mohammad Husseini, Mohammad Salimi, Mohammad Ali Ali, Mohammad Farough Bazyar, Mohammad Masoudi, Mohammad

Today, a grand memorial, imbued with ideological sanctity, stands at the site of Boroujerdi's death. It is visited by pilgrimage caravans.[1] It seems as if this memorial mocks the simple gravestones scattered in the vicinity of the cemetery where the twenty-four from Qaraqasab, six from Khalifehlu and two from Gorkhane rest. This brutal massacre, like others, was never officially acknowledged, and no one has taken responsibility or sought to compensate for the losses.

The benefactor of this memorial of a sanctified Boroujerdi is the public treasury of Iranian society, which visits the designated war zones in caravans at the expense of state funds and, according to local reports, buys souvenirs from border markets.

Piranshahr, War and Displacement

Unlike many in Iran who had perhaps heard little about Iraq, we Kurds were well acquainted with our neighbouring country before the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War.[2] That is because of the constant movement of porters through the Qandil Mountains, which allowed us to become familiar with

Amin Ahmadi, Mohammad Amin Safa, Mahmoud Darizeh, Masoud Mir Mohammadi, Mostafa Esmati, Mostafa Faqri, Mansour Janah, Hejar Karimi, Homayoun Nilouferi, Vafa Elyasi, Youssef Iyazi, Youssef Habib Panah and Youssef Hassan Zadeh.

1 *Raheyan-e Noor* is a term used for large groups of religious and tourist caravans that visit the war zones left over from the Iran-Iraq War in the west and south-west of Iran, as well as in the provinces bordering Iraq. This movement is considered a form of war tourism in Iran. The Foundation for the Preservation of Sacred Defence Works and the Publication of Values is the main organiser and overseer of the nationwide Raheyan-e Noor tours.

2 On 22 September 1980, the Iraqi military forces, under Saddam Hussein, launched an attack on Iran. In the months leading up to this invasion, there were clear reports and signs of Iraqi troop movements along the border, indicating their readiness to strike. However, the leadership of the Islamic Republic failed to take any preventative measures against the potential threat from Iraq. The Iranian military, weakened by the execution, dismissal and purge of many senior officers, was unable to mount an effective response. This conflict, known in Iran as the Imposed War and the Sacred Defence, lasted eight years. Throughout the war, one million people were killed or wounded, including 262,000 Iranians and 105,000 Iraqis. According to international statistics, the Iran-Iraq War cost the Iranian Government $627 billion and the Iraqi Government $561 billion. Additionally, the cost of reconstructing the war's destruction is estimated to be $644 billion for Iran and $452 billion for Iraq. In 2020, the commander of the IRGC navy stated that Iran spent $19.6 billion during the war. (See Bakhtiar, 2014.)

both the goods and the people of Iraq. Before Saddam Hussein's rule, there was also a Kurdish radio station in Baghdad, known as Radio Baghdad, which my uncle Ahmad always listened to. In the village, with no television or electricity for a long time, many relied on the radio for entertainment.

In 1979 Iraq began attacking Iran, sporadically shelling and bombing Piranshahr. During these intervals, we frequently moved between Piranshahr, Gerdashavan and sometimes Naqadeh. It was sheer displacement.

I remember the first Iraqi assault on the city. Gradually, the sounds of gunfire echoed through the mountains toward us. Large bombs approached; their terrifying resonance was vivid. It was clear that this was more than just the ongoing conflict between the Revolutionary Guard and the Peshmerga.

We had heard that Iraq had invaded Iran with the aim of overthrowing the clerical regime. Saddam Hussein was portrayed as a robust, brave man with a moustache – powerful and Sunni. He was known to hold his hand to his chest during prayers, but was hostile toward his own Kurds, killing and displacing them. This was the image we got from our Iraqi Kurd connections, and our knowledge of him was limited to their mythologised portrayals.

Porters and others who crossed into Iraq through the Qandil Mountains reported that everyone there was armed. The army was well-organised, and public wealth was far greater.

Our main exposure to the war between the two countries began with the intense shelling and bombing of Piranshahr. It was the first time we encountered something larger than the local skirmishes that had been our main concern. Now, we were becoming familiar with fighter jets and sonic booms.

When things calmed down, we returned to the city, knowing we were yet to face something much larger. We used cigarette wrappers to enhance signals or adjusted the aerial on the roof to catch Iraqi television. On it, we saw reports on the war. At the time, everyone had colourful plastic filters to make their black-and-white TVs display colour. The amusing part was that people appeared in several colours: blue heads, green chests and yellow legs.

The bloody bombardment of 1984 reduced the city to ashes just before the spring. Houses were set ablaze. It was the day we truly understood fear, fire, explosions, cruelty and insecurity. From food to fuel, everything was rationed. We had to wait hours in line to get petrol. My role as the eldest son was to stand in line with barrels and 20-litre cans of petrol until it was our turn. In the cold, with plastic boots, I froze while waiting for the petrol to arrive. Then I would call my mother and a few others to help push the barrels home. We had to pump petrol from 220-litre barrels into 20-litre tins for cooking and heating. The smell of petrol and diesel – and the rationing – became familiar. I often stood in line for hours to get oil and rice, which would make the limited rations we received through coupons last and alleviate some of the distress of securing basics in those dire and anxious times.

Whenever we heard the horrific sound of air-raid sirens from loudspeakers and the radio, day or night, we would seek refuge in makeshift shelters, usually located in schools or mosques, hoping to escape death.

The city's appearance had changed. The slogans on school walls and streets were no longer against the Democratic Party or Komala; instead, they proclaimed, 'Death to Saddam', 'Death to American Imperialism' and similar phrases. This external war had diminished internal conflicts between the Democratic Party and government forces such as the Revolutionary Guard. Everyone had become embroiled in the Iran-Iraq War. American flags and pictures of Saddam and American leaders were burned, which indicated that what was happening was far beyond our localised understanding. As I grew older and experienced bombings and missile attacks on cities, I began to grasp the depth of the war between the two countries and its toll.

Despite all the difficulties, we endured and lived until air and artillery bombardments forced us to return to Naqadeh. In total, we were displaced three times to Naqadeh. Being displaced from a city where one was born and belonged is a torment, but war disregards such sentiments. The first time, we stayed for about a year; another time, for a few months; and once

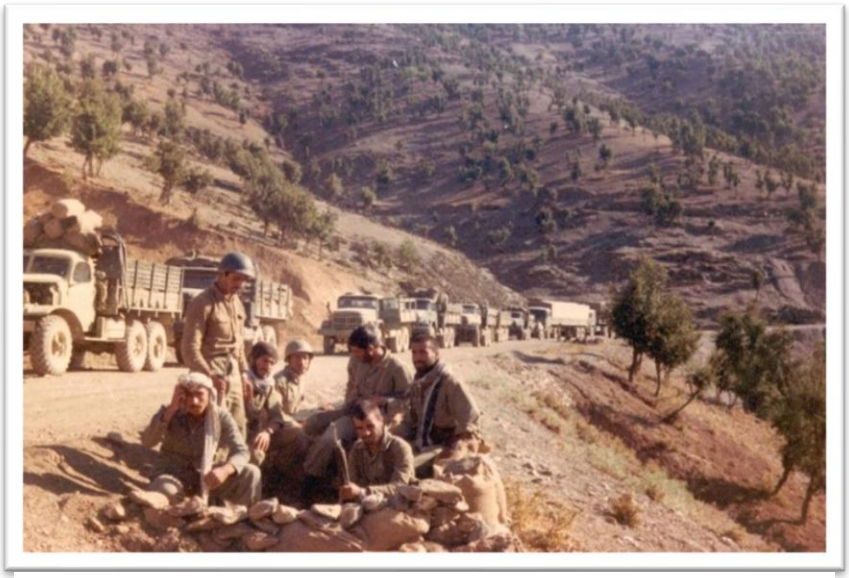


Image 78: The war on the Sardasht Road axis. Spring, 1981.

for nearly a year. With Iraq constantly attacking border towns, forcing people to flee to Mahabad, Naqadeh and the surrounding villages, life was marked by displacement. The first time we went to Naqadeh, we stayed in our own house; during subsequent displacements, we sold our house and rented another.

The periods in Naqadeh were peculiar. Returning to a city where I had fond childhood memories was bittersweet, as I no longer knew anyone there, despite my deep connection to the place. I often visited my Aunt Maryam's house in Naqadeh, Aunt Zeynab's in Khalifehlu, or the village of Gol and Aunt Khadijeh's house. After the war in Naqadeh, most of the Turks who had lived in Kurdish areas sold their homes and moved to Turkish regions. The Kurdish population of Naqadeh had significantly decreased since the 1979 war. The city's appearance had changed drastically, with some areas seemingly deserted.

After the war between the Government and the Kurds, my father rarely visited Naqadeh. Many had returned, but he feared that if he did, he might be arrested and imprisoned. This fear was not unfounded. Some people who were initially imprisoned or harassed had no real involvement in the events and had their lives disrupted by mere accusations. When we were forced to return, my father avoided public visibility in the city, treating the house as a mere lodging. Early each morning, he would travel to the

terminal with a few shopkeepers, all of whom had their businesses in Piranshahr, and return home in the evening under the cover of darkness. I accompanied him to Piranshahr a few times. It had become a ghost town with only a few shops open, selling goods to soldiers. Although my father's shop was not far from our home, I was afraid to approach it. The city's condition had not yet normalised, and the walls were still scarred with bullet holes and shrapnel.

Arrest of My Father

Let us rewind a little. After the conflict in Naqadeh, we were living in Piranshahr when Hassan Ajam, a Kurdish-Turkish mixed-race individual, involved my father in the trade of Iraqi dinars. Transactions across the border were conducted using these dinars, making them a significant foreign currency in the area.

This job brought many troubles with it. At first, the martial law imposed restrictions on movement, making it difficult for my father to travel freely to other towns. During this period, access to (and from) the city was restricted in the evenings. Trading dinars was technically illegal, but the regime turned a blind eye to it. Men conducted their dinar exchanges on a corner of Shah Street, now renamed Imam Street.

Everything was calm until the autumn of 1981. One weekend, we had gone to Gerdashavan when news arrived that my father had been arrested. We rushed home immediately. I didn't fully grasp what it meant when they said, 'They've arrested your father!' I only remember that all our relatives gathered in our house, and the women were crying. My grandmother and my sister Mahbubeh, who had an exam, had not accompanied us to Gerdashavan.

My grandmother recounted that my father had returned from the market and placed the dinars of the day in his bag. He had performed his ablutions and started praying when there was a knock on the door. Mahbubeh opened it to find an armed jash.[1] He asked if this was Karim Ahmadi's house, and after she confirmed that it was, he forcibly entered. My grandmother screamed. My father, terrified, interrupted his prayer to

1 *Jash* means 'mercenary'. However, the term in this context does not refer to a mercenary from the Kurdish perspective, but to someone from the areas around Miandoab.

see what was happening. The guard claimed to be from the Revolutionary Guard. He stated that they had received reports of him holding Iraqi dinars and engaging in prohibited activities. He took both my father and the dinars. My grandmother and Mahbubeh, in distress, sought refuge and later could not find my father.

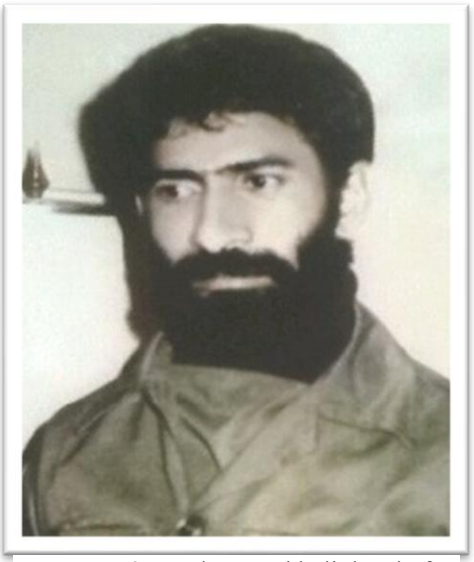


Image 79: Pasdar Moghbeli, head of Intelligence of the Piranshahr Revolutionary Guard. 1981.

My father recounted that a local officer named Ahmad, who was both cunning and duplicitous, took him into an alley and forced him to count the dinars – approximately 70,000, part of which belonged to my father's business partner. It was unusual for just one person to make an arrest; typically, it involved several individuals and a different procedure. The Revolutionary Guard's headquarters[1] was only a few minutes from our house, but my father was taken through back alleys. The officer entered a house, which we later learned belonged to his son-in-law.

He took out the dinar bag, gave most of the money to his son-in-law, who was local, and told my father, 'Kaka Karim, it has been reported that this money belongs to the Democrats, and you are collecting it for them. The Ahmadis have plenty of Peshmerga, and you are being arrested on this charge. If we take you with this amount of money, you will certainly be executed. We will keep most of it so that you are not executed and can be freed sooner. Don't mention this; it's for your own good!' He took a portion of my father's money as a bribe and demanded silence. This kind of

1 The Revolutionary Guard's building was in the former Customs Administration, which after the Revolution was taken over by the Democratic Party and used as a dormitory, the office of the Judicial and Local Commission, a prison and a place to store machinery repairs.

behaviour is still observed among some security and military personnel, reflecting the deep-seated corruption in Iran's organisational structure.

My father said, 'I had no choice. I would have preferred if he had taken all the money and let me go. I asked them not to hand me over because they had fabricated a case against me and were preparing to execute me.' But the officer replied that he couldn't do that because the commander of the Revolutionary Guard in Piranshahr had ordered his arrest. Interestingly, the amount of money recorded in the case was less than what the officer had left, suggesting that every intermediary took their share.

After my father's arrest, our lives underwent fundamental changes once again. From the following day, our routine became standing outside the Revolutionary Guard building and crying to be allowed a few minutes with him. I was around ten or eleven years old, and I remember those days vividly. We were advised to cry to evoke the sympathy of the Guard. I was a proud child, and the idea of seeking pity through tears felt somewhat demeaning, but I had no choice. It seemed that our collective sorrow made us cry, not just eliciting sympathy.

Typically, the Basij and the Guard would push us back, and we would cry until a senior officer came to explain what was happening. By that time, I had learned more Kurdish and had nearly forgotten Farsi, so my elder sister Mahbubeh would speak to them. They often brought a Kurdish soldier to speak with us and tell us that we could not see him at that moment and to return the next day. The Guard all looked alike, without rank, and called each other 'brother'. At that age, I saw them all as bearded men in drab green uniforms with Kalashnikov emblems on their pockets.

It appeared that Kurdistan was a training ground for the system, as many of these individuals later became officials. For instance, the city governor in 1980 was a Fars Guard named Salehi, and in 1981/82, they appointed Army Conscript Officer Gholamreza Ansari as governor of Piranshahr. He later became deputy political governor of Urmia and Iran's ambassador to Russia. The selected individuals were gradually promoted to higher positions.

After a long time, they allowed us to see my father. Where? At the entrance of the guardhouse. That day, I hardly recognised my father; he had become very emaciated in the month we had not seen him. We had never seen him with a beard or so distressed, thin and scared.

He embraced us, smelled us and wept. Then my father held me tightly once more. Since the time of the Shah and the subsequent turmoil in Naqadeh, when he used to take me on his bicycle around the city, physical contact had been rare. Later, in the village, amid all the war and displacement, our connection was severed, but on that day at the guardhouse, it was reestablished. I still feel the warmth of his embrace and my longing for him. During the brief visit, my father cried. I had only seen him cry once before, after the deaths of Kaka Hussein and Kaka Hamid in the Jaran war. This time, I felt a mix of helplessness and anger that I couldn't do anything. My grandmother and mother scolded him, saying, 'Be ashamed, man! Why are you crying? What has happened? We will get you out; we have made arrangements and promises.'

My mother was a strong character; I rarely saw her cry. I witnessed it only twice: once when she came to London years after our emigration, shedding a few tears and expressing grievances about my father, and once during that short meeting with him.

Our brief time together ended. Several of the Guard pulled my father away from us. They were pulling him from one side, and we from the other, and this struggle continued at the door until they took him away.

This Snack is Mine!

In our efforts to see my father again and secure his release, we visited several places. One Friday, after being out of touch with my father for a while, my mother encouraged me and Tabibeh to go to the customs building – the central headquarters of the Revolutionary Guard and my father's prison – and tell them we missed him. She hoped that, as we were children, the Guard might feel some compassion. Tabibeh and I stood there for hours, pleading. Every time a vehicle entered, we began to beg, until a food truck arrived. It had a large pot behind it, and the aroma of the food was tantalising and maddening. The driver was a soldier; since we had no understanding of hierarchy, we also begged him to let us see our father.

No matter how much he explained that he had no authority, he couldn't dissuade us. Eventually, a Guard arrived and asked, 'What are your names, and what are you doing here?' We stumbled through our response in broken Farsi. He was kind, which gave us hope. The Guard went inside and came back after a while, saying, 'Your father is here. Do you want to

see him?' We were overjoyed. He patted my head but not Tabibeh's, probably because she was a girl. He said, 'We'll bring your father out for you to see. Just in the yard and briefly.' He took us into the yard and handed us over to a Basij member. Smiling, he also gave me two cans of tuna. I had never seen canned tuna before; I put them in my pocket, but all my thoughts were consumed by the meeting with my father, overshadowing the cans.

They brought my father out. He was so happy that he knelt in front of Tabibeh and me, embraced us and inhaled deeply. I had a packet of salted snacks that I had bought to share with Tabibeh. My father, excited, said, 'Did you bring this snack for me?'

I quickly replied, 'No, it's mine', and hid it behind me! I don't know why I did that; I was a child and didn't understand.

Now that I have experienced imprisonment myself twice, I understand that even a simple snack can be a deep longing for a prisoner, especially for one in solitary confinement. But at that point neither Tabibeh nor I knew anything about the life, suffering or regrets of imprisonment, and neither of us thought to offer the snack to our father. We only understood the depth of the situation when our mother, upon hearing the story, struck me on the head with her hand and said, 'Shame on you!' My mother had a famous saying: 'May it be that while your father suffers, your bones crumble to dust.' She meant that our father was of utmost importance, and she always hoped nothing would happen to him.

The meeting was brief and became even shorter with the arrival of a Guard who, speaking in Turkish with a local accent, pushed my father toward the iron prison door. He said, 'Whoever allowed this meeting has made a mistake!' Conflicts between Turkish Guards and Persian Guards, who were mostly from Shiraz, Kerman and Yazd, were not uncommon. My father's pleas in Turkish for a few more minutes with us earned him more abuse and insults.

I had previously witnessed my grandfather and uncle being beaten and my grandmother being shoved by Basij members. The Revolutionary Guard's special forces had come to Gerdashavan and had brutally beaten my uncles and grandfather in Mine Qazi on the charge that we had sheltered Peshmergas. To me, my grandfather was a brave and noble man. On that summer day in 1983, armed men, including Kurds, dragged him out of the house and beat him in front of us with rifle butts.

It seemed that once they learned people referred to them as *jash*, or 'traitors', they became even more brutal. They constantly shoved him, and he would fall into the gutter, but they didn't relent. They beat him as much as they could. Worse than the rifle-butt blows to my grandfather's head, face and side was that the blows came from armed Kurds – those who were supposed to be allies but were loyal to the regime. They used curses that penetrated to the core of one's being.

That incident, however, did not match the bitterness and humiliation of their treatment of my father. He was so ashamed he couldn't look us in the eye.

Later, I learned that the Guard who patted my head and gave me the tuna was Jahangir Moghbeli. He was the one who had issued the order for my father's arrest. At the time, I was a child and felt a sense of warmth from his kindness, but later, especially during my teenage years when my nationalist sentiments became more pronounced, I felt ashamed of that feeling. Why should I have felt good toward this person? He was the head of the Revolutionary Guard, had arrested my father, and many had been tortured, killed or executed by him or at his orders.

Becoming the Man of the House, the Jash and my Mother's Self-Immolations

In such circumstances, people usually sought intermediaries who were in cooperation with the Government. At that time, some of these intermediaries were Government-affiliated Kurdish armed groups or members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (the temporary leadership) who had sought refuge in Iran and had close military and intelligence ties with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Some of the KDP forces lived in Piranshahr and had several bases, one of which was in the village of Shinabad. The Peshmerga forces of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, led by a person named Mulazem Ali, had occupied the historic hill above the village, which belonged to the village lord, Mohammad Amin Agha Amin-Ashyeri. After my father's arrest, my mother and I were often at Shinabad in the KDP bases, and we also spent



Image 80: Governmental Muslim Peshmerga – local mercenaries known as *jash*.

time in Naqadeh and Urmia.[1] Sometimes, my uncle would come with us. We would cry and plead in hopes of meeting the KDP commanders and discussing my father's situation with them.

During the time my father was absent, I was repeatedly told that I was now the man of the house, which was a strange burden. It felt like a false persona; I wasn't sure how to handle it. This feeling stemmed from my youth, and the weight of the responsibility left me anxious and confused.

One of my responsibilities as the man of the house was to accompany my mother. We went together to Urmia to visit Mulla Mustafa Barzani's eldest son. Idris, whose son Nechirvan is now the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, passed away a few months after this visit from a heart attack.

Our visit was very brief. Through an intermediary, we conveyed our pleas from one end of a large room, where we sat, to him at the other end. Years later, while I was in London, I met Masoud Barzani and his nephew Nechirvan several times at the British Parliament, Chatham House and other places. During one of these meetings, I recounted this memory to one

1 Between 1980 and 1982, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (the 'KDP') had bases and party centres in Urmia, Silvana and Rajan. During those years, Massoud and Idris Barzani were frequently based in Urmia and Rajan. In fact, KDP forces remained in Iran until the Gulf War and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (the 'KRG') in 1991.

of Masoud Barzani's companions, who was also my university classmate, and I saw tears welling up in his eyes. He too had had similar experiences.

The political relations between the KDP and Iran meant that many Kurds who had issues with the Islamic Republic and its judicial and security centres would seek the KDP's help. The facilitators were relatively effective intermediaries between the bewildered people and the system that could not meet their demands, even though they had limited authority and power to claim the rights of the people. At that time, I did not fully understand the political dynamics and the disputes between political factions and the KDP, but, after my father's release and in the last month of 1981, when many villagers from Karezai Shkak, including our relative Karim Yekav, were mercilessly killed in a region-wide 'cleansing operation' by KDP forces alongside the IRGC, I could not believe that these were the same people we had begged for my father's freedom.

My uncle frequently visited their centres in the villages of Silvana and Rajan, but failed to meet the Barzani brothers, who were the key figures, and to get a handwritten note from them for my father's release.

I was always with my mother. They would say that my mother, a young, beautiful and lonely woman, needed to have me with her. They kept saying I had to take care of my mother. My grandmother emphasised that point the most. I had no real concept of what caring for her meant until an event clarified it for me. We were on our way to the IRGC headquarters in the customs building. The route we had to walk was filled with armed men with Kurdish attire and accents, leaning against the customs wall and smoking. One of them made a lewd comment to my mother and, I think, tugged at her chador a bit. My mother screamed, and they laughed. She was enraged, especially since she had not been allowed to visit my father for some time, and she shouted, 'You *jash* are shameless and dishonourable! You're holding the Government's weapons and standing against the Kurds.' I was stunned and did not know what to do. I had been told to watch over my mother; now, a man with a weapon had assaulted her, and all I could do was watch. My mother grabbed my hand angrily, and we went back home.

I thought that, if I had walked alongside the wall, they would not have been able to say anything to my mother or harass her. I had an odd sense of self-reproach, constantly blaming myself. After that, I understood the concept of caring for my mother better. Whenever we went to places where

men were present, I would stand between them and my mother. I tried to create a protective barrier around her to ensure she had a safe space. On the bus, I would sit by the window, and I would sit in the middle to prevent any man from getting too close to her. Overall, I became more sensitive to violence in the streets and public spaces.[1]

We could not meet my father for a long time, and our childish cries and pleas were no longer effective. We could tell from my mother's behaviour that she was frustrated and worn out by these hard times. Later, she told us that, one morning, silently, she filled a twenty-litre barrel half up with oil and went to the IRGC's central building. She took out the barrel of oil and a match from under her Kurdish dress and said that if they did not allow her to see my father, she would self-immolate.

The Guard quickly pointed guns at my mother from the rooftop and the entrance. Passersby were scared, and the situation became tense. Moghbeli, the interrogator and the person responsible for my father's arrest, promised my mother that she would see my father soon. Having heard such promises many times, my mother did not trust him and insisted on seeing my father that moment. When Moghbeli saw there was no other option, he revealed the truth and said that my father had been transferred to Urmia Prison. They were so dishonourable that they had remained silent in the face of our desperate pleas and my mother's suffering and had not told us to go to Urmia to see the prisoner.

We visited my father in Urmia Prison two or three times. During two visits, my uncle came with us. He was with us and managed the arrangements, but there was little news about the rest of my paternal family. Some of them were also struggling with displacement and harsh living conditions at that time. My grandmother would say, 'When Karim was arrested, where was the family that claimed to stand by each other? What did they do? After all these years, we had to bake bread in people's homes to fill our stomachs!'

1 In Iran and in Kurdistan, catcalling by men toward women, which remains common, is a clear example of public harassment. Although the Islamic Penal Code of Iran includes penalties for such behaviour, they are generally not enforced. Some of these catcalls have roots in Kurdish ethnography and culture, often containing gender-based elements. They frequently involve comparing women to birds and beautiful animals (like peacocks and gazelles) or to the environment. Sometimes, the most humorous methods are used to tease young women, which can even elicit laughter at times.

Our economic situation was poor. Moghbeli and his accomplices had taken all our belongings, but we received regular help from my grandfather's house. My mother and grandmother baked bread in people's homes, and my grandmother's bread-making skills once again came to our aid. You might remember that the fragrant and tasty breads she baked were a factor in the mediation of Qarani Agha for her divorce from her first husband.

Those days, the region was also unstable, with conflicts starting at night. We were in the midst of the conflict, because our house was close to the IRGC headquarters and the Intelligence building, where the clashes occurred. My grandmother would cover the windows with mattresses. When we said that bullets could easily pass through the mattresses and blankets, she would say, 'It might slow them down.' Amid all the anxiety, fear, lessons and conflicts, my grandmother's way of looking at things made us laugh, which was a source of strength for her and us.

Meanwhile, in the absence of a family head, they expected me to be the man of the house. But how old was I? Now that I think back, I feel sorry for myself. At the height of my childhood, I was forced to act grown-up and manly. I was constantly reminded from all sides that I was the only man in the family, and it was a heavy burden on my young shoulders. Therefore, I experienced a lot of astonishment, confusion, fear, anger, shame and humiliation from various situations during those days –

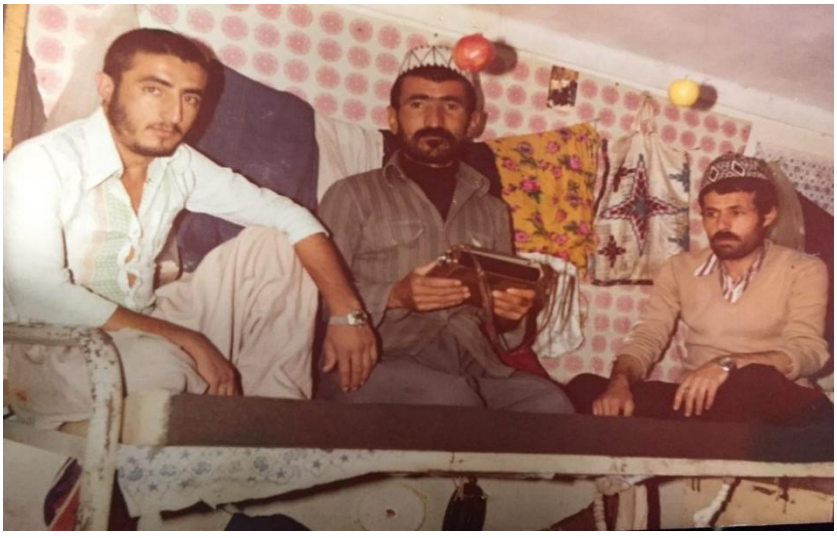


Image 81: My father (first on the right) in Darya Prison. Urmia, 1981.

emotions that were far too overwhelming for a child and for which my capacity was far too narrow.

I remember, that winter, an electric stove had just come onto the market, or rather, to Kurdistan. We did not have enough money, but my mother bought a stove on credit. Unfortunately, it soon broke down. We could not afford to repair it. I was the man of the house and had to do something. I looked through my sisters' vocational training book to learn how to repair electrical appliances. I opened the stove with a screwdriver and the tip of a knife, removed the front spring, and managed to disconnect the wire that was wrapped around a brick in a spiral and had burned out. I pulled the wires a bit, brought them closer together, and tied them. When I plugged it in and it worked, I was thrilled! As the man of the house, I had managed to do something important and repair an essential appliance amid the chaos and poverty. My grandmother was so proud and kept saying, 'Kameel did this!'

That experience taught me an important lesson. I realised that the grandeur of many tools and devices is in their external covers and casings. Once we remove the beautiful, decorative or tough exterior, the mechanism and internal components are much simpler than we think and are quite like each other. I believe this applies not only to tools and devices, but also to many professions, political structures, organisations, research methods and even people.

A Slap for the Stew

The first time we went to Urmia to see my father, we headed to the house of Mam Aziz, the eldest son of Khan Jaldiyan, who was said to be both a fellow townsman of my father and my uncle. We stayed there overnight. He tried to do something to secure my father's release but was unsuccessful.

On another occasion, my uncle and I visited my father. Across from the prison was an old teahouse that also served food and was always filled with cigarette smoke. Urmia Prison is called the Sea Prison because it's located near Lake Urmia. That day it was raining, and, to stay dry, we entered the teahouse without buying anything. The smell of kebab and stew drove us crazy! Since I was the favoured one, I thought everything would be provided for me, especially because my grandmother was with

us. It was the first time I saw stew being served in an earthenware dish with vegetables and onions that had been pounded with a kind of wooden mallet or meat pounder. Until then, I had only ever had Kurdish *shorba* soup, which typically includes bread.

I cried and threw a tantrum. Despite my mother and aunt's whispers that we couldn't afford it, I wouldn't let it go.

For the first and only time, my uncle, driven to despair, slapped me. He had no money, and with three other children besides me present, my tantrum put him under a lot of pressure. The painful slap made me cry even more, and my grandmother's shouting filled the teahouse.

My mother didn't say anything, but I saw her break down.

My grandmother cursed my uncle and shouted, 'Damn you, Ahmad! How could you slap Karim's son? His father is in prison, he's just a child and he wants stew! I'll sell my earrings and buy stew for everyone.'

My mother held her back and didn't let her go.

In the end, they bought me stew, and I ate it bite by bite, sobbing and hiccupping.

That day, I understood the real meaning of poverty for the first time. The humiliation, helplessness and anger that poverty brings were compounded by the wretched political system that had taken my father from me.

One of my other experiences was facing a telephone in the visiting room. The telephone conveyed my father's voice from the other side of the thick glass that separated us. It was astonishing!

Many images from those days are etched in my mind: the harshness and power of the authorities; the terrifying appearance of the guards; the high walls; the bearded men behind barbed wire; women and children sitting anxiously on one side of the glass while, on the other side, tired men with long beards smiled under duress, which only increased the tears of the women, who covered half their faces with their veils.

Children looked at their fathers in disbelief, unable to understand why they couldn't embrace them. Sometimes they forgot about the glass and tried to get closer, only to bump their heads against it.

About forty years later, this exact experience was repeated for me and my son in Evin Prison in Tehran. During our phone call, as we tried to kiss and hug each other, we bumped our heads against the glass.

My father also had strange experiences during his imprisonment. He learned things that he shouldn't have disclosed.

He told us, 'When I told the prisoners that half of the money had been taken by Ahmad the informer and that Moghbeli was his accomplice, they warned me not to speak of it anywhere, as I could be executed for accusing the head of the Revolutionary Guard, who had recently been killed or, according to the Government's narrative, martyred.'

My father was sentenced to several years in prison, but he spent only nine months there before being released.

Barzani's Signature

My uncle's meeting with Idris Barzani played a significant role in my father's early release, although we never fully understood the reasons or details.

One of the leaders residing in Naqadeh, who had refused to collaborate with the Revolutionary Guard and join the Kurdish factions in Iran, was engaged in construction work and collecting spring herbs in Naqadeh. He advised my uncle to go to the military base in the village of Silvana near Urmia to obtain a letter from Idris Barzani. At that time, many believed that going to Silvana was walking into the middle of the conflict between the factions and the Democratic Party, and some Kurds in the region were extremely fearful of the factions and their revenge tactics. However, my uncle went to the military base and spent three days waiting at the checkpoint, hoping to catch a glimpse of Idris or his brother Masoud in the convoys of vehicles and to deliver his petition to them or someone in their office.

On the third day, one of the vehicles suddenly stopped in front of him, and his childhood friend Rahman Karimi asked, 'Ahmad, what are you doing here?' As previously mentioned, Rahman Karimi was from Jaldian and a friend of my uncle's. He was a senior commander in the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, but had recently left the Party to join a splinter group that had established a new party and was negotiating with the Iranian Government, with the support of the temporary leadership. Rahman, who was one of Barzani's close advisors, took the letter from my uncle and handed it to Idris Barzani in the vehicle behind him. Rahman and Idris told my uncle to return the next day for a response.

The following day, my uncle went with Rahman Karimi to see Idris Barzani. On Rahman's advice, Idris wrote a letter to the head of the Urmia court, stating that part of the dinars for which my father had been arrested belonged to their party, and, thus, he should be released.

My uncle waited for Idris to write the last line of the letter, but suddenly someone rushed in with news that the factions and the Revolutionary Guard had engaged in severe clashes with the Peshmerga forces in the Rajan region. Idris stopped writing the letter, but, as Rahman prepared to join Barzani's forces in the battle, he promised my uncle he would personally deliver the letter to the court.

This was my uncle's final meeting with Idris Barzani and his childhood friend Rahman, who had taken a very different path from him. Rahman was later tried and executed by Sanar Mamdi, a prominent figure from the Mamdi clan who had split from the Democratic Party and founded a new party called Ararat. Sanar Mamdi, after a period of being a fugitive, escaped Iran. The Revolutionary Guard returned Rahman Karimi's body to Jaldian with official and military honours and attended his memorial service. This led to him being discredited among some people and labelled as a traitor to the Kurdish cause, although the Democratic Party had previously explicitly branded him a traitor to the Kurdish cause.



Image 82: Idris, Sabir and Massoud Barzani.

What could have alleviated my father's charges was if the political-activity accusation was removed, making it appear that Karim Ahmadi was merely a businessman and family man. The judge handling my father's case was a cleric who had made a hasty judgement in just a few minutes, lacing his remarks with insults, since my father was from Naqadeh and had been accused of possessing weapons at the beginning of the Revolution, had many Democratic Party relatives, and, most importantly, there was a report from a senior official like Moghbeli on his file. Moghbeli had written that my father, representing the Party, was engaged in trade or was in possession of its money. My father had little hope of being released anytime soon. No one knew how the revolutionary court would deal with him and his charges. The only piece of luck my father had was that the amount of money listed in the court report was much less than what he had had when he was arrested.

One day, without any prior notice, he was called. My father had thought it was for a meeting with his brother, but instead he was told, 'You are free.'

Kill This One for Me

My father gained considerable political insight during his imprisonment. Sharing a cell with political prisoners provided a valuable opportunity to gather information.

He recounted, 'We were transferred to the political prisoners' wing, where we found ourselves alongside guerrillas, members of the Tudeh and Komala parties, Democrats and the Mojahedin-e Khalq. The Mojahedin were clever individuals, some of whom were not locals but had studied at Sharif University of Technology and were well-informed. They crafted a radio amplifier from items like steel wool, an old transformer, radio parts, a few watch batteries and aluminium spoons. This device allowed us to receive signals from political-party radio stations, as ordinary radios couldn't pick up certain frequencies due to interference.

'We took turns listening to the radio; for instance, one hour would feature news from the Mojahedin, and the next hour would be dedicated to another group. Some of us would cover ourselves with blankets at the far end of the room, listening to the radio while others stood guard.'

They occupied themselves with beadwork, which was also customary in prison at the time. Beadwork was a tradition across Iranian prisons,

providing not only a pastime but also a means of livelihood for impoverished or isolated prisoners. In addition to beadwork, making prayer beads from date pits and other similar crafts were common in Iranian jails.

Listening to the radio to follow regional developments and conflicts was not particularly fascinating for my father. Unlike the Mojahedin, who eagerly awaited news of military operations, people like my father fervently hoped for zero conflict.

Especially in that province and around Urmia, if any Guardsmen or Basij were killed, those on death row or facing severe punishment were paraded for the grieving families to choose which prisoner was to be executed in retribution, and the sentence was quickly carried out. It was akin to choosing a fish at a seafood restaurant and saying, 'Kill this one for me' – with the same level of casual brutality.

The tragic aspect was that Government victims were honoured as martyrs, securing lifelong benefits for their families, while those killed from the opposing side were branded cursed and traitorous, which affected their families' civil rights, including employment opportunities. This discrimination extended even to their burials. Martyrs' cemeteries were adorned using state funds, placed in prime locations, while the executed or conflict casualties were often buried in remote graveyards and referred to in Government rhetoric as 'infidels' or 'damned'. Sometimes, bodies were not even returned to their families and were buried in mass graves, the locations of which were kept secret. Many of the political prisoners executed early in the Revolution, especially the Kurds and those from 1988, remain buried in unmarked locations.[1]

My father said that he was so terrified, he listened to the news only hoping there would be no news of conflict or, if conflict did occur, that it wouldn't be in our province or even in Urmia and its surroundings. If it

1 The execution of political and ideological prisoners in the summer of 1988, known as 'the 1988 massacre', was an event in which several thousand political and ideological prisoners were secretly executed on the orders of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. These executions took place in the prisons of the Islamic Republic of Iran during August and September 1988. The victims were buried in mass graves. Most of those executed were members of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, although members of other leftist groups, such as the Organisation of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (Majority) and the Tudeh Party, were among them.



Image 83: Executions in Paveh Hospital, Summer 1979

did happen, he hoped it wouldn't involve local Guardsmen or Basij. If revenge was sought, the prison gates would open and the prisoners would be lined up. Anyone with a robust build and a significant moustache, who appeared more Kurdish, was at risk of being accused of having killed a Guardsman, leading to their execution.

At the time, there was a rumour in Iran that Kurds either decapitated Guardsmen or boiled them in hot water, even eating them afterward. Those with sturdy builds were deemed more likely to commit such acts and were therefore at higher risk of retributive execution. My father would often trim his moustache to make it less conspicuous and would stand bent over. I remember, when my father was released, he had a moustache reminiscent of Hitler's and never grew a thick moustache again.

A young man from the Mojahedin-e Khalq who was in my father's cell was said to be the son of a senior leader. His family would come from Tehran, plead with the prison authorities and, after much begging, be allowed to enter part of the yard. My father and the other prisoners would watch from the window as the mother of this prisoner pleaded, 'They're going to kill my son. They just want a short confession on TV. Agree to it and say you've repented, or they will execute you!'

But the young man replied, 'No, it's impossible, Mother. If I confess, it will demoralise all those fighting on the front lines and in cities. They stand bravely against this tyrannical regime, fighting and dying. If my confession causes doubt in anyone's mind, I would have betrayed all my beliefs.'

This was an attempt to manipulate the prisoner's emotions through his emotional ties. He was executed weeks later. Executions at that time were by shooting, and each family had to pay 70 tomans per bullet. If they were lucky, they received the body. The family of the executed had to pay compensation for the irreparable loss of their loved one. This degrading and humiliating treatment compounded the suffering of the bereaved.

Another frequent topic of discussion among the locals and my father was the role of certain regime leaders in the arrest of even their own children. It was said that Mulla Hassani, the Friday Prayer imam of Urmia, played significant and unusual roles not only in regional incidents, but also within his own family. His eldest son Rashid and one of his daughters were allegedly affiliated with the Fadaiyan Khalq (Majority). Mulla Hassani facilitated or enabled the arrest of his son.

It is worth mentioning that many organisations, both in practice and in propaganda, had previously supported the Iranian Government's policies because the regime was anti-imperialist.

Later, as Hassani cooled down from the initial revolutionary fervour, he remarked in his memoirs, 'Rashid didn't deserve execution as he had committed no crime; perhaps it was because he refused to repent that this happened.' According to Hassani, the judge who sentenced Rashid to death became afflicted with a serious illness and fell into severe poverty.

Such occurrences were common at the time, when ideological and governmental beliefs dominated social and mental spaces. Fathers within the system, not an insignificant number, betrayed their own children, leading to their arrest, only to later realise their innocence, but regret and guilt offered no solace.

After his release, my father came from Urmia to Naqadeh with my uncle. He got off at the Naqadeh-Mahabad junction. He went to Aunt Khadijeh's house in the village of Gol and the next day arrived at our home.

To this day, my aunt fondly recounts those sweet moments: 'One of the villagers brought me good news . . . Karim has come from prison! You wouldn't believe how I jumped from the roof to the yard and ran all the way to reach Karim.'

Without a phone and with the dark setting in and roads closed due to martial law, my father stayed there for the night and came home early the next morning. All the relatives came – even those I hadn't seen during his time in prison – coming to drink tea and eat sweets, chatting with my father as he spoke and spoke, sometimes with laughter but often with sadness. It was evident he was intentionally omitting parts of his story, especially his time in solitary confinement. I understand this intimately, having experienced solitary confinement twice myself, and I deeply feel his emotions, sorrows, angers and even his self-censoring.

After this period, my father was never the same, lacking the courage and spirit he once had. He feared the system and its brutality. The prison experience had instilled a deep fear in him, serving as a harsh lesson from the power structures. Solitary confinement alters a prisoner's mind, creating a constant fear even when no external authority is present to control or impose restrictions. My father would often say, 'The system does not joke and is extremely ruthless.' Although he was not a timid man, having been a soldier and a fighter, the experience of the Revolutionary Guard's prison and the torture in Piranshahr broke him. He had felt the grip of systematic power and violence, and he always warned me to avoid confrontation with the system, to abandon my research or at least to change the scope and focus of my work.

Those who wrongfully harmed our lives also met interesting fates. I mentioned the head of the Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence, a Guard named Jahangir Moghbeli, who had given me canned tuna. He was later killed by Abdullah Qaderi from the village of Sarokhani, a regional chief and brother of Colonel Qaderi, a Democrat commander. Abdullah Qaderi was not a Peshmerga but had been evading security forces and lived in the local villages. Abdullah Qaderi, also known as Abdullah Sarolank, had secretly gone to visit his wife Kali and children in the village of Andizeh near Piranshahr. Moghbeli learned of this through a local informant and went with a team of Guardsmen to arrest him, but Abdullah shot and killed Moghbeli before fleeing.[1]

Moghbeli, originally from Kerman province, was a founding member of the Western Front Intelligence Operations. He remained with the Revolutionary Guard in Piranshahr, where he frequently spoke at Friday Prayer against the Democratic Party and to promote revolutionary ideals. Following the purge of most local teachers, a number of teachers from Kerman were brought to Piranshahr to re-establish the schools. Some of these teachers were our instructors and came to class armed. After Moghbeli was killed by Abdullah Qaderi, the Kurdistan Voice radio station, affiliated with the Democratic Party, reported that Moghbeli had been killed by a former regime agent.[2] At the time, it was rumoured that

1 This event took place on 11 April 1982.

2 Moghbeli, the Intelligence officer of the Revolutionary Guard; Hassanpour, the Guard commander; and another Guard member named Dezfuli were among the young and

Abdullah Qaderi was an armed SAVAK operative from the Shah's era who had escaped and was under a death sentence. Following this event, Abdullah Qaderi's wife was arrested and his children were repeatedly mistreated. Abdullah later died in a car accident in Iraqi Kurdistan, though his associates still question the true nature of his death.

Exactly ten days after Moghbeli's death, another incident occurred. My grandmother, guided by her beliefs, remarked that justice, however delayed, is always served, and she thanked God for the swift retribution she witnessed. Ahmad Zaban-Bargafa, a local to the region, was promoted due to his services, including handing over my father and other regional collaborators. He was given a motorcycle and rode recklessly through the city streets. Having received his reward, he was elated. However, on the evening of 22 April, he was abducted by a team of Democratic Party Peshmerga in the Kohneh Khaneh area near Piranshahr. He was then tried in a field court outside the city and executed by firing squad, and his body was dumped in a pit. Grand ceremonies were held for both him and Moghbeli at the city's Shiite Mosque.

Although it is said that there is more joy in forgiveness than in revenge, I cannot forget the laughter and joy of the families and townspeople on those days.

revolutionary forces of the Guard, mostly of Farsi or Lur origin. They were initially deployed to Kurdish areas under the pretext of preventing indiscriminate clashes between the local Turkic Guards and the Kurds. Some of the Guard were members of the Combatant Muslim Movement affiliated with Dr Peyman, and there were also some Tudeh, Fedai and Mojahedin members among them, who were gradually purged.

Chapter Five: On the Path of Adolescence and Discovering New Worlds

The Occupations of a Displaced Person

After being released from prison, my father took on jobs that the system had no stance against. Initially, we had no money to start over. We were forced to sell our house and moved from the Qapan Alley to a rental house near what is now Qods Street. After a while, we moved to a two-room house with a constantly leaking roof. Eventually, we settled in a house on Tajalli Alley and stayed there until after the bombing in 1984.

We moved so frequently from city to city, neighbourhood to neighbourhood and village to village that I became completely disorientated. I was always afraid that we might have to move again and lose everything we had due to ongoing conflicts and wars.

During those years, my soul felt unanchored; I couldn't find lasting friendships or retain long-term memories of a stable place. Our lives consisted of constant moves from one house to another.

My father became a shopkeeper, borrowing money from several places to buy a shoe store with a small retail section, along with all its equipment. It took a long time to pay off the debts, but, eventually, he became the owner of the shop, with some equipment bought on credit. My father was shrewd and experienced in business. He knew that items needed by soldiers and military personnel in the area sold well – items such as cameras, radios, knives, creams and so on. Many soldiers served in large garrisons in Pasveh, Jaldian and Piranshahr or returned from the war fronts in Haji Omran, the Qandil Heights and Sardasht. They frequently

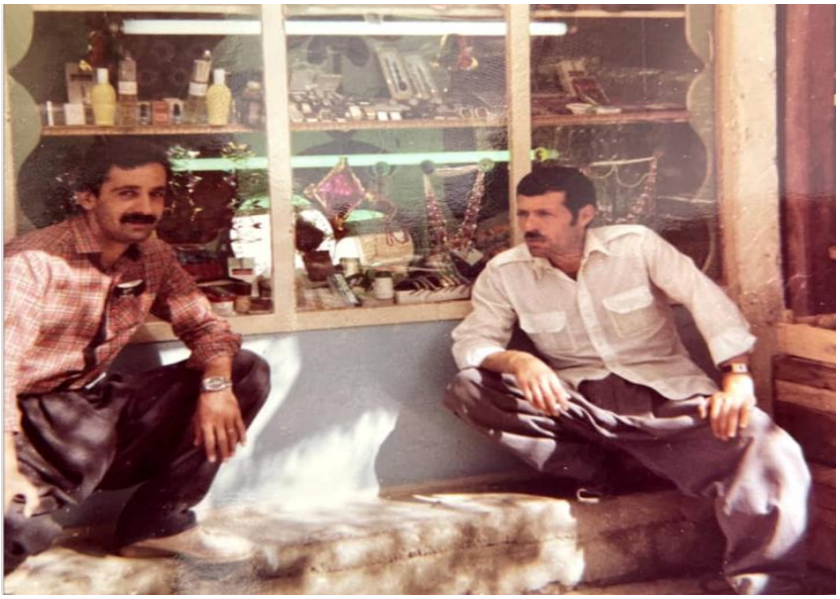


Image 84: My father in front of his shop (on the right). Piranshahr, 1983.

passed by the shop on Imam Street (formerly Shah Street) and became regular customers.

Later, when his ingenuity re-emerged, he introduced goods suitable for young brides and urban and rural women, becoming a boutique owner. He was among the first boutique owners in the city, and locals referred to it as a 'luxury shop'.

All of this undoubtedly had a significant impact on my maturation, including my early sexual maturity and my awareness of the opposite sex.

My father's boutique was one of the first places to offer tapestries. One side of the shop displayed tapestries with themes that had no connection to the local culture – the Mona Lisa, Marilyn Monroe, women with long hair on horses, English homes, and traditional Romantic and poetic images. But, even in this seemingly low-profile profession, the system occasionally clashed with my father. For example, due to the ban on images on tapestries, Government authorities or Islamic Revolutionary Committee (the 'Komiteh') patrols would collect them. Sometimes, luxury foreign goods arrived from Iraq, such as soaps with pictures of beautiful women. By order of the Komiteh's patrols and the Public Places Office, we had to cover the faces and eyes of these women with black markers or tape. At

that time, the monitoring system was very sensitive to such things and imposed many restrictions.

Back then, part of the shop's stock came from Iraq, from an unofficial market that was primarily sought after by soldiers and locals. Some of the luxury goods, such as perfumes, cosmetics and sewing supplies, came from Tehran. Importing luxury items from across the border, from Iraqi Kurdistan, which was only a few kilometres from Piranshahr, was the main job – and perhaps a century-old tradition – of merchants like my paternal grandfather, who was once called a 'smuggler' in colloquial language and is now referred to as a 'porter'. These people were always at risk of being shot by border guards from outside the region, and many lost their lives in this dangerous endeavour.

As instructed by my father, I always went to the shop after school, but I couldn't and didn't know how to sell anything. Only at noon, when he went home, would I sit in front of the boutique to keep an eye on the goods outside until his return. I would also help him close the shop in the evening. I was an errand boy, handling tasks like cleaning the windows and sweeping the floor. Or, if someone called from home asking for onions and tomatoes, my father would buy them and I would deliver them home.

In the early days, we had a bicycle, but later he bought a Yamaha 100 motorcycle. As I grew older, I cherished the moments when I took the keys from my father, who reluctantly handed them over to me, to buy things for the house. Sometimes, I would tell my mother to ask my father for just a kilogram of onions or potatoes instead of a sack. My mother would be surprised, and I would laugh, explaining that it was to get the keys from my father and ride the motorcycle. The excitement of adolescence made riding my father's motorcycle extremely appealing. My mother would glare at me and take the groceries from me. Without a license, I would ride around the city so many times that the engine would get hot. My father would say, 'I don't understand why the fuel runs out so quickly and the bike gets so hot when you use it!'

My father's interactions with his customers were interesting. He had signals and codes that, when used, meant I should leave the shop so he could speak privately with a customer or friend, regardless of whether they were male or female. I quickly learned the codes for female customers, but he often discussed politics or business quietly with his friends. Sometimes, when I didn't catch the codes, he would hand me the motorcycle keys and

tell me to buy something for the house. His codes were intriguing; sometimes he would lift his foot and place it on a short display or light his cigarette.

The times I went to Tehran with my father were amazing. I can confidently say that, apart from myself and one or two other boys whose fathers were shopkeepers, no one our age in our city had access to the capital of Iran. My favourite parts of these trips were going to the zoo, riding the Ferris wheel and going to the Lalehzar cinemas, which were entirely male spaces without women or children.

With his social connections, my father improved our financial situation and gained a prominent position. When we boarded the bus, we would sit in the first or second row behind the driver, who was one of his friends, which signified wealth and influence. It meant we were close to the driver, could have dinner with him, could listen to our favourite cassette tapes during the journey, or could have the bus conductor serve us tea. While other passengers slept at night, we would sit next to the driver and talk, see the entire road, be away from the diesel engine noise, and sometimes even sleep in the driver's and conductor's beds at the back of the bus. These were special privileges I enjoyed. The private or mischievous conversation of the drivers, often involving passengers and their hosting experiences in Tehran, were among the intriguing aspects of these trips.

When we arrived in Tehran early in the morning, we would first go to Lalehzar for a traditional meal of sheep head and feet, and sometimes even go to the bathhouse. Then, we would enter the Grand Bazaar from the Shah Mosque entrance and start shopping according to my father's list, which was written in his scrawling handwriting. Usually, a shop would be marked and the goods there would be packed. We would buy items from different parts of the market and collect them in one place. The shopkeepers would pack the cartons, and we would stay there until the cartons were packed and strapped. The cartons were sent to Habibi's shipping company, which handled deliveries to the western part of the country. A few days later, the goods would arrive from Tehran. It would take about two days to unpack and organise them on the shelves, which was the exciting part of the process. New and old customers would come, and the praise for the new arrivals would begin.

It seemed as if we were the epitome of modernity in the city, introducing the fashion and trends of the time to the people.

Many city residents saw people like my father as agents of cultural change in the city and surrounding villages, and jokingly or seriously said that he was responsible for creating expenses and promoting luxury. There were those who were not very pleased with these symbols of modernity, such as my grandmother and even my mother, who did not show much interest in luxury items. They resisted modernisation and its symbols and were somewhat loyal to traditional lifestyles and ways of consumption. But the generation that my sisters and I belonged to *was* interested in these new phenomena, and no one really made a fuss about it.

The Story of the Cannibals and the Capital of Fars

As usual at that time, when we went to Tehran, we wore Kurdish clothes. Initially, I did not understand that the environment outside of Kurdistan and Tehran was somewhat hostile to Kurds and Sunnis. Until 1985 and 1986, I had rarely seen a Kurd in our city wearing modern clothes, or what we called 'Ajam pants'. I recall that, in 1984, during one of these trips to Tehran, there was a section of the market called the Arab Market, where several Iraqis from Karbala, Najaf and other places had shops and booths.[1] They were all wealthy and sold perfumes, colognes and foreign goods. My father was acquainted with one of the shopkeepers from Fars in that market. One day, my father had to go to the other side of the market. I was tired, so he left me with the shop owner and went. It was noon, and the market was quiet. I was reading my favourite magazine, *Keyhan-e Bacheha*, which I had just bought, when I noticed the atmosphere had become tense. Several of the shopkeeper's neighbours entered the store, whispered to

1 Some of these are Feyli Kurds, who are a subgroup of Kurds primarily found in the border regions between Iraq and Iran, particularly in areas like the Zagros Mountains. They speak a dialect of Kurdish known as Feyli, which is part of the Southern Kurdish language group. Feyli Kurds are predominantly Shia Muslims, which distinguishes them from many other Kurdish groups, which are traditionally Sunni. Historically, the Feyli Kurds have faced significant persecution, particularly under the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Feyli Kurds were stripped of their Iraqi citizenships, expelled from Iraq, and had their properties confiscated. They were often accused of being of Iranian origin, which was used as a pretext for their expulsion. As a result, a large number of Feyli Kurds were forced to relocate to Iran, where they still reside today, although many remain stateless and continue to face challenges regarding their legal status and rights.

each other in Farsi and gathered around me. They bought me a glass of herbal sherbet and said, 'We have a few questions for you, but you mustn't tell your father.' I took the sherbet and smiled at them.

I was young and small in stature, unable to speak Farsi well, and felt inferior to them due to cultural, social and generational differences. I was under a lot of psychological pressure, especially when they said, 'We've heard that Kurds in your area slit the throats of Shiite people and guards or throw them into a pot, boil them and then eat them. How do they do this?'



Image 85: Re-publication of fake content after several decades.

Translation of Tweet:
1. In recent years, #**Javanrud** served as an #**ISIS** base in the west, from which they carried out terrorist operations within the country.
2. During the #**Kurdistan** unrest at the beginning of the Revolution, instead of sheep, the #**Komala** sacrificed 16 human beings in front of a bride.
3. Kurdish terrorists used to decapitate many individuals using floor tiles to ensure they died a slow and agonising death.

Until then, I had neither seen nor heard such a thing, and I was unaware of the extent of negative propaganda and rumours about Kurds in Iran, not

knowing how much the media, especially during the early years of the Revolution and the Kurdish conflicts while under the management of Sadegh Ghotbzadeh,[1] was emphasising these stories.

I was struck by fear and bewilderment. I tried to recall where I had seen someone's throat cut. The only thing that came to mind was animated cartoons, but nobody died there. If I thought of a more realistic memory, it would be the body of our neighbour Hajji, whose head was shattered by a bullet, or the bloody corpses from the Iran-Iraq War, but they still had heads, and nobody had cooked them in a pot.

I told them this, but the men burst into laughter and said, 'We mean slitting throats with a dagger.'

I replied, 'I have never seen such a scene, nor have I heard of anyone being thrown into a pot and cooked.' They released me but insisted that I tell my father nothing.

As soon as my father returned and saw me, he knew something had happened. I was biting my nails and anxious but said nothing. I kept visualising scenes of throats being cut, or people struggling in pots, or Peshmerga fighters tearing apart bearded Guardsmen and eating them with blood dripping from their lips. Of course, I had never actually seen any of these things and could only imagine them, but it made me feel awful. I had often seen Peshmerga fighters eating and biting into chicken and red meat, but now I was doubtful whether it was truly animal or chicken meat. Could it be otherwise? We had also eaten that meat at the table in our grandfather's house or our own, and at various events.

On the way back, I was curled up in the bus, reflecting on that day's events. I clumsily buried my head in my magazine when my father insisted I tell him what had happened. The driver, who was my father's friend, said that someone must have bothered me at the market. Under pressure from my father and the driver, I recounted the story. When my father heard that they had asked me about the taste of human flesh, cooking and throat-cutting, he was extremely angry and upset. He yelled and swore.

1 Sadegh Ghotbzadeh (alias Esfahani), born in March 1936, was a revolutionary activist, a devoted follower of Ruhollah Khomeini, an opponent of the Pahlavi regime and a politician. After the victory of the 1979 Revolution, he held positions such as minister of foreign affairs and director-general of the National Radio and Television Organisation of Iran and was a member of the Revolutionary Council. Ghotbzadeh was executed on charges of conspiring against the Islamic Republic and plotting to assassinate Khomeini.

Early the next morning, he called the shopkeeper and his neighbour. I heard him talking loudly and cursing. He shouted, 'Where do Kurds cut throats? Why did you ask a child these questions? I have had dealings with you for years. Why did you harass my child?' He remained angry and upset for several days and never worked with them again.

These people had believed the things they heard from the media and asked about them, but their actions were a form of child abuse. When I researched social issues, I realised this.

The Islamic Republic's media, in the early years of the Revolution and due to events in Kurdistan, had a project to vilify the Kurds. Many people believed these false and ideological insinuations.

Later, I heard that stories about decapitations of slain Guardsmen in the Kurdish wars were widespread. The main point here is that these heads were not cut off by the Democratic Party, nor the Komala, nor any Kurds, as there was no opportunity for decapitation in guerrilla warfare. I read responses from parties and supplementary materials that said that the Guardsmen, to discredit the Kurds, would calmly sever the heads of their fallen comrades and send them to their families, to stir up the public opinion against the Kurds. The propaganda machine and the media were also influential in spreading such rumours.

Years later, I heard an interesting account from a former official of the Revolutionary Guard who was also Kurdish. He said that several of the Revolutionary Guard from the Kerman and Yazd regions were killed in a clash in the Oshnaviyeh and Mahabad area by the Democratic Party. One of them was a young man from Yazd that he knew. They sent his body home dressed in Kurdish clothes with a weapon to supposedly show unity between Shiites and Sunnis and indicate that Kurds were fighting against anti-revolutionary groups. He said that the young man was killed by a bullet to his heart and another to his left arm, but when he took the body (on the Martyrs Foundation ambulance) to his village, the family's mourning increased when they saw it. They said his head had been cut off. The official did not believe it, as he had died right beside him and was sealed in the coffin that went to Yazd with him. When he saw the deeply cut neck, he guessed that the Revolutionary Guard members in the area had done it before wrapping him in his shroud.

He said that one of the reasons he resigned from the Guard at that time was this event. That was also why, when he travelled in Kurdish clothes to

cities outside of Kurdistan, he could feel the weight of scornful looks, as if they were saying, 'You are an outsider and alien, unacquainted with civilization, and should be avoided!'



Image 86: Me. Piranshahr, 1983.

Kameel's Library of Cinema Love

I was not born into an educated or cultured family. My mother was illiterate, my grandmother couldn't read and my father had only a modest education. As a child, my father attended a local religious school in his village, Jaldian, under the guidance of a well-known cleric, where the focus was primarily on learning the Quran. He learned enough to read, write and manage basic arithmetic – just sufficient for handling business matters. However, despite his efforts, he did not continue with his studies for long. Later, he improved his skills, but I did not inherit any educational advantage from my parents. The age difference between my siblings and I was not significant enough for them to play major roles in my learning.

I began reading in the primary-school library, a habit that developed on its own and gradually became a regular part of my life. I became one of the most frequent visitors to the library, borrowing and reading nearly every book available, except during a period when I was driven away by the lecherous and greedy gaze of the school janitor. Later, I started visiting the city library, but when I found even those books unsatisfying, I turned to banned books.

These banned books, often without covers, were remnants from the Pahlavi era or the early political period after the Revolution, still kept in some households. Since they were not printed by official publishing houses, their covers were left blank; thus, they were called 'white books'. Eventually, I began exchanging these books with a few others, including

my friend Yousef Javid, forming a system of swapping banned books among ourselves.

Like some other kids of that era, I was also enamoured with the magazine *Keyhan-e Bacheha* and a satirical magazine called *Gol Agha*. I bought nearly every issue of those magazines. Whenever my father had to go to Tehran for work, I either accompanied him and bought the magazines myself or he would bring them back for me.

Later, I set up a small library with the neighbourhood boys. We placed our books in a wooden fruit basket outside our house and exchanged them with other kids.

We kept a notebook to record which books others had borrowed, and we encouraged the kids to read. There were all kinds of books, including some that were banned, making their reading a crime, yet teenagers were drawn to them.

The area where we lived had previously been under the influence of Kurdish parties, which frequently distributed books. These books were found in nearly every household. Political and leftist ideologies were prevalent, and in the early years after the Revolution, the parties tried to familiarise us with political views through books and films.

Regardless of the ideological, political or party-driven agendas around me, reading books and watching films became my gateway to understanding life and nurturing my dreams. These activities profoundly influenced my life, and I can say that I watched nearly every film that played in the small cinema of our town. When the cinema closed, I would take a minibus once a week, under the pretence of going to the library, and travel an hour and a half to Naqadeh, or sometimes even to Mahabad, to watch a film and then return the same way. It was risky, but I could not resist watching any film that was advertised on television, which at that time had only two channels. If a film wasn't screened in the nearby cities, I would plead with my father to take me with him to Tehran so that I could go to the cinema. In short, my father's trips to Tehran were an opportunity for me to buy books and magazines and to watch films that I hadn't been able to see in Naqadeh or Piranshahr.

The Story of My Glasses

I wonder if you've read *The Story of My Glasses* by Rasoul Parvizi. It's about a schoolboy in old Shiraz who couldn't see the blackboard clearly and had to sit at the front, until he finally got a pair of glasses that rescued him from this predicament. The story is filled with humorous episodes.

My own experience with needing glasses, however, was far from comedic. Like Parvizi's protagonist, I too had to ask my teachers to let me sit in the front row so I could see the board – a spot no student ever wanted, as it put you directly in the teacher's line of fire.

My eyesight was poor, and I was always forced to volunteer for the front row. When watching television, I'd press my face close to the screen just to see better. While poor eyesight ran in our family, my situation worsened due to excessive reading and watching TV. I often couldn't see the board clearly and had to borrow my classmates' notebooks to copy down what I'd missed.

The problem escalated to the point where, despite my fear of the principal and the school supervisor, I finally confided in them. One day, they handed me a referral and told me to go to the hospital's emergency room. For reasons I still don't understand, they sent me to the hospital alone during school hours. When I arrived at the ER and explained my problem, they laughed and told me I needed an eye doctor, not emergency care.

Time passed, and then my father was arrested by the Revolutionary Guard, leaving us in financial ruin. It was a strange paradox that we had to turn to the very system that had taken away our livelihood.

The story of getting help from the Relief Committee[1] to obtain my glasses is one of those tales that leaves me unsure whether to laugh or cry.

1 This institution, the second to be established after the 1979 Revolution, was founded on 5 March 1979 by order of Khomeini, with Habibollah Asgaroladi as its head. The official purpose of this institution is to support and empower the deprived and disadvantaged. The Relief Committee benefits from numerous financial and capital resources. *Zakat* ('charitable giving') and alms are just a part of its income. The Economic Complex of the Relief Committee alone has four holdings, each operating with several companies in specific sectors; however, the performance statistics of this economic branch are not published. The managers of the Relief Committee also avoid releasing any related figures. Currently, the Relief Committee is overseen by Iran's Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and official bodies are unable to investigate or scrutinise it. In addition to

I'm not certain how we were referred to the Relief Committee, but I know that my mother was so ashamed of going there that she would choose quiet times to visit, hoping no one would see her. I accompanied her on several of these visits.

The Relief Committee was a large hall divided into sections, one part filled with food items and another with old clothes, their origin unknown, spread out and often emitting a musty smell. My mother would pick out a few pieces, while the elderly Basij man in charge would repeatedly shout in Turkish not to take more than two items.

One time, while I was with my mother, I found myself drawn to the books there. A local woman on the staff noticed me holding a book close to my face and asked, 'Why are you holding the book so close?' I explained that I couldn't see well. She asked why I didn't have glasses, and then realised it was an inappropriate question: if my family could afford glasses, we wouldn't be relying on the Relief Committee. She spoke with my mother, and the following week, we returned, but not for clothes this time.

A bearded man told my mother that he would arrange for me to get glasses. A few days later, I was driven to an eye doctor in Urmia in a grey Toyota, the driver of which was coincidentally our neighbour. At none of the checkpoints were we stopped; the bearded man would simply raise his hand and we would be waved through. I felt an odd sense of power, as if I were somehow special, not yet understanding the significance of the Relief Committee's vehicle bearing a licence plate like those of the Revolutionary Guard's, with their feared symbol of a hand gripping a rifle. When we stopped for petrol, the driver, who was Kurdish, quietly warned me to watch what I said because the bearded man was a Pasdar, a member of the Revolutionary Guard, albeit in civilian clothes. This revelation complicated things for me.

As I grew older, I learned that, at that time, most government institutions, whether charitable or not, were under the control of the Revolutionary Guard. Security chiefs in most offices and institutions, and even some of their employees, were often affiliated with the Guard or Intelligence. The heavy-handed approach of the Guard had instilled in the public the belief that they were the regime's enforcers. They were

supporting some people in Iran, this institution has also provided aid to countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Comoros and Palestine.

especially feared by the Kurds, who saw them as a source of constant worry. Even Kurds who had aligned themselves with the regime and the Guard lived in a state of fear and uncertainty.

The Toyota driver was a young man with a cassette player in his car that continuously played Quranic recitations and prayers. Once, when the bearded man stepped out at a junction near Naqadeh-Urmia, the driver quickly slipped a cassette into the player and told me, 'If he asks where this tape came from, tell him it's mine and that I had it in my pocket.'

The tape was a collection of songs by Mohammad Mamli,[1] a popular Kurdish singer from Mahabad. We did as he suggested.

I'm not sure why the driver referred to him as a Pasdar. Perhaps it was because of his beard, or maybe he truly was a member of the Guard. As soon as the man got back into the car and heard the music, he said, 'What's this? Turn it off! It's sinful.'

Both the driver and I were tired of the constant Quranic recitations and prayers, so whenever the bearded man stepped out, even if just for a minute, we'd quickly listen to some music.

I don't remember what happened, but, for some reason, we didn't buy glasses in Urmia that day. The bearded man told me, 'Soon, there will be a camp organised by us, taking selected students from various schools to Tehran. If you're interested, sign up at your school and come with us. We'll get you glasses there.'

I was eager to go to Tehran, but my mother refused, saying, 'The camp is run by the Relief Committee, which means it's affiliated with the Guard. I won't let you go.' After much pleading and involving my grandmother and uncle, she finally relented.

We travelled to Tehran in several buses from different towns and were taken to a pleasant area, which I think was in the north of the city. They

1 Mohammad Mamli was born in 1925 in Mahabad. He was a beloved and talented singer from the Mokrian region. In 1948, he performed his first song. Over a 54-year career, he recorded more than 300 songs, continuing until 1992. Mamli passed away on 23 January 1999 in Mahabad and was laid to rest in the Artists' Section of the Mahabad Cemetery, amid a large and respectful turnout from the local community. His songs were often romantic and festive. Some have accused him of copying certain Turkish songs from Azerbaijan, and his critics claim that he primarily performed at the gatherings and weddings of local chieftains, rather than engaging with ordinary people, who are referred to in the local (Kurmanji) literature.

housed us in a large mansion, which they said had been confiscated from Amir Abbas Hoveyda,[1] a name we didn't recognise at the time, but it certainly sounded important. The mansion had a large swimming pool. Every day, we were served breakfast, lunch and dinner in a grand hall. Occasionally, we were taken on visits to places like war exhibitions and Behesht-e Zahra cemetery. Early each morning, they'd wake us for exercises, followed by Islamic ideological lessons. Most of our days during that week passed in this way, and we quickly realised we'd been tricked.

One day, they took me and another boy named Khaland, who also had poor eyesight, to a doctor in an ambulance. I still don't know why they used an ambulance. It would blare its siren unnecessarily through Tehran's traffic, causing people to clear the way for us.

They took us to the eye doctor's house, a grand residence. The elderly doctor was quite distinguished, especially for us war-weary border kids. His fountain pen was coloured a dazzling gold or was perhaps even made of gold. He had a royal-insignia cup as a pen holder and a gold-plated dish for his glasses. He even wore a classy silk scarf around his neck. Neither Khaland nor I had ever seen such a beautiful home or a golden fountain pen, and we couldn't help but laugh, particularly at his ornate cup and dish. The doctor, noticing our laughter, scolded us quietly, warning us not to laugh in front of 'these people'.

He explained that these were not people to joke around with and that they would make life difficult for 'people like us'. At the time, I didn't understand how he could see himself as having anything in common with Khaland and me, two Kurdish kids standing before him in our worn-out clothes. Later, I realised he was referring to a shared opposition to the Islamic Republic, whether it was because we were Kurds or because of his own reasons – different from ours but similar in nature.

1 Amir Abbas Hoveyda served as Iran's prime minister for 12 years and 6 months during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In the early days of the revolutionary movement in Iran, he was dismissed by the Shah. After the Shah's overthrow, despite having the opportunity to flee, Hoveyda chose to stay in Iran and, through Dariush Forouhar, surrendered himself to Mehdi Bazargan's Interim Government. He was then handed over to the Revolutionary Court. According to one account, he was executed by order of Sadegh Khalkhali, the presiding judge at the time, while another account suggests that he was killed during a recess before the trial concluded.

The doctor gave us our prescriptions, and, later, we went to Urmia again to get our glasses. We bought them from a shop called Nour, located on what was formerly Pahlavi Street, now Imam Street. From that day on, I became a glasses-wearer, which had its own set of challenges. Initially, I struggled to walk properly with them. Of course, the other kids made fun of me. As I grew older, I started avoiding wearing them, especially in the presence of girls or at weddings and in shops. My cousins nicknamed me Blind Mouse or Moshe Dayan, after the Israeli prime minister who was blind in one eye.

What would today be a simple task, completed in an hour, took me several long journeys to Naqadeh, Urmia and Tehran – just to see the world a bit more clearly.

A Hostile Environment Known as School

In 1978, I attended kindergarten in Naqadeh and in September of that year I began first grade at Anoushirvan School. The school, now likely an all-girls' institution, was coeducational back then. Located in the western part of Naqadeh, near the caravanserai and what is now called Vahdat Square, it was just a five-minute walk from my home.

Initially, my mother would accompany me, but gradually I gained independence, sometimes walking alone, sometimes with Habibeh, and occasionally with my paternal cousins, along with Ali.

Once, I had an embarrassing accident at school, wetting myself – a mortifying experience common to many children. Instead of going home, I wandered off to the caravanserai. My mother, having been informed, eventually appeared to change my trousers and take me back to school. I will never forget the fear and shame I felt upon returning to the classroom. My classmates had laughed at me, making me feel outcast, and I was filled with dread.



Image 87: Mahmoud Ghaderi Primary School, Piranshahr

The schoolyard was empty because the children were in their classes, and

only the teachers' voices echoed. I managed to reach the classroom door, but couldn't bring myself to go in. What if they laughed at me again? They had already driven me out with taunts, chanting in unison, 'Go home, go home, you stink . . .' The memory remains vivid up to this point, but what followed is a blur.

My first-grade experience coincided with the Revolution and protests, intertwining school memories with those of the upheaval. Those who attended school during the 1978–79 academic year will recall the frequent closures due to protests. Schools reopened only briefly before the Newruz holidays. After the holidays, we returned to school for just two weeks before the urban warfare in Naqadeh began at the end of April, forcing us into displacement and a different educational experience, which I have already described.

Subsequently, amid our frequent displacements, I continued my education within the Islamic Republic's system. It's a period that harbours some of my darkest memories, a few of which I will share.

I wonder if you've ever received a prize at school and been called up on stage during the morning assembly to be applauded? We all know how wonderful that feels at that age. In my entire life, I received a school prize only once. It was during a morning assembly in Piranshahr at Vafai School, in the fifth grade. As usual, the propaganda organisation had sent a letter



Image 88: Students cleaning the schoolyard. Early 1980s.

to the school, initiating a competition. I didn't care about the nature of the competition or the prize; I was only interested in being applauded in front of the assembly.

The competition involved writing forty slogans for Khomeini, which were plastered all over the city walls. It wasn't difficult, as the city was flooded with slogans, especially those of Khomeini. I covered various parts of the city, jotting down forty slogans, not in one notebook, but in three, giving me three chances to win the lottery. I laugh now at what I did. I didn't understand a word of those slogans; I was merely copying them. In the end, I won the competition – amusingly, both first and third place. My prize was a book of the leader's speeches, along with a Quran or something else that I don't remember, but the applause in the assembly was all that mattered to me. When they called out 'Mohammad Ahmadi', I proudly climbed the high steps to receive my prize, though the name Mohammad felt unfamiliar to me; everyone knew me as Kameel.

My schooling took place during the harsh years of displacement caused by civil conflicts and the Iran-Iraq War in Naqadeh, Gerdashavan and Piranshahr. But calling it 'schooling' is a stretch; it was more like a battlefield. There were a few teachers who terrified me. One in particular was my fourth-grade teacher at Motahari School. I've heard he's gravely ill now, so I won't name him. He looked different from others, with red hair, blue eyes and a face that many of us found frightening. He enjoyed beating students. His passion was finding one or two students at the beginning of class who hadn't done their homework, just so he could hit them. He was particularly fond of one of the classroom bullies, who often served as the class monitor.[1] One boy's father was a kebab seller, and he himself was a

1 Classroom monitor: linguistically, the term 'monitor' means 'observer', and in a school context it refers to a student who acts as an impartial overseer in the teacher's absence. However, in our school and likely many others, monitors did not perform this neutral role. Instead, they served as the eyes and ears of the headmaster, deputy head and teachers, reporting everything they observed. Monitors functioned like secret police in the flawed and exploitative education system, using their position to settle personal grudges with classmates by frequently writing their names on the blackboard. They were effectively open spies for the school, which is why they were often chosen from among the least academically inclined students. Sometimes, the most troublesome and aggressive students were appointed as monitors so that control could be maintained over them, as well. I am unsure if this was the case in other cities or schools, but this was certainly the experience during my time in school.

troublemaker in class. I was one of the rowdy students who didn't get along with him, so my name was always on the board, becoming a permanent fixture there, never erased.

When this teacher entered the class, he would hand his pocket knife to the monitor, instructing him to go outside and cut a fresh branch from a tree. Normally, the principal and headmaster would carry a ruler to punish students, but the monitor had to find the greenest, most flexible branch for this teacher. A good branch, in his view, needed to have a springy quality, and the monitor would carefully select one to bring back.

The teacher would then meticulously trim the branch, smoothing it out before calling up troublemakers, lazy students or those who hadn't done their homework. We had to stand before the blackboard with our hands raised. If we flinched in fear, the punishment doubled: five strokes became ten. This routine continued, and if he felt like it, he might end with a few slaps and kicks. It was reminiscent of a justice system that hadn't modernised but ran entirely on the judges' whims, much like Iran's judiciary today. Unfortunately, despite the abolition of corporal punishment, the core of the education system remains outdated and ideologically backward.

Sometimes the punishment was individual. He would call you up to show your homework or recite a lesson. The class was a mixture of fear and laughter. Each student responded differently. Some cried, some pretended, but the strange part was that the students sitting in their seats would laugh.

There was an even harsher punishment for graver offences. The student would be laid on a bench, shoes and socks removed. The monitor would sit on his knees, and another student would hold his hands and shoulders, while the teacher struck his feet with the branch. This was the worst punishment—akin to the old-fashioned *falak*, a method used in the past not on students but on thieves and criminals in the town square.

The Teacher Who Was a Butcher

After the aerial bombardment of Piranshahr in 1984, we were displaced once again to Naqadeh, where I attended Mohammad Raouf Middle School. There, we had a terrifying teacher named Shir Ali the Butcher. This man taught English at school but also worked as a butcher as his second

job. He was an imposing figure: broad-shouldered, muscular, with a thick moustache. To this day, I still wonder how such a man ended up in the education system, teaching a subject like English. Sometimes I think it might have been part of an educational policy to instil fear in children, especially in our region. It wouldn't be surprising, given the dysfunctional and flawed nature of the education system, that such a terrifying figure would be considered an acceptable presence. But how could anyone with a sound mind justify allowing a man so ruthless – who was a menace to both the physical and psychological wellbeing of children – to teach?[1]

When he struck someone, they were left incapacitated. His slaps were so forceful that the ringing in one's ears would last for days, and his kicks were unbearably painful. The entire school lived in fear of him. His level of punishment was beyond comprehension. He became a veritable monster in our eyes. I remember walking past his shop, which was near the Gendarmerie Square and across from Keivan Bazaar, pulling my jacket or coat up to avoid being seen. Although I knew the odds of him recognising me in a crowd were slim, the fear lingered.

I believe the terror he instilled in us laid the groundwork for many of the fears some students would carry into later stages of their lives. Why on earth was a butcher chosen to be a teacher? Was it just because he had a skill in cutting meat? In this broken system, it seemed that he had found a place to carve up not only meat, but also the souls and bodies of innocent children, victims of such an education system.

Sometimes my mother would go to his shop to buy meat, which she would then use to make kofteh or shorba. I was even afraid of the meat that came from his shop. Whenever I saw my mother pounding the meat on the stone with a wooden mallet, I would imagine my teacher chopping it with a knife, and I would have nightmares of him entering the classroom with a knife, opening the attendance register, and calling my name,

1 It should also be noted that, at the beginning of the Revolution, a process known as 'purification' was initiated within the Iranian education system. During this period, many teachers and student teachers who did not share the political and religious beliefs of the Islamic Republic were dismissed and barred from their positions. They were told that their presence posed a danger to the futures and educations of children, potentially leading to the misguidance of students. Additionally, ideological training courses were established for these teachers, and religious and ideological exams were administered. As a result of this process, a large number of teachers were expelled.

Ahmad, which was at the top of the list. My poor English only amplified my fear.

Once, he called on me to answer a question, but, by sheer luck, the bell rang. He told me, 'Next week, you will be the first to come to the board.' I spent the entire week in terror, certain that he would call on me to recite English grammar and that I would get beaten. I tried to memorise every word of the lesson to minimise my chances of getting hit, though in truth I understood none of it and I didn't dare to ask any questions.

The only escape from this teacher was to fall ill. On Friday night, in desperation, I took a few of my grandmother's pills, hoping they would make me sick enough to be taken to the hospital so I wouldn't have to go to school. I felt dizzy and fell asleep. But when my mother woke me up in the morning, I was fine. This was the worst possible outcome: I was well and had to go to school. During those twenty minutes of morning exercises and songs, my stomach was in knots with dread. As we marched in line toward the classroom, I bit my nails and felt a sharp pain in my stomach, all the while glancing outside to see if the teachers were heading to their classes. But there was no sign of Shir Ali the Butcher.

Then the school's principal came and announced, 'Shir Ali the Butcher's mother has passed away, so he won't be coming today.' I breathed a sigh of relief! He didn't come to school for a whole week. May light shine upon his mother's grave, for her death was a blessing to us. That week felt like a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. It reminded me of my grandmother's story about Sultan Mahmoud and the carpenter, wherein the carpenter's wife tells him, 'Man, stop worrying so much; God is greater than Sultan Mahmoud.'

Please, Sir, Hit My Child

A more significant issue was the mindset of parents toward corporal punishment in schools. With their limited awareness at the time, they believed the school was always right, and if their child was beaten, it must have been because they did something wrong and deserved it. This ignorance led to a tacit collusion between schools and families in exploiting and exerting power over the bodies and minds of children.

There was an even worse aspect to this. If we missed school or were late, we would bring our mothers to explain. Back then, fathers were generally



Image 89: Me, Fifth Grade. 17 Shahrivar School, Piranshahr, 1982.

excluded from educational matters and played no significant role, so mothers had to handle everything with the school. This exclusion of fathers, particularly for us as boys, had profoundly negative consequences, altering our relationships with our fathers in undesirable ways.

Other children would see you with your mother in the school office, and rumours would spread that you were a 'mama's boy'. But that didn't bother me much because something worse would happen! My mother, after explaining to the teacher the reason for my lateness or absence – usually due to going to the village or attending a wedding – would say, 'Please, sir, give Kameel a few slaps. He misbehaves at home, causes trouble and doesn't study!'

With this mindset, how could we, as children, expect our families to defend us against unfair beatings from teachers and school administrators? The traditional view of parents was that, since children feared their teachers, the teachers were tools for disciplining them. Parents themselves would give teachers the green light. With such a low level of awareness, the only method of child-rearing they knew was to instil fear and humiliation. Little did they realise that this fear and humiliation in childhood would cause future anxieties, inferiority and anger.

This blind trust in teachers, or anyone within the education system, could be found in most families. No parent would find joy in their child's suffering, but the roots of this attitude can be traced back to Iranian-Islamic culture and beliefs. Phrases like 'whoever teaches you something makes you their servant' and 'teaching is the profession of the prophets' highlighted the sacredness of teaching and the revered status of teachers,

which made any criticism from students or their parents almost impossible. The teacher was always right because the belief was that teaching was a holy profession and teachers always had children's best interests at heart.

We, as children, rarely, if ever, shared what the teachers did to us with our families. And even if we did, it was unlikely our parents would react. No government body monitored the work of teachers or schools. Later, through friends from other parts of Iran, I learned that they were subjected to the same conditions.

Today, due to various factors including the rise of media, the expansion of private schools, the retirement of that generation of teachers, and the increased literacy of parents, conditions in schools have improved. However, I can confidently say that until the 2000s, the situation in Iran, especially in smaller towns and villages, was more or less the same.

Imagination Leading the Way to Becoming a Sage

My childhood was my heroic era. As I mentioned earlier, I envisioned myself as a successful and important adult. I felt a deep need to become someone significant. This may have stemmed from my adventurous nature, along with common insecurities like a desire for attention and self-doubt. Adding to this, I lived in a region fraught with crises and turmoil, where often my only solace was found in distant dreams and aspirations for the future.

In my family, the father was the commander. The dominance of familial and societal regimes was nearly absolute. Alongside this were the parties, their ideologies and their clashes with the ruling system, leading me to witness power struggles from a young age. I encountered significant figures in my life, political personalities I met through my family's position and location: from leaders of the Democratic Party to others who were always accompanied by escorts. I attended political meetings and received nearly two years of education in Kurdish. These experiences left a mythical impression on my young mind, traces of which linger. Even now, when I watch a film where a security team opens the door for an important figure, I'm reminded of that time.

In my childhood dreams, I was always a prominent political figure. As I grew older, I aspired to become a minister. However, with the little

experience and understanding I've gained about politics in Europe, Turkey and the region, and after seeing the more realistic and murky side of politics, I no longer wish to hold a political office.

I now think more about the importance of a scientific and social position – the role of the wise elder I frequently mention these days. A sage has no bodyguards, but many followers and even opponents.

I dislike political office because it's superficial and distances you from your beliefs, throwing you into an endless struggle. One term comes, and the previous must go. I now seek something bolder and more enduring. Another reason for this shift is my aversion to political intrigues and conflicts, which have begun to terrify me.

Imagination has always been a driving force that brings me closer to my desires. My unattainable dreams and aspirations, in which I found joy, were rooted in what I lacked and inspired by the stories, events and experiences around me.

Having a creative mind has certainly played a role in the birth of these dreams. I was heavily influenced by stories and novels, leading to much daydreaming. Without books, films, writing and research, I would have undoubtedly become a different person and followed another path. During the turbulent childhood and adolescence, I've detailed extensively in this book, imagination was my constant saviour.

Daydreaming elevated my mind and spirit to such heights that the harsh realities of my life couldn't stand up to its power. If it weren't for my imagination, would there have been books, films, writing and research in my life? The answer is no. Thanks to my imagination, all these became possible for me. I was fortunate that my imagination found a way to manifest, leading to certain outcomes and setting me on a different path. The realities of my life were so bleak and challenging that they could have led me anywhere but here. My imagination was the liberating force that overcame these realities.

Many children and adolescents have their lives so dominated by unyielding power that they have no room for daydreaming. Their dreams die in the graveyards of their lives. In the battle between reality and imagination, the harsh social realities often crush their dreams. I'm glad I'm not a stranger to imagination and have no shame in saying that sometimes daydreaming is good. I believe it's a kind of mental recreation, and I think one should always have dreams and aspirations, even using

them to lay the foundation for future projects. Interestingly, with such faith, I've almost always achieved my dreams, and even in the toughest situations, there's a voice inside me saying, 'Kameel, don't worry! The best will come to you at the end.' And I can't help but agree with it.

I've also had long-held dreams, but I've never berated myself for any of them. (Perhaps later I've laughed at them!) On the contrary, every dream and aspiration has been a reason for me to praise myself. Looking back at my dreams and aspirations over time, I see desires shaped by my age, era and circumstances, and I think I've achieved most of them.

As a teenager, I dreamed of seeing the world's wonders, visiting Egypt and Africa. During my youth, I wanted to become a significant political figure. While I may not have fully realised that dream, I've come close and now no longer desire it. In London, I was active as a student; in Kurdistan of Turkey and Iraq a coordinator for anthropological research; and more recently in Iran a leader and researcher in social harms, engaging in both action-orientated and research-driven work.

At the very least, I've reached some of my goals and desires. At one time, I wished to be able to speak publicly, be a good orator and leave a strong impression on everyone. I wondered if I would ever be able to speak like so-and-so in front of people, without trembling hands or voice, and speak confidently in front of the camera. Now these dreams have come true and have become somewhat mundane. They no longer hold the same allure and perhaps even repel me.

Now that I've reached fifty, many of my childhood dreams have come true. Back then, influenced by the novels I read, I fantasised about a life full of adventure and certainly never imagined that one day I'd become a researcher. In fact, I don't intend to remain a researcher for my entire life. Why should I spend my entire life working and living under one title? My lived experience in a specific place and culture have turned into research work, but now I'm thinking about executing my ideas.

I've achieved much more than I ever thought possible. I had a great drive to achieve my dreams. My determination, effort and persistence, along with a touch of luck and encounters with unique opportunities, have helped me get closer to what I wanted to be. Now, I feel that a more significant part of my life has begun, and I know that in the second half of my life, I'll follow a path different from the first.

I also have dreams for others, especially for my son. I hope he has opportunities for education and great experiences and that he follows his dreams. Perhaps every parent secretly wishes for their child to have what they lacked or to follow in their footsteps, but for me what matters is that my son finds his own path. At the same time, I want my son to indulge in daydreaming and enjoy it, just as I did. That's why, when I see him lost in play and conversation with himself, I unconsciously remember the little Kameel. I just need to provide him with the necessary opportunities. Not in the clichéd sense, that he must have everything I didn't, but the essential opportunities. Leave the rest to his effort and determination. My father, with his traditional mindset, always said, 'Parents want their children to be better than themselves; a father always wants his son to be more of a man than he was.'

Part Three: Sailing Through the Storms of Adolescence

Introduction

Adolescence is a complex and difficult stage of life. Even in relatively stable environments where those around you acknowledge its unique challenges, it's still a time filled with struggle. As I noted in Chapter One, in traditional societies — or those in transition from tradition — people are typically seen as either children or adults. The distinct phase of adolescence, with its particular sensitivities and needs, is often not formally recognised.

I had a difficult adolescence, as did many of my peers. At an age when we desired to be heroes and were in the process of discovering ourselves, our surroundings, and our personal and social identities, we were suddenly confronted with revolution, war and the profound changes that follow. For those of us who belonged to minorities, the challenges become even greater.

Aside from such major events, we lived in a society where tradition governed most aspects of life. Although there were some benefits, in many respects, our families and society in general were unprepared to face the new world, and their misguided methods of upbringing unintentionally caused serious harm.



Image 90: Me at the start of adolescence.

With the rise of a reactionary regime, this situation intensified. Harsh, restrictive measures replaced the necessary education. Although the Government of Iran still maintains this approach, the societal atmosphere has somewhat opened up and issues like sexuality and relationships with the opposite sex are not as taboo as they once were. The new generation approaches these matters with more awareness, thanks to the growth of non-governmental media and freer access to information through the spread of the internet. The parents of this generation, many of whom are my peers, have distanced themselves somewhat from the ways of their predecessors.

My adolescence, though, etched bitterness into my psyche. Memories linger like old scars. We were constantly suppressed at school, at home and in society. We wanted to be seen and to reshape the world around us, but the battery of intentional and unintentional suppression was stronger than our dreams. Many of us gave in, but some did not.

I too was wounded and hurt, but I tried, even during adolescence, to find a path toward my dreams. The hardships were not my choice, but my dreams were!

Chapter Six: The Girl Who Abused Me

In every person's life, unpleasant events occur that we choose to keep silent about for various reasons. Sometimes, we assume they are not universal experiences, and other times, due to the cultural environment we live in, we prefer to bear the burden of a great bitterness alone. In many cultures, especially in the East, sharing personal experiences of sexual abuse is often met with misconceptions and stigmatisation, and sometimes with exploitation, leading to shame and dishonour for the individual and their family. Therefore, discussing such experiences, especially in traditional societies, has far more severe consequences than in modern or developed ones.

Throughout my career, as I have researched social issues and problems, my interest has largely been rooted in my personal experiences. We all know that sharing certain experiences can have bitter consequences, but I want to gather all my courage and write about some of the painful events that worsened my condition during adolescence. Some friends, acquaintances, editors and even professional proofreaders of this book, out of kindness, suggested deleting this section, but I refused. I have recounted and deleted these events multiple times, thinking about this decision and its consequences for a long time. Ultimately, I decided to share this part of my life with my readers. After all, aren't these events what make us who we are and shape our personalities?

Many children and adult individuals go through sexual abuse and assault, but, due to the lack of a suitable platform, it is not discussed, and they do not receive psychological support. I hope parents will read this painful part of my story and provide more support, care and supervision to their children during childhood and adolescence. This care will also benefit society. Often, children who are abused, because of the mechanism

of compensation, perpetrate different forms of abuse, and if they are not supported and treated in time, they enter vicious cycles, reproducing violence in other forms.

I thought a lot about whether to mention the names of the individuals involved, but I realised it was not necessary. Perhaps mentioning a small sign would make family, relatives and acquaintances realise who I am talking about, which would not make me happy, although I know the individuals involved in these events will read this text and know who I am referring to. Those who created bad experiences for me were likely victims themselves, and God knows what kind of abuse and similar painful experiences they had endured. My goal is not to tarnish someone's reputation but to try to open the way for discussion about these problems.

Society at that time was more violent, and this violence was evidenced in children and adolescents. There was no supervision over children's behaviour. Bullying occurred openly in schools, in streets and during play. There was no sex education, and there still isn't.[1]

Discussing child and adolescent sexual abuse usually leads to collective concern for girls, and most people are unaware that in closed societies boys are often the most abused. In such societies, families and social institutions exercise more control over girls, considering them weak and in need of more care, according to the dominant gender approach. However, they have a different view of boys, thinking they are men and can protect

1 The systematic approach to this issue has remained largely unchanged over the past forty years. With the religious integration of the government structure after the 1979 Revolution, religious discourse has increasingly dominated the societal mindset. Consequently, the family, school and education systems have become so intertwined with ideological and religious views that discussions and education on sexual matters now face even greater challenges than before. With sexual topics becoming taboo through religious rhetoric, society has become more closed off, pushing discussions on sexuality to the margins. Nevertheless, both before and after the Revolution, appropriate sexual education has been largely neglected, due to ignorance, in social and cultural planning and policymaking. The conditions of war, deprivation, cultural poverty and a lack of proper parental care and the closed-minded belief that sexual matters are taboo and should not be discussed with children and adolescents have created huge problems for all. The education system itself was and is authoritarian and unilateral in its behaviour. Students lack the trust and supportive environment to express their concerns. This is especially true for children and adolescents who were already dealing with the stress of war and conflict, growing up in an atmosphere rife with violence and insecurity.

themselves. The greater freedom and lack of supervision increase the likelihood of boys being harmed.[1]

Throughout my life, I have had mixed feelings about my hometown, and when I was a refugee there, I did not want it to be my permanent residence. When we moved to Piranshahr, we spent part of our summer vacations in my hometown, and I have mostly fond memories of those days. However, in 1982, a disturbing incident occurred. It was the peanut harvest season, and people were helping each other. Each person had a task. The neighbour's daughter was responsible for delivering lunch to the agricultural fields. They said a man or boy should accompany this young girl so she wouldn't be alone, and they sent me, who was around eleven years old, with her.

It took half an hour or more to deliver the food and return. The girl would sit on a donkey, and I would ride behind her. When we encountered a man on the way, she would get off the donkey with shame, and when we were both riding, she would tell me to hold her tightly from behind so I wouldn't fall. Sometimes, she would take my hands and put them on her breasts, and, occasionally, she would put her hand on mine and rub her breasts. I was on the verge of adolescence, and my sexual curiosity and inclinations had begun, but the girl's behaviour was strange to me, and I didn't know what was happening. I only felt the warmth of her body. This incident was repeated several times. There was no conversation between us, except for her heavy and interrupted breathing.

One day, halfway through our journey, she stopped the donkey and said, 'Let's rest under the tree.' She lay down in a ditch near a water canal,

1 Some believe that discussing the sexual abuse of boys, colloquially referred to as *bacha bāzi* ('paedophilia') in Iranian popular culture, is a long-established and common practice. Persian literature, both in verse and prose, extensively recounts the prevalence of this act across various social groups and classes, often portraying it as a symbol of power, dominance and social status for the abusers. In Iran, there is a prevailing belief that boys are more frequently subjected to sexual abuse than girls at certain ages. But why do perpetrators succeed? Legal associations across societies argue that the primary reason is the silence of victims. Boys, due to taboos, traditions and the cultural expectations of their families and society, remain silent. Furthermore, neither their families nor educational institutions have taught them how to respond appropriately to such situations. In a society like Iran, when a child is sexually assaulted, the family's first response is often denial. This mechanism functions with great force, as families, in efforts to protect their honour and dignity, and out of shame, deny the incident as much as possible.

and I lay on top of her. She held me tightly and moved her body. I didn't understand what she was doing, but I felt bad, and even the scent of the carnations she had made into a necklace and put around her neck didn't calm me down. Our bodies were very close, and she kept kissing me.

This happened several times. Once, she lay on top of me on the ground and rubbed her body against mine. She would initiate and finish this behaviour, and I didn't have the power to say I didn't want her to do this to me. I was always worried about her doing it again.

Sometimes, I ask myself what I really felt about this experience. Did I enjoy it or not? Perhaps I derived some physiological pleasure from the unwanted connection, which I felt in my genitals. However, apart from this stimulation, I didn't have a pleasant feeling inside, and I was confused. Each time the abuse occurred, my curiosity grew and she went further.

I don't remember why she stopped. Maybe the work on my grandfather's farm was finished. Later, whenever I saw her, I would distance myself from her with fear and shame. This girl got married very young, but she always took the opportunity to touch me, caress me and hug me.

I also want to say that, in this situation, I consider myself a victim, as well as this girl and dozens of other young girls and their desires and needs – victims of societal suppression and ignorance. Many girls may fall into early marriages or risky relationships to satisfy their sexual desires.

Apart from the scenes I had witnessed in the women's public bath or during childhood games, this was my first experience of recognising my own sexual organs and those of the opposite sex. Now, due to my age, experience and field of work, I know that the girl's behaviour was sexual abuse and assault.

I was never able to talk to anyone about this. What happened between this girl and I was an unknown and ambiguous to me but brought a sense of powerlessness and weakness. Neither the beginning nor the end of this relationship was based on my will and desire. I couldn't determine the outcome. I was ashamed to talk about it. This experience occurred at the onset of my puberty and has undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping my subconscious mind.

Spit-Filled Humiliation!

I was in the fourth grade at Motahari School, a harsh environment where teachers were notorious for their strictness and corporal punishment, as I mentioned earlier. Shafie, our neighbour's son, was a year and a half older than me and was in the fifth grade. We had moved to the city from the village that same year and were classmates. Our mothers were friends, and we got along well too. My mother always told Shafie to 'take care of Kameel'.

It was a time of war, but the school gates were always open. Kids would often hang around outside during recess. Shafie had secretly started smoking, and I would watch with fascination as he rolled tobacco into paper (something I still haven't mastered). Cigarettes were scarce and expensive, so many people smoked like this. During recess, Shafie and I would sneak out of school, and he would smoke. Behind our school was a small room without windows, known as the 'motor water' room, which is now part of the new mosque. The room was originally built for watering the surrounding trees but had been abandoned and was in disrepair. Shafie and a few other students would smoke in it.

One day, while we were sitting there, a strong gust of wind blew in. Shafie tried to light his cigarette, but the wind kept extinguishing it. He asked me to hold my jacket over his head so he could light it. I did, and soon we heard the other kids shouting from outside. They dragged us out of the room, accusing Shafie of doing something with me. Shafie was bigger and stronger than me, and I was smaller and more delicate, with pale skin and light green eyes. My clothes and general appearance were also different from the other kids, so I had a hard time fitting in. The kids accused Shafie of 'messing with' me, and some even made up worse stories. They insulted and humiliated us, and we couldn't do anything about it. With anger, shame and wounded pride, we watched them in silence. In situations like this, even the most powerful people can't withstand collective judgement, let alone two young boys like us who didn't know how to respond to such accusations.

What's interesting is that the insults and humiliation were mostly directed at me, as the perceived victim, while the perpetrator was not held accountable. In fact, sometimes the perpetrator was even praised and admired.


Image 91: Me. Spring 1983.

The kids pushed us out. We wanted to run away, but that would only confirm their judgement. We stood in the alley opposite the school, surrounded by a group of kids, who started spitting at us. Two of them were my classmates. I remember the bitterness of that day, standing helpless and humiliated as the kids spat at us, without even giving us a chance to defend ourselves. My face and clothes were covered in spit, and they called me names like 'you're nothing', 'you're a faggot' and 'you're a spoiled kid'. The culture of the time was harsh and merciless, and such insults were common among elementary-school kids.

I never understood who started this rumour, but later we realised that our frequent visits to that room had raised suspicions among the children, leading them to think the worst.

Some of the kids who had bullied us were from the Mangur region, who, like us, had been forced to leave their homes near the border and settle in Piranshahr. In Kurdish regions, there's a misconception that people from Mangur are violent, uneducated and oppressed, and that they're agents of the Government. I don't agree with this stereotype. While some people from Mangur, including ethnic group leaders, may fit this description, the majority are simple, honest people who live in rural areas and are known for their hospitality and chivalry. I don't understand why the entire community is demonised and stereotyped based on the behaviour of a few.

Analysing this incident is different for me now than it was during my childhood. Having gained experience in social research, I can no longer

make judgements about a community or its behaviour based on emotions.[1] That day, I was deeply hurt by the accusations of those young Mangur kids, but now I realise that I shouldn't generalise their behaviour to the entire community. My responsibility today is to analyse and challenge the cultural stereotypes and misconceptions that have become ingrained in our society.

On that fateful day, our neighbour and friend, Ibrahim, who was a judoka, saved us. I felt humiliated and ashamed, and seeing Ibrahim made me feel even more so. I didn't know how to explain to him that the children's accusations were false. But he never asked me any questions and didn't judge me.

This incident created a difficult situation for me – people accusing me of being involved in sexual activities. This false label stuck with me for years, causing me immense pain and distress. I couldn't talk to my family or teachers about it, as I knew they wouldn't support me and might even make things worse.

We didn't have anyone to turn to or trust. In a society where the system is closed and influenced by a particular ideology, families are affected by its flawed structures. Children in such societies are caught in contradictions, and since trust is a scarce social capital, they don't dare tell their parents or teachers the truth.

My friendship with Shafie continued. He was a good person. We remained neighbours and friends until he went to military service. We never discussed the incident, and our friendship even grew stronger. Perhaps the false accusations strengthened the bond, as we were both victims.

That incident had far-reaching consequences: even years later, people would whisper about it in public gatherings, and some would make snide comments. This shows how damaging labelling and slander can be, affecting a person's life and relationships for decades. The humiliation and insults of that period linger, and I sometimes struggle with their psychological aftermath. However, it may have led me to pursue research

1 In human societies, people generally view those who differ from them – in language, religion, skin colour or tribe – with suspicion or denial. They tend to avoid interacting with such individuals, whether through friendship or marriage.

and scientific understandings of sensitive topics like child rights, child sexual abuse, gender and sexuality.

Fighting Back Against the Bully

It was 1984, and I was in my first year of secondary school. We had been transferred to a new school on Sardasht Street. This was the same school where Moghbeli – the man who had arrested my father – had once been. He was later killed. The school was farther from my previous one, and its atmosphere felt more like the outskirts of the city. Many students were from rural areas.

One of the students, whose father was a carpenter and lived near us, had taken a liking to bullying me without any reason. He was bigger and stronger than me and would often beat me up in the schoolyard or wait for me outside the school gate and harass me. Later, he even developed a sexual interest in me. His behaviour became a constant nightmare for me, and I couldn't sleep at night for thinking about him.

One day, when I came home from school, I saw him standing outside our house, holding his books and waiting for me to come out so he could harass me again. I would go up to the stairs and look out the window to see if he was still there, and my mother would ask me, 'Kameel, what are you doing on the stairs in this cold weather? What's wrong?' I couldn't tell her anything, but even if I had I wouldn't have received much support. Maybe I thought that, if I told her, she would just scold me and tell me to be more careful. Maybe I felt I would be seen as weak and unable to defend myself. The fear and lack of support made me even more alone and helpless.

In addition, I had a belief in masculinity and power that had been deep-seated in me by my family and society. This belief told me that, as a boy, I had to show courage and strength and shouldn't express my emotions or show weakness. This belief made me even more reluctant to talk about my problems.

One snowy day, I was walking home from school when he caught up with me and forced me to go to the nearby municipal garden. He said he wanted to beat me up. I was scared, but I didn't run away. This time, I stood my ground and fought back.

I learned a valuable lesson that day: facing our fears is the key to liberation. As a child and teenager, I often felt helpless and unable to resist my fears, but when I faced those fears and stood up to my bully, my helplessness turned into a self-confidence that stayed with me for the rest of my life.

We lived in a system of fear and intimidation, where punishment, humiliation, threats and insults were common. One of the worst threats was that our parents would be called to school. If our parents came to school, it meant we would be in trouble at home, too. My father was mostly absent from my educational life, and I was afraid of him. He only came to school to bribe the teachers and get me good grades.

I'm not bitter about my father's behaviour, but I do remember that he was more like a school principal at home. He would often spit in my face and humiliate me in front of his friends and customers. I was a teenager who needed attention and affirmation, but my father never provided it. Instead, he would criticise and belittle me, making me feel like I had no one to turn to. He was a traditional father who showed his love in different ways, but, according to the standards of the time, he was a good father. Even when he bribed my teachers to get me good grades, he would say at home, 'You're lazy and stupid! Look at what other kids are achieving!'

Another incident that I remember from that time, but don't want to go into details about, is related to the traditional culture that still exists in Iran and certain other countries. It's common for children to sleep in the same place as relatives or acquaintances. Sometimes, unfortunate incidents can happen. Many children experience this. I had learned to protect myself by sleeping near trusted people, usually women, or near the wall. Sometimes, these incidents would go so far that I would refuse to go on trips that required overnight stays. I realised that many children had developed similar strategies to protect themselves. When you're a child and vulnerable, you learn tactics to avoid and respond to danger. You have to flee from the situation and the person who harmed you – or wanted to.

Poverty, Sexual Assault and a Love of Motorcycles

Childhood envies have their own politics. As a child, I was envious of others, but I was also the object of envy. The important people in our lives, through their examples, play significant roles in creating, provoking and

moderating envy. Therefore, it's an emotion that forms in the context of social relationships and through communicative behaviours in childhood and adolescence, rather than being an innate trait from birth.

Before I had a bicycle, I was envious of kids who had them. I remember that, among the Kurdish immigrants from Iraq, there were a few rich kids who had bicycles, nice clothes and different toys. Such goods were scarce in Iran, and I wanted them. As I grew older, in school, I was envious of kids who had better bags and stationery than me. More accurately, it was a shared feeling! Non-Kurdish kids, whose fathers were military officers, had clothes and stationery that people in our region couldn't afford for their children. We felt this sense of discrimination deeply.

Later, as a teenager, I was envious of others' social statuses and positions. For example, they had beautiful girlfriends or nice cars and went on trips that I couldn't afford. When I left Iran, the nature of my envy changed, and it turned into healthy competition. Healthy competition can be constructive for our personal and social development, so envy and healthy competition contrast with each other.

But people were also envious of me. I experienced this intensely during one of our periods of displacement. I think it was Eid al-Fitr, and I was standing in the Vahdat Square, near the old caravanserai in Kuykha-Khalil, Naqadeh. I was about twelve years old and wearing a new, beautiful Kurdish outfit. Two boys passed by. The older one, who was one of the local bullies, said, 'Why did you look at me?' But I hadn't even looked at him. He attacked me, throwing me to the ground, but I realised his goal wasn't to beat me up; he just wanted to dirty my clothes. He opened my Kurdish scarf and threw it into the gutter.

Later, when I became friends with him, he said, 'Kameel, do you know why I beat you up that day? Because your clothes were so nice and new, and I didn't have anything like that.' Tears welled up in his eyes, and he continued, 'I didn't care that I was beating you up for no reason; I just wanted to tear your clothes. That's why I threw your scarf into the gutter – so you couldn't wear it around your waist.'

This shows how envy, accompanied by regret and comparison, can provoke a teenager's (or anyone's) anger and lead them to harm others.[1]

1 This act of harm is an individual response stemming from feelings of envy, resentment and anger, which arise from a socially deprived environment. While this behaviour often

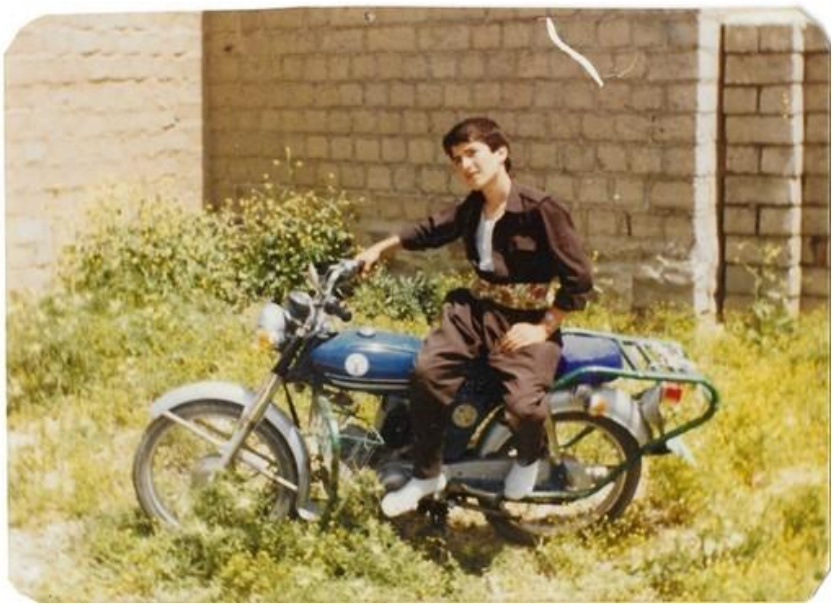


Image 92: Me with my father's motorcycle. Piranshahr, 1985.

I understood his envy deeply and felt its intensity. I realised that poverty can be a significant factor in creating envy and driving different social classes against each other. When I started my work as a field researcher, this issue was always a concern for me. I addressed it in my research, especially in my recent work *Border to Border*, which is about identity and ethnicity.[1]

I empathised with him and later became friends with him. After 1984, when I returned to Naqadeh, we remained friends. We formed a gang and played sword fights with Turkish boys on the Qalat hill in Naqadeh, secretly rented motorcycles and played video games. His father had a teahouse where they also sold game birds, such as fighting roosters commonly used in cockfights.

In those days, I was deeply in love with Atari games and motorcycles, but my friendship with this boy led to one of the worst experiences of my

appears in conditions of poverty and deprivation, the emotional aspect remains unseen. These analyses belong to the field of the sociology of emotions, which focuses on emotions from a sociological perspective. It demonstrates that deprivation isn't merely material, manifesting as poverty, but also carries emotional and affective dimensions.

1 Ahmady and colleagues, 2021c.

life. His family was prone to fighting and conflict. He was a victim who led me down the path of victimhood. I'm glad I didn't continue down that path, but, unfortunately, he did, and he passed away a while ago after a period of severe addiction and illness.

We both collected money to rent motorcycles. He would steal from his father, and I would take money from my family and grandmother. I would also sell bread and do odd jobs to make money. We would often combine our money to rent a motorcycle for a quarter of an hour, and each of us would ride it for as long as we had paid for.

Our addiction to motorcycle riding increased, and soon we had no money left, so he asked me to go with him to see a boy who would give us some. That boy would touch us, then give us a good amount of money. My friend kept telling me to come with him, but I refused. However, my situation was dire, and I had no other way to make money. If we were in Piranshahr, maybe I could have taken money from my father, but at that time there was no other way.

Eventually, I agreed. We set a date and went to the boy's place. It was a second-hand shop run by a boy a few years older than us. His father had given him the shop, and they seemed to be financially well-off. I had a bad feeling and was anxious. My friend told me again, 'It's nothing. Just close your eyes, and it will be over. We can rent a motorcycle for an hour, and it will be great.'

Since he couldn't close the shop door, the older boy took us to the storage room. Everything happened in a few minutes. We were facing the wall. He was touching us. He started with my friend and finished with me. Later, I realised I was the target, and my friend had shown me to the boy from the beginning.

I will never forget the horror of that day. My breath was short, and it felt like a snake was wrapped around my neck, suffocating me. My head was burning. I wanted to die. The sound of his breathing, his foul smell and the smell of the shop . . . It was a terrible feeling, selling myself for money. I hated myself and my friend, who had taken advantage of my weakness. Nothing quite like that had happened to me before, and I had never been so desperate. I had always had my own belongings, my grandmother, my parents and relatively middle-class finances, and I had limited ideas about how to make money. But, during that period, all my

financial resources had been spent on renting motorcycles and playing Atari.

I never went near that shop again. My friendship with that boy ended. For a long time, I blamed him for what happened, but now I understand that he was a perpetrator but also a victim. At his young age, he had probably experienced similar traumas and lived in an environment marked by deprivation and dozens of other social problems.

Deprivation has various dimensions; for example, the material/financial, the psychological/emotional and the socio-cultural. I believe that financial deprivation brings about and sustains other forms of deprivation. The emotions resulting from deprivation are regret accompanied by anger at not having, shame, fear, sadness, humiliation, self-deprecation, distinction, guilt, rejection and many others equally unpleasant and suppressive. Such emotions motivate individuals to act in ways that alleviate them. The irony is that, with actions such as sexual harassment where both the harasser and the victim are in the position of victim, each experiences a further dimension of deprivation. The only difference between them is the type and level of deprivation.

In the atmosphere of that time, sexual energy was suppressed and limited, and the monster of the 'morality police' was everywhere, enforcing the limitations that society and tradition had created but couldn't fully control. Alongside the surveillance that resulted from the Islamisation of everything, the morality police (the Komiteh), which gradually replaced the Revolutionary Guard, made targeted efforts to culturally homogenise society. The Revolutionary Guard, schools and the Islamic Republic's media and broadcasting organisation worked hard to spread a violent Islamic culture, to eliminate other cultures and to conform them to the dominant culture.

After this incident, my love for Atari decreased, but my love for motorcycles remained. Later, I was allowed to ride my father's motorcycle, and, when I came abroad, I bought a motorcycle, although it no longer held the joy of wandering and cruising around that I had experienced as a teenager. Many things ended or faded, but the bitterness of that incident never disappeared. I constantly blamed myself for going there, thinking I was guilty. The incidents in the village and Piranshahr, the harassment and malicious intentions of my classmates and the accusations against me

would come to mind, and I would mercilessly tell myself, 'You see, they were right.' I constantly put myself on trial.

This incident and the girl's behaviour in Gerdashavan, according to today's global definition, constituted sexual abuse and harassment. Because the girl was not much older than me, although I was still a child, I thought it was simply a physical act to which I reacted – I physically enjoyed it. However, it led to my premature sexual awakening, which was not a good thing. The incident with the second-hand-shop boy was entirely humiliating and made me feel guilty, shameful and angry.

War Crimes During the Bombing of Piranshahr[1]

Unlike battles in Khuzestan, Ilam and other regions of Iran, the war in Kurdistan was dual and more complex. On the one hand, there was a guerrilla and irregular war between Kurdish parties, the forces of the Revolutionary Guard and the army, while on the other hand, the Iran-Iraq War was intensifying. When Iran, with the help of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq and later the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, established the northern front, the air and artillery attacks by the Ba'ath army exacerbated our sufferings.

The afternoon of Friday, 7 March 1985 is one of those dates that's sharp in my memory – a bitter and bloody day. I was in my second year of middle school, and our home was on Tajalli Street, at the end of Quds Street. The alley was named after the Tajalli family, and I had always wondered what characteristic, aside from their wealth, warranted their name being on the street. Fridays were bath days. With the presence of water heaters in homes, we no longer went to public baths. That cold winter morning, we all took turns having a bath and preparing to enjoy our holiday. We were watching cartoons on television and laughing when the roar of Iraqi planes grew loud. They were returning from a cross-border operation over

1 On 8 March 1985, Iraqi fighter bombers targeted over fifty locations in the city of Piranshahr, including the streets of Eastern and Western Seyyed Qutb, Zargatan, Shinabad Street, Azadi Square, the hospital area and Shahid Beheshti Street, resulting in the deaths of more than 90 defenceless civilians and the injuries of many others. Among the victims were families who lost as many as ten members at once in a single moment. Throughout the years of conflict (1980–1988), this county was bombarded over 26 times by the Iraqi air force. The peak of the airstrikes occurred on 8 March 1985.

Piranshahr. We had heard the planes so often it had become ordinary for us. However, that day was different – the difference could be heard in the sound of the planes.[1]

Everything happened so quickly that there was no time to activate the red alert. The barracks and the city were adjacent to each other. Earlier, there had been multiple attacks on the barracks, but not a single rocket had struck the city. That day, though, the iron giants came intending to hit the city. They started their bombardment in a crossfire pattern from the Haji Omran and Kohneh Khaneh borders. They struck the village of Shinabad, then bombarded another section of the city crosswise. Hell had broken loose. At one point, the sound of explosions coming from the city was continuous. Smoke was everywhere, and people were wailing and crying.

The terrifying growls of the planes and the sound of bombs exploding gave us no chance to put on our shoes. I don't know why we all went to take shelter next to the wall of the half-built mosque; perhaps because it

1 A serious question has always lingered for us: why, when Iraqi planes could so easily have bombed military and government targets throughout the war without harming innocent civilians, did they directly target non-combatants, who were the true victims of the conflict? Perhaps only the Iraqi Government can answer this question, but even at that time people had their suspicions. It was widely believed that Iraqi forces would press on toward Piranshahr — until 1981, when Rahman Karimi, a commander of the Democratic Party, covertly collaborated with the Iranian army and helped halt their advance at the Haji Omran border by arranging the transfer of the Piranshahr brigade to the frontlines. Moreover, when the Iraqi army, in collaboration with the Mojahedin-e Khalq, aimed to capture Piranshahr, and even Government forces intended to retreat to Naqadeh, the city's residents expressed their willingness to resist the Iraqi army and the Mojahedin. Furthermore, the Democratic Party itself opposed the Mojahedin's occupation of Piranshahr. Some residents of Piranshahr did not believe that the Iraqi Government would bombard the city under the pretext of the Kurdish Democratic Party's collaboration with the Islamic Republic in the war and Kurdish struggles. Others attributed these indiscriminate bombings to the proximity of the largest bases of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the army in Piranshahr. Additionally, the presence of hundreds of Peshmerga and the temporary headquarters of Iraqi Kurdish opposition forces in and around Piranshahr, who were attacking the Iraqi army alongside Iranian forces, may also explain the airstrikes. Regardless of the reasoning put forth by various groups, the bombings of Piranshahr and similar cities in 1985 with such intensity and cruelty from the Iraqi air force remain a significant mystery in the history of the Iran-Iraq War. This is because most military and security centres of the Islamic Republic were clearly identifiable, and Iraqi aircraft could have easily targeted them. Of course, there is no doubt about the brutality and ruthlessness of the Ba'ath regime; they sporadically bombed civilian areas in Iran or launched missile attacks, killing innocent non-combatants.

was new and had no windows that could injure us. The mosque was named Quds, and later, the name of the adjacent alley was also changed to Quds. Eventually, we bought a house on that same alley. On that difficult day, the walls and the half-finished building of the mosque became our refuge. My mother had always been brave and fearless; unlike some people, she had become adept at recognising the sounds of planes. For instance, she would say, 'That's an F-14'. She identified the models of the planes and the bombs, discussing them with a man beside us, who had thrown himself over his wife and children. It was an absurd and ill-timed discussion; we were caught between life and death, and our childish selves could not bear such fear. Perhaps my mother dealt with her anxiety this way, because she was very composed and didn't display her fear like others did.

People knew that, when the MiGs were in an aggressive stance, they would soon drop bombs and rockets, but when they were ascending, they would not launch any. During those brief periods, dozens of Iraqi fighters bombarded the area with hundreds of cluster bombs and rockets, including napalm and other incendiary weapons — some referred to locally as *sarough*, although the exact type remains unclear.[1] Piranshahr was defenceless.

Imagine for a moment: you are in the street and see a plane dropping a bomb or firing a rocket. The bomb or rocket screams down, and you don't know where it will land and whose house it will destroy.

There were many planes overhead. The sounds of the bombs fell in rapid succession. Moments after the bombing began, anti-aircraft fire responded from the ground. At times, the planes swooped so low and fast that their roar seemed to tear the air like a thunderclap — as if they were breaking the sound barrier or, at least, overwhelming the senses with deafening noise. It felt as if the earth and sky were shaking in unison. The screams of women and children, along with the shattering of glass, etched horrific images into our minds.

Suddenly, darkness fell, and smoke and fire engulfed everything. The smells of gunpowder and fire were in the air, and the city resembled

1 In 1980, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons was adopted and came into effect, making the use of incendiary materials such as napalm and white phosphorus illegal (Faghih Habibi, 2017, pp.177–196).

something we had only seen in apocalyptic movies. Our ears were ringing from the screeching of the fighter jets and the bombs exploding around us.

Until then, I had experienced many confrontations and witnessed war up close. The sounds of bullets, Dushka, mortars and artillery fire were not new to me, but I had never heard a sound more terrifying than the bombing on that day.

My grandmother lay on top of us, and my mother lay over all of us. All around were heaps of smaller people under larger ones who were trying to protect them. Depending on where you were in this situation and how many people were lying on you, you might have seen some daylight. Your only security was that someone had thrown themselves over you, and if a piece of shrapnel came your way, it would hit them, and they would die instead of you. The person who is dearest to you. At that moment, you think that you might survive, but how will you continue life without that dear one? Fear, anxiety and sorrow engulf you. There is no security, hope or joy in the world. Everything is dark and uncertain.

What a strange creature a human being is. At every moment, they think of their life and existence, yet deep down, they desire another. This is the story of every human – the hesitation in choosing between oneself and another person in all of life's decisions.



Image 93: Bombing of Piranshahr. Zargatan, March 1985.

Eventually, the bombing stopped. I don't know how long it lasted. Ten minutes? Half an hour? In such circumstances, does anyone even think of time? The city and the homes that had been vibrant just an hour before were no longer places of life. Just a single rocket, in a small city where houses are close together and many people live in each house, could lead to the death of many, let alone such extensive bombing. We were fortunate, though, that our share in the bitterness from this bombing was merely cracked walls and a collapsed portion of our kitchen.

As always, the rumour mill ran hot. They said several thousand people had been killed, and the news was continuously repeating the number of planes, bombs and the places that had been destroyed.

'Do you know about so-and-so?'

'Where is your brother?'

'Did you see your father before the bombing started?'

People were constantly inquiring about their loved ones from each other. They wanted to flee the city.

My father was at his shop during the bombing. Frantic and dusty, he had reached our house on his motorcycle and was searching for us. As soon as he arrived, we all sighed in relief that he was alive.

Kak Baghi was our neighbour. When he started his minibus, we were all ready to go. We had experienced displacement so many times that we could gather everything we needed in the blink of an eye and set off. As always, my father stayed behind to protect the house in the city.

The minibus passed through the city centre. I saw buildings and offices that had turned to rubble within a few hours, and people were busy pulling out corpses. Disintegrated and burned bodies. Others were fleeing. What I saw was apocalyptic.

We left the city and began our new displacement. That night, we went toward Naqadeh and the village of Jaldian. It was the same village where my paternal grandfather had passed away years earlier. I don't know why and how we ended up there. We spent the night in a stranger's home. The radio was on, and we listened to the national news of Iran about Saddam's attack on Piranshahr, translating it for my grandmother and mother, who did not speak Farsi. When the number of dead was announced, everyone's crying filled the room.

Interestingly, and sadly, I was happy that our city's name was mentioned in the national news. The legitimisation of a small city like

Piranshahr by the centre was so significant to me that it has remained in my mind. The problem of centre-periphery even affected a child.

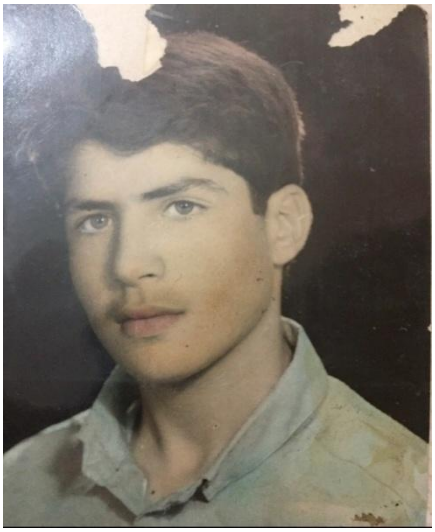


Image 94: Me during the time of displacement. Naqadeh, 1985.

The next morning, we headed toward Naqadeh. This was not the first time after fleeing that we had returned there, but it was both strange and frightening. My memories of Naqadeh were so intertwined with blood that I felt a sense of horror. Each time, I would ask myself how I could face all those bitter and bloody memories. How could I return to the house where I had first witnessed death, just a few metres away? Is it possible to forget that image? Although my life was shaped by all the years of conflict between Kurdish parties, the Government, artillery fire, air bombardments from Iraq, and witnessing corpses in Naqadeh and other regions, I felt this city held my spirit captive.

In Naqadeh, I got to know other war victims and those affected by the bombing. I have seen children whose parents were victims of bombardments in the cities around Naqadeh. I have met an elder who lost three children, and it was extremely painful to listen to the story of their massacre. The killing of innocent people shows us the impact of war crimes on the soul and body of society. The loss of countless lives during the Iran-Iraq War still weighs heavily on our hearts. There are many survivors like me who, even after decades, cannot forget their loved ones.

Nationalist Kids with Tin Swords

It might seem strange, but children in our area had their own battles, akin to localised Haydari-Naemati wars.[1] This term was used in our region to

1 Haydari and Naemati are the names of two factions that have been present in most cities of Iran from the Safavid era to recent decades and have frequently clashed with each other. The term 'Haydari-Naemati wars' refers to conflicts in civil societies that lack a logical basis and stem from popular prejudices.

describe ethnic and neighbourhood disputes, which often reflected the geographical or ethnic divisions in predominantly rural areas. I think these disputes should be termed 'neighbourhood wars'. Neighbourhood wars were a form of entertainment for children, leading to group formations among teenagers and creating a competitive atmosphere. Unfortunately, they sometimes escalated into very violent altercations.

In the town of Naqadeh, these childish conflicts took on the scent of ethnic nationalism and sectarianism, reflecting the ongoing tension between followers of Shia and Sunni Islam. We, as Kurdish children, felt like Peshmerga fighting for the liberation of our homeland from oppressors. I'm not sure about the motivations of the Turkish children, but they might have felt similarly, seeing themselves as defenders of their land or representatives of the Government. However, the nationalist sentiment was more pronounced among the Kurdish children. It was clear that the mentalities of both groups were shaped by the social realities of their respective ethnic and national communities. They represented values and ideologies that had always existed within their social worlds, which were rooted in creating an 'other' to exclude and marginalise.

Even to children, it was evident that more resources were available to the Turkish side. For example, parks and recreational areas were predominantly built in their neighbourhoods. This discrimination and deprivation had begun under Reza Shah and continued before and after the suppression of Kurdish movements like that of Simko.[1] During the Islamic Republic era, it was perpetuated with religious and nationalistic undertones. These areas still receive more development and progress. Such differences and discriminations fuelled ethnic conflicts, and children expressed their anger and desire for revenge.

1 Ismail Agha, also known as Ismail Agha Shekak or Simko (/Simitko), was a significant figure in Kurdistan and on the borders of Iran and Turkey for about 25 years. He is one of the most important figures in contemporary Iranian history. Ismail Agha belonged to the Shekak tribe and was one of its leaders. In 1922, in his region, which included the cities of Salmas, Urmia, Mahabad and Naqadeh in the western part of Lake Urmia, he rebelled against the Central Government of Reza Shah Pahlavi, becoming a formidable adversary to him. He frequently clashed with Government forces during the late Qajar period and the early Pahlavi era. Ultimately, he was assassinated on 21 July 1930 in the city of Oshnaviyeh after a conspiracy by the leaders and army of Reza Shah Pahlavi. His base of operations was the Chehriq Castle.

The authoritative figures – city officials, school administrators and teachers, who were mostly Turkish – often caused the Kurdish children distress. The entire social system, from the policies of authorities to the educational institutions and their staff, was managed in a discriminatory manner. Therefore, it was natural for us to feel like urban Peshmerga opposing the status quo.

Beyond these issues, religious conflicts had intensified sharply after the Revolution, exacerbating the situation; we Kurds were Sunni, while the Turks were Shia. The Shiite quest for power had surged after the 1979 Revolution, but we found it difficult to understand that this power stemmed from the dominant discourse of the ruling system, not an inherent superiority of religions.

Returning to Naqadeh after the bombing of Piranshahr in 1984 was a reconnection with my hometown. I recognised the areas and neighbourhoods, becoming familiar again with the streets and people. As I grew older, I saw things more clearly. It was during this time that I realised the extent to which the city was divided between Kurds and Turks. There seemed to be an invisible wall: on one side, all Kurds, and on the other, all Turks. I tried to analyse this segmentation and delineation. I had just started studying history and delving into political science. The historical oppression faced by Kurds and the city's ethnic and cultural divisions sparked new challenges and ways of thinking, and questions that I could only answer through books and films. Perhaps this was the main driver for me to read and watch films.

The cultural and social structures of Naqadeh became clearer to me during my school years. I realised that children had also formed their own groups: Turks on one side and Kurds on the other. Piranshahr did not have this atmosphere or at least did not experience ethnic division in the same way. In Naqadeh, everything was divided into two camps, and I even noticed that Kurds behaved differently from Kurds in other cities. Influenced by my own ideas, I quickly emulated these divisions, becoming one of those who made ethnic distinctions in everything, from street fights to games.

The adult world had caused peace in the child's world to fade, replaced by discrimination, ethnic anger and outrage at 'the other'. We as children were unwittingly being groomed to reproduce the discriminatory adult behaviours. Our minds were being shaped, and we tried to engage in mock

battles with our cheap tin swords. We bought these swords from blacksmiths in the upper part of the city. They were not sharp, but they could cause scratches and injuries if you struck directly. Each of us got injured several times, and there were instances of swords going into heads, faces and eyes. Our fights sometimes lasted for hours. We would hurl insults at each other and call each other derogatory names, like 'Turkish fool' or 'dirty Kurd'.

These battles did not occur in Turkish or Kurdish areas but on middle ground. We fought on a hill that had been occupied by Turkish snipers five years earlier during the Naqadeh conflict. Those snipers had caused the deaths of our neighbours and family members. Unknowingly, we were even reproducing the battlefield locations in our childish disputes, our games mirroring the adult conflicts.

We understood where the origins of the divisions lay. Were we trying to recreate history? I don't know. Whatever the case, we maintained our positions and launched surprise attacks. Turkish children did the same, but the Kurdish attacks were more frequent. Our anger, fuelled by the discrimination we faced, was evident. We were suffering this discrimination at all levels of life, with no escape. We also had a sense of superiority over the Turks, believing, 'We are Kurds; we are braver'. Meanwhile, the Turkish children said, 'We are mountain people and wilder, so we fight better!' These labels became so ingrained in us that we relentlessly strived to prove them in our interactions with each other. The reality was that we fought better than the Turkish children, who usually ended up defeated. Consequently, older children were brought in to beat us. Sometimes we were beaten and had to flee, but we didn't let it end easily. The next day, we would find them again in another alley and make them pay.

The Kurdish School and the Turkish School

The rift between communities was continually exacerbated by the authorities. At times, I thought all Turks should leave Naqadeh and vacate the city that belonged to the Kurds. This sentiment was so strong in me that, later, I would don Kurdish attire and venture into Turkish neighbourhoods, seeking to provoke them into conflict. This mindset was common in the Kurdish community, as many believed the authorities

deliberately discriminated between Kurds and Turks, an attitude that particularly influenced children.

Additionally, we grew up in families with strong nationalistic feelings toward the Kurdish identity, who were disillusioned by the Government's actions. In social gatherings, discussions about the discrimination between Kurds and Turks were frequent. When we witnessed such biases outside our homes, we were consumed with anger and resentment.

The situation in our schools mirrored the divide. With few exceptions, Kurdish and Turkish areas each had their own schools. Regardless, Kurdish and Turkish children often clashed. In girls' schools, separation was impossible, as there was only one girls' high school in the city. My sister, Mahbubeh, recounted how they were referred to as 'refugees' at school. She described a Turkish girl who wouldn't speak to Kurds or even meet our gazes. One day, I overheard that the girl's family had been killed during the Naqadeh conflict in the spring of 1979. Like her, Mahbubeh was quiet, with blue eyes and blonde hair. Once, the girl thought Mahbubeh was Turkish and borrowed a pen from her. Mahbubeh lent it, and the girl thanked her in Turkish. However, when she later saw Mahbubeh speaking to a Kurdish girl, she became upset and refused to talk to her again. Mahbubeh remarked, 'This girl had gone through terrible experiences, and, apparently, Kurdish forces were involved in her family's death, but what role did I play in those events?'

She did not realise that childhood traumas like losing loved ones diminish one's ability to differentiate between such matters. Although women and girls had limited roles in the larger conflicts between Turks and Kurds, their relationships were also affected by the prevailing tensions. Unfortunately, this atmosphere remains palpable today.

Sociology and history demonstrate that divisions and conflicts between two ethnic groups, nations or cultures have deep roots in their pasts and seldom occur suddenly. The historical conflict between Turks and Kurds is no exception. Communities in this region have sought better living conditions and grazing lands since ancient times, leading them to the northern Zagros areas. Each experienced various bonds and rifts with empires, monarchies and central governments over centuries, resulting in persistent problems between them.

For Kurdish children, who knew little of the distant past, the superiority of Turks and their support from the Government was deeply troubling. We lived in the present and struggled to see the history. Both Turks and Kurds believed they were the indigenous people of the region and its rightful owners; thus, a deeply rooted sense of ownership held bonded each community. I am confident that if Mahbubeh's Turkish classmate and even Mahbubeh herself had been older and aware of the region's history, they would have formed a friendship that at least diminished their feelings of estrangement – provided such tragic events hadn't happened to the girl's family.



Image 95: Students at a school in Piranshahr, alongside a comment from a user sharing their similar story of studying and displacement.

Within Kurdish political parties, there are many Turks who have become Peshmerga fighters or have married into Kurdish families. The movement and migration of peoples throughout history is a natural phenomenon, and now both we and the Turks are destined to coexist. Although many from both sides perceive reality differently, the problems stem from the rulers' exploitations of the differing identities of Turks and Kurds. While these divisions may not be visibly pronounced today, during my later visits to Naqadeh, I sensed that the ethnic situation there still simmered beneath the surface.

When I revisited the initial draft of this memoir (in late August 2021), a street conflict between Kurdish and Turkish youths tragically resulted in two fatalities, turning Naqadeh into a scene of chaos for several days.

During my time in Iran, I frequently travelled to Naqadeh and its surrounding villages for various reasons, including research, local events, weddings, funerals and family visits. I observed that some Kurdish and Turkish people in the city held very strong positions against each other.[1] Even the younger generation, who had not witnessed the past conflicts, harboured negative views of the other ethnic group, shaped by the prevailing political and ethnic climates of the city and ingrained cultural

1 The depth of animosity between Turks and Kurds in Naqadeh can be observed in the statements occasionally released by both sides on social media. In one of my research projects titled *Border to Border*, which examines identity and ethnicity in Iran and has recently been published by Mehri in London, I included interviews and quotes from both Arab and Baluch ethnic groups, as well as Farsi (Persian-speaking) and the two nations of Turks and Kurds residing in Naqadeh. There is a pervasive sense of anger in the city. Kurds perceive the Turks of Naqadeh as Government-aligned. However, many young Turks do not align themselves with the Government and currently hold more transnational views toward Turkey and Azerbaijan, desiring a Turkish government for themselves, similar to the way Kurds aspire for independence or some form of federalism. Interestingly, neither group acknowledges the other's right to such aspirations. Essentially, both groups have contentious relationships with the Government, but also significant conflict between themselves, leading to one of the most controversial and heated ethnic disputes in Iran. While the historically strained relations between Turks and Kurds is a separate discussion, some argue that those who understand and accept the concept of federalism in Iran do not oppose the establishment of a Turkish local government in Turkish areas, nor a Kurdish local government in Kurdish regions. Therefore, those who emphasise ethnic and national differences are fundamentally opposed to federalism in Iran; they are supporters and affiliates of the Government who fear that their interests will be jeopardised, and thus they seek to maintain the existing centralised, authoritarian system.

stereotypes. The ruling system has cleverly and consciously maintained and even inflamed these divisions. It takes victims from both sides, who see little reason to resolve the issue.

I have always aspired to be a catalyst for unity and cohesion among the residents of this beautiful region, and I firmly believe that such a day will come.

Scavenging and Theft for an Atari

Those who were teenagers in the early 1980s will never forget the first version of the Atari game devices. It featured a plane in a water channel, targeting all the ships and planes in its path. The game became popular in Naqadeh around the same time, and I spent a lot of money on it. I even remember stealing to play Atari. As a child, I once stole vegetables from Mr Arab's shop with my cousin and other kids, though I'm not sure if that counts as stealing or just a childish prank. But for the Atari, I stole money from my sister, Mahbubeh.[1]

The story begins when a shop near our home got an Atari console. They had a 14-inch TV set up on some wooden crates with two chairs in front for gamers. Other kids would queue up for their turns, paying five or ten tomans to play for a few minutes.

I became addicted to the game, continuously losing and barely advancing past the second or third level. All my pocket money went on Atari. I stopped buying cakes, drinks or even magazines like *Keyhan-e Bacheha*. My world was reduced to one thing: Atari.

Anyone who played this version will know what I mean. You would stare tirelessly at the green screen, moving the joystick left and right, shooting to destroy enemy ships and planes. Suddenly, they would appear

1 This is where the issue of children's addiction to computer games comes into play, highlighting how a lack of oversight over technology giants and the market can significantly contribute to detrimental learning experiences for children and lead them down wrong paths. This topic warrants a more extensive discussion, which goes beyond the scope of this autobiography. I will only mention that addiction is linked to need, and if families and communities adequately plan and respond to the recreational and leisure needs of children and adolescents, they will not seek out inappropriate ways of fulfilling their needs for entertainment.

in such numbers that you couldn't keep up, and you would play with increasing anxiety. Time and again, you would hand over five tomans and start all over again.



Image 96: Me and the Cart

The day I took money from my sister, I hit rock bottom. I had reached a stage in Atari where I wanted to advance to the next level, but I had no money left. Accidentally, I saw some money in Mahbubeh's purse, was tempted and went for it. I found a roll of notes – probably money my father had given her to buy Kurdish clothing. The first twenty toman note I took made me feel uneasy, and my heart raced. Guilt, shame and fear mixed inside me. I stole, played with anxiety, lost and then went back to Mahbubeh's purse repeatedly. I didn't know what would happen if she found out.

The next day, she noticed and said, 'My money is missing.'

My mother replied, 'No one has touched your money!'

She didn't follow up, and the issue was quietly resolved. No one found out it was me, but I still feel guilty and blame myself for what I did. Perhaps my mother knew Mahbubeh was right and suspected it was me, but she silenced her with the authoritative statement, 'No one touches your money,' to prevent any confrontation or embarrassment for me.[1]

1 In some cultures, it is commonly believed that a mother's love and affection for her children, particularly for the eldest son, run deeper than one might imagine. In many cultures, especially traditional ones, mothers openly express their affection for their children, in contrast to fathers. Spoiling children and covering up their minor and major faults seem to be unwritten maternal duties in traditional cultures. While fathers love their children deeply, they often do not show it openly and strive to maintain a boundary between themselves and their children. Generally, in some societies, children perceive their fathers to be stricter; however, fathers justify this by wanting their children to surpass them. This dynamic has historically been prominent in Iranian culture. The mother's nurturing role is often exaggerated, taking on the father's responsibilities in relation to the children and thereby diminishing or, at best, overshadowing the father's

To earn money for motorbike rides, computer games, cinema outings and snacks, I needed to do something. One of the things I did was rent a cart and scales from the bakery shop in Qalat with my cousins, Sabir and Amir, and go out to buy dry bread – stale bread no longer fit for human consumption. The shop gave us some initial money to buy dry bread and plastic bags. At the end of the day, it bought back the bread scraps we had collected, turning a profit by reselling them, often as chicken feed or for other secondary uses. Sometimes we would also find dry bread in trash bins near houses or on the streets. We would shout in Kurdish in Kurdish areas, 'Wirdakê nân; wirdakê nântan hêye' (meaning, 'Do you have dry bread for sale?') In Turkish areas, we'd say, 'Kurde çoreğ war', which meant the same. We used old scales with a string hanging from a piece of wood to weigh the bread. I don't know where I learned to press the scale's lever with my elbow to make it weigh a bit less. My strength was limited, and it didn't make much difference. If an old woman or housewife wasn't paying attention, I'd count 1.2 kilos as 1.1 kilos. Later, I realised that these practices were considered underweighting in the adult world. Along the way, we would also collect aluminium, metal, plastic, and oil or diesel barrels from trash bins and add them to our load.

On a hot Friday afternoon, we bought and weighed dry bread from a lonely old Turkish woman in the Qalat neighbourhood. Sabir and I loaded the large, heavy sacks of bread onto the cart and noticed Amir was missing. We searched for him and found him on the small, carpeted hall of the old woman's house, engrossed in watching *Tom and Jerry* cartoons and laughing heartily. His laughter and carefree attitude annoyed me. I gave him a telling-off and dragged him out of the house. We were too young for such work, and Amir's behaviour was merely typical for his age. Although we were not particularly poor, many children worked to earn pocket money or support their families, which, despite its downsides, I found valuable.

Now that I've shared this story, you might have questions about underweighting, stealing metal barrels and so on. These are not actions a

role. This is because there are few constructive, dialogue-based interactions with the children, particularly the son. The mother emerges as both the saviour and the victim, leaving a weak image of womanhood for her children, while the father remains a symbol of masculine strength.

child takes instinctively. Later, I always wondered if someone influenced us to act this way. Did these behaviours stem from observing other children and adults? In some stories and conversations in the streets and markets, such actions were not only seen as acceptable, but also seen as clever and even praiseworthy. These were values that infiltrated our environments, and we emulated them.

Of course, we should not forget that feelings of inequality and bitterness due to the country's crises probably influenced these behaviours. We were children entitled to enjoy our childhood and be happy, but this right was taken from us by inept politicians and officials. We felt vulnerable and thought we had to fend for ourselves. We were in a crisis we hadn't caused, leading us to mistakenly think we should wrong others, too. Perhaps to better understand my childhood, and having become a parent myself, I later undertook two studies as a researcher on child scavenging[1] and forms of child labour.[2]

Although I believe that working and earning money can be positive and constructive for children, it must occur in a safe environment, under adult supervision, and be strictly regulated. In collective research, I aimed to address this issue by presenting statistics, hoping to make a small step toward reducing the suffering and exploitation children endure. When we started these studies, Iran was no longer at war with Iraq, nor were there the same political and party conflicts, but children's problems had not diminished since I was a child. Even now, for officials, children's issues are not a priority, and working on them can be seen as security related.

I had learned the art of business from a young age. During summer holidays, I sold biscuits in Piranshahr, and when profits were low I would buy biscuits with my pocket money to convince myself that it wasn't such a bad day for business. In our dry-bread-selling venture, we sold the bread to the shop owner, who deducted the initial money given to us, and we took our profit, splitting it three ways to indulge in Atari games, motorbike rides and childhood dreams. The last time we rented the cart and scales, we decided to leave them by the shop and sell the dry bread and other items elsewhere. Hence, we didn't visit Qalat Naqadeh for a long time.

1 Ahmady and colleagues, 2019b.

2 Ahmady and colleagues, 2021a.

Of course, this is my version of the partnership in the dry-bread business, and Sabir and Amir might not agree. They believe I took more profit and was the one who rented the motorbike and kept the bag. As we grew older, we joked about it. They would bring up these points, and I would argue that I was the one who created this job opportunity, being older and using my reputation to rent the cart and handle the money. If they had driven the motorbike, they wouldn't have managed due to their shorter height, so . . . These arguments and justifications continued to fuel our banter.

Collaboration of the People's Mojahedin with Ba'athist Forces

There seems to be a sadness that accompanies the evening, made deeper sometimes by the weight of global events. One such sorrowful evening was on 27 September 1985 (though some accounts suggest 1986, or possibly following the earlier Piranshahr bombing in 1984). After the bloody bombing the previous year, we had finally returned from Naqadeh to Piranshahr. The city had calmed somewhat, and, despite numerous problems, people were engaged in their daily routines. However, this tranquillity was not to last. That autumn evening, as we were in the yard of our house, the city and its surroundings were bombarded.

As I mentioned before, Piranshahr's geographical position as a border city meant that Iraqi planes frequently flew overhead, attacking and bombing the city. We knew these attacks were due to the proximity of the army and Revolutionary Guard bases. They were nothing new, but that evening the Iraqi artillery was relentless.

We did not know what was happening or what to do. We had never experienced such intense artillery fire before. Although we had heard tank and RPG fire from afar, the artillery was shaking the earth and sky with its thunderous roar. Before the sound of one explosion had faded, the next one would erupt. We couldn't even determine whether the fighting was between the Revolutionary Guard and political factions, or between Iran and Iraq. Men returned home early from work, and women and children flooded the streets. The city was in chaos. Once again, it felt as if the apocalypse had arrived, and our share of it was overwhelming.

Throughout the war, planes would drop rockets near the military bases and fly off. Everything had become so routine that we had grown

accustomed to the sounds of bombs and rockets. But that day, the incessant artillery fire was unfamiliar. In no time, people became refugees, fleeing the city.

As the fighting intensified and the sound of gunfire grew closer, we quickly packed some bread, cheese and a few pieces of clothing into a bundle and headed into the fields that surrounded the city.

Along the way, we saw a caravan of refugees heading toward the Sardasht road – not the main road visible to Iraqi sentries, but through the fields and mountains. Where were they going? They did not know. They didn't even know which group was attacking or who was caught in the midst of the battle this time. Rumours and gossip became rampant again. Some said Iraq was attacking from the Haji Omran border and targeting Piranshahr. Others claimed it was the Democratic Party's attack, while someone else argued, 'No, it's the Mojahedin!' Another voice shouted from behind, 'It's the Iraqis!', and yet another, seemingly impatient, said, 'You're being too optimistic! It's the Iranians.' We were baffled as to why Iran would attack its own border city in the middle of the war. Even the speaker seemed unsure of what they were saying.

Later, we learned what had happened. Iraq intended to advance with its ground forces and the support of the People's Mojahedin, to cross the Haji Omran border and occupy Piranshahr. The army, seemingly insufficiently equipped, was preparing to withdraw from Piranshahr. The city's administration was also getting ready to move to Naqadeh with all its resources. In the mountain range between the village of Qarna and Naqadeh, the army and the Revolutionary Guard were digging tunnels and constructing bunkers. However, when some Piranshahr residents realised what was happening, they voluntarily went to defend their city. The Kurdish Democratic Party strongly opposed Iraq's decision and warned the Mojahedin that, if the attack continued, it might even engage in armed conflict with them.

Iraq, for various reasons, eventually abandoned its plan to attack Piranshahr. Meanwhile, the Kurdish Democratic Party also publicised its independence and its refusal to adhere to any conditions set by Iraq.

Despite this, we once again became refugees and moved to the village of Gerdashavan. After this incident, we returned several times to the surrounding villages and to Naqadeh city due to the Iran-Iraq War and regional unrest – right up until the mid-1980s.

Watching Television in a Language We Don't Understand

When we first got a television during the Shah's era, it hadn't been long since broadcasting began in Iran. In that short time, though, it managed to demonstrate its magic to everyone. Those of us born and raised in the 1950s and 60s acknowledge the power of television during those years. For us, living far from the country's centre and in a closed environment, television was truly a saviour and a catalyst for many changes. When it arrived at our house, I was about four or five years old. There was only one channel, and it broadcast in Farsi, a language we did not understand. Therefore, aside from silent cartoons like *The Pink Panther*, we couldn't comprehend the programmes. In our family, only my father knew Farsi, so the programmes had little relevance and were mostly just images and songs for us. I remember that the music sections had many fans, and younger family members like my aunts and older sister watched them.

Kurdish radio, however, had a lot of listeners. Besides the Party radio, there were two other Kurdish stations in the region: one in Kermanshah and the other in Mahabad.[1] In the border villages, people could also listen to Baghdad radio with a booster. Mahabad's Kurdish radio had a programme called *Khawkhizan*, meaning 'family', which our female relatives loved immensely. I believe it is still on air. This was during a time when radio had a significant influence in Iran, often referred to as 'the golden age of radio', post-Revolution. This golden age was not about the quality and structure of the programmes, but about the extent of radio's audience and influence. Meanwhile, acquiring a television was difficult and expensive, and its reception in many border areas and even small towns was very poor.

When, in the 1970s, cassette tapes became one of the most accessible and easy-to-use mediums for listening to music, record players, gramophones and other large, cumbersome equipment were pushed aside and became decorations. The lightness, ease of use and relatively easy duplication of cassette tapes led to them quickly gaining popularity. Older individuals remember the significant role cassettes played during the 1979 Revolution. Those from the 1950s and 60s also have many memories of cassette tapes.

1 On 17 June 1980, the *Radio Voice of Kurdistan in Iran*, also known as the Democratic Party's radio station, started broadcasting.

Anyone who liked a singer tried to collect their cassettes. Among the youth, a collection with greater variety was considered more modern and up to date. It was quite common for people to lend their cassettes to each other. The incredible power of tape recorders at that time was as notable as, if not more so than, television and radio. In addition to popular songs, sometimes we recorded humorous and satirical radio programmes and listened to them throughout the day.

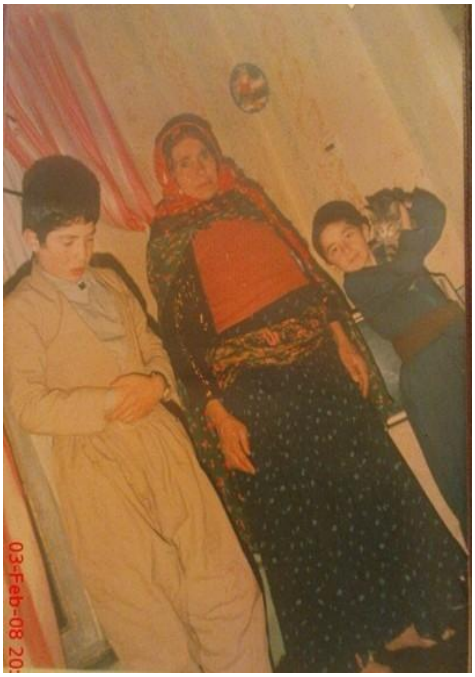


Image 97: My prayer for the camera. From the right: my brother Rasul, our cat Pesh, my grandmother and me. 1985.

Gradually, television took over from radio and tape recorders and increased the region's desire to learn Farsi and understand its films and series. For instance, my mother showed little interest in television before she attended literacy classes, but once she learned to read and write, she watched series like *The Broom Seller*, which took place in Tehran and followed a wandering broom seller who encountered interesting events on his journey.

Television entered Iran in 1958 and took about two decades to become the most important medium in the country. The golden era of television's rise in popularity among the people was in the early 1980s. Although it had earlier gained a significant following in large cities before the Revolution, it arrived in our region later. I think there's no need to discuss the impact of television on people's lifestyles. This issue is so evident that everyone understands it.

After the magic box began to influence our region, young men wore Kurdish clothing less frequently. However, women's clothing remained predominantly Kurdish, except for a few young individuals or those who attended school or worked and had to wear uniforms. This duality seemed strange to me. It persists in the modern cities of Kurdistan. For example, in large cities like Mahabad and Sanandaj, especially in public spaces, many

men wear suits, due to the uniformity imposed during Reza Shah's era and by later efforts of the Islamic Republic. However, most women still wear Kurdish clothing at weddings. Perhaps one reason is the beauty and grandeur of Kurdish clothing and the display of gold and jewellery, or perhaps it is the traditional society's desire to restrict women from appearing in public spaces in anything less than traditional clothing.[1] Nowadays, women's public attire is almost uniform, with the manteau — a long coat worn over clothes — and headscarf, which could be due to the cumbersome nature of Kurdish clothing or the Government's hegemony in standardising women's dress across the country. The Government has also managed to standardise men's traditional clothing so that it's no longer possible to distinguish between Kurds, Baluchs or others based on appearance and clothing. Many ethnic groups, both consciously and unconsciously, resist this. Since clothing and dress styles are important cultural elements with symbolic aspects, people continually strive to maintain identity and authenticity through local dress and language.

The ongoing threat to Kurdish identity from various systems and the fear of assimilation or homogenisation have led to a rise in nationalist sentiments and a focus on preserving Kurdish culture, including clothing and language. This attachment to Kurdish language and dress has particularly intensified among elites in recent years or decades. However, the situation has changed, and, apart from some literary gatherings and similar events, it's rare to see women wearing Kurdish clothing in the streets, unless they come from rural areas for medical reasons or are older. Older women usually wear a manteau over their Kurdish outfits and comfortable clothing known as *saghez* or *senne* at home, but they attend most ceremonies in traditional Kurdish attire. Television promoted this change in styles, and I could see its impact clearly among the younger members of my family.

1 Kurdish women's clothing is incredibly diverse and, structurally speaking, doesn't typically fall under the category of restrictive or overly modest attire. This might raise the question: if society or families are comfortable with women wearing traditional Kurdish outfits, which are often more revealing than usual, wouldn't they also allow them to wear even more modern, body-hugging styles? So, it's clear that the conservatism of traditional society isn't the only factor behind the lasting appeal of Kurdish dress. For Kurdish women, these clothes are more than just fabric; they're a powerful symbol of their ethnic identity and heritage.

Another change that television brought to our lifestyle was advertising. Some of the songs we sang in the streets and during childhood games were derived from the rhythmic tunes and jingles of television commercials for products like vegetable oil, Penguin cheese and the Fiat 1100. Interestingly, although these products were foreign, their ads were in Farsi.

Television advertisements always brought a sense of longing for us, who were deprived of many central amenities. Children looked at these ads with envy according to their preferences: some yearned for the Fiat 1100 or new models of car, while others craved Penguin cheese.

One of my greatest regrets was not being able to watch films advertised on television, as they were shown in Tehran cinemas and sometimes took months to reach us. It was difficult for small cinemas to purchase them, and perhaps there were few viewers. I can confidently say that when the announcer said, 'Starting tomorrow in Tehran cinemas . . .', it was a significant distress for me. The sadness stemmed from longing, deprivation and discrimination. I was intensely interested in seeing these films and would wonder, each time commercials aired, when it would be our turn. Why didn't we have cinemas? (We did, but they were burned down during the early Revolution.) Why did it take so long for films to reach nearby cities? Why did everything have to be in Tehran and large cities? I was constantly comparing, feeling envious and questioning why this disparity existed.

Here is the Voice of Iranian Kurdistan

Whenever a conflict occurred in the region and on the frontlines, Iranian television would show images of piles of dead Iraqis and declare victory, while the other side also claimed to be the victor. On both sides, news was distorted and manipulated by those in power, each tailoring reports to suit their own interests. We didn't know which side was telling the truth and which was lying, and we had no way of finding out.

In family gatherings, interesting analyses were offered. Men who witnessed the events up close would say, while watching Iranian television, 'They are lying; many troops have been killed and captured.' Many people distrusted the Iranian state media from the beginning, and the distrust was even stronger in our region.

We also had two other media sources in the region: one was the Kurdish Radio and Television of Iraq, and the other was the Democratic Party of Iran's station, managed by the Party's Peshmerga, which regularly reported on the regional conflicts. These stations did not report on the Iran-Iraq War as broadcast by the Party's radio station; they covered regional events or those happening in villages a few kilometres away. This news was believable to the people because it was narrated by eyewitnesses. As we ourselves witnessed some battles and conflicts during our displacements, we noticed the numerous contradictions between the reality and the official news from state media. For instance, when a conflict occurred in the Kurdish areas, Iranian radio and television pretended everything was safe and secure. The unreliability of the Iranian Government and its affiliated media started to form in those early years after the Revolution and has increased to this day. When the media does not show social realities and represents everything through the policies and interests of a portion of the government, it loses its function. Currently, national media is more useless and unreliable in Iranian society than ever before.

All these issues came together and unintentionally involved us in politics from a young age. I will never forget the epic voice of Ahmed Shirbeigi,[1] the announcer of the Democratic Party of Iran's radio, who made teenagers like me sympathetic to the Party. Perhaps some of us were even drawn into Party activities and joined up because of him. Every day, at the start of the programme, with his warm, resonant voice, Shirbeigi would almost shout, 'Here is the Voice of Iranian Kurdistan!' Reports would broadcast the achievements and spoils that the Democratic Party

1 Ahmed Shirbeigi, born in March 1955 in Mahabad, began as a Peshmerga fighter and became a radio announcer for the Democratic Party's station in 1980. Radio Kurdistan broadcast news of the Party's clashes and regional developments, with Shirbeigi's voice at the forefront. In the 1990s, after a Party split, he sought asylum in Switzerland and later voiced some criticisms of the Party. His passionate tone inspired many young Kurds to join the Democratic Party. The station's news bulletins, led by his famous line 'This is the voice of Iranian Kurdistan!', aired daily at noon.

had won, and each piece of news created a sense of pride and heroism in a Kurdish teenager.

War and politics had taken over my childhood and adolescence, and we heard two different songs. The Party's station, as a nationalist Kurdish medium, sanctified everything and portrayed us as victims and resilient heroes. Iranian television showed heroic battlefield scenes, indicating how bravery was demonstrated on the frontlines and how, despite the oppression, we would prevail. Many of these heroics later turned out to be staged and cost the lives of young people, whose deaths intensified the excitement and the fervour for martyrdom. Long speeches by Khomeini and numerous clerics were also a staple of those days of state media, and, occasionally, humorous and popular speeches by Qarati were broadcast. On the other hand, Iraqi television tried to dominate our minds with uncensored foreign films, music and songs, promising a better and different life. The image of Saddam Hussein, broad-shouldered and gallant, draping medals of honour on his officers' chests, and countless other narratives tried to show us how much better life was on the other side of the border!

At one o'clock in the afternoon, it was rare for a radio to be off. In most houses in Kurdish cities and villages, the sound of the Democratic Party station's news would echo. At night, during the broadcast of Radio Israel's Farsi programmes, some people would listen closely to hear the news and



Image 98: Ahmed Shirbeigi, announcer of the Democratic Party Radio. Qandil Mountains, 1988.

analyses. In our home, my father, who knew Farsi, would listen to Radio Israel. Most men who knew Farsi, like him, listened to Radio Israel,[1] and, again, the same contradictions arose. While Iranian television said that Israel was attacking and killing Palestinian children, Radio Israel reported, 'Saboteurs have set fire to several places.' We were too young to analyse these contradictions, but my father would say, 'Look! On television, they show a child throwing a stone, and an Israeli soldier is watching him. In Iran, if you point a finger at a guard, they will crush you.'

Radio Israel also had a segment for requested songs,[2] which was very appealing to younger listeners, including my friends and me. After the news, Farsi songs were played, and, at that time, my father would turn the volume down. My sisters would usually protest, so he would have to turn it up again. I found it interesting that a father who always spoke about his nightclub-going days during the Shah's era had become so involved in politics after the Revolution that he had lost interest in listening to music. The hardships of those days might have left no room for emotions. As he grew older, he lost his job and livelihood. He became displaced, and these events impacted every aspect of our lives. As our generation grew older, we sometimes listened to the leftist radio, which had its own distinct worldview.

Video and Unrepeatable Night Gatherings

Unlike television, which took a long time to reach the border areas and peripheries of the country, video technology arrived in Kurdistan earlier than in other parts of Iran, except for the major cities. After the Gulf War, the onset of the civil war in Iraq and the Iraqi army's attack on Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, many Kurdish refugees entered Iranian Kurdistan. The smuggling routes between Iran and Iraq became more open, allowing

1 The Farsi section of Israel Radio broadcast from 1958 until 10 May 2017. It was launched with the aim of strengthening ties between Iran and Israel. Amnon Netzer was its founder and Menashe Amir one of its prominent broadcasters. At one point, it was estimated to have had between two and six million daily listeners in Iran. The Farsi section ceased operations in mid-May 2017, after sixty years of continuous programming, due to a decision by the Israeli Parliament. This radio station operated under the supervision of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, which was dissolved by a parliamentary resolution.

2 BBC Radio aired a similar programme with Behzad Bolour as the host.

video and colour television sets, looted from Kuwait, to enter Iran and spread to other cities. Along with video players, a vast number of videotapes, taken from Kuwaiti homes, arrived in our region in unmarked bags. We suddenly faced a massive influx of video films, including everything from family and private films to pornography.

Almost all children of the 1980s remember the sight of a video player wrapped in blankets, arriving at a home with great caution and secrecy. These devices were usually rented, as most families could not afford to buy them. By the early 1990s, families gradually began to own them, and, in the larger cities, Betamax films were converted to VHS. Larger films were now available on smaller devices.

Typically, one of the neighbours or relatives would rent the video player, and others would be invited to gather with their food and snacks at the host's home. Apart from family gatherings, we sometimes rented videos and films discreetly, always on the lookout for empty houses, to avoid detection by the local Komiteh. One of the popular Indian films at the time was *Sholay*. Turkish films, especially those featuring Ibrahim Tatlıses, also had many fans. When we still rented video players, we would watch films late into the night, breaking seeds and watching together. Often, family gatherings before holidays centred around video screenings. We would rent a video player and a selection of films, bringing them home hidden under shirts and coats to avoid detection by the authorities. The genre of the film didn't matter – we watched everything from Iranian and Indian films to Jackie Chan's martial arts and Hong Kong action films, to 1960s and 1970s police dramas and cheesy romances.

To maximise our viewing experience, we rented a large number of films and endured sleepless nights and next-day drowsiness. The films often included sexual content, so the older generation discovered various methods of censorship. They would either fast-forward through the scenes or, in a more diplomatic manner, ask us to close our eyes during them. But avoiding these scenes was often impossible. Indian films, which were rarely under three hours long, had extended song-and-dance scenes, which we fast-forwarded to reach the main plot. We often laughed at these long dance sequences around trees and mocked the romantic and sentimental characters portrayed.

The video boom had a significant impact on the culture of people in all cities, both large and small. New films changed our lifestyles and even our

fashions. I could easily see this change in my father's boutique and in people's different shopping. For instance, girls would want headbands styled like those worn by Turkish actresses like Hülya Avşar or bangles like those worn by Indian actresses. These products were quickly manufactured and shipped from Tehran or the Turkish border to our region.

Families, besides the highly popular Indian and martial arts films, sought out music videos of their favourite singers, which were known as 'shows' at the time and were quickly duplicated on video and cassette tapes. Ibrahim Tatlıses had a large following, and for a time our region was a hub for Turkish music. Kurdish songs from other parts of Kurdistan, such as Turkey and Iraq, also entered the region's oral and popular culture.

Despite severe restrictions and government crackdowns, video technology had a significant impact over at least a decade, largely freeing society from the political control of the Government and even challenging it. The official media system in the late 1980s and early 1990s made significant efforts to block the distribution of videos and films, but as VHS turned into CD and DVD, and transportation and copying became easier, the task for law enforcement became more challenging. Daily newspapers reported the seizure of large quantities of DVDs, but none of these repressive measures could prevent the viewing of uncensored foreign films and New Year's shows by Los-Angeles-based singers. The Government's efforts proved futile.

Some people continuously claimed that the younger generation was declining. While it is undeniable that video had detrimental effects in that closed environment – such as my own experience with pornography at a young age, which left me feeling cold and inadequate – I will not delve into a complex discussion of the pros and cons of pornography here. Instead, I wish to highlight the harms of unawareness when watching such films. At that time, we had little understanding of special effects or cinematic tricks, and we easily accepted everything we saw in these films. Such imbalanced comparisons lead to increased dissatisfaction with one's body and physical abilities, and that self-dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with one's sexual partner affects sexual pleasure.

We also heard many amusing stories. For example, it was said that a father, watching a film of his choice with his family, suddenly encountered

a sexual scene. Everyone panicked, and someone quickly unplugged the device. In other cases, video players were smashed in frustration.

Such changes caused that closed society to open slightly. Although the Government and traditional norms remained firmly in place to prevent too much change, technology had its effect. The power of technology often surpasses that of government and tradition.

The Spread of Banned Books

From 1982 onward, reading non-academic books became a pleasurable activity for me. I had little interest in textbooks, except for social studies, literature and especially history. I turned to reading magazines. My interest in magazines began with *Keyhan-e Bacheha*[1] in Naqadeh and continued with *Gol Agha* after we were displaced to Piranshahr. At that time, only a few copies of this magazine arrived in town; I would get one, and another boy, whose father was the commander of the Piranshahr military base and attended our school, would get the other. We two would purchase *Keyhan-e Bacheha* and, after reading them ourselves, would pass them around the other kids.

At that time, my father's situation had improved, and I could buy more storybooks. My friend and neighbour, Ibrahim, was also an avid reader, and we would exchange books. We would arrange the books on fruit baskets in front of our houses – one day in front of mine and another day in front of his – and trade them with each other. Our setup was quite like a library, complete with a notebook in which we recorded the names of borrowers. We also encouraged other kids to bring their books, marking our first experience of group collaboration, which ended after the bombing in 1984. Many of Ibrahim's and my own books were taken and never returned. Nothing quite returned to its previous state after that incident, but at the time I felt good. This informal library and the exchange of books became a form of escape from my life, especially since I wasn't happy at school and didn't return home in a good mood.

1 *Keyhan-e Bacheha* is the oldest children's magazine in Iran, part of the Keyhan publishing group. Jafar Badi'i is its editor-in-chief. It was first published in 1956. After a pause during the press strikes of 1979, its publication resumed.



Image 99: Me and Gol Agha Magazine

The pressure and stress at school were significant, including occasional beatings, humiliation and bullying. I had gone through very different education systems under the Pahlavi regime, the Democratic Party and the Islamic Republic. These changes were severely detrimental to my learning and diminished my motivation to study. I was filled with fear and anxiety. Under these circumstances, reading became my sole motivation, and the library was my refuge from the harsh realities of my life. I soothed myself with non-academic reading as a counterbalance to the traditional, harsh and unprofessional teaching methods at school. Even when I couldn't find books or magazines to read, I would read old newspapers that my father used to wrap goods in at his shop. Sometimes I didn't understand their content, as they discussed war, slogans and revolution, but they somewhat quenched my thirst for reading.

After the Revolution, books were severely censored. However, people still had copies of some books from two or three decades earlier, which were bought and sold as banned or smuggled books. These books were not officially published or reprinted but were sometimes available as offset prints. Some bookstores had these kinds of books, but they did not display them, selling them instead under the counter.

Banned books were very diverse. Some fell into political and religious categories that the Islamic Republic did not favour, while others were romance novels, detective stories and popular fiction that conflicted with the cultural and moral policies of the regime.

I read banned detective and crime novels from the Shah's era, including works by Mickey Spillane, who created the private detective Mike Hammer and called himself the literary equivalent of chewing gum, and

popular fiction like the works of Parviz Qazi-Saeid,[1] who created characters such as Lawson, Samsung and Richard. These stories fascinated us because, apart from the excitement and mystery, there was always romantic relationships between detectives and their secretaries.

In the early years of the Revolution, the censorship office was very active. Most books for re-publication were heavily edited and altered. During my teenage years, uncensored books, especially those with references to sexual matters, were particularly appealing. In adolescence, anything forbidden attracts more interest, as we are driven by curiosity and the desire to experience everything, especially physical and emotional maturation.

The Islamic Republic's efforts and extensive censorship system aimed to present a uniform concept of love and affection, which was merely a family consisting of a man, a woman and many children. This was certainly not an image found in romantic novels, whether in Farsi or other languages, which is why even Farsi books were subject to the regime's censorship. This situation is not significantly different even today.

I believe the attraction of teenagers to uncensored books, particularly those containing sexual issues, was related to the closed nature of society and the lack of interaction between girls and boys. Marriages continued to be traditional, and powerful monitoring institutions (including families) made considerable efforts to maintain control. However, they could never fully control the feelings, emotions and curiosities of adolescent boys. I had two unmarried sisters who socialised with their friends. I observed their behaviours, their fashions and their makeup, and gradually discovered how love, flirtation and the desire to be noticed played out.

1 Parviz Qazi-Saeid was a renowned author of detective novels in Iran from the 1950s to the late 1970s. After the Revolution, he moved to the United States, where he worked as a host and political analyst. He began writing at the age of 17, primarily focusing on detective and crime genres, with many of his works reaching multiple reprints. He captivated readers with his character Detective Lawson and Lawson's two colleagues, who were involved in various mysteries and crime stories. Before the 1979 Revolution, Qazi-Saeid was a serial writer for *Ettela'at* newspaper and also penned detective and romantic stories for *Ettela'at for Girls and Boys* magazine. Alongside R. E'temadi, he was one of the most prolific serial writers of that period. His books were popular in Afghanistan, and some were translated into Pashto. Notable works include *Temple of Death*, *Terror on the Nile Shore*, and *Lawson on the Island of Fear*. He passed away on 23 April 2022, at the age of 83, in the United States.

No matter how much repressive mechanisms restrict the living space of teenagers, adolescents will increasingly desire to fulfil their emotional and psychological needs. When they cannot meet these needs through proper and healthy methods, which ideally should be provided by social networks and family, they will seek alternative ways to fulfil them. That is when the same family and the social network that created these issues point fingers at the teenager and label them 'deviant' and 'problematic'. However, when thorough analyses of the causes and factors are done, some conclude that it is society and the family who should be held accountable.

This flawed cycle continues in modern Iranian society, only its form has changed. I think the main reason for this cycle is society's lack of understanding of adolescence and comprehension of teenage development.

The Baker's Wedding Night

During our time as refugees in Naqadeh (how strange to be displaced in one's own homeland!) there was a bakery across the street from our house. It was a gathering spot for the young men, while the girls often stood outside their homes or by the water fountain near the mosque.

The son of the baker was getting married, and his wedding became the talk of the neighbourhood girls. I would hear them gossiping and laughing about it. The day after the wedding, the baker's son opened the shop later than usual, which became fodder for the girls' jokes. They said he looked different – his complexion brighter, his face changed. I was curious, so I went into his shop under the pretext of buying ice cream and stared at him until he said, 'What's the matter, Kameel? Why are you staring at me so much today?'

I used to think that a man's appearance would change after his first night with his wife, but no matter how closely I observed him, I couldn't see any difference. He was just wearing new clothes, and his face was cleaner and a bit flushed, with traces of the glitter from the wedding on his skin. Clearly, what the girls were saying had a hidden meaning – one I didn't yet understand. I was looking for physical changes in him, while they were making fun of the lightness and joy he felt after his first intimate experience.

Until a few decades ago, Kurdish wedding traditions, much like those in other ethnic groups, followed strict rules. The presence of a bride's virginity, and the expectation that it would be lost on the wedding night, was a central condition for the marriage to proceed. If not, the marriage could be annulled, leading to divorce. To ensure the bride's virginity had not been lost before marriage, a white cloth was spread beneath the couple's bed to catch the blood from the rupture of the hymen. The cloth would then be shown to the families as proof.[1]

The obsession with virginity has many historical, social and economic dimensions. Some scholars argue that the importance placed on virginity is not solely about controlling a woman's body or ensuring her sexual purity. That idea has been promoted by feminist discourses in recent decades, making people believe that virginity is only about control. However, classic sociological and anthropological views offer other explanations. One is rooted in traditional medicine, because of which it was believed that a tighter vaginal canal could protect women from infections, making it more likely that virgins had better reproductive health.[2]

Additionally, in patriarchal societies, where inheritance is passed down through male heirs, the assurance that a bride wasn't pregnant by another man was crucial. In the absence of pregnancy tests, a bride's virginity was a reliable way to ensure this. Declaring a bride's virginity publicly on her wedding night also served as a guarantee that any future pregnancy would be her husband's child, preventing other men from laying claim. This

1 The hymen is a weak indicator of true virginity. Many women lose it before sexual activity due to factors like masturbation, tampon use or non-sexual activities. While bleeding on the wedding night is often seen as proof of virginity, medical research debunks this idea. Lack of bleeding can occur due to a woman's relaxed state or a congenital absence of the hymen. Additionally, sexual relations aren't limited to penetration, and women may engage in other forms of intimacy or even surgically repair a torn hymen to appear virginal. Thus, the presence or absence of a hymen isn't a sign of virginity. Virginity, though rooted in biology, has extended beyond physiology to cultural and gender dynamics throughout history, with many societies taking the view of 'virginity as a virtue' (Zadsham & Borzouian, 2021).

2 Today, there are pills and capsules designed to be inserted into the vagina that rupture during the first sexual intercourse, releasing a red substance resembling blood. Some people use these as a substitute for the hymen. Additionally, some types of hymens are elastic and can only be removed surgically, not through intercourse. Another type, known as a ring hymen, does not require tearing or removal, allowing for penetration without bleeding, which can lead to doubts about the presence of a hymen (Sanagoo, 2018).



Image 100: Family wedding. Third from the right: my sister Tabibeh and my father.

system, developed in a time before medical advancements, helped society maintain order. As the woman bears the child, the pressure inevitably fell on her.

The groom's female relatives, including his mother and sisters, would visit the bride and congratulate her – after seeing the bloodstained cloth – often kissing her in celebration.

While in traditional societies much of the pressure surrounding sex falls on women, it doesn't mean men are exempt. In Kurdish communities, a man's failure to consummate his marriage brought immense anxiety and could lead to him being labelled 'not a real man'. The groom had to enter the bridal chamber, complete the act swiftly and emerge to announce his success, proclaiming himself a 'lion' rather than a 'fox'. If for any reason the groom was unable to perform, it was said that he had been 'bound', meaning someone in the wedding party had cast a spell or jinxed him. In such cases, he would be taken to a local healer for a remedy or thrown into a cold village pool to snap him out of it, before he tried again. Some marriages fell apart if the groom couldn't consummate the marriage.

Though today we view it as normal or even trivial, in the past, failure was a source of intense stress for men. My aim here is not to defend such traditions, but to illustrate how, in traditional societies, individual choice has no place. Even the most private matters are collective concerns, and decisions about them are made by the group – whether about a woman's virginity, a man's sexual performance or, as I mentioned earlier, love and marriage.

If a bride wasn't a virgin or her hymen didn't bleed during intercourse, the consequences could be dire. The marriage could be called off, and the bride would face disgrace. In some cases, her family might bribe the midwife to cover up the truth. There were stories – whispered in my community – about grooms who would cut themselves to stain the cloth, or clever midwives who would switch out the sheet at the right moment, or brides who secretly tore open small pouches of animal blood to mimic the expected results.

These stories were often told in hushed tones. In the conservative society of my youth, such matters weren't openly discussed, but sexual innuendos and metaphors were embedded in the culture. In some regions of Kurdistan, certain proverbs and expressions carried sexual overtones. These were common in the jokes and sayings of the older generations and sometimes even became the subject of public humour. Much of what I heard growing up was cloaked in animal metaphors. They would say, 'Look at that girl, she runs like a boundary horse' – a term for a fast, strong horse that crosses lines and boundaries. Or they'd comment on a boy by saying, 'His chest is like a lion's', implying he was dangerous. There were also many derogatory sayings about widows, such as 'Look at the mother before you ask for the daughter's hand.'

My grandmother had her own phrases, often with an unspoken sexual edge. She'd say, 'An old girlfriend is like an unsaddled horse. You don't need to prepare her; just mount and ride' – meaning there was already a history between you and her, and you didn't need to woo her again.

Such sayings surrounded me as a boy and caught my attention even more as I became a teenager. This flood of sexual imagery and innuendo

may have stemmed from the suppression of sexual discourse, driving people to express themselves through proverbs and veiled language.[1]

The prevailing culture in Kurdish society was that decisions about marriage were made by the family elders, particularly the fathers. The head of the family would decide who the daughter would marry, often without her input. Similarly, the groom's family would choose a bride for him, and the preferences of the couple were seldom considered. Modern ideas of romantic, individualistic marriage, in which the choice of partners is made by the individuals themselves, were unheard of. It wasn't uncommon for the bride and groom to meet for the first time on their wedding night.

This lack of choice sometimes led to extreme outcomes, including women running away with their true loves. There's a curious contradiction here, though: in some cases, when a woman ran off with another man, her husband and his family would negotiate peace through a system called *maslat* or 'settlement'. With the help of elders and religious leaders, they would settle the matter with a sum of money, ensuring that any feud was avoided. Sometimes, the angered husband might go as far as killing his wife or her lover in an act of revenge, although this was less common.

My Conflicts with My Father

Generational conflict has always existed and will continue to do so. Sometimes, during times of significant social change, these tensions become more pronounced, as was the case between me and my father.

To put it simply, my father was unhappy with my assertions of independence. In my early teenage years, these issues were naturally more pronounced. I sought my own freedoms and pushed back against restrictions. My peers also had their differences with their fathers.

At times, I felt that my father was becoming more sensitive toward me. I noticed how other boys moved freely in society, while girls were more restricted. But in our family, it was the opposite: I faced more supervision

1 Proverbs are considered part of the oral literature within cultures, but the topics they encompass vary from one culture to another, emerging from the collective relationships and interests or conflicts of the people in that society. Some proverbs exhibit gender biases; this verbal sexism can be part of the perpetuation of a sexual culture that, based on its hierarchical relationships, places one gender in a superior position over the other to exert power.

and restrictions than my sisters. I constantly questioned why, as a boy, I had to answer for my movements, while my sisters did not face the same scrutiny. This question went unanswered, and it seemed to me like a power struggle. In hindsight, I realise my perspective wasn't entirely realistic. I hadn't noticed that my sisters were naturally constrained by societal norms, traditions and the prevailing gender expectations. Moreover, both Mahbubeh and Tabibeh behaved in ways that wouldn't upset our parents.

My father treated his children in ways that he believed would maintain respect between father and child, in accordance with the culture he followed. He wasn't warm, but to ensure I didn't fall behind in school and that I was treated well, he gave gifts to my teachers. He may not have appeared kind on the surface, but, deep down, he was incredibly compassionate. This was a common trait among fathers of that time. They didn't realise that their teenage sons needed close emotional relationships with them. When there's a rift between a father and his adolescent son, it can have negative consequences, affecting the son's personal identity, his emotional maturity and even his future relationships.

My life was somewhat different from others'. In the occasional conflicts I had with my father, my mother's support was noticeably absent. My only source of support came from my grandmother. I sometimes think that her unconditional backing might have prevented a natural bond from forming between my mother and I. My mother was a cold, resolute woman. She wasn't one for affection, and from what I know of my maternal grandparents, it's unlikely she received much warmth from them, either. Perhaps she felt reassured by my grandmother's presence and stepped back. Nevertheless, at times I did feel the absence of a natural relationship with my mother.[1]

1 In traditional child-rearing environments, mothers sometimes support the father's position as the family's authority through their silence. However, in private, they advocate for their children and raise issues they believe favour the children with their husbands. These relationships have deep historical and traditional roots and became ingrained habits within family dynamics. This behaviour is often still observable in familial situations today, showcasing the mother's hidden power and influence over the father as the dominant gender. The secretive nature of this behaviour suggests a persistent fear of children exploiting their parents, contributing to a lack of transparency. The father serves as a controlling force and symbol of authority, often benefiting from the mother's role as the mediator for the children. In these relationships, while the man's humility

When I clashed with my father, he would tell my grandmother, 'You've ruined him and won't let me discipline him. You've turned him into this!'

Sometimes, it wasn't even my fault. I would wear traditional Kurdish trousers because wearing non-Kurdish trousers (referred to locally as 'Ajam trousers' or 'double-lobed trousers') wasn't yet common. Like most teenagers, I would alter the traditional Kurdish outfit, making the trouser legs tighter or raising the waistband. However, my father found these changes disrespectful to tradition, which upset him. Additionally, I associated with a few forward-thinking young people in town, which also irritated him. After I left school and before my first arrest, my political activities became a source of concern for him.

Whenever my father got angry, he would shout and yell, but he never hit me. Reflecting on it now, I realise his outbursts were likely due to his concern for my future, considering his own past political experiences. He



Image 101: My grandmother, me and my father.
Piranshahr, 1983.

toward his wife may be apparent, his acceptance of her insights and criticisms also tends to be concealed.

was worried I might follow in his footsteps and that it would harm the family.

As I mentioned earlier, when my father was imprisoned, during our first visit, he hugged me. I was so excited because it had been years since he had embraced me. Since the Naqadeh conflict in 1979, we hadn't had any physical contact. It wasn't just me; I think it was the same for my siblings as well. He only seemed cheerful when laughing with friends or strangers. At home, he appeared stern and distant. Many years later, when I returned to Iran, his demeanour had changed considerably, but during my childhood and teenage years, this was how he behaved. His words often carried criticism, and he would always end up comparing me to other children, telling me to learn from them. As I grew older, I developed my own defence mechanism in response to his behaviour. Whenever he began his lectures, I would smile and say, 'Next, you're going to mention how so-and-so's son works in his father's shop and does such a great job!' I knew exactly where the conversation was heading, and answering back only made him angrier. For a teenager, being compared and belittled is one of the worst forms of insult, damaging the self-esteem.

I continued this approach for a while, but before leaving for military service, I changed my strategy. Perhaps, through reading more, I gained new understanding and could manage the situation better. I had matured, developed new ideas and become calmer. Whenever he started a discussion, I would remain silent, letting him speak without reacting, which eventually calmed him down, too. After a while, I would quietly leave the room, go to my bedroom or the living room and either read or watch TV. Eventually, he also changed, and since he wasn't getting the response he wanted from me, we both grew accustomed to silence. This is how our relationship gradually became more balanced and improved. Both of us had developed. I had grown older and wiser, and he had mellowed with age.

My mother and grandmother always advised me not to upset my father. In public, my grandmother would side with me, telling my father, 'Karim, you have no right to talk to Kameel like that!' But in private, she would say, 'Kameel, you shouldn't have acted that way.' She would offer grandmotherly advice, reminiscing about her own childhood and how she used to torment her father, whom she greatly feared. She would tell me, 'Your father is a good man. He's provided you with so much; you should

be grateful.' My mother had her own steadfast rule: 'You are never to say a word that goes against your father's wishes, nor speak ill of him behind his back.'

Youth and Teenage Love

As I mentioned earlier, when Piranshahr was bombed in 1983, we moved to Naqadeh and lived in our former house for a while. Later, my uncle and father, who jointly owned the house, sold it, and each moved to a nearby place. My uncle bought a house, while we rented a three-bedroom house, and my father also bought a car. He didn't have a driver's license, but owning a car in the early 1980s was a special privilege. My father would drive his red Mazda without a license to his shop in Piranshahr, and I would proudly show off to everyone that my father had a car.

Although we had piped water, some streets and alleys still had water pumps. One of them was near our house, in front of Haji Aziz Mosque. The water from that pump tasted sweeter and was of better quality, and it was free. Women and girls would fetch water from there for drinking and cooking. Those water pumps, known as *trompa* in Kurdish and Turkish, and men cycling are still considered symbols of the city.

Traditionally, fetching water from the springs in villages was the responsibility of women and girls, a practice rooted in both mythology and social norms. In Iranian mythology, Anahita is the goddess of water, and springs represent her presence on earth. Hence, men were not supposed to go to the springs, as it would be a violation of Anahita's sanctity. Socially, the spring served as a place where young people, especially boys, might spot a potential spouse.[1] This old tradition was also replicated in our town. When the girls came to fetch water, the boys would appear as well. There were other reasons for the boys to be around, too: when my sisters' friends visited our home, older boys would take notice of them and treat me with unusual politeness. As I grew older, I began to understand the reasons behind their kindness!

1 In this context, many prominent Kurdish singers have famous songs, and there is a wealth of folklore poetry on the subject.

At times, I would trade information. Everyone knew I had a special interest in detective novels. They'd give me books, and, in exchange, I'd share details about my sisters' friends. It was also during this period that I began to understand my feelings toward the opposite sex more clearly.

It all started with one of our neighbours. They were a family of regional notables and had a daughter who was friends with my younger sister. We were about the same age, although she seemed to act like she was closer in age to my older sisters. I made every effort to get her attention – dressing well, passing by her quickly with a greeting – but I was too shy. Time passed, but nothing more happened. This affection stayed in my heart, without any outward expression.

In short, adolescence was a time of fleeting crushes and street romances, which usually culminated in a few words exchanged or a letter. Most homes didn't have phones and face-to-face meetings were limited, so letter-writing became the primary mode of communication. We bought notebooks with designs of a pierced heart bleeding into a bowl, adorned with roses around the edges. These romantic images symbolised the love-struck gaze of young girls. We'd give the best-looking, bloodiest pages to the neatest writers in class, who would be paid in cake and soda to write letters for us. The love letters were almost identical and could be called early versions of copy-paste. Those with a flair for writing would string together clichéd phrases to compose them. No letter had a name – neither of the sender nor the receiver – and each ended with a poem. The general theme was 'I saw you once, and in a single glance, I fell in love.'

We all carried these letters around, rolled into tiny balls, wrapped in tape, so small that we could throw them at a girl we fancied as we passed by. Then, we'd wait for a day or two to see what the response would be. If she agreed, maybe she'd throw a letter back and, after a couple of days, a relationship would start, which meant nothing more than exchanging glances in



Image 102: Water Pump (Trumpa) in Naghadeh

the alley or in front of her house. Occasionally, if the opportunity arose, a few words might be exchanged. Due to the traditional culture, it was rare for relationships to progress further. Those cases were exceptional. There are many stories from that time about letters ending up in the wrong hands, found by a father, mother or brother, and the aftermath was often bitter.

By then, telephones were becoming common in the area. If the family had a phone, great; if not, you'd stand by her school route at a specific time. If you were lucky, you could speak through a neighbour's phone. If both were bold enough and the girl came from a less strict family, you might arrange a meeting at night, known in Kurdistan as *jezhvan* ('the lovers' meeting place'). Countless poems and stories have been written about these night-time rendezvous, like this verse by the famous Kurdish poet Hemin:

Ll Jêzhvanê, lamêžê chawarêtm
('I've been waiting for you in our meeting place for so long')
Nêhatî kîzhî juwanî halbžarde!
('But you, beautiful chosen girl, never came!')

As phones became more widespread, late-night conversations between girls and boys became commonplace. Girls without brothers or under loose supervision could talk on the phone at night. Some would sneak the phone from the living room to another room or, if they were wealthy enough, they'd have their own wall phone and they'd talk secretly in the dead of night. I often saw young boys, with money they'd clearly saved up, come to my father's shop to buy wall phones for their girlfriends. Sometimes, we'd buy these phones back, as parents would find and sell them to us, and then we'd resell them to new buyers.

The Islamic Revolutionary Committee and Morality Patrols: From Our Era to Jina

In smaller towns, romantic relationships faced two main threats: the Islamic Revolutionary Committee (the 'Komiteh') and families. The Komiteh was the more significant threat, transcending traditional or modern cultures, as it operated in nearly every city. If a girl's parents

discovered her relationship, there would be arguments, but in most cases they would keep the matter discreet to protect the family's honour. In Piranshahr, the Komiteh patrols, led at the time by a man named Haji Sadeghian, were particularly harsh. Ironically, later, news spread of Sadeghian's involvement with two local prostitutes. His brother, a commander of the Revolutionary Guard, happened to be the head of the military camp where I served during my mandatory training in Saeen-Dej.

The Islamic Revolutionary Committee[1] was the first military organisation formed after the 1979 Revolution, established on 11 February 1979 by a directive from Ayatollah Khomeini. This entity operated parallel to the police and gendarmerie until 1989, much like the IRGC worked alongside the regular army. By the 1980s, every Iranian, regardless of age or social class, had encountered the Komiteh's patrol vehicles.

Initially, patrols in major cities focused on confronting the Mojahedin Organisation, and there were numerous reports of violent clashes between it and the Komiteh forces. The fundamental purpose of both the Komiteh and the IRGC was to prevent any potential coup by the army, police or gendarmerie, while also keeping them under strict supervision.[2] After the merger of the gendarmerie, police and Komiteh into a unified law

1 The Revolutionary Committee was established in 1989 after the enactment of the Law of Police Command. It merged with the gendarmerie and the City Police to form the Police Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The initial bases of the Komiteh were local mosques, with a cleric overseeing each committee. Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani was the first head of the Komiteh. Upon its establishment, the organisation operated based on its affiliation with key power structures, without coordination with Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's Government. Its activities included disarmament and ensuring security at various centres, confiscating property, appointing officials for certain institutions, detaining former officials and other similar tasks. Due to the rapid formation of the organisation and poor management and oversight, numerous instances of law and human-rights violations occurred within the Komiteh structures, notably the appointment of Ismail Eftekhar (known as Ismail the Slicer) as the commander of one of the Tehran branches of the Komiteh.

2 According to Article 150 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the mission of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is to safeguard the Revolution and protect its achievements (although later its powers were defined and clarified by law). Based on Article 143 of the same Constitution, the duty of the Islamic Republic Army is to defend the independence and territorial integrity of the country as well as the Islamic Republic system. As a result, these two armed forces were not entirely aligned. A primary reason for the formation of the IRGC was the fear of a military coup. Effectively, the IRGC was used to exert some control over the army.

enforcement agency, many former Komiteh officers were appointed as commanders.

Although the intensity of their confrontations with the public, especially the youth, eventually lessened, aggressive behaviour toward citizens, particularly women, persisted, as evidenced by the Morality Patrol, or 'Morality Police'. The Morality Patrol was officially launched in 2008 during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. It carried on some of the Komiteh's duties regarding women's dress codes and aimed to uphold the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, one of which was enforcing mandatory hijab. In past years, resistance against compulsory hijab has increased. These patrols regulated the colour, size and style of citizens' clothing, especially targeting women and girls. Many Iranians grew frustrated with the harassment and constraints, leading to protests that yielded no substantial results. Numerous women were arrested for not adhering to hijab standards or for engaging in what were deemed 'improper' relationships. Many reports have surfaced detailing physical injuries, including paralysis, sustained by individuals fleeing from mixed-gender gatherings to escape the patrols. Some even died under suspicious circumstances or due to torture in police custody. One of the earliest victims of the Morality Patrol was Sara, a nurse in Tehran. In 2008, after being detained by the Patrol and released, she mysteriously passed away. The official cause was listed as heart failure due to poisoning. Notably, Sara had called her mother the night she was released, complaining of chest pain and mentioning one of the patrol officers by name. The next day, Sara was found dead. Despite her family's efforts to seek justice, the case was dismissed and the officer was acquitted.

Similar incidents occurred repeatedly. However, on 13 September 2022, a Kurdish girl named Mahsa (Jina) Amini was arrested by the Morality Patrol in Tehran for allegedly violating hijab rules. Reports indicate that she suffered a stroke while in custody and died a few days later. Her death, widely regarded as unjust, ignited widespread public outrage. On 16 September, protests erupted, initially in Kurdish regions and soon after across much of Iran. People took to the streets, denouncing both compulsory hijab and the regime itself. Headscarves were burned in some cities, and Mahsa's death became a symbol of solidarity among Iranians.

Contrary to what the Iranian Government and state media claimed, the protests following Jina Amini's death were not solely about women's

rights or the hijab. Social, economic, political and cultural grievances had accumulated over decades, and her death triggered a nationwide outpouring of discontent. These protests differed in structure and scope from previous uprisings. They spread symbolically across various sectors and, for a time, continued in a highly localised manner. While initially focused on women's issues, the movement quickly transcended gender. Men and women stood together to defend each other's rights. It even expanded into ethnic and nationalistic domains. The movement garnered support from diverse social groups, including adolescents, students, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers and even industries. Prominent figures, such as athletes and artists, took on symbolic roles, and more social groups gradually joined the protests.



Image 103: My teenage years and the start of smoking. Naqadeh, 1987.

What distinguished these recent protests from previous ones was their gradual development, the absence of a single leader and their grassroots nature. This, combined with the active participation of various social groups, made the protests unique in Iran's modern history. Over the past few decades, Iranian society has endured immense hardships in all areas of life. Social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and social identity has eroded, leaving the country fragmented. Yet these protests provided an opportunity for a collective revival, rekindling the essential elements that hold a society together.

Returning to the 1980s: Piranshahr was a small town, but it had several Komiteh patrols that roamed the streets, especially near girls' schools during the busy afternoon hours. I often had run-ins with them for two

reasons. I was one of the first boys to wear t-shirts, at a time when wearing a t-shirt or jeans was considered a crime punishable by severe penalties. I also styled my hair with oil in the trendy Indian fashion of the time. Young men dressed like me were frequently stopped, searched and taken to the Komiteh, where they'd have their heads shaved in a cross-shaped pattern. Sometimes they were beaten, and if the offence was deemed more serious, they were sent to detention. After that, families were contacted, and the situation would become even more complicated.[1]

My cousin Habibeh and I would sometimes walk to school together in the mornings. Our families had recently moved to Piranshahr from Naqadeh, and our houses were close by. One day, as we were heading to school, Komiteh officers arrived and assumed we were dating. Despite explaining that we were cousins and, according to Islamic tradition, considered *mahram* ('lawful companions'), they didn't believe us. We were both taken to the central Komiteh headquarters in the old Zargatan neighbourhood. After questioning us separately and realising our answers matched, they called our fathers to collect us. When they arrived, they scolded us, blaming us for the situation. We were bewildered. What had we done wrong?

One tactic young people used when arrested was to destroy or hide any love letters they had, as being caught with such letters often resulted in being beaten with electrical cables – a particularly painful punishment. During one of my multiple arrests, I noticed that the corners of the patrol vehicle were full of hidden letters. Being caught with such letters was terrifying. The Komiteh would beat us with cables, saying, 'How many times have we told you not to hang around outside?'

For more severe offences, the consequences were far worse. For example, being caught with alcohol or with a member of the opposite sex

1 This was an issue that some young people in the city faced with the Komiteh. I believe that if the youth of Iran were to write their narratives about encounters with Komiteh patrols in the 1980s, even without editing, it would create a long and captivating novel. Although this harsh ideological structure was somewhat moderated in the 1990s, a different form of ideological repression emerged in schools and universities. In reality, the oppressive, harsh and ideological framework did not vanish; it merely transformed its structure and mechanisms of implementation from the open streets to the enclosed education institutions, focusing on socialisation and cultural assimilation in schools and universities. This shift allowed for more precise control and enabled the mechanisms of repression to operate within the cultural sphere.

could lead to formal charges, a court case and imprisonment in cities like Naqadeh or Urmia. On the way, one would endure countless additional beatings. The Komiteh wielded absolute power, controlling the town and enforcing its rules as it saw fit.

However, resistance did grow over time. During peak hours, young people would sometimes refuse to get into the patrol vehicle and resist arrest. As the harassment intensified, so did the resistance. If they dared to arrest a girl, people would intervene, attacking the Komiteh officers, who would then fire warning shots into the air.

What did Mahbubeh do to Abu Sizdeh?

Some moments in life are too difficult to bear. Recalling them even years later can weigh heavily on one's heart. The year 1984 was one such painful and challenging time for us. Sometimes I wonder how we survived that dark year and made it to the present.

I mentioned earlier that, after the brutal bombing by Iraqi planes, we left Piranshahr. Occasionally, I would return with my father, only to find that Piranshahr had become a ghost town, devoid of life and filled with fear and dread. Many houses had been destroyed, and everything was stripped of any sign of vitality.

There was talk of loans for reconstruction, but people were afraid. Rumours circulated that Iraq was watching from Haji Omran with cameras and would bomb the city again the moment people returned. Desperate people believed every word. It was a tough situation. When we returned, not only had the back wall of our home collapsed, but other parts of its walls had crumbled. The city wasn't safe, and we feared that the back walls could fall on us at any moment. We needed to repair them, which naturally required time. We lived at Mahbubeh's friend's house for a while, something unusual under normal circumstances, but we were living in anything but normal conditions at the time.

The bombing of 1984 severely affected Mahbubeh. Part of her distress was related to her personal issues, but the bombing was the main trigger. One of her friends was killed, several others were injured and one lost a leg. These events turned the kind, gentle Mahbubeh into someone tormented.

We spent some time in Naqadeh and then Gerdashavan. My father did everything he could to bring Mahbubeh back to normalcy, but it was in vain. She was restless, muttering feverishly some nights until near dawn. She wasn't recovering in any way. Sometimes, people would stay up late reading the Quran over her, and they constantly brought blessings from local sheikhs, and seyyeds to pray for her.

When she was especially unwell, we took turns staying up by her side to look after her. One night, it was my turn. I was tired, so I listened to the radio to stay awake. The only channel broadcasting at that time of night that I could understand was the People's Mojahedin. Most of their programmes were in code, sending messages to their forces in Iran. The Democratic Party had similar broadcasts, sending coded messages to their Peshmerga fighters, who were patrolling and carrying out operations inside Iran. They'd say things like, 'Group X! The fox has left the hole, but the marten is entering another. Bring food for it.' I sat by Mahbubeh's side, listening to these broadcasts.

One day, after we settled in Naqadeh, Mahbubeh did something remarkable. The city was in a strange state, and the Revolutionary Guard had taken over the house of Mulla Saleh, the former Friday Prayer leader who had fled to Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan. They had turned it into their base. They had also set up a few speed bumps and checkpoints nearby, where cars had to stop or slow down, which allowed more monitoring and control.

In Naqadeh, there was a young man everyone knew as Abu Sizdeh, though no one dared call him that to his face. He was the commander of the local Revolutionary Guard's guerrilla operations. People despised him, but he had gained so much power that no one dared speak against him. He was constantly chasing Peshmerga fighters and had his own system and structure in place. Every day, he drove a different car or motorcycle, carrying the best pistol tucked into his Kurdish sash, bullying people and doing whatever he pleased without answering to anyone.

This Abu Sizdeh, whose real name was Abubakr Mahmoudi, had quite a story. He had once been a Peshmerga in the Afshin battalion of the Kurdish Democratic Party. Later, he supposedly 'repented' and surrendered to the Government's forces. The Revolutionary Guard in Naqadeh recruited him. After some time, when the Party issued a call for more fighters, he rejoined as a volunteer Peshmerga. One horrifying tale



Image 104: Three months before the bombing. From the right: my mother, Rasul, me, Grandmother and Mahbubeh. Piranshahr, autumn 1983.

about him was how he killed thirteen Peshmerga fighters while they slept, although some found it hard to believe such a betrayal from a fellow Kurd. It's said that, during his guard duty, he tampered with the weapons of thirteen of his comrades. Some people argued that it was impossible for him to quietly kill thirteen people and disable their weapons without causing any noise or disturbance. After all, the Peshmerga slept with their weapons by their sides, always ready for an attack from the Revolutionary Guard. But, apparently, he managed to kill them. They say one of the Peshmerga, Mustafa Hajizadeh, who was close to him, woke up and thought they were under attack. He reached for his gun but found it wouldn't work. He chased after Abubakr, who told him to come with him and surrender to the nearest Islamic Republic base. Mustafa refused, and Abubakr killed him, too. According to this account, twelve others were killed in their sleep.

Abubakr was from the village of Khalifan in Naqadeh. He spent a few years in the city's Intelligence office, where he was responsible for recruiting Peshmerga defectors. Later, he became the head of the

operations team in Urmia's Intelligence office. He married the daughter of a Turkish martyr's family, but they eventually divorced. He later married the daughter of a Mulla from the village of Kasa-Karan in Piranshahr, and they lived in Naqadeh. This marriage didn't last long, either, and his ex-wife now resides in Tehran.

I think Mahbubeh was one of the few people who ever put Abu Sizdeh in his place. I remember that, at sunset, I was in the alley with our neighbour's son, who was a seyyed, reading a magazine. My sister Mahbubeh was standing at the end of the alley like the rest of the neighbours when Abu Sizdeh rode in on a military motorcycle (a tall 250 cc bike used by the Revolutionary Guard). As he tried to cross the speed bump, his brakes screeched due to his high speed. A Basiji or Revolutionary Guard at the checkpoint told him in Turkish, 'Brother, slow down a little.'

Abu Sizdeh got off his bike and brutally beat him up. Then the commander joined in and hit the guard as well. Abu fired two shots into the air, as if he had scored the most beautiful goal in the world and was doing a victory lap!

Mahbubeh, whose mental state had been fragile since the bombing, and who would get confused by the sound of bullets and planes, suddenly lost control. She ran into the street and stood right in front of Abu, shouting and cursing at him, 'You're a monster! You're evil! You come here firing shots and showing off, while people like you are the reason for our misery!' She went on to call him 'a sellout – a treacherous collaborator!'

Everyone froze. We couldn't even dream that someone would dare raise their voice to Abu, let alone a young girl swear at him like that. Mahbubeh completely tore into him, yet Abu didn't say a word.

I was holding my breath, expecting him to shoot my sister. Everyone else was feeling the same, but he just stared at her, smiled, got on his bike and spun around in wild circles a couple of times before riding away.

Mahbubeh's confrontation was an example of the pent-up rage and disgust many people felt toward the system and people like him.

Everyone present was happy that finally someone had stood up to Abu. Mahbubeh's voice and tone were so strong and bold that Abu's demeanour had changed entirely. The man who had been roaring like a lion moments before had become as timid as a mouse.

Looking back now, I see how similar the anger and resentment toward figures like Abu Sizdeh is to the anger of the Iranian people during their intermittent street protests. It's a fury born from all the dissatisfaction and oppression imposed on the people by the system since the 1979 Revolution, which bursts into full-fledged protests over a single trigger.

In our small world, Mahbubeh became a hero. Her actions gained the people's approval and empathy. In the case of Mahsa, a similar thing occurred, where the feelings of solidarity, belonging and identity that had faded over decades in Iranian society were revived, breathing new life into the community, giving us hope that society could live again.

Come Be My Bride

Mahbubeh was a hero, but this incident made her mental state worse for a while. We wanted to return to Piranshahr, but she refused to go back. She was confused: on the one hand, she had a phobia of returning to that place, and on the other hand, she wanted to go back home. We decided to stay with her closest friend's family in Piranshahr for a while. Living with a family we didn't know well, except for their daughter, who visited our house, was unusual for us, but, after the bombing, a sense of solidarity had developed among the people. Many families who had lost their homes were staying with others while their houses were being repaired.

The family of Mahbubeh's friend had a son and five daughters. Their mother had passed away, and their stepmother was from the Turkish community in Naqadeh. Their father was originally Turkish. They had been living in Piranshahr for many years, but the locals considered them Ajam (non-Kurdish). We had a happy and lively social life in that house. There were many boys and girls of similar ages living together, and we would often joke and chat together. This continued for three months until our house was repaired. This relationship and coexistence helped Mahbubeh's mental state improve, and it seemed that our decision to return to Piranshahr had been the right one.

It was in that house that I first noticed signs of my attraction to one of the girls. Now that I think about it, I realise that those feelings were not all mine – my mother was also guiding me. She would say to one of the girls, 'You're suitable for him. Come be a bride. I'll give you this gold bangle.' She would promise the girl the bangle, which was wide and expensive and

called a 'Kurdish bangle', and say that she would marry me to her. I was young, and I enjoyed it, but I was also shy and felt a mix of pleasure and shame. The girl and I naturally gravitated toward each other. I think she was a good person – calm, interested in reading and different from the other girls in the family.

She would have liked to hug me and maybe even kiss me, but, influenced by the culture, tradition or the religious and education books I had read, I would say that I would never touch her until we got married. That would be a betrayal of her trust. Now that I look back, I find my attitude toward the subject interesting. These feelings of guilt and shame, influenced by religious and traditional teachings, were ingrained in us and had a restraining effect. They had been internalised through the education system and in childhood and adolescence and had a relatively good controlling power. To the extent that we were in situations outside the norm and contrary to social contracts, we would not engage in relationships.

From the perspective of others and my grandmother, it was clear that my mother had not made a mistake in choosing her desired bride for me. After all, she was a woman and understood the qualities of a good local bride; a bride who would be both a wife and a daughter-in-law, filling the gap left by her daughters when they got married. She, who had married at a young age, thought it pleasant that we would marry in our teens and join the large group of child brides.

I had fallen in love, but as my grandmother always said, 'Planning and fate are separate, and each follows its own path.' In the end, my mother's plan did not work out and I did not benefit from this innocent and pure love.

Usually, those who marry in their teens are opposed to others marrying at the same age. I have heard this from many people who married young and did not have good lives. In general, I do not find people who married in their teens and did not regret it later. The dissatisfaction of those who married in their teens is that their teenage feelings and emotions were not fulfilled, and they were left with a sense of longing for that period. Years later, when I conducted research on child marriage in Iran, I clearly saw the effects and consequences of these early marriages.

The end of this story was bitter, like most loves. The girl started a relationship with another boy. It was natural that she would want to be

with someone older and more mature than me, but I thought she loved me, too – which was true for a while. A few weeks later, I joined the school theatre group, and I saw the boy more and got to know him. He was in charge of all the school's theatre groups. Usually, kids were attracted to these artistic and cultural activities, and some even got involved with the propaganda organisation. After performing a programme at school, they would ask you to attend a camp, and then you would be invited to propaganda events like the Decade of Fajr, 22nd of Bahman, and Quds Day.[1]

This young boy was also in charge of the youth group in the propaganda organisation, and, aside from the age difference and his position, had two important things in common with my beloved: they were both Turkish and Shia. The boy, who was also a member of the Yekani group,[2] had an extraordinary talent for attracting teenagers who had special talents, were bookworms or had good voices for singing anthems. He would use them in various events and give them prizes. With this approach, the kids would naturally be attracted to the activities he had in mind. He knew how to give them an identity and a sense of pride and, without their knowledge, lead them in the direction he wanted. Usually, he was closer to one or two of the older and more experienced kids. They had more power and prestige,

1 The naming of this occasion was established by the Islamic Republic in 1979. Quds is the Arabic name for Jerusalem and refers to the last Friday of Ramadan. On this day, the Islamic Republic organises an annual street rally to express support for Palestine and show opposition to Israel and the Zionists.

2 Before the 1979 Revolution, around forty Turkish-speaking families lived in Piranshahr, most of whom were Yekani. After the attack by Ismail Agha Shakak, some Yekani fled to Khoy, Salmas and Urmia, while others settled in Piranshahr, engaging in trade with Iraqi Kurdistan. This group, initially coming for business, established Urmia as their centre of commerce and significantly impacted the city's economy after the Revolution. Before the Revolution, many had shops on Pahlavi Street, and some engaged in street vending and trading sheep, skins, dairy products, etc., known among the Kurdish people as *čerchî*. These Turkish families were Shia Muslims and had built a mosque named Imam Hussein at the western end of Pahlavi Street, now called Imam Street, where they held religious ceremonies, including mourning rituals during Ashura and Arbaeen and memorial services. They maintained warm and friendly relations with the Kurdish residents, and some became relatives through marriage. Before the Revolution succeeded, a wave of return began for these Turks back to their homeland. Following the Revolution, most sold their homes and shops and left Piranshahr. In 1980, when the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps seized the city, they constructed a larger mosque named Sahib al-Zaman, dedicated to the 12th imam of the Shia, on Independence Street, where most of their official ceremonies were held.

and there were many rumours behind their backs that the leader had sexual relationships with them. It was apparently an open secret, but no one dared talk about it!

I also collaborated with them for a while, but the first time I performed with my classmates on Quds Day at the Turkish mosque in Esteghlal Street, I felt bad. Every word of the anthem I sang added to my guilt. I thought I had betrayed the Kurdish people. I told myself that my family was pro-Party, and I was singing in front of military and Basij forces. Of course, I didn't know what Quds Day was and why I was participating in the programme. I was just a kid, and the sense of pride and identity that the group had instilled in me had led me to participate. After that day, I did not participate in such activities and distanced myself from the group, but it was too late. The young boy had taken me home on his motorcycle a few times during my visits to the propaganda organisation, and it was during those times that he had seen my beloved and started a relationship with her.

When I found out about this betrayal, I suffered and, like many of my peers, faced a broken heart.

During that period, I was involved in writing poetry. I wrote many poems in Kurdish and Farsi about betrayal, flirting with someone and falling in love with another. In short, to heal the wound, I tried to combine my poems with the themes and motifs of Kurdish epic and emotional poetry.

This incident was a bad memory for many years. When I went into military service, I got a small tattoo on my left hand that said *ghemin* (meaning 'sad' or 'sorrowful'). The tattoo means that this part of my history is always with me. It reminds me that humans are complex and vulnerable creatures, and first experiences are important and shape our destinies.

Fortunately, the soldier who did the tattoo was inexperienced and wrote it badly, so it's not clear what it says and can't inadvertently reveal the secret of my teenage love to everyone[1] . . . although I am revealing many secrets myself!

1 Although tattooing is an ancient tradition practised throughout history for various reasons, including therapeutic and aesthetic purposes – particularly on the face and hands – it has entered a new phase with the advent of industrial tattoo machines, becoming especially popular among the youth. Numerous studies have examined why young people are drawn to tattoos and the decision-making process behind getting one. This

Field Schools, Field Executions

After 1983, Iraq bombed Piranshahr and its surrounding areas a couple more times. They targeted the villages in the Mangur region, particularly around Mirabad and Sardasht. We ended up living in other people's homes in these villages. Classes and exams were held under tents and in mosques. We had become so accustomed to displacement that it no longer felt extraordinary. First, we went to villages near Mirabad, a newly established city between Piranshahr and Sardasht. One of those villages was called Kuper.[1]

When we had to leave, we went to Hangabad,[2] a large but very deprived village. It was so impoverished that it didn't even have a teacher. The village head gave us and a few other families a corner of a semi-ruined building, which I think had been an office, to live in.

We lived, or rather survived, there with the family of my father's close friend, Qader Seyyedeh-Aisha.[3] Qader was called by his mother's name, Seyyedeh-Aisha.[4] She was originally from Iraqi Kurdistan. It was quite unusual, and sometimes even considered disrespectful, to address a man by his mother's name. Qader was a good speaker and a lover of literature. He also wrote Kurdish poetry and was knowledgeable about music. He had written several poems and songs for famous local singers like Seyyed Ali Sardashti, Qadri and Glenani.

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inclination often arises when an individual is in a difficult emotional state or experiencing profound sorrow.

1 A village located 23 kilometres from Piranshahr.

2 A village situated 38 kilometres from Piranshahr, which has had a military presence since the Shah's era.

3 Qader Seyyed-Aisha was a fighter of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan during the Shah's time, and his brother Mirza Ali was an old Peshmerga of the Party. It is unclear why, but he did not have a good relationship with the Party official in Piranshahr, Seyyed Rasul Babi Gewra. In 1979, while he was running a shop in Garcheshane, he was arrested on Babi Gewra's orders and spent some time in prison in the Sarshakhan area of Mahabad.

4 Seyyed is an honorific title used for male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, while Seyyedeh is the corresponding title for women. In this context, Seyyedeh-Aisha indicates that Aisha was a woman of seyyed lineage, and the name was passed on to her son as a form of identification, despite its grammatically feminine form.

In this village, we had a makeshift school with no real order. One day we had a teacher; the next day we didn't. One day there was a class; the next day there wasn't.

When the end-of-year exams arrived, all the displaced children from the surrounding villages gathered in a village near Kuper, which had been temporarily set up as a centre for holding middle-school exams. Seventy to eighty students were sitting on the floor of the mosque, taking the exam, when suddenly there was a commotion. A few people, whom we later learned were Peshmerga, entered the mosque with their faces covered and took outside one of the men who was supervising near the prayer niche. Other teachers asked who they were and what was happening. They said the man was a spy. The accusation was that he was spying for the Revolutionary Guard. It was later revealed that he was an education department employee and an active member of the Basij. His job had been to inspect schools in the Mamesh and Mangur regions, and his family were among the village chiefs, most of whom were armed and official Basij members. Apparently, when he inspected the villages under his supervision, he would ask the students when the Peshmerga had visited the village or their homes, and then he would inform Intelligence and the Revolutionary Guard of their comings and goings. A little farther away, out of our sight, on a hill, they read him a military court verdict and executed him right there. After the field execution, they left his body and went away.

What were we supposed to write in our exams? In that situation, could anyone even concentrate on writing? We looked at each other and heard the women of the village shouting, but we didn't know if they were happy or scared. How could we study in the midst of displacement, bombing and this violent atmosphere? The only lessons we could learn at that time, seeing that scene, was how short the distance between life and death is and how destructive anger can be.

At the height of our adolescence, we became familiar with the ugly, distorted face of death in every incident and experience, and it kept revisiting us. What we learned from these experiences was that the world was not a place of peace, friendship and tranquillity, but a place for anger, revenge and acts of violence.

The person who was arrested that day on charges of working for the Revolutionary Guard and executed by the Peshmerga without trial is one

example of the dozens of people who were tried and punished under revolutionary conditions without the supervision of a sound and professional judicial authority. There were many from both sides who were probably imprisoned, executed or killed because of a biased and vindictive report. Khalkhali, the revolutionary religious judge who later claimed that he had executed no one without Khomeini's permission, executed people en masse in the cities and villages of Iran and Kurdistan. Revolutionary conditions without control led to chaos and the sacrifice of thousands of people, many of whom were innocent.

Khalkhali and his supporters in the region and Tehran were primary factors in the escalation of conflicts in Kurdistan and the failure of peace talks between the provisional government and various Kurdish parties. Hundreds of people were executed or sentenced to long prison terms in Kurdish cities in the early years of the Revolution on his orders and those of other religious judges.

In those years, the clashes between the Revolutionary Guard and the Peshmerga also affected people's daily lives. My sister Mahbubeh was a witness to one of these countless incidents. About a year after the field



Image 105: Execution of 11 Kurdish prisoners on orders of Khalkhali.
Sanandaj Airport, September 1979. (Photo by Razmi.)

execution, a similar incident occurred in Naqadeh. Mahbubeh, who was visiting Aunt Maryam's house, still talks bitterly about that day. A man who sold ice cream was a neighbour of Aunt Maryam's. He would put a rubber icebox on his motorcycle and go to the villages. One evening, a group of Peshmerga with covered faces entered the city, knocked on the man's door, read a verdict right there and executed him. My sister said, 'They executed him in front of our eyes.' The sound of gunfire and people's screams was another shock for Mahbubeh, who had already suffered psychological trauma from the war and bombings in Piranshahr and had only recently recovered.

The Peshmerga had identified this man, who was apparently only an ice cream seller, as having joined the Intelligence branch of the Revolutionary Guard. Under the pretext of selling ice cream, he would go to villages and ask children if there had been any Peshmerga in their homes the night before. Although many children were told not to say anything, some, perhaps because of the ice cream and their young ages, would say something inadvertently.

In those days, in addition to mobile ice cream vendors, the Revolutionary Guard used fabric sellers, fruit sellers, scrap-metal dealers, and rag pickers to collect information. People gradually realised who was giving local information to the Intelligence services in Naqadeh and Mahabad. The Peshmerga would then execute that person to deter others.

What I have described is only part of the realities that I have seen with my own eyes or heard from my loved ones. I do not intend to compare the actions of the parties with those of people like Khalkhali. My only goal is to show how violent a time we lived in and how chaotic the situation was. Khalkhali and the newly established regime executed and even massacred people simply for opposing the Islamic Republic. They committed systematic crimes that will eventually be investigated, and the horrific dimensions will be revealed to everyone. I must also say that I do not intend to exonerate the parties. They certainly made mistakes, and some of their members committed wrongdoings – cases that many say the particular organisation or party was unaware of. They are not like the case of Khalkhali, who explicitly stated that he had the permission of Khomeini in all cases, nor like the executions of the 1980s that were validated by the explicit and written order of Khomeini himself and were carried out by some of the current leaders of the regime.

One should never forget that the expression of violence in any form may be a suitable tool for suppression in the initial stages, but ultimately violence begets violence, and the vicious cycle will continue. The violence that the Islamic Republic systematically used against the Kurds manifested in many ways.

Ideological Education, Kurdish Nationalism and the Desire to Drop Out

The situation was complex and dangerous. People lacked security, and my poor father would drive us daily on his motorcycle to nearby villages for school and exams. During those years, I deliberately avoided studying, to the point of wanting to drop out. The education system had disillusioned me severely, and I found it unappealing. I felt disconnected from the subjects in the textbooks. I yearned for much more. As soon as I could, I changed my path, reading non-curricular books, listening to foreign radio stations and watching films and documentaries. My connection with school had vanished. My knowledge and desires surpassed the education system's scope. The ineffective and ideologically driven education system led me to believe that going to school was a waste of time. I developed an interest in leftist politics and read about the history of the Tudeh and Democratic parties. I even sought out the forbidden writings of Dr Ghassemlou, secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, who had not yet been assassinated and was considered a role model or icon for Kurdish youth. Even though I didn't fully understand many of the discussions, I still read them.

I tried to learn and advance in my own way. Alongside this, I became interested in global literature, reading books by Jack London, Victor Hugo and others. In my mind, I would walk along the River Thames in London, contemplating the class dynamics and social structures of that era, or reflect on the story of a poor Indian boy who ran away from home and changed his life. He joins a trading business, catches the attention of a merchant due to his talent, is invited to his home and eventually falls in love with his daughter. Stories like Jean Valjean's and many others transported me to realms I only dreamed of. I wished to change my life like some of the characters. I searched for what I lacked in books. Living in an insecure, war-torn environment devoid of comfort and peace drove me



Image 106: Entrance card for the 5th grade exam. 1983.

toward books and their heroes, allowing me to momentarily escape my surroundings and live differently in my imagination.

These experiences went far beyond school lessons, in an ideological school system that, after much upheaval and educational disruption, held no appeal for me and constantly pulled me into street demonstrations for various reasons, whether it was the February 22nd rally, the US Embassy takeover,[1] Quds Day . . .

The situation had reached a point where, the more the education system worked to indoctrinate me ideologically, the more I immersed myself in my own world, distancing myself from the system. They taught us how to handle weapons, encouraging us to consider joining the front lines and increasing Sunni participation. However, I followed my own path, and the anthems that blared from loudspeakers and the construction of trenches during the Sacred Defence Week held no significance for me. My relationship with the system was over.

1 The US Embassy in Iran was seized in 1979, nine months after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Students following the line of Imam Khomeini stormed the US Embassy on former Takhte Jamshid Street (later renamed Tâleghâni) and took 66 American diplomats hostage. These hostages were released after the Algiers Accords were accepted by both the Iranian and American Governments.

Perhaps many children in Iran during those years experienced similar circumstances, but our situation in the Kurdish regions was unique. In this environment, I developed an anti-government and anti-system identity, finding myself within the framework of Kurdish nationalism. The system was ineffective in brainwashing children like me. The ruling regime in Kurdish border cities and towns made every effort to attract teenagers, but the severe deprivation and lack of basic living standards in Kurdish Sunni areas – unlike in Shiite regions, where the situation was somewhat better and the regime held a more favourable position – reduced their chances of success. In addition, there had been numerous conflicts and wars between the regime and the Kurds, and you would find few families without at least one member who had been killed by the Revolutionary Guard or Basij, or who was mourning someone. Many also had children who were members of the Democratic Party or Komala, and these factors certainly influenced their mindsets.

The memories of my adolescence and those of many others were filled with accumulated anger toward the Islamic Republic's actions, which, due to deprivation and a constant state of war and tension, held no legitimacy in our eyes. The regime's propaganda and ideological efforts to attract teenagers yielded few results.

Every event and incident has its cause. Nationalism and its inclinations do not occur without reason or justification. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, national rights remain a significant demand of the Kurds that has yet to be fulfilled – even the use of Kurdish in schools is being boycotted. The Islamic Republic's approach toward the Kurds mirrors Reza Shah's and his son's policies of assimilation. It seeks to deny ethnic and linguistic differences through homogenisation and centralisation, disregarding them while employing dogmatic methods to suppress legitimate demands. Assimilation in culture and language, influenced by Reza Shah's outdated single-nationality view of nationalism, has been adapted by the Islamic Republic's leaders into a cultural-linguistic strategy focused on Fars people to marginalise non-Farsi nationalities, including the Kurds.

Both regimes have used similar and consistently repressive mechanisms in dealing with Kurdish demands and human rights. The only difference lies in the application of their strategies. They have always resorted to othering, portraying the Kurds as the 'other', in opposition to the Iranian and Shiite identity, and using both nationalist and religious approaches to

vilify and marginalise them. Kurdish demands have been manipulated and distorted to serve the regimes' interests. The attraction of Kurdish youth to nationalism is a form of identity formation for Kurds, even when faced with military aggression.[1]

To elaborate further, it should be noted that nationalism is not without cause, whether among the Kurds or generally. It requires a sense of discrimination, repression and suffering at the hands of a nationalist or chauvinist group.

The Iranian constitution emphasises the freedom to speak and teach in local languages in schools, but this has never been implemented. Although Kurdish-language education exists at higher levels in Sanandaj University, it remains limited and primarily accessible to the elite and academic circles, with little impact on the general public.

Regarding the era of Reza Shah: when an ethnicity or nationality holds power and considers itself superior while attempting to suppress others, its behaviour is not purely nationalist but is indicative of a different form of chauvinism. Many argue that Reza Shah transcended the boundaries of nationalism[2] and imposed a chauvinistic ideology.

Bribes for Grades

Until the mid-1980s, our region experienced constant bombings and clashes on a weekly basis. Some of the teachers were also members of the Basij militia or the Revolutionary Guard and approached issues with clear biases. These teachers came from other parts of Iran. They arrived at school every morning with stern faces, exuding coldness. They had little motivation to teach, and this environment alienated many students.

I frequently failed subjects like Farsi, Quran and Maths, and I was always terrified of being beaten. I experienced insecurity on all fronts,

1 Goutarnarma, 2018.

2 Nationalism contrasts with extreme ethnic nationalism and fosters a sense of belonging and identity cohesion. While nationalism promotes cultural interactions and values cultural differences through cultural relativism, extreme ethnic nationalism seeks to belittle and suppress other ethnicities. It's often accompanied by prejudices and irrational biases. The approach of Reza Shah and subsequent rulers created a dichotomy between their culture and the 'other', leading to the marginalisation of other cultures and fostering cultural animosity.

which made school unbearable for me. I constantly pleaded with my family to let me drop out. From middle school onward, my father resorted to bribing teachers to secure passing grades for me. Even after I failed my second year and my overall grades fell below average, he insisted that I continue my education and wouldn't allow me to quit. Reluctantly, I repeated the year, enduring constant humiliation and people mocking me by calling me 'Kameel the slow learner'. I intentionally failed again, leading to my eventual expulsion from school under the prevailing policies at the time.

Despite my success in subjects like Social Studies, History and Literature, I could never grasp Maths, Geometry or English. I simply didn't have the aptitude, and I held a deep resentment toward the education system. I even took part in a protest. During middle school, two friends and I formed a small protest group. First, we complained to the vice principal, then to the headteacher, Mr Rash, who was a family friend, and finally we sent a letter to the city's Department of Education. Our letter questioned why we were forced to study subjects that held no interest or practical value for us. We argued that we should be allowed to focus more on the subjects we enjoyed. It was a bold letter, but the headteacher ridiculed us, calling a meeting to read the letter aloud in front of all the teachers, who burst into laughter. The Maths and English teachers, who were present, grew even more hostile toward us, assuming we were trying to undermine them. Instead of recognising our genuine interest in other subjects, they treated our disinterest as a personal attack. The teachers had an absurd attachment to their subjects, failing to see the larger issue.

This was the nature of the education system at the time – one that suppressed curiosity and initiative.

As I mentioned before, after the Islamic Revolution, many teachers were either purged or repressed. The ones who replaced them lacked even basic training in child psychology or pedagogy. The only concern for the education authorities was promoting an ideology – one that wasn't even genuinely Islamic, but a construct of the Islamic Republic's political agenda. In such an environment, the wellbeing and futures of students were entirely disregarded. Teachers and administrators didn't seem to realise that the violent conditions we, as children, were living through made it nearly impossible for us to focus on school. We were denied the space to imagine or dream. If only the teachers had explained to us, with a

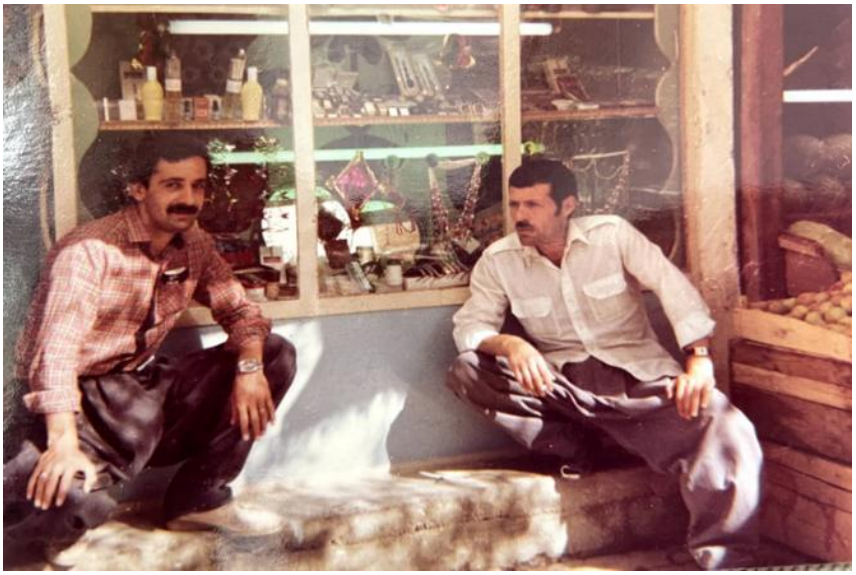


Image 107: My father with one of my teachers, a family friend, standing outside a shop. Piranshahr, 1983.

little empathy, that, while we might prefer some subjects, we still needed to learn others to succeed in the future, perhaps we would have been more patient.

In 1986, I finally dropped out of school, a decision that filled me with joy at the time, though I later came to regret it. As I grew older, I even forged a student ID card and attended some classes at the open universities in Naqadeh and Mahabad. I had a deep desire to continue my education. That longing eventually led me to London, where I re-engaged with my studies. Even after leaving school, I never stopped reading. I studied subjects that genuinely interested me – history, geography, literature and social sciences. I even took self-imposed exams. Later, I began writing and translating into Kurdish, although my grasp of Kurdish wasn't strong. However, I had a talent for literature and wrote short stories while I continued to study intensely.

I was never against education. My efforts to forge a student ID and attend university courses show how much I valued learning. My pursuit of knowledge through various professions also reflects an inner drive. But the system failed to nurture or guide that drive. Instead, it fostered resentment, making us despise what we couldn't understand.

At the same time, my family, especially my father, contributed to my lack of motivation. Instead of encouragement, they often humiliated me. Unfortunately, this sort of demeaning behaviour and the assigning of derogatory labels were all too common in families back then, and it persists today.

The disillusionment I felt with both school and my family were deeply intertwined. Nevertheless, I don't entirely blame my family for the hardships I endured in school. They had placed their trust in the teachers, and, as I've said before, trusting teachers was a cultural norm at the time. Ultimately, it was the school's responsibility to create a safe and supportive environment for us, especially in a period when no child was living in normal circumstances.

Iran's education system is a complex issue, closely tied to the country's social, political and cultural history. Today's system remains as confusing as it was in the past. We all know that, in this system, knowledge and understanding aren't prerequisites for passing. Instead, the focus is solely on getting a degree and passing the entrance exams. When my father resorted to bribing teachers, it was a symptom of a diseased system.

Today, the nature of such bribery has changed. Families now shape the education system by paying for private schooling, where they can set the agenda for both the schools and the teachers. As a result, no student ever truly fails.

While the mechanisms have changed, the core problem remains. The content of education is still heavily ideological, as evidenced by the curricula, which show that those drafting the textbooks are more concerned with legitimising the regime than with providing modern, relevant knowledge.

Chapter Seven: I Work to Exist

Dropping out of school lifted a heavy burden off my shoulders. I felt carefree, but I had to work to support myself. I tried a few jobs and eventually ended up on the path I wanted to take. Looking back, I realise that I often did what my father didn't want me to do, yet he would support me. He loved me, but in his own way and based on his own thoughts. I think most fathers in my homeland love their children in the same way, which is why they often keep a distance from them, especially during childhood and adolescence.

After dropping out of school in the second year of middle school, I felt good at first and thought I had made the best decision. Deep down, I knew it was time to fly and that I shouldn't stay there any more. I saw myself in a different environment, and my grandmother's constant singing in my ear since childhood echoed in my mind: 'I see you in London, and you're an engineer.' It was as if her voice were calling me.

My father forced me to work in a mechanical workshop for a while, and I also developed a passion for photography. I worked in a photography studio that belonged to my father's friend, and I loved it. I tried various jobs, and these experiences later helped me in London. They led me to work in visual and media fields, and I eventually earned a Master of Visual Anthropology[1] from the University of Kent.

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1 Visual Anthropology and Ethnography are closely related disciplines that intersect in film and ethnographic studies yet differ in approach. Visual Anthropology primarily focuses on written analysis, starting with theory and concluding with interpretation, while Ethnography centres on filmmaking, beginning with conceptual ideas and ending with the production and presentation of films. Visual Anthropology views culture as conveyed through visible symbols such as gestures, rituals and objects within natural and constructed settings, often enacted through performances involving costumes and props. This discipline holds that, since culture is visually expressed, audiovisual tools can

Child Labour or Apprenticeship?

During my teenage years, and even before that, it was common for kids to work during the three-month summer break. Some would sell goods on the street, and others would work in technical workshops. I, who couldn't adapt to the school system and study, had to work and earn money.

From any angle, street vending and wandering were not only unbeneficial to kids, but also sometimes led to abnormalities. The phenomenon of child labour, which usually results from poverty and economic instability, differed fundamentally in my time from the common definition.[1] In my time, it was usually temporary and aimed at teaching children and teenagers, mainly in professions like mechanics and welding. The kids who worked during my teenage years were not poor and worked to learn skills.

In 1986, after dropping out of school, my apprenticeships or attempts to find a future job began. My father said, 'Now that you're not studying, you have to work and learn a profession.' It was funny that he suggested I become a barber. His reasoning was that it required only a pair of scissors, a mirror and a chair. He thought it was a good job, but I didn't like it.

One of the jobs I liked was photography. We had a camera in the shop, and since childhood I would take pictures of everything. My father was opposed to it, saying, 'Photography is a job for loafers. It's not for you.'

effectively document and analyse it as data. Its origins lie in positivist ideas that objective realities are observable, though modern theorists highlight culture's social and experiential dimensions. For more information see Rabi, 2010.

1 In Iran, child labour has become a social problem stemming from the country's ailing economy, gradually evolving into a dysfunctional culture. This culture enforces a mentality encapsulated by the phrase 'let him become a man', which contributes to the increase in child labour. Some children engaged in labour are not necessarily compelled to earn incomes, but the phenomenon of child labour today is linked to poverty, migration and unstable economic conditions. A commonality in both cases is that children whose priority is education are forced into work. Currently, child labour does not align with the physical and psychological characteristics or capabilities of children, leading to numerous detrimental effects on their physical, psychological, personal and social development.



Image 108: Me. Gurbask village, Sardasht, 1989.

He pressured me to become a mechanic, and I also loved motors and cars, so I didn't mind trying it. Our neighbour, Rahman Shit ('Rahman the Madman'), was a mechanic. My father took me to him to become his apprentice. He was a good man and a skilled worker. He adored his only son and would often praise him in front of the apprentices. Perhaps because he would sometimes get angry, they called him 'the Madman', which was unfair. If anger were the criterion for madness, half the city would be considered mad!

I started working, replacing the springs of Jeep and Shahbaz American cars, which were common in the region at the time. Closing the workshop and the shop had certain rituals. When the sun set, Master Rahman would close up, and, since I was his neighbour and my father had entrusted me to him, we would drive home in his beloved Land Rover. Two things always happened: I would sit on the back seat, putting a cloth down so my work clothes wouldn't dirty the car, and he would barely let me open or close the door, lest it break or get oily! He would do it himself or constantly warn me about it.

Every evening, we would stop in front of the best fruit shop in town and buy some fruits. He would carefully select them and wash three of them for us to eat. On the way, he would play local songs by Hassan Zirak and

Mohammad Mamali until we reached home. His son, Farhad, wasn't too happy about my presence in the car and eating fruits every evening, but by sitting in the front seat, which was considered prestigious in Iran, he would make up for my presence in the car. When we arrived at Master Rahman's house, he would proudly honk the horn for his daughters to open the door. In a hurry, afraid that his daughters might see me dirty and oily, he would open the back door with the corner of a cloth and say a quick goodbye, and I would get out.

I worked as a mechanic's apprentice for a short time. To appear more experienced, I would secretly rub engine oil on my clothes and make my hands and face dirtier. Despite my young age, customers would then trust me and sometimes give me more tips. The other apprentices would get jealous and tell the customers that I had only been there for ten days and didn't know how to do the job. They were right; I couldn't do many tasks, and I couldn't even replace the springs, which required technique and physical strength. I was a school dropout and a loafer, and I didn't last long.

After a while, I left the workshop to pursue my passion for photography.

Getting Beaten by Pasdar Naghi

I had been interested in working since I was eleven years old. At that time, I was trying out different jobs and wanted to earn money. Sometimes, during the summer, I would sell biscuits, and once, when I was in the first year of middle school, I started a small business with a friend, Ismail Ahmadi, selling liver kebabs in the city park. I always worked during the summer; from collecting dry bread[1] to doing other jobs. Before I started working at the mechanical workshop, I rented a small space from a neighbour across from my father's shop and set up a juice stand. Soldiers

1 Dry bread collectors are individuals who pay people for their stale bread. Also known as 'roaming salt collectors', they collect dried bread or recyclable items such as plastic containers, paper bags and metals to transport them to various recycling centres. While their work shares some similarities with that of waste collectors, there are key differences: waste collectors typically do not visit neighbourhoods or pay for waste, whereas dry bread collectors actively go into the streets, pay for discarded items and usually carry goods for sale.

on leave would buy juice from me, and it was a source of income. Sometimes, I would also sell cigarettes at the main intersection of the city, where Azadi Street met Imam Street.

At that time, selling foreign cigarettes was prohibited, and it had to be done secretly. I couldn't sell them openly, so I would hide the boxes among the branches of trees and sell them to soldiers. One day, while I was selling cigarettes, my beloved, the same girl who we lived with for a while, passed by. I will never forget how embarrassed and humiliated I felt. She saw me and came up to me, saying, 'Kameel, are you selling cigarettes?' I was so ashamed that I wanted to lie, but I couldn't. I told the truth, and it was hard for me to admit. For a long time, I blamed myself, and it was no joke – my first love had seen me selling cigarettes!

It was one thing to be seen by a friend or acquaintance while selling cigarettes, but it was another thing to be caught by the municipal authorities or the Komiteh. One day, the authorities came to collect the cigarettes. Maybe I was being stubborn, and I didn't leave. I had a modern look, with fashionable clothes and hair. I thought I was a city boy. That day, a young Pasdar (Revolutionary Guard) named Naghi, who was from Miandoab, kicked my cigarettes away and took me to a nearby alley, where he beat me mercilessly without any explanation. It was normal for them to take our cigarettes and maybe slap us around, but this was excessive. The young Pasdar was beating me not because of the cigarettes, but because of my different appearance and probably because I was Kurdish. He was also angry because I had resisted him.

The incident continued until the people in the alley, especially the old women who were watching from their windows, started shouting, 'May your hand break!' Some even spat at him. He cursed at the people in Turkish but continued beating me. I responded in Turkish a few times and resisted him. When my resistance turned into a fight, he pulled out his gun and threatened me! I had to surrender, and the struggle continued until he got tired and left me with a bloody face and nose. I was just a teenager, and although I had technically broken the law, I had done nothing to deserve such violence. I was a humiliated teenager in a discriminatory, power-hungry and oppressive system that aimed to exclude and punish. I was a victim, but I didn't have the power to resist. My accumulated anger and hatred toward the ruling system grew stronger every day.

I had been beaten by an officer who wasn't even responsible for removing street vendors. He had acted arbitrarily, influenced by the ideological policies of the ruling system. This policy gave rise to a deep sense of grievance and a psychological burden among teenagers and young people of my generation, particularly Sunni Kurds in the region, leaving many with lasting scars of exclusion and resentment. This behaviour is now defined as 'fire at will' and is a clear sign of the oppressive power of the Government, which pits citizens against each other and wants to maintain its power through inhumane divisions. In cities with Kurdish and Turkish populations, the system had given power to the Turks to create divisions between the two ethnic groups, to maintain its own interests.[1]

The gun that the ruling system had given to the young officer had given him a power that he and his superiors didn't have the capacity to handle. Therefore, he could beat me mercilessly, curse at others and show off his power by pulling out his gun. The misuse of power had gone so far that it seemed normal in Naqadeh and surrounding cities for the ruling system to harass and oppress Kurds. Such incidents created a deeper divide between us and the ruling system, and this practice still exists in different forms today.

A Camera for Tomorrow!

My father had one of the most prominent shops in the city, and you could find the best cameras there. At that time, brands like Kodak and Zenit were the most popular. I had opportunities to take a camera and go to the mountains, villages and countryside to take pictures. Of course, convincing my father to buy 24 or 36 film rolls was a different story, and I had to pay for the printing costs. I took pictures of my family, relatives, people, holidays, weddings and funerals, as well as nature and animals – even the

1 The issue of animosity between Kurds and Turks will only be resolved when both groups attain a level of awareness that transcends the divisive ideologies and policies of the regime. They must recognise that coexistence requires mutual tolerance and that they equally have the right to good and natural lives in their shared environment. It must be stated clearly: there is no other way to eliminate division! All past events have demonstrated that the Government stands in opposition to the people, and its governing style is destined to continue in this manner.

so-called ‘crazy’ people in the city.[1] Unbeknown to me, I was creating a rich archive of the culture and life of the people, and later I realised that some of the photographs were ethnographic and anthropological.



Image 109: A scene from the documentary Bread and Poverty

Photography was a job that unintentionally determined my future path. I was very passionate and sensitive about my photos, and I wouldn’t give them to anyone. This became a joke among my family and neighbours, but I didn’t care. I would take pictures and not give them to anyone, no matter what others said![2] What was a joke to others was serious to me. Photography was my way of looking at people and understanding them from different perspectives.

My persistence and interest eventually convinced my father to send me to one of his acquaintances, who had the most famous photography studio in the city. He also had the only laboratory for developing and printing film. Seyyed Samad Mortazavi was a good man who had a history of political activism and opposition to the Government. Later, we found out that he had infiltrated the Intelligence agency with the coordination of the Democratic Party and was providing information to the Democratic forces. Seyyed Samad left his home and life behind and joined the Democratic Party. The regime, which had discovered his cooperation with the Party, arrested and tortured him for a long time. After his release, he had no choice but to flee and seek asylum in Norway. They say he died there due to the consequences of the torture.

1 Generally, individuals with intellectual disabilities were referred to by the inappropriate term ‘crazy’ or ‘شێت’ in Kurdish. They often resorted to begging and frequently faced verbal abuse from people.

2 There was a negative tradition in society where individuals who possessed cultural items, such as cassette tapes or photographs, would monopolise them, rather than allowing for their reproduction and broader access, and use them to boast to others.

My friend Jalal Lahijani and I were there at the time. Jalal later followed in his teacher's footsteps and joined the Democratic Party to escape arrest and imprisonment. He even became a cameraman for the Party's television station and is now a refugee in Norway. In 2006, when I returned to Iran for my mother's funeral, Jalal was the cameraman for my first documentary film about Kurdish smugglers in the Mokrian region. This documentary was one of the first visual works on the subject of smugglers.[1]

I started learning professional photography and understanding it with Seyyed Samad. At first, I would clean the shop and was basically a servant. Later, he took me to the darkroom and allowed me to develop the photos. It was a time-consuming job. He had three apprentices. One was senior, one was middle-level and the other was a servant. One day, when I returned from lunch, I saw the shop was surrounded by armed men, all of whom were from the Mangur ethnic group. Seyyed Samad and his brother, Ahad, were fighting with a few of them. Some Intelligence agents had also arrived to mediate and prevent the fight between the two brothers and the armed group.

Apparently, when I was not there, one of the armed men from Mangur had gone to Ahad to take a picture. They had argued, and Ahad had beaten him. The armed man had brought twenty of his relatives, all of whom were armed! The brothers were inside the shop, and the Intelligence agents were outside. The leader of the agents was someone named Sadra,[2] who was the deputy intelligence officer at the time. They wouldn't let the brothers leave the shop, because they knew that, if they did, they would be beaten or killed by the Mangur men. The atmosphere was terrifying. Shots were fired. I was afraid to go forward, and the neighbours had hidden themselves. Seyyed Samad suddenly came out and shouted, 'Don't think we're afraid of you! Although we're from the same language, you'll never be like us. You're thirty people, and we're two, but we're not afraid!' As

1 Ahmady, K. et al. (2006b) Poverty and Bread [Documentary]. Available at: https://kameelahmady.com/poverty-and-bread (Accessed: 17 March 2022).

2 The deputy of the Intelligence office in Piranshahr, Sadra was from a village near Khorramabad. After completing his military service in Piranshahr, he joined Intelligence, where he worked until retirement. He was fluent in Kurdish, and few knew he was not Kurdish. Sadra played a significant role in apprehending organisational cells of the Kurdish Democratic Party and could sometimes attract individuals associated with the Party through his persuasive language, unintentionally turning them into informants.



Image 110: Bazarani Peshmerga fighting the Ba'athist Iraqi army

soon as they came out, the Mangur brutally beat them and hit Seyyed Samad on the head with a gun. For a long time, he had stitches and bruises on his head and face, and he became disorientated.

The behaviour of the Revolutionary Guard and Intelligence agents was completely calculated. They quickly retreated. They preferred to stand back, because they were afraid of being shot. When the fight was over, Seyyed Samad was taken to the hospital. That day, I saw that there was no justice or fairness, and no one cared about the armed Mangur men, who were affiliated with the regime. But the question arises, what would have happened if the situation had been reversed? If Seyyed Samad had attacked the Mangur, would the Revolutionary Guard and Intelligence agents have stood back and watched? These individuals were actually

protectors of the Mangur and didn't react when they attacked Seyyed Samad.

After this incident, my father didn't allow me to stay at Seyyed Samad's photography studio. He said, 'Seyyed Samad is hot-headed, and this won't end here. There will be more fights and revenge.' So, I became an apprentice to another photographer, named Kak Hussein, who was also known as Hussein Peyman. He was a young man with a charming face and a very smooth tongue. Many people would pass by his shop without intending to have their picture taken, but he would take their picture and charge them a lot of money.

At Hussein Peyman's photography studio, there were three apprentices around my age. Usually, there was no customer or passerby who wouldn't have their picture taken by Kak Hussein. The better the customer's appearance, the more money Kak Hussein would make. His photography studio was one of the last ones on the way to the Haji Omran border. Soldiers would usually pass by there, and many of his customers were soldiers, officers and army captains.

My experience working with Hussein Peyman had its negative and positive aspects, the most important of which was learning negotiation techniques and communication skills that could be used to attract customers and build relationships. He managed different situations well and was an interesting person. He would often go to Tehran, bring back film and negatives, and introduce new photography techniques to the city. He would wear stylish suits, carry a Samsonite bag and like to be seen with a cigarette in his mouth. His trips to Tehran seemed suspicious to us, and we would say that he must have a girlfriend there, because he would always groom himself before leaving.

At that time, Kurdish refugees from Barzani and Jalali, or the Kurdistan Democratic Union, had a base in Piranshahr and its surroundings, and they would even walk around the city armed. These two parties were rivals, and armed clashes between their forces were common. Their rivalry continues to this day in different forms. One day, we were standing in front of the shop and a Barzani Peshmerga, who was very serious and had a real guerrilla look, with an old Brno rifle and a red Barzani scarf, passed by.

Hussein Peyman saw him and said, 'Kameel, go get him! Tell him my teacher wants to see him.' The man was armed, so I was afraid to approach him. I called out to him, and he came back.

It was like the story of *The Fox and the Crow* from our third-grade textbook. Hussein Peyman told him, 'You're so handsome and brave! When I see you, I feel good, and I think Kurdistan will be free because of you!' The man fell into his trap and sat in front of the camera.

Hussein Peyman took several pictures of him and printed them in large format. I was calculating the cost in my mind, and it was a lot of money. After the man left, I worried for several days, because he was armed and the Barzani had a history of violence and mistreating people. I was thinking about how he would react to the high cost of the pictures, and I even told my father about it. He said, 'Hussein Peyman knows how to handle it. Just don't interfere!'

The day the man came back, the same hospitality was given to him: tea, sweets and *falooda*. Hussein Peyman handed him the pictures, and when the man hesitated to pay, Hussein said, 'You're my guest.' He didn't know that, when you tell a Kurdish Iraqi that he's your guest, he'll take it seriously, because the concept of *ta'arof*, or 'excessive politeness', is not common among Kurdish Iraqis, or at least it's less prevalent.

The man put the pictures under his arm, thanked Hussein, and left. Hussein was shocked. The man had reached the other side of the street when Hussein told me, 'Kameel, go get him! He's crazy, and he's leaving!'

I was afraid to go after him. I said, 'He'll beat me!'

Hussein came out of the shop and forced me to go after the man. I called out to him, and with fear, I said, 'My teacher says you forgot to pay for the pictures.'

The man said with surprise and in the Kurmanji dialect, which is not common among us, 'Your teacher said I'm his guest.'

I had a strange feeling. On the one hand, I agreed with him, and on the other hand, my teacher wanted his money. I stuttered and explained in a broken tone that my teacher had said to take the money for the pictures.

The man slapped me hard on the ear and said, 'You Iranians are so shameless and dirty!'

I was overwhelmed with frustration, shame and anger, and tears welled up in my eyes. I saw Hussein Peyman peeking out of the window, and I looked down and returned to the shop. I couldn't do anything. I was just a kid, and he was an armed man.

Hussein was afraid and didn't go after the man, and the man never came back to pay for the pictures. I was upset with Hussein's behaviour. This

experience didn't make him change his ways – he continued to use his smooth talk. He never told me that what he had done was wrong and didn't try to make amends with me, who was innocent but had been slapped.

Hussein Peyman would often remember this incident and curse the Barzani man who hadn't paid him, but every time his words would miss the mark. To be honest, I was happy deep down. It was what he deserved!

The Familiar Cycle of Violence

I don't know if you've ever worked as an apprentice in a shop, but usually the shop owner will assign one person to keep an eye on the other apprentices and report back to them. In Hussein Peyman's shop, there was an apprentice around my age who came after me and took on the role of informant. He was Hussein's neighbour, had connections and was known for being a show-off and a snitch. Whatever we did, he would report back to Hussein. For example, I and my friend Muhammad, who was the senior apprentice, would sneakily smoke cigarettes together, or he would use the shop's phone to talk to his girlfriend or make prank calls. The next day, we would find out that Hussein knew all about it. We had a few fights with him, but it was pointless. He thought that, to get ahead, he had to stab us in the back. Maybe he was right. In Iran, being a snitch and a show-off has always been beneficial.

In reality, he was weak-willed and afraid of us. To defend Muhammad, I told him, 'One day, I'll really beat you up,' and I did the same thing to him that the carpenter's son had done to me a few years earlier. I took him to the city park and really gave him a hard time. I would push him around and pretend to be a karate expert. I even thought about taking it further, but I didn't have the desire or the courage to do so. Although I let him off, I repeated the violence that had been done to me in a different way.

Unintentionally, I tried to make up for the harm that had been done to me at the beginning of my adolescence, and I used the same mechanism to inflict harm on him as 'the other'. Later, when I read psychological theories in university, I realised that our past experiences can sometimes be reflected in our behaviour unconsciously, producing harm. I, as a victim of what had happened to me, reproduced and repeated it, albeit differently. What I did to Hussein's apprentice that day was a reproduction of the

violence that had happened to me in the not-so-distant past. Probably, my actions gave him a serious shock, making him reconsider his snooping ways. Although there were other ways to warn him, such as talking to him about his actions, I was just a kid and didn't think of them, and I wasn't in a position to advise others. Of course, in my adolescence, I didn't like advice and didn't believe in it.

After that day, the apprentice stopped snooping, or at least did it in a way that we didn't notice any more. Later, we became friends and had a good relationship. Sometimes, we would go cycling together in the afternoons, and I think he never told anyone that I had beaten him up – just like me, who didn't tell anyone about the beating I got in the city park – until I wrote this book. One day, I told Muhammad that I had beaten up the new apprentice, and he said, 'Good job!'

Years later, when I was no longer in Iran, I heard that Hussein Peyman had changed his profession from photography to gold trading. They said that he had made a fortune overnight by trading antiques. However, Hussein Peyman or, rather, his greed, cost him his life. He got into a dispute with a few people from Bukan. They tied him to a car seat, shot him in the head and set his car on fire.

This is the story of my photography teacher, who used his hands, tongue and face to get rich and, if the story of his death is true, lost his life in pursuit of wealth. For many people, Hussein Peyman is a symbol of a clever and skilled person, someone who, as long as he benefited, didn't care about anyone, whether they were Kurdish, Turkish or Farsi. When he used his apprentice to spy on others, it was his policy; everyone was a means to an end.

Europeans have done some studies on the culture of Iranian ta'arof ('politeness'), which, apart from being funny, are interesting. The lies that Iranians tell each other in their relationships, interactions, business and trade, such as 'you're welcome', 'don't pay', 'the shop is yours' and so on, apart from not being genuine, have cultural and social meanings that are usually hidden from view. Two reasons for these ta'arofs could be the lack of transparency among Iranians, who are not straightforward and decisive in their relationships, and their desire for approval and motivation. These two factors – the lack of transparency, the ambiguity and the constant denial of everything, as well as the desire for approval – have led to the use of false ta'arofs in their social relationships, which are sometimes

interpreted as dishonesty and cunning – exactly like my experience with the Barzani man who slapped me and said, 'You Iranians . . .'

My Father's Shop and My First Business Venture

Before I went to serve in the military, I had tried my hand at several other jobs, all of which were beneficial in their own way and helped me get to know the community, the business world and the harsh realities of life. At that time, I had become a skilled photographer. I had several albums of photographs with social themes. I would sometimes send them to magazines and newspapers or participate in festivals.

For a while, I lost interest in photography and worked in my father's shop instead. I had grown up, and he trusted me. It was a great feeling to be able to take care of the shop when he was away or to accompany him on his trips to Tehran. This experience of trust and companionship, which was happening for the first time between my father and I in a masculine way, gave me a lot of confidence.

On the other hand, traveling to Tehran was also attractive for me. I could sometimes go to the cinema and enjoy more exciting entertainment in the capital. Occasionally, my father would attend funeral or wedding



Image 111: Ahmad Daneshvar (my father's friend) and my father (left) at my father's first shop after his release from prison. Imam Street, Piranshahr, 1982.

ceremonies and leave me in charge of the shop for two or three days. When he returned, he would see that the decor had changed, and everything was sparkling clean. I would observe the shops in other cities, take photos of their decor and make changes to our shop while my father was away. I wanted to create a sense of harmony and beauty in my workspace and life, and I would take action when my father was not around. Sometimes, he would object to the changes, but, eventually, he would come around. After all, his job as a boutique owner had made him more flexible and toned down his traditional market persona.

I had saved some money from my photography work and also earned some as an apprentice. My father and I made a win-win deal. One day, he said, 'I'll give you some goods. Go to the surrounding cities and sell them, and take some money for yourself.' He wanted to teach me how to be a shop owner through this method. By doing so, he was helping me become independent, gradually stand on my own two feet and gain experience and skills in the market. Both my father's trust and the opportunity to distance myself from the small environment of Piranshahr, gaining more experience, were invaluable to me.

Taking goods to other cities was heavily restricted. At the Revolutionary Guard checkpoints, they would search cars and find the goods. I had two bags. Sometimes I would find a female passenger on the minibus, put one bag under her feet, and hold the other one myself. They usually didn't search women.

My father would buy beads, gold-plated wires and woollen scarves with sequins from Pakistan and India. I would sell them in other cities like Mahabad, Sardasht, Naqadeh, Oshnaviyeh and Bukan. He would buy them in bulk, and I would sell them to shop owners in smaller quantities.

Apart from the financial gain I made from these transactions, my freedom to travel was very important. I could easily explore the cities, gaining a unique experience that many of my peers didn't have. This opportunity let me start exploring Kurdistan. I gradually became more professional in the art of buying and selling and negotiating. I had gotten to know the prominent shops that sold these goods and had become acquainted with their owners, and I would bring them products. I learned how to negotiate prices and some of the tricks of the trade.

I soon had a good amount of savings. I collected money and kept it with my grandmother. I spent part of my military service independently, using

my own savings. I bought clothes and a new camera and was happy to have my own money and maintain my pride. I had my hands in my own pockets and didn't take money from my father. This financial independence was very sweet. I think it can give everyone a good feeling and boost their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Motorcycle Accident and Seeking Forgiveness

My father had bought a car but had yet to sell the motorcycle. When he went to Tehran, he would store the motorcycle in our old kitchen, covering it with cloths and a tarpaulin and locking the handlebars. He entrusted the shop to me, but not the motorcycle, fearing that I might crash it recklessly in his absence. Perhaps it was sensitivity or even frugality. Many fathers behave like this, claiming that their main concern is their sons' safety and wellbeing.

I wasn't deterred, though. As soon as he left, I would fiddle with various keys until I finally got the motorcycle started. Despite my mother's strong objections, I would take it out for a spin, often at breakneck speed.

One time, while my father was in Tehran, a friend and I decided to race from one end of the city to the other. We planned to start at dusk, from the old petrol station known as Ibrahim Qazi's Exit, all the way to the Sardarshah roundabout. We would start together, with two witnesses following us. My father had a Yamaha 100 and my friend had a Honda 125, which was more powerful.

The race began, and we sped along wildly. Traffic regulations were non-existent at that time, and there were no traffic lights in that small, war-torn city. As we neared the end of the route, with just a few dozen metres to go, I heard a loud crash and braked sharply. I saw that two motorcycles had collided in front of the telecommunications building. I knew one of the riders was my friend, but I wasn't sure who the other was.

My friend's motorcycle had ended up in a ditch. I went to him, and he told me to go as it was nothing serious. We were both frightened, but in the darkness, we couldn't see much.

The next day, news spread in the city that Mustafa, the son of Haji Karim, and his nephew were in a severe accident and were dying. They had been taken to the Urmia hospital, which meant their condition was very grave.

I was anxious for two or three nights and couldn't talk to anyone about the incident. My father's trips usually lasted four days. Every evening, as I closed the shop, I would visit my friend, who worked as a welder with his father. We exchanged the latest news about the accident, and we were both under great stress. The thought of whether the accident would end well and whether the injured would survive weighed heavily on us.

The local police station was next to our shop. A Tehran-based soldier, who was a traffic patrol driver, would frequently visit our shop. I kept asking him about the situation, to the point that one day he asked suspiciously, 'Kameel, were you involved in that accident?' I said no, but since I had a motorcycle this incident stayed on my mind, and I was following up on it. He said, 'At Haji Karim's insistence, a detective from Urmia has come to look into the matter.'

Haji Karim was an influential and wealthy man. I was terrified! When my father returned, I recounted the story with much fear and embarrassment. After much shouting and arguing, he informed my friend's father, and both of them told Haji Karim about the incident. When I explained the details to my father, he realised that, as I was somewhat involved in the accident, he should be prepared to seek a settlement.



Image 112: Me and my father's motorbike

The injured were discharged from the hospital and returned home. One of them had a severely injured throat and struggled to breathe. A tube had been inserted into his throat, and parts of his intestines had been removed because the motorcycle's handlebars had penetrated his abdomen. The two had broken limbs, and neither of them was in good condition. In the traditional environment of that time, with no insurance system, the party responsible for an accident had to cover all medical expenses and damages. If the injured were young and unmarried, the severity of their injuries could hinder their chances of marriage, as they would be considered incomplete or unfit. This made the situation even worse.

My father, my friend's father and two of the most prominent clerics in the city gathered some elders and went to Mustafa's house for a settlement. We were all feeling ashamed and embarrassed. My father was angry, and during those few days of visits to Haji Karim's house, he threw insults and objects at me, continuously belittling me. I knew Mustafa and had some friendly banter with him. When we visited his home, I took every opportunity during the visits to ease his anger. After all, he was my friend, and the consequence of our motorcycle race was serious. I joked with him, but both my father and Haji Karim looked at me very harshly, leaving me with no option but to submit. I felt shame and regret under their gazes, but I was at a loss as to how to make amends.

My father and others said, 'Look, it's an accident, and the boys took the motorcycles without permission. Please forgive us . . .' They shouted back that this had ruined their lives.

Late in the night, we reached a tentative agreement, but a careless comment from someone led to a dispute and everything fell apart. The only solution was to schedule another meeting and start the negotiations anew.

The clerics who were with us whispered to my friend's father and my father, 'It's very tense right now, and we have no choice but to leave and come back another time. We can't make decisions in this atmosphere.'

They were right. As we were about to leave, a conflict erupted. The Democratic Party attacked several Revolutionary Guard bases in the outskirts of the city, and, shortly after, the power went out. We knew that the conflict between the two sides would lead to martial law. In that tense atmosphere, we were stuck in Haji Karim's house with about twenty people and couldn't leave until morning. If we had ventured outside, we would have risked death or arrest.

In that chaotic situation, we, the teenage boys, mischievously watched our fathers and quietly laughed. They glared at each other angrily. They couldn't stand each other but had to stay together until morning.

Eventually, the clerics, who were presiding over the meeting, jokingly said, 'We know this is not a pleasant situation and that you certainly don't want guests like us, but it is what it is, and we have no choice but to stay here until morning.' They brought in oil lamps, and we sat talking and eating fruit. The Party/Revolutionary Guard conflict turned out to be fortuitous, and a settlement was reached that night after all. It was agreed that we would pay compensation and the matter would be resolved. They wished the injured a speedy recovery and shared some long stories, perhaps hoping to offer advice.

The matter concluded, we spent a peaceful night at Haji Karim's house. Although there weren't enough beds for everyone, we all stayed in the large room and went home early the next morning – with trepidation. We feared that the Revolutionary Guard might arrest us, suspecting that our large gathering meant we had held a Party meeting. In those days, suspicion and rumours were rampant, and it was easy to be unjustly punished. Usually, clerics in our regions had Kurdish nationalist backgrounds, which added to the worry.[1] During the early revolutionary years, even a small gathering could give the Komiteh, Revolutionary

1 Kurdish Sunni clerics have been active since the era of the Republic of Kurdistan and even earlier. They played significant roles in the revival of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran following the fall of the Republic. During the armed uprising of the Party in the years 1967–68 and in 1979, alongside the Revolution, many Kurdish clerics actively participated in the ranks of the Democratic Party, with some even reaching leadership positions. They were notably part of the Union of Kurdish Scholars, which remains closely tied to the Party. Before the Republic of Kurdistan, Sheikh Ubaydullah Nahri, a prominent Kurdish cleric, led a Kurdish national movement in 1880, openly advocating for the independence of Kurdistan. In the uprising led by Ismail Agha Simko, Mulla Mohammad Tarjanyzadeh served as the editor of the newspaper *Rojh Kord – Shavi Ajam* (literally 'Kurdish Day – Night of the Persians') and was a key advisor to Simko. Mulla Khalil Gorehmeri was among the most recognised clerics during the nine-month uprising against Reza Shah's army. In the Republic of Kurdistan, both President Qazi Muhammad and Prime Minister Haji Baba Sheikh were top-ranking clerics. In the 1967–68 uprising, clerics such as Mulla Awareh, Mulla Mahmoud Zanganeh, Mulla Qadir Vordi, and Mulla Qadir Lachini lost their lives among the rebels. Later, clerics like Mulla Abdullah Hassanzadeh became the Party's secretary-general, alongside Mulla Sheikh Izaddin Husseini, Kak Ahmad Mufti Zadeh, Sheikh Jalal Husseini, and Mulla Khader Abbasi, who were all notable political clerics.

Guard or Intelligence services a pretext to arrest everyone.[1] Since our family, like some others, was known to support the Democratic Party and had connections within the Party, it heightened suspicion.

In the morning, we left two by two in different directions from the house. Despite everything, if security agencies caught wind of the settlement meeting, they might become suspicious and, as Kurds say, 'strip us of our needs'[2] to believe the incident was a motorcycle accident between two stubborn teenagers and nothing more.

After the accident, my father no longer allowed me to use his motorcycle, and I was banned from riding at all.

1 Generally, the Islamic Republic is highly sensitive about large gatherings and celebrations, imposing restrictions and opposing such events. Recently, in 2023, a host of a private party was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of serving alcohol to guests.

2 This implies that it is too late and the opportunity has passed.

Chapter Eight: Political Activities

Politics had chosen me, much like displacement. Both pursued me relentlessly, and many, both willingly and unwillingly, joined me on this path. For those unwilling to remain passive in the geography of Iran, politics is often the primary choice. Perhaps this is why everything, even if initially apolitical, inevitably takes on political dimensions. Iran's social history bears witness to this recurring pattern. From a young age, I was immersed in a politically charged environment, my lived experiences intertwined with its dynamics, and I endured many displacements as a result. My close ones were also involved in politics. My mind was shaped by this environment, which is why I became engaged in political activities during my adolescence.

At that age, one often believes they can alter the complex equations of the world and play a role in its processes. Even though I have not ceased these efforts, one's perspective on this path and these actions becomes more nuanced over time. One learns that the subject is not as simple as it seemed in youth, when one aspired to be a hero. As people grow older, their experiences increase, and they often laugh at their youthful imaginings. They understand that the world of politics, despite its apparent simplicity, is profoundly complex and bears little resemblance to their past naive and straightforward notions.

Two Deaths in Forty Days

In 1989, two events had profound impacts on the political equations of the region. One was the death of Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the other was the assassination of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic

Party of Iran. These two events occurred thirty-nine days apart and were fundamentally different: one was a natural death; the other was an assassination.

With Khomeini's death on 4 June, the opposition hoped that the structure of the Islamic Republic would experience some form of collapse or at least a weakening of central power that might create opportunities for significant changes. However, despite figures like Khamenei and Rafsanjani, the Government continued its course with even greater intensity.

On 13 July, Dr Ghassemlou was assassinated in Austria. Several years prior, Khomeini had declared Ghassemlou an apostate and had deemed his blood permissible. This was further confirmation that the Islamic Republic had no qualms about eliminating Ghassemlou, the apostate. The event profoundly affected our region; it seemed that, in people's minds, there was no longer room for negotiation. Everyone believed that engaging in dialogue with the Central Government was a mistake. Many claimed it was not the first time Kurdish leaders had been killed under the guise of negotiation and attempts to establish peace with the Central Government. Leaders such as Ismail Agha Simko and his elder brother Hamza Agha Mangur had been assassinated in similar fashion earlier. In the eyes of the people, to negotiate with the Government was to repeat history.

Dr Ghassemlou and his companions were assassinated on 13 July 1989, on the eve of the fortieth day of mourning for Khomeini. Many, especially within the Kurdish clerical community, believe this date was chosen deliberately and with awareness. The fortieth day holds special significance in Shia Islam for the occurrence of events. The Islamic Republic, which considers itself the representative of the Mahdi and ostensibly adheres to Shia principles, had intentionally orchestrated the assassination to eliminate one of the most popular and influential Kurdish leaders on the fortieth day of their great leader's death.

In over three decades of leading the Democratic Party, Ghassemlou transformed it into one of the most progressive parties fighting for Kurdish rights in Iran. After Khomeini's death, his successors feared individuals like Ghassemlou. Removing him from the political arena meant weakening the main Kurdish base of resistance – the Democratic Party.

Lunch with Dr Ghassemlou

I had seen Dr Ghassemlou several times before. I mentioned that the first time was at the house of Mulla Saleh, the imam of Naqadeh, in the early days of the Revolution. I saw him again at the famous and controversial Party meeting at Naqadeh stadium, and later in the villages of the Lajan region near Piranshahr. After our displacement to the village of Gerdashavan, the Party's cultural and theatrical activities continued. On one occasion, we went to the nearby village of Barkamaran to watch the play *Jargal*, and I saw him again. I don't recall if it was on Peshmerga Day or the anniversary of the Democratic Party's founding, but it was a significant event held in a place called Dayeh-Shikhi. He and some members of the Party's Central Committee arrived with an escort of military jeeps, some equipped with 106mm cannons, and they dined with the people in the mosque.

At that time, food was served on large trays known as *majmeh*. Two people would eat from separate dishes placed on the same tray. Some of my relatives were involved in the Party and held commanding positions, so we sat beside them. When the food arrived, the usual jokes began, including a popular one about finding a child to eat with because children ate less, leaving more food for adults. I was seated with my father and family members, dressed in Kurdish attire with a headdress, and possibly a weapon hidden under my shawl.



Image 113: Assassination of Dr Ghassemlou and his companions. Vienna, Austria, July 1989.

Ghassemlou looked at me and said, 'This is one of the Ahmadys. It's quite obvious. He has both blue eyes and blond hair.'

I think he was referring to the men from my clan, particularly my father's cousins, some of whom had red hair and blue eyes, and one of whom was a regional commander.

He then said, 'Young Peshmerga, come and eat with me.'

It was one of the most memorable meals I have ever had, and I have always felt proud of it. Dr Ghassemlou was the figure whose photo was on our school's blackboard, whose songs we sang, and whose words I heard daily on the radio and in gatherings. Now I was eating with him, which was a great source of pride. His wrinkled face and charismatic smile – inseparable parts of his countenance – were very sweet to me, and I reminisced about it for a long time. You can imagine how astonishing it was for a young boy to dine with the leader of a major and influential party. He spoke with a Sorani Kurdish accent, similar to Kurmanji.[1] He asked me what grade I was in, my age and what subjects I was studying. He inquired if it wasn't better to study in Kurdish and if I missed Naqadeh. He asked me politically charged questions that I didn't fully understand, but he asked them loudly enough for those around us to hear. I think he wanted to send a message to them.

A couple of his peers jokingly remarked, 'Rahman is so clever! A child can't eat that much meat!'

He laughed and said, 'If you don't eat it all, your uncle is here.'

I think he took half of my meat portion because it was too much for me. Sharing this meal with Dr Ghassemlou elevated his status in my eyes, and I was more convinced than ever that I wanted to be like him. For years after this event, I exaggerated the story and told it as a tale to others. Even when I was arrested before my military service, one of the stories I told was about

1 Some believe that Ghassemlou was a Sorani Kurd, not a Kurmanj, and his family belongs to the Baradost, specifically the Amir Khan clan (Amirkhani Lep Zerin), which led a rebellion for freedom in the 17th century at the Dandam Castle. The Baradost people, residing in the valley of Ghassemlou (Gali Ghassemlou) and the Bile Plain (Dasht-e Bil) between the Shekak and Sorani Kurds in southern Urmia, toward the western border of Maragheh and Lolan on the other side of the border (Kailashin) in southern Kurdistan, speak a dialect that has evolved into a distinct variety influenced by Badini and Sorani.



Image 114: Dr Ghassemlou and children. Mahabad, 1979.

this lunch with Dr Ghassemlou, which made the interrogators laugh in unbelief.

To many, Dr Ghassemlou was a great man whose humility led him to dine with a young boy. This high and profound understanding of him as a leader made him a role model for me. I held him in special esteem and saw him as invincible.

When I learned of his assassination, the first thing that came to mind was our lunch together. I felt deeply saddened and disheartened because I saw part of my own aspirations in him, and now my dreams had been shot through the heart. He had painted for me a beautiful world of great political figures and their social-justice struggles, a world to which I was drawn and for which I endured both beauty and hardship. My life seemed to reflect Dr Ghassemlou's concerns, albeit in a form that belonged to my own social world. That day and that shared meal with him taught me so much and gave direction to my life.

From White to Black

During that period, many people across the country wore white instead of black. They were too disillusioned to mourn Khomeini's death in black clothing — yet they didn't realise that soon the regime itself would shroud them in black.

Early in the morning, the television announced Dr Ghassemlou's assassination, but we rushed to the radio to confirm the news. We tuned into the Party's channel and found it to be true.

My father and grandmother mourned as if they'd lost a family member, while my mother, other female relatives and neighbours lamented. The atmosphere in most Kurdish homes was much the same. The region mourned, and a veil of sorrow descended over it.

The city became heavily securitised. Many people closed their shops and went on a general strike. The Basij and Revolutionary Guard marked the closed shop shutters with red Xs as a show of threat. Later, some shopkeepers had their licenses revoked and were fined in court. Market strikes were a common form of collective protest in Kurdistan.

Amid our grief, the Revolutionary Guard showed no restraint. They distributed sweets and beverages and wrote slogans on the walls. 'Death to Ghassemlou! The hypocrite has gone to hell', 'Revenge, revenge', 'End of the dissolved Democratic Party', and similar phrases were seen on the city walls. Some armed Kurdish Government supporters joined the Revolutionary Guard in this celebration, while those who had lost family members in the war with the Democrats expressed their joy, which was deeply distressing for the people.

When the radio and television had announced Khomeini's death thirty-nine days earlier due to illness and old age, the people went into a state of



Image 115: Week of public mourning. Mount Qandil, June 1989.

panic, and on the first day many did not dare go out onto the streets. Were they upset? Certainly not. You could sense a hidden joy mixed with anxiety. They feared what would happen next. While the military forces were in mourning, dressed in black and carrying black flags, Jalal Lahijani (another friend) and I took our bicycles and, smiling, rode from the checkpoint at the edge of town toward the forests of Sardasht. We spent those compulsory days off on a picnic, discussing politics and fantasising about the collapse of the regime.

My social response to these two deaths was completely different. I wore black for Ghassemlou, mourning with elegies and heroic poems recited by the well-known Democratic Party radio broadcaster Ahmed Shirbeigi. However, after Khomeini's death, I spent all my days in leisure and joy, wearing white.

Tragically, many children across the border in Kurdistan likely had similar feelings of grief and mourning for Khomeini as their leader and idol. Each side saw itself as justified and its leader as legitimate. Khomeini's death reminded us of all the wars and displacements we had endured. That is why we congratulated each other, and we vented the anger from all the displacements he had caused.

Graffiti and Distributing Pamphlets

Influenced by the diversity, the competition and the political activity of various Kurdish parties in the region where I grew up, my political inclinations intensified gradually after leaving school. I felt I had reached a point where my life was changing direction. The freedom from the ideological state education system gave me a valuable opportunity for personal growth. I would often say to myself, 'You're not going back to school any more; you're going to become an influential person and make a difference.' I would also tell myself, 'You won't be staying here; you're going to create change . . .'

Some of my father's friends, including a few shopkeepers in the area, leaned toward leftist ideologies. Among them were a couple of expelled teachers, and one had been exiled from Mahabad to Piranshahr for his political activities. He was witty and kind and provided me with many banned books to read. He, along with others like him, handed me manifestos on socialism and workers' movements, encouraging me to read

and discuss them with him afterward. Through these individuals, I became more familiar with subjects like history, politics and social science and was introduced to various political parties and movements in Iran.

At that time, Noureddin Kianouri was the head of the Tudeh party.[1] His books and memoirs were given to me by the same people, and I read them diligently. I also got my hands on the works of Golesorkhi[2] and other banned authors. Alongside this, I had contact with Kurdish nationalism in its classical sense, which itself had strong leftist influences.

Gradually, continuous reading began shaping my mind, allowing me to think more critically and analytically about various issues. I had moved on from detective novels and works like Jack London's and started focusing on analytical and historical books in Farsi. Slowly, I became involved in the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, the predominant political force in the region where I lived. At the time, various leftist groups were also active in Iranian Kurdistan, but the Democratic Party distinguished itself through its emphasis on independence and local legitimacy.[3]

One of Ghassemlou's most crucial moves during his time as the Party's secretary-general was emphasising the Party's political, organisational and ideological independence from Soviet-aligned leftist groups, particularly

1 Noureddin Kianouri was the grandson of Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri, who joined the Tudeh Party in 1942 and engaged in the struggle against the Pahlavi regime. During the peak of revolutionary activities in 1979, he was elected as the first secretary of the party. With the onset of the Islamic Republic's crackdowns in 1982, he and many members of the leadership and cadre of the Tudeh Party were arrested. Kianouri eventually passed away on 6 August 1998.

2 Khosrow Golesorkhi was a Marxist poet and writer who, along with a group of like-minded individuals, was arrested in 1972 on charges of plotting to assassinate the Crown Prince. In the early morning of 18 February 1974, he was executed by firing squad, along with several other members of the Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas.

3 During the early 1980s, several leftist organisations operated in Iranian Kurdistan, including the Tudeh Party and different Fedayeen factions. The Tudeh Party, aligned with the Soviet Union, published materials in both Farsi and Kurdish and hosted public broadcasts, such as Q&A sessions with its leader Noureddin Kianouri. While the Tudeh Party eventually fell apart under pressure from the regime, the Fedayeen Majority managed to reorganise, and the Seven-Member Faction dissolved itself in 1984. Amid these shifts, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan remained the only major group that continued resisting the Islamic Republic's authority, despite enduring major losses and internal divisions.

the Tudeh Party. By establishing this ideological divide, he ensured the Democratic Party's survival and autonomy.

My initial foray into political activism began by getting to know the core activists of the Democratic Party in my hometown. Following the advice of one of the members, I avoided engaging in political activities in Piranshahr itself. The primary task for a novice activist like me was writing slogans and distributing pamphlets and underground leaflets in nearby cities, a dangerous and risky job that was typically assigned to younger, lesser-known faces to minimise exposure. According to existing protocol, instead of distributing pamphlets or writing slogans in Piranshahr, I would travel to Naqadeh and Mahabad to carry out these tasks. The culture of writing political slogans on walls in Iran and Kurdistan dates back to the Shah's era, when it was mainly practised by Marxist leftist groups and Islamists. Liberal parties generally avoiding such activities and adopted different tactics.

I often visited my aunts in Naqadeh and Mahabad as a cover. My aunt Maryam lived in Naqadeh, and my aunt Zeynab, after her husband's death, had moved from Khalifehlu to Mahabad. Under the guise of visiting them and my cousins, I frequently travelled to these two cities, quietly carrying out the tasks assigned to me. Part of this strategy was inspired by a German proverb that roughly translates to 'Don't spoil where you sleep.'



Image 116: My cousin Sabir and I. Piranshahr, 1986.

The Kurdish equivalent conveyed a similar sentiment, advising me not to engage in dangerous activities in Piranshahr.[1] Following this logic, I conducted my more perilous actions outside my hometown.

In Naqadeh, I often rode a motorbike or bicycle with my younger cousin, who didn't ask questions about why I had to stop at street corners or what exactly I was doing. He served as a decoy, though he later admitted that he had known about my activities. I wrote slogans, distributed pamphlets and occasionally delivered private messages to certain individuals. I would establish contact with the city cell beforehand, and, based on the plans and locations they provided, I would write slogans at specific spots.

Sometimes, especially on important Party anniversaries, we would distribute pamphlets. Using samples provided to us, I wrote slogans to commemorate the Democratic Party's anniversaries, Peshmerga Day and other occasions announced by the Party. Some texts came from the Party's radio broadcasts, while others were written, printed and photocopied by the city cell and handed to us. These texts often discussed the regional situation and what needed to happen for the Kurdish language and attire to be officially recognised, as well as the broader approach of the Islamic Republic toward different ethnicities, particularly the Kurds. The thoughts and statements of Dr Ghassemlou and Dr Sharafkandi, the Party's secretary-general at the time, were also included in these pamphlets.

By the age of fifteen, I had established regular areas in Naqadeh and Mahabad, where I would distribute these pamphlets.

In Naqadeh, the areas around the Kurdish sports field, the streets of Balakhi and Balagchi, and the neighbourhoods of Sont and Maroofi One and Two became my designated zones. In Mahabad, I focused on regions such as Mokhaberat, up to the Arde Square three-way junction, and the intricate alleys of the old Armenian neighbourhood. In these areas, I often worked with a few other members of the city cell, who came from Oshnaviyeh and surrounding villages. Over time, we learned the best methods to carry out our tasks. For instance, without mailboxes on doors, we had to slide the pamphlets through cracks in the doors of houses.

1 *Kanekî awî lê daxoyêwe berdi tê mexe*: 'When you drink water from a spring, don't throw stones in it.'

Occasionally, we received pamphlets through intermediaries, who were often shopkeepers. In Naqadeh, my contacts included a shopkeeper and a member of a poetry association, while in Mahabad, I coordinated with the apprentice at a photography studio.

Living in this politically charged environment, imbued with aspirations for Kurdish self-determination, shaped my thoughts and built my character. By my teenage years, my activism had matured, and I was determined to play my part in the struggle for Kurdish identity and justice.

Children's Political Participation

In the early days of the Revolution, many political parties recruited a significant number of children. Tasks such as distributing leaflets or writing slogans were often assigned to teenagers and young people. In the revolutionary and rebellious atmosphere of the time, political operatives didn't consider the fact that I or others were just children and should be kept away from dangerous political activities. From their perspective, our youth was an advantage – we were nimble and, even if caught, our chances of being released were higher and faster.



Image 117: Early days of my activism, wearing a Kurdish scarf (Palestinian *keffiyeh*) at a family wedding. 1987.

I later observed this same strategy of utilising children on a larger scale in other regions of the world, in contemporary governments, including sending Basij children to the front lines during the Iran-Iraq War and student groups in Iran being used for political propaganda. Examples of children participating in street protests can also be seen in Palestinian and Lebanese children throwing stones at police or tanks. A similar pattern occurred in Hitler's Reich,[1] and children were deployed by Phalangist spies[2] during the Lebanese civil war.

The Islamic Republic of Iran also prominently displayed this tactic, resulting in bizarre and noteworthy cases. A notable example is the fabricated story of Hussein Fahmideh, whose day of martyrdom is marked as National Youth Day in the official Iranian calendar. It was claimed that, at the age of thirteen, he strapped a grenade to himself and blew up an enemy tank! This false narrative was a propaganda tool to attract more children and encourage their involvement in the war.

I genuinely wanted to collaborate with the Party. It made me feel brave and grown up, and I participated out of genuine belief. Everything was in place for me. Living in Kurdistan made such activities easier. Even in today's Iran, recent waves of social movements, such as those in 2019 and 2022, have seen students, particularly teenagers, participating in political

1 The military use of children generally takes various forms, including using children for propaganda, as child soldiers in war, and for support activities such as guarding, espionage and sexual slavery. During Hitler's time, the 12th Armoured Division of Hitler Youth was composed of 17-year-olds, and this unit suffered thousands of casualties on the French front. The Hitler Youth and the Girls' League showcased the image of a classless society. These youths were actually drawn to the Hitler Youth through recreational camps and cultural programmes and were ultimately used as child soldiers. (See MediaLuna, n.d.) Children, who are often forcibly separated from their families, sometimes incited by extreme ideologies, are compelled to fight for those whose goals can only be achieved by killing others. For them, every child serves as a soldier capable of providing a defence against their enemies. Numerous examples exist where warlords have employed children in this manner. Many instances can be cited from World War I, World War II, military conflicts in African countries (such as Liberia, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda and Rwanda), in the Far East (such as Vietnam and Myanmar), and even more recently with ISIS; however, this phenomenon is most commonly recognised in Africa. It seems that the use of children, regardless of race, nationality or region, has become an inseparable part of modern, unconventional and guerrilla warfare.

2 Phalanges are pressure groups that strive to impose a specific method or mindset within the political society of the country for the benefit of a particular group, party or movement.

activities inside and outside of school. In some cases, they even bring their parents along to street protests. Some of them are killed, becoming victims of a political system that refuses to address social demands and instead opts to suppress dissenting people rather than engage in dialogue with them.

I vividly remember those early days of my political involvement. I was clumsy with writing, and my handwriting was terrible – still is, in fact. Once, our leader, half-jokingly, told me, 'Kameel, you should be the one to come back the next day and read out the slogans you've written on the wall for people and the Sepah! Almost no one can figure out what you've written. At least try to write clearly enough so they can read it.' I was so hasty with the spray can that my writing was even worse and barely anyone could make sense of it. Occasionally, people saw me writing slogans; some, both old and young, would look at me with pride, while others would quietly tell me to move on, whispering, 'Go, go! This way! A car's coming!' Being recognised as an activist gave me a sense of pride and motivation. It felt like a way to make up for the frustrations and repressions I had endured.

My activities continued until the core group in Oshnaviyeh was arrested and, soon after, others were captured in Naqadeh. After these events, we were told that they would soon target other cities and groups, and we were ordered to halt all operations temporarily. My contact disappeared. Shortly afterward, two members from Piranshahr and several others from Mahabad and Bukan were arrested – one of them a relative of one of our in-laws. We had been warned that if the wave of arrests reached our town, we should take it seriously, but there were no clear instructions or plans for escape. If there had been, I wasn't aware of them. My contact no longer showed up, and the number of arrests was growing. In a rush and without any proper plan, I decided to leave town. I boarded a minibus at a rural terminal in Piranshahr and headed to the village of Kohneh Lajan, nestled at the foot of the Qandil Mountains.

Upon arriving in Kohneh Lajan, I went to see Ali, the eldest son of Kak Hamed, who was my father's cousin. Ali had been studying under the village's religious leader to become a cleric, though he never finished his studies. Nonetheless, we still called him Mulla Ali. I explained what had happened and told him I wanted to cross the border. I urged him to join me that very night, suggesting we escape through the valley behind the

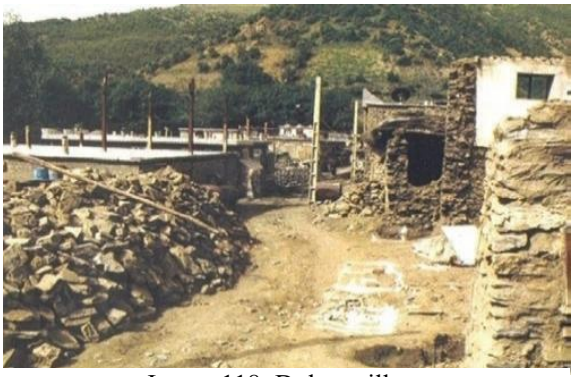
village that led to the Qandil Mountains. From there, we would cross into southern Kurdistan (what is now Iraqi Kurdistan). I was scared and needed a companion. Mulla Ali had lost his father in the Jeran war,[1] so I thought he might be willing to help me escape. We had shared political books, our views aligned and, more than anything, we were family and friends, so I trusted him. But the suddenness of my decision took him by surprise. No matter how much I insisted, he refused to come with me. He advised me against crossing the mountains alone at night, but I didn't have time to stay. I told him, 'Mulla Ali, don't tell anyone, but, even if I have to go alone, I must leave.' Then I said goodbye and left.

Tonight, I'm Crossing the Border

I had to take a minibus headed to Mirabad on the Sardasht Road. I'd been planning this for a few days, asking the local shopkeepers for directions. I'd been to Mirabad before, during my displacement, so I knew it a little. One of the shopkeepers put me in touch with someone involved in smuggling. After some asking around, I found him and stayed at his house for the night. But he kept stalling, making excuses like the road wasn't clear or there were ambushes and fights. I had the feeling he was scared to help me cross the border. He'd just gotten married and was in his own world with his young wife. For the two days I stayed with them, he spent most of his time playing with pigeons in the yard[2] or shutting the curtains to be alone with his wife. Eventually, I gave up, said my goodbyes, and set off for Sardasht on my own.

1 The Jeran War was a significant conflict in the region during the early 1980s between Kurdish fighters and Government forces. It deeply affected local communities.

2 Pigeon-keeping, or pigeon-flying, has long been a cultural element and is considered one of the traditional games. This activity is primarily reserved for men. In Iran, pigeon-keeping is generally practised in two distinct forms: the first involves a competition where the players' pigeons compete while in flight, and the second involves betting between the pigeon owners. In this method, the pigeon-keeper attempts to lure the rival's pigeons to their own rooftop during flight and claim them. Beyond entertainment, pigeons have also been used for messaging, producing fertiliser, their seeds (*chillgooz*), and their meat. In this regard, Jean Chardin, in his travelogue, mentioned the 'Lufti Pit' in Isfahan, a well-known gathering place for professional pigeon-keepers, where pigeons were bought and sold. He also described the situation at that location (Ravandi, 1961).


Image 118: Doleto village

I hadn't told anyone in my family, so they hadn't heard from me for several days. I knew everyone, especially my grandmother, must have been very worried, which added to the weight of my thoughts during those days. At the bustling Sardasht terminal, I ran into someone from Piranshahr. I quickly scribbled a note to my father on the back of a cigarette packet: 'I had to go. Couldn't tell you. Tonight, I'm crossing the border.' I sealed the letter well and gave no further explanation. I figured the man might read it, but at least it would give my family some idea of where I was. They knew my views, so I thought they'd have an idea of where I was headed.

The man from Mirabad had told me, 'At the Sardasht terminal, there are pickup trucks going to the villages. When you get off, you'll come to two villages called Sureban and Ahmadbariv. From there, the border isn't far. Go see so-and-so, and he'll help you cross.' I clambered into the back of a pickup truck with a mix of men, women and children. My clothes stood out from the others – our Kurdish attire was different from what they wore in Sardasht. Their trousers were much looser, more like the style worn by Iraqi Kurds. It was obvious I wasn't local, and people were giving me curious looks. My appearance made it clear I was there to flee and cross the border.

We arrived in Ahmadbariv. The man whose name I'd been given wasn't home. They said he'd gone across the border to find his brother, who hadn't been seen for days, and no one knew when he'd be back.

For the locals, crossing the border wasn't usually difficult, but for an outsider like me, it was full of complications. I returned to Mirabad and stayed another two or three days. It seemed there had been some skirmishes near the border, and my host didn't know what to do with me. I told him I had to leave, asking him what I should do. Relieved, he said,

'Catch a ride to the big village of Alvatan. It has a military base. From there, you can go to the village of Dôletu,[1] and crossing the border will be easy.'

I got a ride to Alvatan. As we approached a checkpoint, they said, 'Since you're a stranger, they might not let you into the village.' They dropped me off so I could pass the checkpoint on foot and rejoin them on the other side. The driver said, 'I'll go ahead, and when I stop to pour water into the radiator, you can hop back in.' I walked for a while before catching up with him. Looking back, I realise how much trust I placed in people back then. But it wasn't misplaced. Almost everyone knew where I was going, and no one reported me.

This showed how popular Kurdish parties were among the local people, and it seemed that helping travellers like me was common practice. An Iraqi Kurd was with us, too. Together, we crossed over and got back into the truck.

We reached Alvatan, but my host had told me not to enter the village. 'Go up the hill until you reach the crest. Get off there, and then continue north until you reach the border. From there, you'll find your way to the Kurdish villages in Iraq.' I knew the Democratic Party had a base on the other side, and I thought I'd go there and introduce myself, and then . . .

In those years, the Kurdish Iranian parties used Iraqi Kurdistan as a kind of rear base, just as the Iraqi Kurds used Iranian Kurdistan as a staging ground for their operations against Iraq. Peshmerga forces from both sides were engaged in guerrilla warfare and organisational activities near the border from early spring to late autumn.

By the time I got off, it was almost dusk. The villagers in the truck were astonished, asking, 'Where are you going? Are you mad?' I waited until dark, then started making my way through thorny bushes, sometimes

1 *Dôleto*, or *Dolatu* in Kurdish, means 'Mulberry Valley', and in Farsi, it is pronounced as 'Dowlato'. A few years ago, this place briefly served as a prison for the Democratic Party of Iran. Dôleto is located at the zero-point border and has only one outpost on a hilltop. During the Iran-Iraq War, Dôleto prison was bombed by Iraqi fighter jets, resulting in the deaths of dozens of prisoners. These prisoners included war captives from the conflict between the Democratic Party and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kurdish spies who had been working for Iran, and those captured in combat against the Party. Additionally, members of a seven-person faction that had split from the Party were detained there, although they were transferred to another prison before the bombing. The collaboration between Iranian Kurdish parties and the Iraqi Government lent credence to the suspicion that the bombing had been coordinated with the Democratic Party.

hearing the rustling of animals, as I headed toward the border. Fear gripped me. It was the first time I had taken such a risk. The isolation, the darkness and the unfamiliar terrain all intensified my fear.

I kept wondering, 'What if I'm caught? Execution?' But my sense of adventure, coupled with thoughts of freedom and victory, drove me forward. The meaning I ascribed to my journey and the hope I nurtured within myself spurred me on. I told myself that, if I stayed, I'd be arrested like the others, and that I was in the right and would eventually prevail over the enemy. Step by step, these thoughts propelled me forward. Oh, the strange power of ideological conviction that made those moments bearable!

I reached the crest of the hill. It was just the beginning of the night, and I'd been warned that the Revolutionary Guard might be lying in wait and that I should cross at dawn. I found a small hollow next to a rock, wrapped my Kurdish shawl around myself and shut my eyes to get some sleep. Past midnight, I was jolted awake by gunfire and then the sound of automatic weapons. A group of Peshmerga were crossing from Iran into Iraq, and shots were being fired from a base above me. The military forces didn't come down, but stayed in their positions, firing aimlessly and hurling insults at each other. Both sides were Kurdish, but the Government soldiers were mostly Farsi and Turkish. Later, I learned that this was a well-known crossing point. Strangely, neither side would get close to the other; they just fired at each other from a distance, more as a show of presence than anything else.

By morning, the commotion had died down. I, inexperienced, exhausted, anxious and now seeing myself as a full-fledged member of the Party, set off toward the border. I was without food or water and so had no choice but to leave my hiding spot and try to cross. I told myself, 'You've come this far. You'll make it through the rest.'

But I didn't.

Drop Your Weapon!

There had been a clash the night before, and I should have waited another night instead of setting off early in the morning. Unaware that, after the previous night's skirmish, the Government forces were now patrolling

with cameras and heightened alertness, I found myself surrounded in no time.

Two Revolutionary Guard motorbikes and a Toyota blocked me from the village's southern road, while armed men cut me off from the upper path. Dressed in a dusty Kurdish outfit – common among Peshmerga and fashionable among young people at the time – I had a backpack slung over my shoulder. They fired shots into the air, and one of them yelled, 'Drop your weapon! Raise your hands and lie on the ground.' I had no choice but to surrender.

They hit me with the butt of a rifle, threw a few punches and kicks and thoroughly searched the area. They kept shouting at me to reveal where I'd hidden my weapon. At first glance, I looked like a young Peshmerga, with all the characteristics. Worse, they had found me near the border, where a skirmish had taken place just a few hours earlier. In pain, I twisted and groaned, pleading, 'I'm not a Peshmerga. I was just trying to cross the border.'

They didn't hear me. From the moment I was captured, I was greeted with violence.

I had been told that, if I ever got caught, I should say my father had gone to Iraq for work and hadn't returned, and I was going after him. I said this over and over, but they didn't believe me. They kept threatening me, saying I was part of the group that had passed through last night. No matter how much I denied being involved or armed, it was futile. I even suggested they ask the driver from the previous day or the locals, but they had no trust in the villagers.

For two days and one night, I was imprisoned in a bunker overlooking the village, which was built underground for protection against air raids. They said someone would come from headquarters to take me, but no one came. It seemed they were trying to force a confession from me, to make me admit that I was a Peshmerga. The base commander and a local Kurdish man from the village came to me each morning, tormenting me. Ironically, that same villager had spoken with some travellers from that day, and they'd confirmed I wasn't armed and had boarded from Sardasht.

The soldier who brought me food was Turkish, and I begged him in Turkish to tell them I wasn't involved, but he replied, 'I'm in no position to help you. If they catch me talking to you, they'll arrest me too!' His words terrified me even more, making me wonder where I had ended up

and how I could convince these people that I was innocent – or, at least, not who they thought I was. Maybe they were even using the soldier to scare me into talking, but I had nothing to confess.

They accused me of being an armed Peshmerga, which meant facing charges of *moharebeh* ('enmity against God') and execution. Countless young men and boys, like me, had been caught in their net, tortured and forced to confess, only to be executed. These thoughts filled me with dread. A misunderstanding like this could end my life, and no torture could be worse than that realisation.

On the first day, they beat me with a rifle butt. My shoulder and back ached, and I couldn't lie down. They genuinely believed they had captured a live Peshmerga, a significant achievement for them. As they beat me, I kept saying, 'This is my ID. My father is a shopkeeper.' They examined my face and skin tone, which clearly indicated I was from the city, but this didn't match the circumstances of my capture.

Later, the violence subsided somewhat. During the interrogations, a radio operator was often present, asking me questions relayed from someone else over the radio. The person interrogating me was a Kurdish mercenary, illiterate, and unable to ask his own questions. He struggled even to speak Farsi. In the end, they told me that the security forces from Alvatan[1] were coming to take me, and they knew how to make people talk.

After two days, a Toyota arrived to take me to Alvatan. Like all vehicles in the war zone, its windows were covered in dust. Two soldiers and a Revolutionary Guard sat in the front, while I was tossed into the back like a sack of potatoes.

As we left Dôletu, the car overheated on the main road. The soldiers went to get another Toyota to tow us. Because the vehicle broke down, they changed course and took me to a nearby base with a large checkpoint at a crossroads. It was night by then, and a curfew was in place, so we had to stay there. There was no prison, so they placed me in a room near the base commander's quarters. The deputy commander wore the uniform of the Revolutionary Guard, but he spoke Kurdish without a trace of a Turkish

1 Alvatan, even during the reign of the Shah, had a gendarmerie unit that monitored the activities of Kurdish Peshmerga on both sides of the border. In fact, the Alvatan border region, which extends to the western edge of Qandil, has never been free from Kurdish groups opposed to the regimes of Iran and Iraq.



Image 119: Me in the khaki uniform known as Peshmerga

or Farsi accent. I had seen many Turks in the region who knew Kurdish, but they always had a slight Turkish accent that gave them away. Later, I learned that these people were Kurds known as Chahardouli[1] and were Shia. I guessed that, because of our cultural and linguistic similarities, this man treated me kindly. After hearing my story, he began speaking Turkish to the others, saying, 'Maybe he's telling the truth. Maybe he was on his way to become a Peshmerga but didn't make it. Why did you beat him? Why make these kids rebellious? He's just a child; he should be in school. He's the same age as my daughter.'

His words were different from the others. From that moment, he took me under his wing. My face was bruised and swollen, and I was covered in dust from the car ride. He ordered a soldier to take me to the outdoor shower and gave me a set of camouflage military clothes to wear. Wearing

1 The Chahardouli people ('Chwar Dawli') live in the geographical region of Ilam. These Kurds, known as the Kelhuri Kurds of Ilam, migrated from Chahardoul in Ilam and are referred to as the Chahardouli Kurds. They are tribes residing in the provinces of Ilam, Hamadan, Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, Khuzestan and Kermanshah. Their origin traces back to Chahardoul Rizevand in Ilam. Their native language is Kurdish with the Rizevandi dialect. Interestingly, they were also nationalists and historically had conflicts with the Turks. However, their Shia faith and the Democratic Party's lack of attention to Shiite Kurds during the early years of the Revolution likely caused a divide between them and Sunni Kurds, leading to their eventual involvement with military forces.

that uniform made me feel awful. In the shower, I washed my own clothes, planning to change back into them as soon as I could. The Revolutionary Guard quietly said, 'Look! They were taking you to Alvatan. Be thankful your car broke down and you ended up here first. In Alvatan, a madman is waiting for you. He'll beat you so badly, you'll wish you hadn't been beaten at Dôletu! Get ready. He's shell-shocked and insane from the southern front, and he's from my village. I'll try to calm him down so he doesn't beat you too much, but you'd better tell him everything you know.'

I replied, 'This is all I've got.' I didn't know what else to say. Maybe I should tell this madman who was about to torture me that I'd been listening to the radio and got inspired by Ahmed Shirbeigi, the Democratic Party's speaker, or that I simply felt like going and becoming a Peshmerga. In my mind, I had concocted a story like that, with no mention of my involvement in the urban cell, but, in their eyes, my guilt was already decided: I was a Peshmerga, and that was the end of it.

We stayed at the base that night. The next day, the kind man said he didn't have leave to accompany me but gave me a message to pass along: 'Say hello to so-and-so; they'll understand I've put in a word for you.'

He was a good man. Years later, when I had set up my own shop, he came looking for me. He had asked around to find me, and he came with such eagerness to see me, but I acted as if I didn't know him. 'Do you remember me?' he asked. He came forward, expecting me to open my arms and thank him warmly for his kindness that day, but I pretended I didn't know him. He asked again, 'You really don't remember me?' Then he lowered his head, disappointed, and walked out of the shop, getting into a Toyota belonging to the Revolutionary Guard that was parked outside. He sped away recklessly, and only then did I realise what had happened.

I grabbed a taxi and went after him, but I couldn't find him. Later, through a local Revolutionary Guard whose father was a neighbour and friend of his, I sent a message and apologised, but I never received a response. I still don't know why I acted that way, but I kept thinking, 'He's still a Revolutionary Guard.' I was a Kurd and he was a Shiite Guard, no matter how well he spoke Kurdish or how much he had helped me. In my mind back then, I was right and he was wrong.

Under heavy guard, I was taken to the Alvatan military base, which was under the control of the Revolutionary Guard of Mahabad. Everything there was serious and terrifying. For the first time, when we reached the

checkpoint, they blindfolded me. They threw me into a carpeted room that was clearly not a prison. Later, I learned it was where soldiers spent the night before being deployed to the front. I spent the whole day there, and no one came to see me. A soldier from Karaj brought me water and food.

I spent the day in silence. The next day, three boys about my age were brought into the room. Shortly after, two armed Revolutionary Guards entered. One of them was the head of Intelligence for Alvatan – the very man I'd been dreading. It was clear from the boys' appearances that they'd already been roughed up.

'I need a Kalashnikov with Four Magazines from You'

The Intelligence chief entered the room with a steely glare, his voice cold and commanding. Without any greeting, he immediately began interrogating us, his tone sharp as he demanded, 'I need a Kalashnikov with four magazines from you.' Eventually, he let us go and said, 'It's time for prayer. I'll be back after I pray. You lot better figure things out. From you four, I want four weapons, and you must hand them over.'

We were too scared to talk, worried they might be standing by the door listening. I whispered to one of them, asking why they had been arrested. They didn't answer. Two of them were older than me and thought I was a spy, so they wouldn't talk to me. I, foolishly, was completely oblivious to the fact that they were my colleagues, working in the urban cell of Oshnaviyeh. But in that terrifying and tense atmosphere, there was no trust left, and we were even afraid of our own shadows.

Before my escape, I had heard that the Oshnaviyeh urban cells had been arrested, but what were these teenagers doing here? I later found out they were from the village of Gorg-Abad and had fled. They were arrested at a checkpoint near the Sardasht border, and, like me, had been beaten at a border outpost.

The guard returned after his prayer and immediately asked, 'Where are the weapons?' He started with the others, asking, 'I was told you had weapons in Oshnaviyeh. Where did you stash them? You carried out armed operations besides Party propaganda.' Then, he started reading off names, accusing them of killing those people.

Suddenly, the interrogation turned violent. He and another guard attacked us, taking off their belts and lashing us. We tried to escape, but

they surrounded us like wolves attacking a panicked flock. We ran in every direction, but there was no escape. Everywhere, we were met with beatings. Then the torture would begin again with specific questions, and on it went.

At one point, he turned to me and said, 'You were arrested in a border conflict, so you have to hand over your weapon . . . at least a Kalashnikov with four magazines.'

I kept insisting that I wasn't involved, but he'd respond, 'Why should I believe you? You were caught at 5 am in the middle of a firefight.' And, to be fair, why should he? My circumstances were hard to believe.

The next day, he said, 'You've forced me to make you talk with cigarettes.' Back then, cigarettes called Sumer, black and long, were being smuggled from Iraq, and I smoked them too. He would light one up while the other guard took one of us aside. Then he'd remove the prisoner's Kurdish scarf, lift his shirt and begin burning his back. He didn't press the cigarette too hard – just enough to make the person scream. Then he'd stop and say, 'Now, tell me: where is it?' Before the second cigarette came into play, the oldest of the group, who had taken the most severe beating, confessed. He said, 'The weapon is hidden at my uncle's house, in the water well.'

Once he said that, the attention shifted away from us, and they focused on him. We were all stunned. They took the boy with them. After some time, he returned with a bloodied face. He couldn't withstand the torture and burns any longer and had lied.

By dusk, when the interrogators left, an eerie silence settled over us. The soldiers, two of whom were from Tehran, tied our hands with our Kurdish scarves and escorted us to the toilet. I wanted to establish some rapport with the Tehranis. I tried to show that I knew Tehran, mentioning how I'd been to Lalehzar, Baharestan and the Bazaar. They mocked me, saying, 'Those places are for people from the provinces, full of smog and traffic. You're from Mahabad; it's obvious by your clothes.'

For Kurds, Mahabad was the epitome of modernity in the Kurdish towns. For non-Kurds, it was more of a proper city than the smaller towns in the region. From the start, I had said I was from Mahabad. If I'd ended up in Naqadeh or Piranshahr, I would've been identified immediately. Perhaps deep down I thought that if I went to Mahabad, I might meet Aunt Zeynab, not my father.



Image 120: Alotan Jungles

The next day, they took us away. The others were sent to Oshnaviyeh, and, unfortunately, I was sent to Piranshahr. From there, I would be taken to Mahabad. Before we were separated, the boys said, 'We thought you were a spy!' When I returned to Iran from Europe in 2009, I visited their village. It was an interesting reunion. They told me how they were beaten again in Oshnaviyeh's Intelligence office, sent to the Revolutionary Court in Urmia and eventually released on bail after enduring a great deal of torture and threats.

As for me, they drove me, handcuffed, in a military vehicle to one of the buildings belonging to the Piranshahr IRGC operations headquarters, which is now a girls' school. There were four other prisoners there: an old man, two young men and a shepherd who had been arrested a few nights earlier during a skirmish between the Peshmerga and the IRGC in the mountainous Delavan area,[1] about twenty kilometres from the city. His crime? Giving bread, cheese and yoghurt to the Peshmerga. Another had been arrested because his son was a Peshmerga, and the other two for political activities and possession of books and pamphlets.

1 Delavan, situated in the north-west of Piranshahr at the foothills of the Kani Khoday mountain range, has long served as a route for illegal border crossings. Peshmerga forces often used the paths through Delavan to enter the Piranshahr region.

They took us to a small bathhouse (Hamman) with two sections: a changing room and the bath itself, the kind you'd see in old government buildings or schools. Two of us stayed in the changing room and three in the bath. The space was so tight that one person had to sleep on the bench in the changing room and the other on the floor. In the tiny bathhouse, the three of us slept on the floor.

They took us for interrogation one by one. From the start, they applied pressure, and their behaviour gradually worsened. Their violence was mostly directed at the two older men, not so much at the shepherd and me. They kept talking about someone who would come and 'sort us out', saying, 'When he gets back, he'll know exactly what to do with you!' It seemed every IRGC base had someone like that.

One tall guard from the Intelligence Operations team was particularly sarcastic and loved mocking us. He usually spoke to the others, but sometimes his comments were aimed at me, too. He'd say things like, 'Oh, sure, if you had your way, you'd be the head of the Democratic Youth Party', then burst into laughter. Or he'd say to another, 'With all the books we took from you, you'd have been the Party's scribe, travelling everywhere with the secretary-general himself.' He knew all the senior Party members by name.

Three times, they sent us into the bathhouse and locked the door from the changing room. At first, we thought the place was overcrowded, but soon we realised it was a collective cell, a form of torture in itself. Sometimes they'd lock us in and leave us to be tortured. The taps for the shower were controlled from somewhere else, so we couldn't stop the flow of water. They would turn on the cold water, flooding the room for ages, then suddenly switch it to scalding hot. The temperature would rise, then plummet. The steam and humidity made it hard to breathe, and we'd shiver uncontrollably. Then, the tall guard would reappear, saying, 'Well? Ready to talk yet?' and would start beating the older men with his belt over their wet clothes. We were dealing with a group of merciless, utterly deranged men. Later, I saw one of them in town. People said he was from town of Hamedan. I heard that, one day at the region of Baneh border, he stepped on one of his own mines and lost a leg and an eye.

'That's how it is, Brother Kameel'

After spending about a week in detention, I became ill with a high fever. On the night they were to complete my file and send me to Mahabad, my interrogator, a stern, gruff member of the Revolutionary Guard, took me to the central office. Despite my feverish state, he beat me during questioning, and I passed out from the pain. I later learned they became worried and took me to the hospital. I vaguely remember two Guardsmen holding me up as they walked and my not knowing where they were taking me.

At the same time, my grandmother had been ill since my disappearance, and family members took turns taking her to the hospital. That night, it was my cousin Shahnaz's turn, and she was with my grandmother and aunt, who was also unwell. Shahnaz later told me that she saw two Guardsmen dragging me into the emergency room of Piranshahr Hospital, my Kurdish shawl covering my eyes. In my feverish haze, I heard a familiar voice shout in Kurdish: 'My house is ruined! That's Kak Kameel!' Shahnaz, overwhelmed with joy and shock, ran toward me to embrace me.

I was regaining consciousness and noticed the Guardsmen shoving her away with the butt of a gun. I then heard my grandmother and aunt screaming as they grabbed onto my legs, arguing with the Guard.

At the time, many of the doctors in Iran were from Pakistan, India or Bangladesh. Dr Shahnawaz, a Pakistani doctor my grandmother liked, was working in the emergency room, where my sister was also a nurse. Despite my weakness, I shouted that I was fine and for them not to worry, but the Guardsmen hurriedly took me away from Shahnaz and my grandmother, still blindfolded, and led me to an examination room. Outside, my family and others were in a heated argument with the Guard.

Dr Shahnawaz asked quietly, 'Aren't you Mrs Ahmady's brother?' I hastily replied that I was and asked him to tell her I was there. In his Pakistani-accented Farsi, he warned me not to talk to him, fearing he would be arrested as well. He left quickly, bringing a Guardsman in while he finished the examination and prescribed me some medication.

My grim interrogator sneered, saying, 'This fool claimed to be from Mahabad, but all his family is here.' He then threatened to 'set me straight' when we got back to prison, clearly angered by Shahnaz's actions.

The Guard rushed me out of the hospital, but Shahnaz had already alerted my parents using the hospital's free phone. Living nearby at the

time, they ran barefoot to the hospital. Just as I was being led out of the emergency room, blindfolded, I heard their voices. My father, despite his fear of the Revolutionary Guard after his own arrest and imprisonment, had snapped and was confronting them. My mother reached me, clinging tightly, asking, 'Kameel, are you alive? What did these godless people do to you?' I kept telling her I was fine and begged her to go, fearing they would hit her. Deep down, I was relieved that my sister wasn't on shift that day, as she might have been fired.

The Guard forced me into a car, and I managed to slightly lift the shawl from my eyes. I could see my mother sitting on the Toyota's bonnet, clutching the windshield wipers, screaming in Kurdish for them to release her son. My grandmother lay in front of the car, refusing to move, while Shahnaz tried to claw at one of the Guard. My father was wrestling with my interrogator. The sight and sound of my family's anguish brought a flood of memories of our displacement. The suffering each family member had endured weighed heavily on me, and I blamed myself for their pain.

Eventually, more guards from the hospital arrived and pulled my mother from the bonnet, while my father and the others were pushed back at gunpoint. I was whisked away to the prison at breakneck speed.

That night, I was transferred to the headquarters of the Revolutionary Guard to prevent my family from finding me. My situation worsened, as I had to explain why I lied about being from Mahabad.

One of the commanders, a man named Keyvan, took a personal interest in my case. He had a large belly and loved torturing prisoners by hitting them while they were blindfolded. This method terrified me because I couldn't anticipate the blows. Keyvan would ask questions while circling me and then suddenly strike. Though they still hadn't figured out my affiliations, I repeated the same story I told them from the start. Over time, the beatings decreased, though I remained in a small, attic-like room with pigeons, making sleep impossible. Six other prisoners were there, and we shared news brought by new detainees – mostly shepherds, farmers or villagers whose homes had been caught in the conflict.

One morning, the Guard came to fetch me. I assumed it was for another interrogation. To my surprise, they didn't tie my hands but instead led me downstairs. Blindfolded, I followed, not knowing where I was going. In the guard post, someone removed my blindfold and told me to sign a paper. In the distance, I saw my father walking toward me. Each step he took filled

me with dread. After so many beatings, I didn't have the strength for another, but when he reached me, he embraced me tightly and began to cry.

Time had reversed our roles. When I was a child, it was my father who had been imprisoned, and we had both cried. Now I was the prisoner, and he stood before me, tears streaming down his face. That day, in his arms, I found a sense of safety. The warmth of his body, the roughness of his beard, and the familiar smell of his cigarettes made me feel secure, despite the harsh surroundings. A short, stocky man known as Kak Seyyed and other family members were waiting for me outside. I felt a brief sense of relief as I saw their tearful smiles.

However, I couldn't forget the Guardsman standing nearby, who sneered and said, 'This one should be sent to Mahabad Prison right now. If he had become a Peshmerga, he'd be here to kill us.'

Lonely 'Tawwab'

Instead of going to Mahabad, we returned home. Upon our arrival, the house was bustling with activity. Relatives and neighbours had gathered, but I wasn't feeling well due to illness, body aches and lack of sleep. I had lost a lot of weight. My grandmother and father insisted that Tabibeh take me to the bathhouse. I was embarrassed to undress in front of her for the examination and to have her wash my back. After what seemed like ages, I finally had a proper bath.

Later, in the living room, I began recounting my experiences, while my family shared what they had endured. Though the ordeal didn't last long, it felt like a lifetime for all of us.

Proudly, Aunt Zeynab said, 'I saved you. If it weren't for Seyyed and his brother, they would've executed you, as the execution order had been issued.' I don't know if it was true, but that's what she heard from Seyyed.

A strange and somewhat sad part of the story was that by 'Seyyed and his brother', my aunt was referring to the younger brothers of Seyyed Rasul Dehghan, known as Seyyed Rasul Babi Gewra, from the village of Pasaweh. He was a prominent old commander of the Democratic Party, whose story I've mentioned earlier in connection with the Naqadeh conflict. Apparently, his two brothers were key Intelligence operatives in

Mahabad.[1] My family had gone to seek help from the Seyyeds, and my father had to bribe them considerably, giving them two expensive American overcoats, a few Casio watches with four dials that were a luxury at the time, some cologne and many other items. Seyyed would return each day, claiming that another item was needed for a specific officer.

In the end, Seyyed managed to obtain a letter from Shokri, the head of Intelligence in Mahabad, ordering that the prisoner be transferred to the city for further questioning. This tactic worked, and I was freed, although it was clear to everyone that the bribes had played a significant role. They must have realised I was just a young boy and not a real threat.

During those days of uncertainty, my father and uncle were scouring the borders and remote areas of Kurdistanat,[2] each from a different direction, trying to find me. Some nights, they would return home, and other times, they would stay out to continue their search. They endured so much hardship, searching far and wide to locate me.

Eventually, those weeks passed, but a new label was attached to me: *Tawwab* – a term for former fighters, supporters or activists who had been captured or surrendered. I had unwittingly and reluctantly become one, although I didn't fully understand the meaning. Among the people, it had a bad connotation, implying betrayal, cowardice or even spying. The regime cleverly manipulated the use of this label, sometimes even encouraging families to cross the border to meet their Peshmerga children, hoping to lure them back with the promise of an amnesty letter.

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1 Of course, I know that highlighting these matters and acknowledging their role as agents requires further scrutiny and investigation. However, at the time, they were armed and made no effort to hide their association with the Revolutionary Guard and Intelligence services. In fact, these brothers were closely acquainted with one of my aunt's neighbours in Mahabad, which led to my cousin revealing information about his and my aunt's interactions with the Peshmerga during trips they took to check on their land in the village of Khalifehlu. This moment of opening up led the older brother to report them to the Mahabad Intelligence, who then came and arrested both of them. This incident occurred a few months before my own arrest, and it wasn't until long after my release that my aunt's family discovered who had reported them to Intelligence. My aunt was released earlier, but my poor cousin was tortured so severely by Mahabad Intelligence that for a long time he would bang his head against the wall like a madman and speak deliriously. Even now, he occasionally talks to me about the torture he endured.

2 The term 'Kurdistanat' is often a term used by the Farsi and Turkish pan-nationalist minorities and is used with specific intentions. I deliberately and consciously use the term here to indicate the geographical scope of the area.

The regime's goal was to undermine the morale of the parties and reduce the number of Peshmerga. At the same time, those who became Tawwabs would carry the social stigma and, in the worst cases, be conscripted into military or Intelligence service. Security agencies worked hard to infiltrate the parties through these defectors, and sometimes the reverse happened, with people spying for the parties.

This system of amnesty letters didn't exist in Turkey for PKK members. There, the Government offered long prison sentences as the only option. Although Turkey now facilitates the surrender of Kurdish militants, it's nothing like the process of Tawwabs in Iran. A similar practice existed in Iraq during the war, where surrendered Peshmerga under Saddam were forced to fight against the Kurdish parties or were sent to military service.

The ideology and propaganda section of the Intelligence office would give us books by Khomeini or Motahari to memorise, assigning us chapters to learn by heart by the following Friday. We had to recite these chapters before a cleric, and, if we failed, we would have to memorise twice as much for the next week. We didn't dare skip these sessions because they would come for us if we didn't show up. I occasionally saw Keyvan during these sessions, probably intentionally showing himself to remind us of the torture sessions with our eyes blindfolded. This routine continued for a while before it abruptly ended.

Alongside these sessions, we were also forced to attend speeches, prayers and Nahj al-Balagha readings, which had no connection to our own beliefs. We had to sign in for attendance. Life became quite strange.

After my arrest, I was no longer the same person, just like my father after his. I was scared and weakened, both physically and mentally. Back then, there was no awareness of the need for psychological support. Although my family tried to support me in their own way, there were no specialists in our area to provide the professional help I needed. I would retreat to my room, curling up in fear. At night, I often had nightmares – haunted by memories of my arrest, the beatings at the Dôletu base, the Alvatan prison, being burned with cigarettes and, worst of all, the mental and physical agony. The fear of suffocating in the bath-like cell and the relentless torture by Keyvan never left my mind.

I had become depressed, and everyone treated me with caution. My mother and grandmother would tell my father not to push me to go to his shop. On the plus side, they gave me whatever I asked for, probably fearing

that if I wasn't happy, I would run away again. My mother and grandmother would often come to me and say, 'Kameel, don't go back to the Party! You promised you wouldn't!' They would constantly remind me.

Looking back now, I feel sorry for the worries they had back then and wish I could have my family by my side once again. Sadly, they are no longer here, but their unparalleled love and sacrifices remain in my heart.

Those were truly difficult times. I had lost my friends – their parents wouldn't allow them to associate with me any more, fearing that I might lead them down the same political path. To them, I was dangerous, someone who might drag their children into the same trouble. Worse, associating with me could get them into trouble themselves. The label 'political' became another burden I had to carry, isolating me further when I desperately needed companions my own age.

After the arrest, I found myself even more alone. People stopped visiting, and trust was in short supply.

In those days, I turned to books for solace. It was as if, in the depths of loneliness, the only refuge I could find was in reading and study. I sought answers to my endless questions about the world I had been thrust into, hoping to momentarily escape the memories of what I had endured.

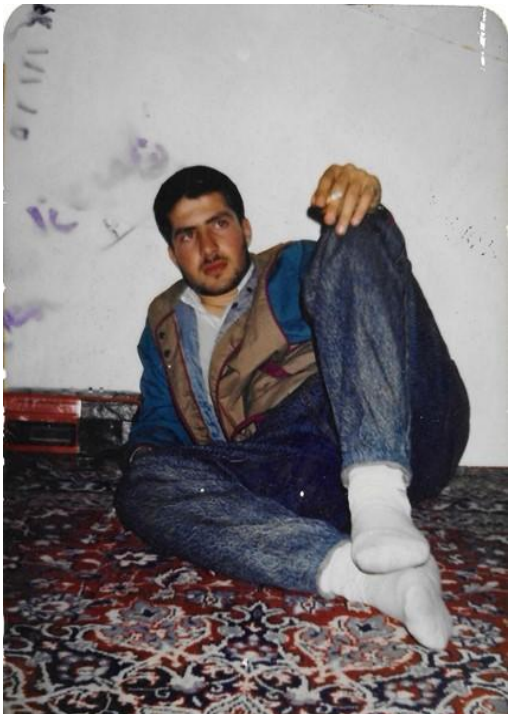


Image 121: Me after being released.
Piranshahr, 1989

The Paradoxical Family

My arrest was a significant event for the family. I mentioned earlier that, after my father's arrest, he was no longer the same man – he became conservative and fearful, constantly opposing my political activities. It hadn't been long since he'd been accused himself, and, having experienced the bitter ordeal of being imprisoned

for political reasons, he was now overly sensitive and resistant to my involvement. Two of his friends also held leftist views; I often associated with them. I suspected that they might have mentioned something to my father about my activities and views, which had heightened his concern, but the main impact had come from his own time in prison and the torture he endured. He would say, 'Politics is pointless, and it will cost you dearly.' He had witnessed the ugly face of politics far more than I had. That fear made him constantly worry about me.

After his time in prison, this became his recurring message, and he never changed his mind. Family members often told me, 'Don't think you're doing anything important or making a difference! You're just a pawn, doing things that will harm you while benefiting others.' These were the sorts of things they would say whenever I was absorbed in reading in my room or returned home late at night after meeting with my so-called 'suspicious' friends. My father would repeat these sentiments. Yet, despite his fear, he never wavered in his support for the idea of Kurdish independence and autonomy, although he doubted it could be achieved in our time. Both of us shared the bond of having been tortured during our respective imprisonments. Although we never spoke about it, we understood each other in a profound and sorrowful way.

My grandmother's perspective wasn't as narrow as my father's. Although she knew little about politics, she would occasionally say, 'My son, no matter how hard you try or how capable you are, you're no greater than Qazi Muhammad! Despite all his grandeur, that cursed Mohammad Reza Shah hanged him. They can hang anyone they want!' She despised Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and this was her take on my political activities. I don't recall my grandmother or mother ever opposing the Kurds' cause or Kurdish parties. They loved them dearly, but, in general, the atmosphere at home was against me being involved in politics, and they all took a stand.

The opposition from my family and many others like them toward their children's political involvements stemmed from the bitter experiences they'd had with Kurdish politics. From their perspective, the Kurds had been struggling for hundreds of years yet had seen little result. Interestingly, they generally admired the Kurdish parties and were willing to help them in difficult times, but they would stop their own children from getting involved in politics and give countless reasons why politics was a

bad idea. They failed to realise that many of these children, usually sons, had witnessed their parents' efforts for Kurdish parties in difficult times, which shaped their minds. When faced with family opposition, they found it perplexing and contradictory. Was the family's stance the one they had witnessed in action, or was it the one they now heard in their parents' cautious advice? One was brave and self-sacrificing, the other conservative.

Eventually, all this led me to distance myself from politics and accept the loneliness of those days, although this behaviour wasn't universal, and over time it diminished. In addition, the second assassination attempt on the Democratic Party's secretary-general, Dr Sharafkandi,[1] three years after Dr Ghassemlou's assassination in Austria, somewhat reduced the level of on-the-ground conflict in Kurdistan. After Sharafkandi's assassination, the Party was forced, under pressure from the Kurdistan Regional Government, where many Party members had taken refuge, to halt its military activities in Iranian Kurdistan, cease armed struggle and shift to a new phase. These recommendations were, of course, due to pressure from the Iranian Government on the leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan.

After a while, I went to Naqadeh to meet with a member of the Party's urban core to try to get involved again. But he told me, 'Kameel, you're a spent force now. We can't work with you any more.' He added, 'You might not like what I'm saying, but you'll understand later how a political movement works.'

This made me feel even more disillusioned. I felt that the movement I had been arrested for, beaten for and tortured for had no support for me and had cast me aside. I saw my relationship with this movement, and with politics in general, as one-sided, and my faith in its support in the face of the torture and suffering I had endured began to fade. The image of the movement diminished in my mind, and the sanctity it had once held for me in my youth, while not completely gone, became lessened and more critical.

1 The second assassination attempt on Dr Sharafkandi, which led to his death, took place on 12 September 1992 (21 Shahrivar 1371 in the Iranian calendar), during an attack by agents of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin, Germany. In this attack, carried out by Lebanese assailants, he was assassinated along with Fattah Abdoli, Homayoun Ardalan and Nouri Dehkordi.

My First Drink and My Aunt's Slap

After my arrest, my family, hoping to lift my spirits, sent me to stay with my Aunt Zeynab in Mahabad. It was there that I first tried alcohol. Aunt Zeynab's landlord in Mahmoudkan[1] was a boisterous, generous man who owned a rented bulldozer. I often visited her house but rarely encountered him. This time, he saw Amir and me in the courtyard and said, 'You must be Zeynab's nephew – the one who's been to prison?' I confirmed. He invited us upstairs for the evening, saying, 'We're having a gathering tonight. Come along.' Amir said we'd ask for permission and come.

Later that night, the sound of music and singing filled the house. I kept nudging Amir to ask Aunt Zeynab for permission, but he hesitated. Eventually, the landlord's daughter came down to invite us.

Aunt Zeynab wasn't pleased: 'No need for that! They'll drink up there, and you'll follow their bad habits!'

I assured her, 'We won't learn anything bad.'

The man with the alcohol was a local baker, famous for his singing. I told her, 'They're singing. We just want to listen.'

After my prison ordeal, Aunt Zeynab was more protective, so she reluctantly agreed but said, 'I'll come too and sit with the landlord's wife.' In truth, she came along to keep an eye on us and ensure we didn't drink.

When we arrived, I didn't expect their drinking to be so open. The table was set with snacks, salads and fruit, along with a four-litre container filled with a clear liquid. I wasn't familiar with alcohol, though I'd heard of beer and whisky from Iraq. But *arak*, or as they called it, 'dog sweat', was new to me. As soon as we sat down, the landlord poured me a glass and asked, 'Have you ever had a drink before?'

I hadn't, but before I could answer, Aunt Zeynab walked in, hid my drink and joked with the landlord: 'Don't give the boy that filth; he's not like that!'

When she left the room, the landlord handed me another glass, urging me to drink before she returned. I hadn't planned to, and I was scared, but

1 Mahmoudkan is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Mahabad, which has drawn attention due to the presence of a historical hill in its western part. After the victory of the Revolution, due to the allocation of lands in the western section of Mahmoudkan to the armed Mangur nomads and their settlement in this area, Mahmoudkan has now become one of the largest neighbourhoods in the city.

I downed half the glass of arak quickly. The burn was intense. I felt lightheaded, almost sick. He handed me a cucumber and some crisps to help with the nausea. When Aunt Zeynab returned, I had to pretend everything was fine. She looked us over carefully, but, seeing us sitting calmly, she went back downstairs.

The landlord poured me another drink, but I refused. He didn't realise it was my first time and didn't mix it with anything to lessen the taste. It truly felt like poison. By the end of the night, I was swaying, although secretly I felt proud to be drinking with the men. As soon as I stumbled downstairs, my aunt took one look at my flushed face and yelled, 'You drank, didn't you?' I wanted to deny it, but I didn't have the energy.

Suddenly, she slapped me hard across the face, making my already red cheeks burn even more. She shouted, 'You'll be on the first bus back home tomorrow!' I was too unwell to argue and fell asleep immediately.

The next morning, while everyone was still asleep, I quietly left and returned home, feeling both ashamed and fearful. After that, I avoided Mahabad for a while.

In the society in which I grew up, boys often have their first drinking experiences[1] in similar ways – introduced by a relative or family friend. Unfortunately, it's rare for this to happen with their father, especially if he's religious. Fathers often discourage drinking, and the father-son relationship in this society is often distant and fraught with challenges. It's as if the structure of the family mirrors that of the Government's: authoritarian, rigid and dominated by the father figure, who has little closeness with his sons. This dynamic creates a blend of emotions in a boy's first drinking experience: fear, guilt and shame, mixed with pride and a sense of manhood. The fear comes from knowing that society frowns upon alcohol consumption, yet they still choose to engage in this forbidden act.

1 A global study published by *The Lancet* has concluded that even minimal alcohol consumption is not beneficial for health, and the best advice is complete abstinence from drinking alcohol. Many consider the harms of alcohol on individuals and society and the increase in crime as a result to be greater than those of drugs. To boost sales of alcoholic beverages, the capitalist world has made this industry highly attractive and significantly facilitated access to it.

Under the Roof of the Brick Kiln

Working in brick kilns was common from the early 1940s to the 1970s. For decades, Kurds from our region, especially from Mahabad, Naqadeh, Sardasht, Piranshahr and the surrounding villages, who did not have agricultural land, were forced to migrate to brick kilns in other provinces with their families. The people on the margins and border regions were the cheapest labour force, who tolerated these exhausting jobs.[1] The brick kilns in those cities were hundreds of kilometres away from Kurdistan, but this hard and exhausting work for a meagre income was a glimmer of hope for the unemployed and low-income-earning Kurds. Working in a brick kiln was seasonal, from the second month of spring to autumn. The foremen had to note down the names of workers for the next season and sometimes even gave them advances to ensure their return.

Children and women participated in this work alongside men. At least the money was cash, and families wouldn't go hungry. However, these traditional brick kilns have now become modernised, and machines have replaced manual labour, leaving workers unemployed. It's no coincidence that people from this region and other border areas have turned to jobs like smuggling, and sometimes even become victims in the process.

I have said that my uncle and I were very close. During one of our migrations, he and his family went to a brick kiln in Naqadeh. Habibeh

1 Due to the large number of individuals seeking work and waiting for it – referred to as the 'reserve army of labour' in social sciences – employers preferred to exploit men and women living near the border with minimal hourly wages. This exploitation aligns with socialist perspectives that capitalist societies force poor workers into exhausting jobs while paying them the least possible wages without any additional benefits. In the working environment of a brick kiln, in addition to the difficulty of the work, the atmosphere is highly depressing, and workers often experience alienation after a while. Alienation is described as a state in which individuals feel distant or estranged from their human nature due to living in a society composed of various social classes and being positioned within a class labelled as workers. The theoretical foundation of alienation can be explained within the context of production in the capitalist system, where workers lose the ability to determine their lives and destinies. Even the right to choose and make decisions is permanently taken away from their (unconscious) selves, affecting how they shape their identities based on their actions, their methods of interacting with those around them and their perceptions of their roles in the services and products generated from their labour.

stayed with us, and when the final exams were over, my uncle came to take her, and my father asked him to take me along to help.

I went to help, and we all took the bus to Malayer. Brick kilns were active during the summer, and many people from Kurdistan who didn't have a good situation and had many children would automatically head to Malayer, Hamedan or Ardabil. My uncle's living conditions were not good, and he couldn't easily afford the expenses of his six children, although my father helped him. However, his income was not enough, so he would take on any job that came his way.

Habibeh and I had a lot of arguments and teased each other about who would sit by the bus window. I would put a hat on her head and say, 'I'll sit for the first five hours, and then it's your turn.'

When we reached the outskirts of Miandoab, Habibeh pinched me hard and said, 'I'm so stupid! In five hours, it will be night, and I won't be able to see anything.'

I had not long been sitting by the window, looking outside, when it started raining, and water began to leak through the old bus's windows. With a bit of mischief, I told Habibeh, 'Let's switch places, and you can look outside.' That way, I would avoid getting wet.

We got off the bus around 4 am. It was neither a city nor a village, but a desolate area. The sun had just risen, and it wasn't too dark. My uncle didn't know the route well and didn't know where to stop. He stopped the bus twice by mistake, causing a commotion among the passengers. We finally got off, and a van took us to an area filled with clay hills. I had seen brick kilns[1] in Ardabil as a child, as my father had worked there briefly. I knew they would make clay hills and then make bricks.

We were 25 kilometres away from Malayer.[2] When I saw the situation, I was terrified. The people were living in unbearable conditions. It was a

1 The brick kilns or traditional brick-making furnaces in Iran have an ancient application. Hand-made or traditional bricks are made from clay and earth, with all processes from sourcing the soil and clay to moulding and baking in the kiln being carried out using manual tools. In Iran, wherever stone is scarce and good-quality soil is available, brick-making and the use of bricks have become common (see Zamrishidi, 1998).

2 Malayer was a multi-ethnic city with a significant population of Kurdish Lak and Kalhor, as well as Lurs. They were Shiites and had distanced themselves from Sunni Kurds. Their religious affiliations meant we thought less about their Kurdish identity, even though they were no better off than we were. The notable difference was that drug addiction, especially to opium, was evident there, while alcohol consumption was more common



Image 122: A Kurdish family in a brick kiln

vast, desolate area that would become a dust storm with the slightest wind. The wind always blew, and you can imagine the situation. The workers' living quarters were small, clay houses with short roofs, one room each. When I went inside, I was shocked to see a small room filled with children of all ages. Two adults could barely fit, let alone a large family like my uncle's!

In front of each room, there was a toilet with a sack instead of a door. Every time you wanted to use it, you were anxious that someone would lift the sack while you were inside. It always smelled, and the sewage was clogged, but the employer wouldn't spend money to clean it. When you entered these small shacks, there was a small kitchen in the corner, where we usually cooked with a kerosene lamp.

The workday at the brick kiln started at 5 am. My uncle, his wife, Habibeh, Shahnaz and I would go to work, and the other children would

in our region. Perhaps in that context, the hypothesis linking addiction to poverty could be more accurately substantiated. It should be noted that poverty has a closer relationship with addiction to drugs, and a distinction must be made between drug addiction and alcohol addiction. In any case, addiction is a behaviour closely intertwined with the social environment and lived experiences of the people, as well as the conditions prevailing in that environment. It serves as both a relief and a response to their suppressed needs and existing hardships, sometimes fulfilling a functional role.

join us later. They would do lighter tasks, like turning over the dried bricks. Everyone was involved in some way, except for the very young children. Habibeh and I would compete, and she would always win. She had four rows of bricks, while I had three, and I couldn't carry more, despite being a boy and her age. However, Habibeh had more physical strength and worked more diligently.

I remember the employer's son had a yellow Jeep, which was considered a luxury car. He would drive it around the brick kiln, creating a dust storm. His father had given him the car, and he would drive it recklessly. I was envious, as my father wouldn't give me his motorcycle. The employer's son was my age, and his father's behaviour toward him always sparked jealousy in me. Of course, at the time, I couldn't understand that this behaviour had economic roots: his father owned a brick kiln with hundreds of workers, while my father was a small businessman in a traditional culture.

My uncle wasn't very good at managing money. Later, we partnered in several businesses, including a fruit stand and smuggling American jackets from Tehran. However, we always lost money and failed due to his lack of financial management. The way the employer paid us at the end of each week made us spend our money on leisure activities, buying things and eating kebabs. Our neighbours would tell my uncle, 'Ahmad, you work so hard, but every week you go to the city and spend most of your money.'

I also tolerated the hardships of working in the brick kiln for the sake of going to the city on weekends. My uncle would take me, Habibeh, and sometimes Shahnaz to the city. We loved eating kebabs, and I don't know why we never thought of bringing some back for the others, who stayed behind. Our weekends were a time to recharge. It was a permanent privilege for me, my uncle and Habibeh, who helped with the shopping.

One of the joys was swimming in the water source on the way back. The girls and women would swim behind a hill, and we would swim on the other side.

I loved eating cake and drinking soda with the employer's son in the only shop in the brick kiln. He always had money, and I rarely did. We had an unspoken agreement that he would pay more. I would sometimes argue that I should pay, but if my uncle didn't give me money, I didn't have any.

I don't remember much about the nights in Malayer, as we were so exhausted that, when we returned, my aunt would bring us food, which was often too salty, and we would eat and fall asleep immediately.

In general, life was hard. My body would ache at night. My feet would burn from running barefoot in the field. Our only comfort was that the rows of bricks would get closer together, indicating that the work was almost done. We had to complete dozens of rows in a day. First, you had to run from one end to the other . . . the more you ran and laid bricks, the closer the rows would get, and you wouldn't have to run as much. This was our psychological battle with the work itself. On the other hand, the fields were close together, and families were in competition, boasting and teasing each other. The fields became a battleground, and the employers liked that situation. The more competition and conflict between families and rows, the more production would increase, and the employer's income would rise.

Each family had a field, where the head of the household would bring clay and mix it, a physically demanding task. My uncle would make the largest brick mould, and we children, especially my aunt, would watch the neighbouring field. We couldn't fall behind; it was a matter of pride. Sometimes, others would mock and humiliate us, saying, 'Look, we've filled two fields, and you're still behind!'

The world of labour is harsh. The harshness of the work makes people harsh toward each other. People had come from hundreds of kilometres away to avoid being ashamed of their lives, bread and children, and they were all Kurds. But why weren't there factories or brick kilns in their own regions, so they wouldn't have to come to another region to work? If there had been investment and job opportunities in their own regions, workers wouldn't have suffered humiliation and hardship. If the development of non-central regions had been balanced, would we have seen such a situation?

Non-central regions in Iran have never been a priority for officials, although it has been repeatedly pointed out that they should invest in job creation and improve the living conditions of people in these regions. However, it seems that it is not in the interest of the ruling systems to improve the situation. Perhaps they don't see the need to address the living conditions of people in these regions, as they don't have empathy.

A view from the kiln's roof revealed its architecture: a complex of interconnected chambers. Inside these fiery furnaces, clay bricks were baked to a deep red, ready for use. But the kilns served another purpose for the workers. On weekends, or whenever we had a break, we'd skewer potatoes on long iron rods and roast them in the intense heat. It was one of the most delicious treats we ever tasted. At other times, after days spent covered in soot, diesel fumes and dust, we'd witness the transformation of raw clay into hardened bricks. Workers would then haul out the stacks, loading them onto lorries. We'd watch with a pang of longing as the fruits of our labour were driven away.

Living in the city, surrounded by red-brick houses, became a stark reminder for me of the hardship endured by the kiln workers. Each brick symbolised their toil and suffering – a cruel irony, given that they themselves could never afford to live in such homes.

As time wore on, I grew weary and disheartened. Despite my promise to my uncle, I couldn't bear it any longer. The place was an ordeal, teeming with scorpions, insects and unrelenting hardship. I craved adventure. This monotonous existence, with its gruelling labour, simply didn't align with my spirit. Escape seemed impossible. My uncle couldn't travel all that way to take me home. But I insisted, complaining and pleading until he finally relented and took me home. I don't recall the exact duration of my stay, but I knew I'd given up prematurely.

This line of work wasn't for me. I lacked the understanding and resilience it demanded. The sheer difficulty of those days remains etched in my memory as the toughest experience of my life — not because it was more painful than the torture I endured later, but because of the emotional weight, the guilt, and the helplessness I felt. Despite the ample opportunities for mischief, I couldn't endure it. Guilt gnawed at me, knowing that Habibeh, Shahnaz and countless other children remained there, toiling away while I escaped. They teased me, both playfully and seriously, but I simply couldn't stay.

Like most of the children there, I was a child labourer, though I wouldn't fully grasp the significance of that term until years later. It was then that I dedicated myself to two research projects, one focusing on child waste-picking and the other exploring various forms of child labour. These projects examined some of the most challenging and exploitative forms of child labour in and around Tehran.

As I worked in the field, observing and interacting with these children, their experiences resonated deeply with me. My own time at the kiln, though painful and distressing, ultimately provided invaluable insights that allowed me to better understand the intricacies and hardships these children faced. After all, I had briefly walked in their shoes. Like them, I had endured humiliation, exhaustion, sleep deprivation and bitter cold. My hands and feet bore the scars of that harsh environment. Some nights, only hope and dreams carried me through to morning. I, too, was someone's precious child, dearly missed by loved ones.

In that research field, I was grappling with a subject deeply intertwined with my past. What researcher could truly claim a more authentic understanding of the struggles endured by these vulnerable children?

Eventually, my uncle accompanied me to the Mahabad bus terminal. Despite his own financial constraints, he reached into his pocket and handed me a portion of the 20 toman note he'd just received from his employer. It was a significant sum for me, and one of the most gratifying sums I'd ever received. I had earned it through sheer hard work, pushing myself to my limits, despite my initial aversion to manual labour. It was then that I truly understood the saying 'No money is as sweet as that earned through hard work.'

In that moment, I felt incredibly wealthy. I embarked on a series of adventures, my first stop being a motorbike rental shop in Naqadeh. I hired a moped and spent the day joyriding through the streets, my heart brimming with a newfound sense of freedom.

My Uncle's Ups and Downs

Uncle Ahmad felt like a friend to me, one who bore the scent of my father, but was kinder and more carefree, which made me feel at ease with him. He had five daughters and, years later, a son. Perhaps that's why he saw me as his eldest son and expected me to interact with, or even control, my female cousins whenever necessary. In my teenage years, I enjoyed this sense of power and would sometimes trouble my poor cousins with instructions like not standing too close to the door or not wearing flashy clothes. At one point, I even played the role of a strict enforcer for Habibeh, who was my playmate and whom I dearly loved. During that time, I was like the Komiteh that imposed restrictions on society! I would scold them

for loitering or peeking out the door, only to stand there myself doing the same things. Despite this brief period, I remained the same Kameel I had always been, a friend and companion to Habibeh. It was amusing that I had no such authority at home over my older sisters. My father never permitted such behaviour, which was somewhat common at the time, so I think I was unconsciously compensating for this lack of power in my own house![1]

I worked with my uncle several more times. Although these ventures were temporary, their outcomes were nearly the same: street transactions, vending, etcetera. One of the memorable periods was when my uncle and I went to Tehran to bring back American overcoats. We bought the overcoats from the Lalehzar market, rolled them up neatly and packed them into sacks. My uncle had arranged with a local guard, and at the first checkpoint of the provincial army in Miandoab, we would hand over an overcoat and pass through. I was terrified of the guard's green uniform and the gun emblem on his pocket.

Since returning to Iran in 2008 and working, I harboured a fear of the army and Intelligence, which peaked with my arrest and imprisonment in Evin. This fear was certainly rooted in the beatings I had endured as a teenager and during my detention.[2] Of course, bribing the guard made me

1 The social, cultural, religious and political structure of society was largely and overtly managed by men, primarily to preserve their interests. Such a structure cannot reproduce itself without the support of law and culture. In class societies, every ruler and powerful figure perceives conflict; however, they cannot tolerate opposition and perceive it as a conspiracy. The essence of authority is such, whether it is to control a few cousins at their father's request or to become the leader of a larger community. Authority is like the two wings of an eagle, preventing individuals from seeing their left and right, thus making them focus solely on what lies ahead. If, for any reason, they perceive movement beyond their wings, they consider it a conspiracy and seek to annihilate it.

2 Recently, in the month of Mordad 1398 (August 2019), when the IRGC arrested me in Tehran, they were not wearing their previous uniforms. However, one day my interrogator, lacking paper at hand, placed in front of me an old interrogation sheet with the IRGC emblem at the top for me to answer his questions. You should have seen my expression! I was more frightened by that emblem than by the interrogation and solitary confinement. It reminded me of the regional conflicts, my father's arrests and imprisonments, the Komiteh and ultimately my own arrest in my youth, along with all the beatings I endured. Experiences of prison and the suffering of torture seem to become part of one's spirit and psyche, always having the potential to resurface. As an Arabic proverb states, 'He who fears something will encounter it', meaning that fear invites confrontation. Memories of prison and torture fade only with death. For those who have

feel a bit powerful, as if we were avenging ourselves against the system. Sometimes, I would deliberately convey this feeling to the guard with a smirk. He would take the overcoat and tell me, 'Go on. Why are you standing here?' I don't know how it happened, but eventually the routes were blocked or the officer was transferred and we couldn't continue that business.

My experiences with my uncle ranged from Tehran to Kurdish villages. There was a period when my uncle rented a pickup truck and bought fruits from the Urmia markets, and we sold them in the villages. I handled the accounting while my uncle weighed the fruits. We travelled to various villages, which was a good experience. I think we visited many villages around Sardasht, Mahabad, Piranshahr and Naqadeh during that period.

My uncle generally enjoyed telling and listening to stories and was a humorous man. Our interactions with the villagers were interesting. When we arrived, the men were working in the fields, so the women came to buy. The open space of the village made it easier for people to interact. I found this environment pleasant because it felt like people were more their true selves there, not trying to display idealised versions of themselves that were far from reality. They expressed their emotions and concerns without censorship, which I found valuable. In many ways, the village system was more open and relaxed than urban structures. Women joked and laughed freely. During the journey, my uncle and the driver, who had a long moustache, would share stories of their travels and amusements. I would sit between them, focusing on the gear and steering wheel while listening intently to capture every word in my memory.

Despite our efforts, we didn't achieve much, and our shared capital was lost. The issue of losing the principal amount was never resolved between my uncle and me! Of course, I wasn't experienced or knowledgeable about finances, so it was expected that my uncle, being older and more experienced, should have managed better.

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experienced prison and torture, their lives seem to divide into two halves: before prison and after it, with many differences between the two. Their characters, demeanours, emotions and concerns are split into the people they were before prison and the people they became afterward. This highlights the terrifying structure and function of prisons, as well as the role and impact of such an environment in shaping the mind. It substantiates the claims of many great thinkers, who have consistently acknowledged and emphasised the non-reformative role of institutions like prisons.

When my father bought a shop in the city centre, he entrusted it to me and my uncle. At that time, Freedom Street East and around Azadi Square had not yet become the commercial hub of the city, but my father seemed to have anticipated that it would later shift to that area. Before that, he gave us the shop, which was his last favour to us. He said, 'Set up a business without having to pay rent.' My father gave us initial capital again! My uncle also had some money, and we started a fruit-selling business in the shop. The shop became one of the best areas in the city for fruit shopping, and people came from all over to buy. But, again, we suffered losses, and our business lasted only three or four months. The fruits would spoil and rot.

My uncle had many friends in whom he trusted quickly. He would put anyone behind the counter without the necessary business acumen, and I don't know what happened, but in the end that money was also wasted.

After closing the shop, I became engrossed in studying again. My uncle rented a truck and sold live chickens in the region. He sold caged and bulk chickens. Once again, his venture failed, and, due to some misfortune, his truck's brakes also failed on the way to Sardasht and he plunged into a ravine, in the middle of a roaring river fed by the snowmelt from the Qandil Mountains! My uncle survived, but all his capital was lost.

Many misfortunes befell my uncle, and the last one was when he was heading to Tehran to buy goods. Their bus was in a head-on collision, and several people, including the driver, were killed. My uncle, who was sitting next to the driver, miraculously survived, but broke his leg and was bedridden for months.

This incident was devastating and effectively paralysed his family for a long time. I took charge of organising their affairs while my uncle was bedridden in Zanjan Hospital with his leg in a cast.

Our relatives, Mam Rasu in my grandfather's village of Gerdashavan and his sister Pure Khatoon in the village of Gol, were traditional bone-setters and had little faith in doctors and modern medicine. They arranged a meeting with the family and came to my uncle's house. They said, 'You've been bedridden for seven or eight months and your leg isn't healed; let us fix it!' Mam Rasu took a saw and began working on my uncle's broken leg. He removed the cast from the leg, which was fractured in several places but had almost healed, and applied pressure to it, re-breaking the bones. My uncle's screams filled the house. The men present

kept urging him to be patient and endure more, saying, 'Ahmad, what's the matter with you? Stop whining. Are you a woman? Be a man!'[1] Our bone-setter kept pressing and aligning the bones, claiming that the leg was misaligned by half a centimetre this way or that, while we young relatives protested – but no one paid attention. That night, my uncle endured incredible pain, and his leg never fully recovered.

Mam Rasu, our traditional bone-setter, was well-known not only to our family, but also to most people in Sandos and Lajan and Piranshahr. It was rare for a day to pass without a customer visiting Mam Rasu with a broken limb. Such local practitioners were common then and even now, especially in small towns and villages, where access to doctors is limited or medical services are expensive, and people have little trust in chemical medicines. They prefer to consult these individuals.

Traditional medicine was divided into two main branches: bone-setting and midwifery, which were often passed down within families. Besides these, there were practitioners of folk remedies, who people consulted for a range of issues, including physical, psychological and even social problems like marriage and family disputes.

My uncle was not a stranger to Mam Rasu (my uncle was the cousin of his wife), had been bedridden for months due to his broken leg. In the end, Mam Rasu used his years of experience on my uncle's leg, which had actually been improving, resulting in a leg on which he would limp for the rest of his life. Mam Rasu never admitted that his intervention had been wrong and that he shouldn't have re-broken my uncle's already healed leg. Although that day our opinions, as younger people without moustaches,

1 Sentiments and beliefs of this nature are rooted in the structure of society and constitute a form of psychological violence against both women and men, legitimising male supremacy, patriarchal authority and the ideology of dominance, thereby perpetuating gender discrimination. The underlying assumption is that women are weak compared to men, lacking stability in character and resilience. Women are presented in these terms as beings incapable of managing their emotions, to the extent that when a man expresses emotions rooted in sadness and pain, he appears feminine, since men are always depicted as a gender that should not express its feelings openly. This behaviour contradicts masculinity and pride, which is a constructed identity of man as the primary gender. These beliefs, which pertain to the general public, reveal how women are constructed as the second gender in their perception.



Image 123: Omid (my uncle's only son), Habibeh, my uncle, me and my cousin Mahnaz.

were disregarded, Mam Rasu's expertise was later called into question, and this incident became a topic of discussion in the family for a long time.

From Politics to Culture

Many thinkers believe that cultural activities are never devoid of politics, and that the overlap between these two areas is so extensive that separating culture from politics might be impossible. These two domains influence each other to such an extent that their connection is undeniable. In fact, if we have a proper understanding of the concept of society, any discussion of delineating and separating these two domains, namely culture and politics, becomes irrelevant and meaningless. Society is a unified whole consisting of cultural, political, social, economic, legal and several other dimensions. There are no boundaries between these dimensions, and we only list them to address the concept of society.

If we understand politics as mechanisms of power within social layers and society, and culture as the way of life in a community, we realise that lifestyle and livelihood are inseparable from power structures. Power is a

concept intertwined with society, and no society – even one close to a democratic structure – can exist without power.

Although cultural-industry professionals often claim to be detached from political and power structures, such claims are ideological and not easily realised. In many cases, whether directly or indirectly and subtly, culture serves as a platform for those in power and their goals. Conversely, political domains also utilise cultural activities to gain legitimacy. The social histories of societies, especially ones like Iran, attest to this undeniable fact.

Having always been curious and seeking more experiences in societal spaces to answer my unanswered questions, I had ventured into the field of politics and gained experience. The next time, I joined intellectual and cultural circles in the city and its surroundings. Although these groups were not overtly political, they had political undertones alongside their limited cultural activities. These groups organised poetry and storytelling events, travelling from city to city. In Piranshahr, Naqadeh or Mahabad, these groups were in contact with each other. They would arrange poetry readings in the homes of local figures, for example. I was one of the youngest members, and many did not accept me into their circles due to my age and previous arrest record. Although others had also been arrested, they were older, more serious and professional, and were thus better accepted. Initially, my presence and concerns were not fully recognised by them, which made my acceptance difficult.

Gradually, I developed a greater interest in storytelling circles. There, I encountered more serious books, and my studies took a new direction. Books on regional history, Mesopotamia, Kurdish movements and the history of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the formation of new countries in the Middle East like Turkey, Iraq and Syria, opened new windows into the history and politics of the region. I read books such as Lenin's memoirs, *The Red Revolution* and other similar works on leftist movements. Some of these books were not banned and I read them freely; banned books were covered with newspaper and exchanged between us for reading. The history of the Kurdish Republic centred in Mahabad was one of these topics. I also read the memoirs of Party leaders, and, during my military service, my perspective on politics and culture underwent a profound change. According to those around me, I became a different person,

moving toward Kurdish identity or Kurdayati with renewed awareness of my previous inclinations.

Kurdayati with Dariush and Razazi

Many people believe that Kurdayati (Kurdishness), as the core of Kurdish nationalism, has a multidimensional nature encompassing historical, political, cultural and literary aspects. Although it is theoretically and practically undefined in the necessary way, it is part of the subconscious identity of many Kurds, regardless of their religious or professional affiliations. Kurdayati and Kurdish identity, despite their varying intensities, are inseparable.

One theoretical aspect of Kurdayati includes Kurdish poetry, folklore, written and oral narratives such as *Heiran*, *Lauk*, *Mother's Lullabies*, and anything related to regional anthropology. Some political parties believe that Kurdayati might have to retreat in practical terms, facing occupation of its land and long periods without the opportunity for uprising, or it might present itself in the form of guerrilla warfare to ensure its survival. However, in other areas, like theoretical domains, it faces less repression.

Theorists argued that civil activities, such as poetry nights; reading *Heiran* and *Beyt*; developing literary societies in cities; environmental-protection associations; reviving and promoting traditional Kurdish dances; distributing newspapers, journals and Kurdish student publications; and teaching the Kurdish language, show that self-help and self-belief are crucial strategies for survival and persistence. They firmly believed that reviving Kurdayati through the blend of literature and daily life was essential, and history proves the validity of this thinking.

During that period, the Komiteh on one side and the suppression of music on the other were significant for Kurdish youths like me. Initially, I became familiar with Kurdish epic, philosophical and folkloric music, remembering cassette tapes of Naser Razazi[1] and revolutionary songs learned in the Party school in the village of Gerdashavan. These were the first things available to me. Before my military service, besides Kurdish

1 Naser Razazi, born in 1955, is a renowned Kurdish singer and poet who, in addition to singing, teaches the Kurdish language and is involved in translation and authorship. Previously a Peshmerga with the Komala party, he has spent most of his life abroad, particularly in Sweden and the Kurdistan Region.



Image 124: (From left) Mamosta Hemin (poet), Nasser Razazi and Najmuddin Gholami (singer).

music, I became acquainted with the songs and music of Dariush[1] and, later, a bit of Ebi,[2] which gave me a broader view of the Farsi language and expanded my understanding of anti-oppression and the struggle against despotism beyond the local context. For my generation, Dariush had a melancholic voice and had long been my only favourite singer. My sister's doctor preferred Googoosh, while my beloved one liked Hayedeh and Mahasti. Later, she embraced Islamic and mystical views and changed her direction entirely.

For me, Dariush represented a significant transformation in music, reflecting Iran's pre- and post-revolutionary concerns in his songs. His

1 Dariush Eghbali-Zadeh, born in 1950 in Tehran and commonly known as Dariush, is a singer, actor and social activist active in pop and rock music. He possesses a bass vocal range and is a member of Amnesty International. Dariush Eghbali is also engaged in drug-addiction recovery-and-prevention efforts. The Ayeneh Foundation, established in 2005 in the United States as a non-profit organisation, aims to provide educational and humanitarian assistance. Under Eghbali's guidance, the Ayeneh Foundation invites specialists and stakeholders in various areas of social harm to offer weekly education programmes to empower the community in addressing social issues.

2 Ibrahim Hamedi, known artistically as Ebi, was born in 1949 and is a prominent Iranian pop singer. He is considered one of Iran's tenor singers and has made contributions across various genres, including rock, ballads, folk music, pop, dance, house and trance. Some have compared him to the famous British singer Tom Jones, noting that Ebi, unlike Jones, has shown political inclinations.

compassionate focus on achieving a free and liberated Iran, with particular attention to social issues such as child welfare, addiction, poverty and social inequality, was evident in his music. Recently, while I was in prison, Mr Dariush Eghbali, through our mutual friend Sayeh Rahimi, who was also my media advisor, kept track of my situation. I shared my experiences with him regarding our mutual interest in child labour.

Among Dariush's songs, I most remember 'Boye Gandom', and I kept together the cassettes of this singer and Nasser Razazi, who had the greatest impact on me during that period. Later, I became acquainted with Mohammad Mamle,[1] a well-known singer from Mahabad who also influenced me significantly, but Dariush and Mr Razazi always held higher places for me. Even when I came to England and listened to various kinds of music, they retained their special places, perhaps because their songs had timeless concerns that were always relevant. They combined love with nationalist and nostalgic feelings, familiarising me with Kurdistan, Iran and the country's concerns. In my youth, I loved music that echoed the political currents of Iran and could evoke romantic feelings in me, especially since I was in love with a girl and our relationship affected my musical taste.

At that time, people around me listened less to Dariush, or at least this was the case for my peers. My musical taste was more mature than my age, and when I became a shopkeeper for a while, this surprised my customers. Many found it strange that I listened to both Nasser Razazi and Dariush, one Kurdish and the other Farsi, or Mohammad Mamle and Hassan Zirak,[2] who were popular among older people, but I liked them. Later, I also became familiar with world music when I visited Tehran, discovering and buying works by Michael Jackson, Elton John and foreign bands, or Iranian bands that had made a name for themselves in Los Angeles.

1 Mohammad Mamle, born in 1925 in Mahabad, was a well-known singer in Mahabad. He was a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party for a time, and his son was executed in 1983 along with 59 young men from Mahabad in Tabriz. Throughout his 54-year artistic career, he performed over 300 songs. In his later years, he suffered from depression and Alzheimer's disease and passed away in Mahabad in February 1999.

2 Hassan Zirak, born in 1921 and dying in 1972, was a singer of Kurdish songs. By recording numerous traditional songs on radio stations in Kermanshah, Tehran and Baghdad, Hassan Zirak contributed significantly to the preservation of this cultural heritage. Hundreds of his songs and melodies remain as a legacy.

During this period, I was less interested in social relationships and romance and thought I should focus on more serious matters. I considered those activities to be childish, or perhaps I suppressed my desires. When the atmosphere became a bit more open and young people gathered in the streets at night, my head was buried in books. Maybe it was because I felt older than my age – or wanted to appear that way. I believed that a person's life experiences determine their real age. I had gone through tough periods and lived through events intertwined with war, politics, poverty, displacement and all aspects of adult life, including experiencing hard jobs. Also, during a sensitive time like adolescence, I endured arrest, imprisonment and torture. All these lived experiences made my 'life age' differ from my chronological age, and my concerns did not entirely align with most people my age.

Bookish Beginnings and Revolutionary Cinema

I was an avid patron of the city library located next to the children's park. It was a small library, but it had a great selection of books. Initially, I would pick books that were popular among the city's avid readers. There was usually a card at the back of each book, listing the names of previous borrowers. We had a few serious readers in town who also had political views. As someone who was keen on role models and personality emulation, I sought out books with certain names on the lending cards. Later, as I established a good rapport with the librarian, I would ask him to show me which books these individuals had borrowed. I wanted my name to appear on those cards, too, and even though I didn't always finish the books I borrowed, I still wanted my name listed alongside theirs.

One of these individuals, whose name appeared on the cards of almost every book, was the brother of a man[1] who my sister later married. He was someone who wore stylish Kurdish clothing and was well-versed in Kurdish language and literature. I found it intriguing that he was politically active yet had a deep appreciation for Kurdish literature and

1 Suleiman Aswad, whose uncle Kuykha-Hola was the chief of the Mangur tribe of Bab-Rasu and an official member of the Intelligence Administration, was also a candidate for parliament for a period. He had a talent for writing and poetry, having authored several novels that have yet to be published. In middle age, he fell ill with cancer and passed away in 2008.

read good books. At that time, I couldn't grasp how these two characteristics could coexist, or that values are relative.

Within this circle, there were people I had met at meetings, seminars or cultural events. They would often attend events like Unity Week, participating in seminars and cultural discussions. There were others whose names I don't recall, but I looked up to them during that period.



Image 125: Women of Mahabad

During that time, I spoke with the librarian, who said if I provided him with perfume from my father's shop, he would give me books in return – effectively, he was stealing books for me. My love for books was so strong that I didn't consider the unethical aspect of this arrangement. I brought him perfume and cream, and he gave me books with library codes. He would tear out the coding and library stamps from the first page and hand them over to me. This way, I was able to expand my personal library. For years, I felt guilty, and when I decided to move abroad, I packed most of the books into several boxes and left them early one morning at the city library's door. The librarian had changed, and it had been several years since these events, but I was too embarrassed to return the books or explain the situation.

My love for cinema began in childhood, sparked by seeing film advertisements on television or visiting Lalehzar cinemas in Tehran with my father. Our city didn't have a cinema; in fact, it had burned down during the Revolution like many others. I would travel to Naqadeh to meet Sabir, and we would head to the cinema together, or I would go alone. Despite the war, road dangers and other risks, I occasionally travelled to Mahabad, although Naqadeh was closer. I preferred Mahabad because its cinema was larger and it had a long history in literature, culture and music. It was modern and politically aligned with my views. Conversely,

Piranshahr was a border town predominantly inhabited by villagers and refugees from surrounding areas. It lacked significant urban development.

Perhaps unconsciously, I acted in a way that made others think I was from Mahabad. I always followed Mahabad's fashion trends. When I returned to Iran in 2008 and later got married, Mahabad was my city of choice for living. Even though I had a home and social standing in Piranshahr, I chose Mahabad for my preferred lifestyle. Mahabad was paradoxical to me; it seemed that modern cities were inherently contradictory. At that time, it was often belittled by certain people and more traditional cities. They said Mahabad was not authentically Kurdish, that its people, especially women, were vulgar and poorly dressed and that it had ruined Kurdish culture. They even went so far as to say that the history of the Republic of Mahabad and its leader, Qazi Muhammad, had been tainted. There were jokes about their alleged moral failings and more relaxed attitudes toward sexual matters, suggesting that ethnic and traditional biases were less prevalent there.

This traditional viewpoint from outside Mahabad existed, but some people from Mahabad viewed the surrounding cities as uneducated and rural, lacking in civility and knowledge of urban life. They would say that people there were involved in tribal disputes and gang-related activities. The conflict between these two perspectives has diminished over time, though it still exists. For my personality and traits, Mahabad held more appeal, and I felt a stronger connection to it. That's why I preferred living there. My father and his friends would often mock me, saying that Kameel always went to Mahabad and returned with something new – whether it was tighter trousers or a new hairstyle.

Nowadays, it seems Mahabad has changed. It used to be at the forefront of Kurdish nationalism but is now in a period of decline, with Sanandaj, Kermanshah and even sometimes Ilam surpassing it. At that time, wearing non-Kurdish trousers in our city was uncommon and even considered a disgrace. I was among the first to wear American six-pocket jeans, which were in fashion in Tehran and Mahabad. Interestingly, the youth in Tehran and Mahabad had similar fashion tastes, while surrounding cities drew their inspiration from regional centres or neighbouring countries. For instance, Urmia took its fashion cues from Turkey, but Mahabad aligned itself with Tehran.

Wearing non-Kurdish trousers was considered a provocative act. The first time I wore them to Gerdashavan, I faced reprimand and humiliation. They would mockingly ask what kind of trousers I was wearing, comparing them to poorly fitting underpants. Kurdish trousers were wide and comfortable, so wearing jeans was seen as odd and contrary to traditional culture. Fashion among young people in cities with indigenous clothing is always contentious, but over time such trends become normalised.

Returning to the topic of cinema: when film advertisements began on television, which only had one or two channels, it took weeks or even months for the advertised films to reach cinemas in cities like Naqadeh and Mahabad. At one point, the best films for me were those featuring actor Jamshid Hashemipour, including war films and crime dramas with hostage-taking and violence. I remember that films like *Taraj*[1] or *Kani Manga*[2] created quite a stir in Kurdistan. *Kani Manga* was the first film I saw where Kurdish clothing was worn, and it intrigued and fascinated me.

Kani Manga had Kurdish dialogues, which initially drew me in, but, after watching it, I realised it was against Kurdish parties. I had thought that, since it wasn't broadcast on television but was in cinemas, it might have a different perspective. However, it presented a completely different image of the Peshmerga. In one part of the film, a Peshmerga leader eats a

1 *Taraj* is an Iranian action-drama film directed by Iraj Qaderi, released in 1984. Set against the backdrop of post-revolutionary Iran, the film explores themes of personal loss, betrayal and redemption through the story of a man who returns from war only to discover that his life has been turned upside down. Featuring Jamshid Hashemipour in one of his early breakout roles, *Taraj* was notable for its gritty tone and urban violence, reflecting the anxieties of the time. The film became popular in provincial cities and border regions, resonating particularly with audiences drawn to narratives of honour, revenge and masculine struggle.

2 *Kani Manga* is an Iranian war film directed by Seifullah Dad, released in 1987. This film is Dad's second cinematic work of that year and holds the record for the longest theatrical run in the history of Iranian cinema, showing for 15 years. The story follows an Iraqi plane that crashes in the Kani Manga region of Iranian Kurdistan, the pilot surviving and escaping. A team of commandos, led by Captain Yavari, is assigned to capture the pilot. A militant group opposing the Islamic Republic, led by 'Kak Houshang', enters the fray to rescue the pilot. The commandos engage in a confrontation with the armed group and manage to apprehend the Iraqi pilot. Iraqi helicopters are dispatched to the area to intervene, initiating an aerial battle with Iranian helicopters. The conflict concludes in favour of the Iranian forces, and, before dying, Houshang confesses that he killed Yavari's brother due to his refusal to cooperate with his group.

whole roasted chicken while the others go hungry. It depicted the brutal execution of prisoners in a way that was far removed from the reality I had witnessed. I remembered when I had lunch with Dr Ghassemlou and he ate the same food as I and the others did, and I had often seen that the food of high-ranking officials and ordinary Peshmerga was the same and shared collectively. The film's portrayal was a stark contrast to the real situation and ideologically distorted. It was an attempt to manipulate the audience's perception in favour of the ruling power structures.

In that era, when films and other cultural products had to pass through numerous censorship hurdles to get approval, such a film, which was completely contrary to reality and false, was easily granted screening permission without regard to the feelings of Kurdish viewers. It seemed that this was not only an attempt to mock Kurds, but also an attempt to show that our suffering, poverty and displacement were of no concern to them. We were to be sacrificed for the benefit of the central authorities. Alongside the various forms of violence we suffered from the Government, these subtle forms of cultural violence were also significant.

I compared the scenes with reality and, in my youthful mind, wondered why the image presented differed so much from what I had experienced. The conflicts I had witnessed were never so clear-cut as angels versus devils. The depictions in the cinema bore no resemblance to my lived experiences or those of my father, who had been imprisoned and tortured, or my grandfather and uncles, who had been beaten by Government-affiliated individuals. It was as if we and our real lives were entirely erased from these narratives.

These distorted messages and manipulated realities were repeatedly reinforced in schools and widely used by the regime. Such apparently organised activities led some people in Iran to believe that Kurds were ruthless and murderous. Although this view has improved in recent years with the growth of media and ease of travel, it has not completely disappeared, and I have often heard such experiences from others, including non-Kurdish friends who admitted their fear of travelling to Kurdistan and interacting with Kurds due to the dominant government discourse.

During that period, many such films were made, and while I was intensely disgusted, I later learned to view them critically and alertly. As I grew older, I came to believe in the saying that, even in war, they don't distribute sweets!

Chapter Nine: The Compulstory Compulsion!

During the era of Reza Shah, military service was made compulsory for boys and young men or, as they were called back then, 'male elements' over eighteen years of age in the protected lands of Iran. From that time, it became known among the general public simply as 'compulsory'. The term 'compulsory' originated from the practice of gendarmes and military officers making surprise raids on villages and, as we Kurds say, 'engaging in search operations'.

The compulsory nature of military service is reflected in folklore, especially in lullabies and Kurdish songs:

> My son grew up with city sweets.
> Reza Shah took him by force to compulsory service.
> Oh, Reza Shah, may you see your son's mark.
> May God not grant your Farsi/Ajam wishes
> [a hint at unfulfilled desires].

In the modern world, military service is defined as a specialised profession, as militaries help to maintain national security. However, in Iran and its surrounding countries, it remains compulsory for every boy to serve in the military, unless exempted for reasons such as guardianship or illness. Preliminary anthropological studies show that, in traditional societies and countries like Iran, military service, like the circumcision of boys[1] and some other customs, symbolises the transition from childhood

1 Circumcision, which involves the removal of all or part of the foreskin from the penis or clitoris of men and women, has a history spanning five thousand years, dating back to ancient Egypt. Today, Muslims, Jews and people from certain other regions of the world circumcise their sons and daughters. Muslims and Jews perform circumcision for

to manhood. When a boy returns from military service, society regards it as a significant achievement, and when he seeks to marry, having a military-service completion card is a crucial requirement for the bride's family. This card is seen as a permit for employment, foreign travel, migration and other similar matters.

Life had become hard for me, but it seemed I was gradually getting used to the hardship. Thus, I ventured into a terrifying two-year period that most people dread. This was despite not yet being of legal age and having the option to choose escape over duty for a year or two. But youth and the plans one devises often lead one to recklessly pursue one's goals. For me, going to the military was very important. I wanted to leave Iran, and for legal exit and official recognition, I needed to pass through this phase. So, I set off early and did not have an easy time. During my two years of military service, not only did I change, but many things also changed in my family and surroundings. It seems that, not only military service, but also life itself is full of compulsory experiences that one cannot easily bypass according to one's will.

Arrested in Military Uniform because of Parvaneh

In Iran, the legal age for compulsory military service is eighteen, unless someone wishes to meet this two-year obligation earlier. At seventeen, I began inquiring about military service and its conditions. I was informed that the Iran-Iraq War had ended a year ago, a resolution had been accepted, and the army no longer accepted soldiers under the legal age.

I was looking for a solution when it was mentioned, 'Currently, the only place that accepts recruits is the IRGC.'[1] The IRGC's policy had changed,

religious reasons and cultural traditions, often marking the occasion with specific ceremonies and celebrations. However, some religious groups conduct this practice to prevent certain medical issues. Some child-rights activists oppose this practice, viewing it as a form of violence against children and a violation of their rights. The practice has drawn criticism due to the physical and psychological pain it inflicts on children, as well as the serious harm it can cause to their physiology and the potential for genital mutilation. See Ahmady *et al*., 2023.

1 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (the 'IRGC'): established in the early days following the 1979 Iranian Revolution by Ruhollah Khomeini, the IRGC is a military organisation tasked with safeguarding the Islamic Republic. The organisation's emblem does not include the name 'Iran'. On 8 April 2019, the United States designated the IRGC a

as many volunteers and Basij[1] members no longer went to Kurdistan, leading to a shortage of forces.

I struggled with this decision, compounded by my personal sensitivities. Conflicts between the IRGC and the Peshmerga continued, and the IRGC's commando units were involved in these battles. Thus, serving in the IRGC in our region was not viewed favourably. Although the Party had suffered a severe blow from the assassinations of its two secretaries, Dr Ghassemlou and Dr Sharafkandi, it still partially continued its struggle against the IRGC. The Komala party was also engaged in similar conflicts, making military service in the IRGC undesirable to many.

It took me a while to reconcile with myself and bring up the matter at home. As expected, my family strongly opposed it, saying, 'You are still underage; you need to wait until the right time.' Even my grandmother, who had always been supportive, was upset and angry, saying, 'You're going to go and get killed, Kameel!'

I explained that the war had ended, but she couldn't believe it and thought it was still ongoing.

Despite their objections, I had no choice but to follow my path. I needed the military-service completion card for a legal exit from Iran. Thus, I advocated with my uncle, relatives and others, exerting significant pressure until they agreed.

I went to the gendarmerie to obtain my enlistment booklet but was told I needed to go to Naqadeh. I made my way to my hometown and visited the old gendarmerie building, now converted into a conscription office. Old memories resurfaced. During the 1979 looting of the gendarmerie, I had entered the weapons room of this very building with my father and uncle, witnessing how people gathered ammunition. This time, however, I was alone, and there was no crowd to contend with. When I received the

terrorist organisation, prompting Iran's Supreme National Security Council to label the US Central Command in the Middle East and East Africa a terrorist entity.

1 Basij Organisation: formed on 5 December 1979 under Khomeini's command and legally recognised by the Islamic Consultative Assembly in January 1981, the Basij is a paramilitary organisation and a subsidiary of the IRGC. It serves as an arm of the Islamic Republic, responsible for recruiting, training, organising and mobilising volunteers to achieve the goals of the Revolution and maintain its achievements. It can be seen as an example of how a social unit can rapidly gain control over previously unregulated resources.

booklet, I felt a strange sensation. I had become a man and was going to serve in the military! I made several copies of the booklet in case I lost it, and I still have those copies.

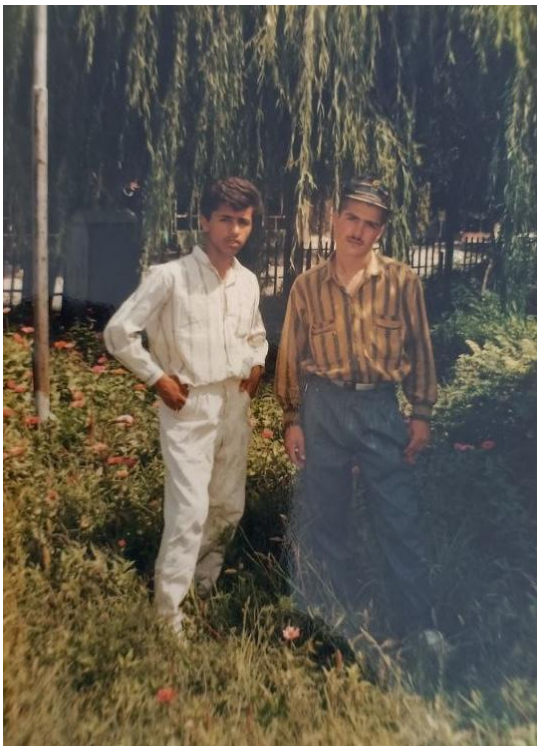


Image 126: Enlistment for training, with my cousin Sabir. Naqadeh Gendarmerie Square, spring 1988.

After obtaining the enlistment booklet, I began searching for the next steps. My father was acquainted with some military officers who frequented his shop. They advised him to send me to the army instead, helping me avoid the IRGC. Hearing this, my father was determined to stop me, as he was particularly opposed to my serving in the IRGC.

However, I was in a hurry and couldn't articulate the reasons for my urgency. My family was baffled. None of my explanations made sense to them. Eventually, I secretly completed my enlistment procedures, and they were left with no choice but to accept it. They were so upset that they did not accompany me on my enlistment day.

On that day, I went alone to the customs building, the very place where my father had once been imprisoned. It felt strange to be alone, but I had to accept the consequences of my actions.

Serving in the IRGC was genuinely difficult for me. Its name, insignia and everything related to this military force reminded me of unpleasant childhood events, including the bitter days of displacement, my father's and my own arrests, and the compulsory ideological and political meetings on weekends. I had no room for regret; the decision was made, and I was to become a soldier. It made little difference where I went.

I was sent to Urmia with twenty-five other soldiers, all older than me, who began asserting their dominance and superiority. I tried to show that I was above them, which led them to take a stance against me. As we travelled from Piranshahr to Urmia, some of them sat at the front of the minibus, discussing their families and wealth to establish who was in charge.

In the beginning, I felt uneasy – constantly anxious and wanting to fit in with them, but they were all older and did not accept me. Besides names, our birth years were written on our shirt pockets, and I couldn't lie about my age. I tried to converse with them, but they ignored me. Five to ten of us were grouped together, and I was not accepted into their circle. I felt lonely and helpless, although I thought this solitude might also make me stand out as unique.[1]

When we reached Urmia, we were taken to a place on Daneshkadeh Street. It resembled a schoolyard, and we stood in line like students. All military institutions share a commitment to discipline, although each has its own methods. We were seated and waited for hours to be divided. We were then assigned to groups with various designations and went into a large mosque. I was placed with a few people who seemed to be from distant villages and isolated. I suddenly felt completely alone. There was no rapport with my group members. We were together out of necessity. The division was based on group, city, ethnicity and language. Turks from other cities and provinces, Kurds from other cities, Naqadeh residents and people from other cities and provinces were all separated into their groups.

We were informed that we were to be sent to the Ajabshir barracks in East Azerbaijan Province. The Ajabshir barracks was notorious for a sign or slogan saying, 'Bring a donkey; take a human'.

A week passed, but we remained there due to continual delays. Eventually, a guard came and said, 'Deployment is postponed. All of you go home for ten days.' We were given leave papers and returned home.

1 The misconceptions surrounding societal development in Iran stem from the inadequate understanding and acceptance of modern thinking based on individual merit. The incomplete modernisation process has led to traditional criteria, such as family lineage, overshadowing skill and analytical ability when assessing individuals. This situation partly arises from the persistence of a declining feudal culture and a detrimental religious ethos that prioritise appearances and superficial indicators of status.

They did not want to, or could not, provide food and supplies for that number of soldiers.[1]

My return was surprising to my family, who mocked me for coming back without going. But once my head was shaved, it made the situation official, and I boasted about becoming a soldier. During those ten days, I asked soldiers I knew or those who had served about what to take for the training period and gained experience from their advice.

After my leave, I returned alone to Urmia to finally be deployed and finish the two years as quickly as possible. When I arrived, all the groups from my city and nearby cities had already been deployed to the famous Ajabshir barracks, and I was left behind.

I was left behind because I was arrested! This time my arrest wasn't political, but I was so unlucky that I was taken to the detention centre on my first day of service. The situation was quite simple, although perhaps somewhat absurd! My uncle had not yet moved to Piranshahr and was still living in Naqadeh. One of my cousins had a friend named Parvaneh, whose parents were teachers living in the teachers' district. We had mutual feelings and occasionally talked on the phone. Our relationship was not one of boyfriend and girlfriend but stayed at that level.

It was significant for a soldier to have a girlfriend and receive letters from her while in the barracks. I had asked Parvaneh, who had neat handwriting, to write me letters once I became a soldier, and she agreed. Before I set off, I wrapped a decorative hairpin as a gift for her from my father's shop. I contacted her and said, 'I will pass through Naqadeh on my way to Urmia, and I will meet you to say goodbye.'

When I reached Naqadeh, I went to the shop of a friend named Kak Omar, near the Gendarmerie Square, left my bag there, and said I would return shortly.

It was Ramadan, and the mornings were quiet. I had arranged to meet Parvaneh early to avoid any issues. I was anxious to reach her quickly. As

1 Since mandatory military service was instituted in Iran over the past century, nutrition has remained a significant issue for soldiers, particularly after the Revolution, when the IRGC joined the armed forces. Despite this, soldiers in the IRGC reportedly have greater satisfaction with their nutrition compared to those in the regular army. However, the financial burden of two years of military service heavily impacts the soldiers' families, as the Government has shifted responsibility for this aspect of service, highlighting the effects of privatisation and reducing state structures in Iranian society.



Image 127: Security and Morality Patrols

I got closer, I saw one of the patrol cars from the Komiteh. Parvaneh was heading directly toward me, and I gestured openly for her to change her path, but the Komiteh officers noticed what was happening.

The patrol suddenly swerved in front of me. The officers got out and threw me into the back of their vehicle. One of them said in Turkish, 'What were you doing? It's Ramadan, and you're flirting with girls!'

I replied, 'We're neighbours. I wanted to say goodbye to her and her mother before heading off for military service.'

They asked, 'Where to?'

I said, 'Urmia.'

They probed further, 'Where are you from?'

I responded, 'I'm from here.' I took out my ID, which stated I was from Naqadeh, and they believed me.

One officer let me go, but another insisted on seeing my leave permit. The document indicated I was going from Urmia to Piranshahr. He exclaimed, 'Why did you lie? You're from Piranshahr, not Naqadeh!' The interrogation continued with accusations that I must be one of the Kurds who fled during the Revolution and never returned. Ultimately, they concluded that I should be handed over to the IRGC's Intelligence unit. They claimed I had lied and needed to explain my actions.

They radioed the IRGC headquarters, reporting, 'We have arrested an army recruit. See what your man is doing in the street, claiming to be from Naqadeh while actually living in Piranshahr. He's acting suspiciously; he might be trying to infiltrate the IRGC under the guise of military service!'

A young guard arrived on a motorcycle from the Intelligence unit, taking me to the IRGC headquarters. Both he and a cleric interrogated me, asking what I was doing as part of their force in the street. The more honest I was, the less they believed me. The young guard said, 'We'll keep you here until you tell us the truth! On your first day, instead of maintaining

security, you've endangered the IRGC's reputation, especially during Ramadan!'

Then, another cleric came and said, 'You need to memorise several sections of the Quran before we let you go. You'll also get extra duty and a reprimand letter so they can hold you temporarily in prison.' He went on to make many threats that, thankfully, I can't recall!

I truly didn't understand why they added so much drama to the situation. The Komiteh had detained me several times before, but it had never been this lengthy or complicated.

Initially, the IRGC didn't have space in their prison, so, every night, they sent me to the Komiteh jail to sleep. They had also brought in a couple of Turks from Naqadeh for eating during the fast, probably because they were addicts; they had been smoking and eating in the streets. I was afraid I would end up in jail with one of them. I hadn't encountered many addicts, except during my trips to Tehran and Urmia, as there were very few among the Kurds.

I spent the first two days in the Komiteh's jail and the next two in IRGC detention. I went through a lot of pointless interrogations, and sometimes, with my eyes closed, I recited Nahj al-Balagha and the Quran, answering the cleric's questions to get out of there.

In the end, they handed me a letter confirming my absence was justified. At first, I thought they had acted honourably by not reporting me and ensuring this wouldn't be noted in my record. However, I later realised it was quite the opposite; they had gone to great lengths for me!

To Holasu

A young guard brought me to the city centre on his motorcycle and dropped me off at Gendarmerie Square. I went to my father's friend's shop to collect my belongings.

When he saw me, he said, 'Where have you been? I haven't heard from you, and I called your father. He keeps calling me, and your uncle keeps dropping by. They are worried sick!'

I quickly made up a story, collected my bag, and hurriedly left the shop to go to Urmia. Upon reaching the military barracks, I found that everyone had already been deployed. I was left all alone. They told me I had to return home until the next deployment date. I was afraid to go back, so I said,

'Send me wherever you like, but please send me to Ajabshir, as my fellow townsfolk are there.'

They said it wasn't possible; they had already started their training, but there was another barracks in a town called Saeen-Dej or Shahin-Dej. The first phase of the Revolutionary Guard training was being held in a village there called Holasu. They said, 'We could send you there, but you would have to go on your own.'

I had heard of it before. It was on the other side of West Azerbaijan, but it seemed like it was on the edge of the world. If I went, I wouldn't come back home. My few days' absence could become a story of its own! I went to Miandoab and from there took an old minibus to Saeen-Dej. It could be described as a small town, and it seemed its residents were mostly Revolutionary Guard and Basij, which was odd. I boarded one of the military jeeps that were used for passenger transport. I got off twenty kilometres away, near the Holasu barracks, and handed the letter to the guard. The head of the training section at the barracks came. I explained that I had arrived late to the deployment and finally managed to start the training course.



Image 128: Holasu training camp

We were supposed to be assigned to a unit named Maqdad for deployment to Kurdish cities, but, thankfully, it was their first training period so they had no military-training experience. The classes they held had no proper instructors – almost all the trainers were soldiers themselves. For us, the soldiers, it was very hard because everything was new, and the authorities didn't know what to do. Whenever they fell short, they would beat and trouble us, and since there was no structured training programme, it felt like we were attending a bodybuilding class with daily sit-ups and crow-walks on the mountains!

The trainers' passion was to keep us out of the classroom. Therefore, instead of training, they frequently took us to the mountains. The commander of the entire training barracks was Pasdar Sadeghian, the younger brother of the head of the Piranshahr Komiteh, and he shared the same bad temperament as his brother! I was terrified even at the mention of his name, and my body would shiver.

For three months, we endured the worst food of our lives in that barracks, sleeping on dilapidated, lice-infested beds under rough, foul-smelling blankets. The military food was scarce and poor quality. They would give us dry rice, sometimes with undercooked grains that stuck between our teeth. Occasionally, they would generously mix in some lentils. Most of the time, we ate boiled potatoes and eggs. Only on Fridays did we get frozen chicken, which was considered a festive treat! On the day I was deployed, my grandmother had packed extra bread and cheese for me. It was a habit of mothers and grandmothers to pack so much bread that it would go mouldy. I would remove the mould and secretly eat the rest, which also had a strong mouldy smell. The local cheese, which we called Kurdish cheese, spoils quickly in unsuitable conditions. I would separate the spoiled top layer and eat the rest. I would hide this bread and cheese under my blanket to protect it from the soldiers' theft, but, due to the heat, it would spoil quickly. It was there that I realised the immense value of bread to families and truly understood the importance of it. My grandmother used to say, 'A house without two trays of bread is not blessed.' She had grown up during times of poverty and famine, and I often empathised with her hardships.

I felt very alone. I didn't have a single fellow townsman, and only a few Kurdish soldiers from Sardasht were regionally and linguistically close to me. The rest were all Turkish-speaking from villages in Zanjan, Ardabil,

East Azerbaijan and so on. I had no understanding of their dispositions. My only luck was that I could speak Turkish. They did not know Farsi, which made communication difficult. Those who did not know Farsi were in a worse position, enduring more beatings and humiliation in training. Most of the instructors were Farsi, with many from Shiraz and Semnan. Our battalion was named Maqdad, and the Shirazis managed it. Coincidentally, there was significant tension between the Saeen-Dej residents and the Shirazis, with ethnic insults exchanged frequently between the Farsi and Turkish staff. We Kurds watched this with surprise. We were accustomed to being insulted, but we were in a place where, thank God, we were spared, and for the first time, we saw the Turkish-Farsi conflict.

Once, during the training period, I was punished. I think I laughed in the line. The instructor saw me and said, 'Do fifty sit-ups!' My knees were giving out when, suddenly, he noticed my lanyard. I had written *ghamin* ('sorrow') on it, a reminder of a youthful love that had failed. He became angry and said, 'Does a soldier write something romantic on his lanyard?' At that time, I was very attached to the word 'ghamin', even using it as a pseudonym in my writings and poetry. I got angry and responded. He then beat me severely.

The next day, to make up for that incident and to soothe myself, I went to the barracks' tattoo artist, a Turkish soldier from Malayer. He did tattoos behind the toilet yard with a needle, mixing cigarette ash and pen ink.[1] I paid him to tattoo 'ghamin' on my upper arm. He did it with thick needles and minimal equipment, and it was very painful. Out of stubbornness, I endured the pain, but my arm became infected, and I struggled with it for a long time. The soldier had written the word so poorly and hastily that no one could read it over the years!

My three-month training period was a lonely and difficult experience but, finally, it ended. Since I had no friends, enduring the days was harder for me. The Sardashtis were all related and traditional, and they did not allow anyone to join their group. I had significant differences with the

1 In the past, before the invention of industrial tattooing machines, tattoos were typically applied by barbers or local beauticians, often in bathhouses. The tattoo ink, which was usually green, was made from a mixture of several substances, including kohl, lamp soot and animal blood.

Turks. I spent some of my time with a Farsi-speaking soldier who guarded the ammunition depot. Most of my time was spent reading. The barracks' books were mostly religious and not to my taste. When I went home on leave, I would buy books from the town's only bookstore. The owner was an old man who liked me. I was one of the few soldiers who spent money on books, which he found interesting.

After the three-month training, those who were more educated had to complete specialised courses in machine-gun handling, first aid, RPGs and mines before being deployed. I don't know what wisdom led them to place me in the RPG unit! I was shorter and not very big in build. The RPG is a heavy weapon with three large, heavy shells. Operating it requires both physical strength and aiming skill.

There was no logic behind the training period. For example, there was no shower at the barracks. Therefore, from two to five in the morning on Fridays, the IRGC would take over the Saeen-Dej bathhouse so we could use it. All the soldiers from the barracks would run from Holasu to the town to get to the bathhouse. We would wash in our own assigned shower rooms, which was a whole ordeal. We didn't know each other and were embarrassed to undress. We would go to the shower one by one while the others waited in the changing room. After showering and cleaning up, we had to run an hour back on the dusty road to the barracks. By the time we arrived, we were dirtier than before!

The military environment drives some soldiers to smoke or even turn to addictive substances. Perhaps the loneliness and harsh conditions push soldiers in that direction. Cigarettes were as valuable as gold during training. Occasionally, we would sneakily roll and smoke tobacco with other soldiers. During that period, in a bold move – or, rather, to show off – I announced that I was quitting smoking. The training officer lifted my hand and said, 'Look at this brave soldier! He has decided to quit smoking and has handed over his pack of cigarettes to me.'

I had started smoking at around thirteen. For a long time, I would sneak a few cigarettes from my father and smoke with my peers. We didn't really understand what smoking was; we just blew the smoke and engaged in childish games. We only wanted to mimic adults. As I grew older, I learned proper smoking from an Iraqi Kurdish boy. They smoked a lot, and it was ingrained in their families. I would steal cigarettes from my father and smoke in the city's Grand Mosque toilet. The toilets were generally open and without doors, so I would keep the smoke from spreading. Initially, I took a few puffs and felt good. Gradually, my smoking increased to more than one or two cigarettes a day, and, eventually, I smoked in front of my grandmother, who disapproved of it. I continued smoking until my military service, and my addiction became a serious problem. I had to quit, but it was difficult. I would usually ask other soldiers to give me one or two cigarettes. They did so with a great deal of reluctance. The soldiers who managed to get cigarettes also avoided smoking too much in front of others, to keep it from becoming apparent. We would sit in groups of three or four in a corner of the yard to smoke.



Image 129: Forced participation in Ashura ceremonies. Saeen-Dej, winter 1988.

During the training period, soldiers would secretly smoke cigars by buying them and sneaking them in for some small change. The soldiers who lit up made loud noises and acted recklessly. Whenever a soldier was caught, they were taken to the commander's office and punished. The commander was always on the lookout for these soldiers, trying to uncover the perpetrators. It was a constant battle between them.

Many soldiers experienced bouts of illness, either from eating bad food or from the harsh conditions. Their illnesses were frequently dismissed. Once, a soldier from Paveh, who was very sick, was not allowed to go to the hospital. The soldier's condition worsened, but he was still not permitted to leave. Despite his repeated requests, the authorities sent him back to his barracks.

In such situations, when they did allow sick soldiers to leave, they would make them walk for hours. The walk was very exhausting. One day, our commander decided to take us on a long, exhausting walk through the mountains to test our endurance. We were sent to walk for hours, and we only managed to return in the late evening.

My personal experience was like this. My pain was the loneliness of being far away from home. I was enduring hardship on my own. Each day felt like a week, and I was deeply immersed in the isolation.

From RPG Gunner to Medic and Secretary

After basic training, we were initially sent to the Jandaran region, located between Mahabad and Sardasht. Jandaran was a mountainous area where some of the Mongol tribes resided. This area contained villages that, between 1980 and 1983, had not yet been 'cleansed', as they were under the control of the Democratic Party. There was also a relatively large and well-known market there, selling Iraqi goods.

In this region, there was a hill known as Helicopter Hill. In the early 1960s, the Peshmerga had shot down a helicopter there, and the name stuck. What we did in the Maqdad battalion was set up temporary bases on the mountain heights and hills, lay barbed wire around us and occupy the area for several weeks to a month. We lived in bunkers –more like holes – that had been prepared beforehand, with minimal facilities. Sometimes, soldiers pitched tents next to the trenches and lived a nomadic life for up

to a year, which caused considerable damage to the pristine environment of the area.

We would move from one place to another several times throughout a season. For us, who had no experience with this kind of life, it was very difficult. There were days when all our time was spent securing roads, guarding the base, visiting nomads who were moving between summer and winter pastures and similar tasks. There was also the risk of clashes with the Democratic Party, as the Peshmerga were still active in the area. Fortunately, they did not attack small bases like ours.

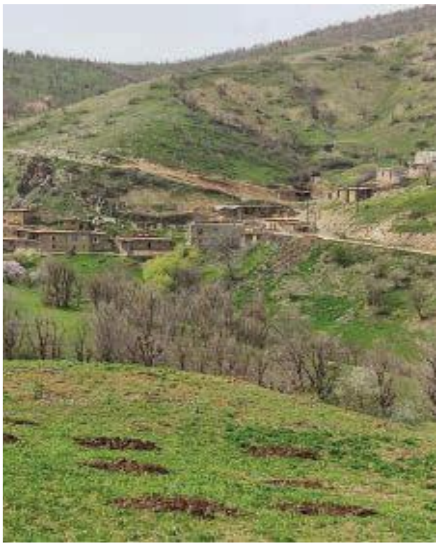
After that period, the Maqdad battalion was dispersed throughout the spring, summer and autumn, returning to Saeen-Dej for the winter. We spent half of the winter at the camp and the other half on leave, which meant we had one-and-a-half months, sometimes more, on leave – a great deal for a soldier. Part of the reason for our long leaves was the lack of budget to support and feed all those soldiers. During my first winter leave, I rejuvenated. I knew what to bring when I returned.

Our situation in the Maqdad battalion also came with a sense of adventure, as we never knew where we would be the next month, which was exciting for me as I enjoyed surprises and thrills.

In the spring, we returned to Holasu and were sent to Mahabad and the Shamat Plains. We stayed in a mosque for a while in a village called Daryaz, three to four kilometres from Mahabad. At night, we would go out on patrol and sleep during the day. There was not much news, and our role was more about showing presence. We occupied the mosque for so long that the locals complained, saying it was a place for prayers, not for soldiers' rest.

Later, we moved to neighbouring villages, mainly in the Shamat and Shahr-e Veyran regions. We stayed in each village for a while, including the villages of Qom-Qaleh, Qazluqapi, Laj and Qara Qeshlaq. In one of these villages, there were wedding festivities for several days. A few soldiers, including myself, secretly watched from the roof. We envied the joy of the celebration, as we were confined soldiers.

My situation changed after being deployed to the Mahabad region. I had received a month of RPG training, but the platoon commander realised I was not suited to the role and changed my position. He saw that I either lagged in formation or my friend Mohammad Saleh, whom we called Hammeh Saleh and was from Saqqez, carried the RPG rounds for me.


Image 130: Jandan region, Sarasht

Mohammad Saleh, who now lives in Germany, was one of my best and most loyal friends from the service. I had also played a role in the commander's change of opinion by informing a few people that I was not reliable for shooting RPGs.

Fortunately, I got lucky. The platoon medic's service ended, and I became the new medic overnight, with just a few minutes of training in bandaging, injecting and carrying the wounded. This role was a step up from carrying RPGs and felt much more prestigious. It felt good to be called a doctor. I had a first aid kit with a Red Cross emblem, containing various pills, bandages, ointments and basic items. Soldiers and locals would come to me when they fell ill. I was caught between the satisfaction of being a doctor and the limited knowledge and resources I had.

It was interesting that, when locals fell ill, they had no choice but to come to the base. Sometimes I went to the guardhouse to attend to people. During that period, I read every medical and health book I could get my hands on to at least understand how to handle cases and what to pay more attention to. Besides some common pills, diarrhoea medication and mosquito bite ointment, I had nothing, but with complete confidence I spoke about their illnesses, based on what I had read in relevant books, and eventually prescribed aspirin. They believed in my expertise. It was psychologically reassuring for them that the medicine was effective. Sometimes they would recover and pray for me.

When we moved to the Sardasht region, our platoon commander changed. Initially, our commander was a tall and simple Pasdar named Akhavan from Saeen-Dej, who had learned to read and write through literacy programmes. We had heard in secret from his secretary that he had just reached the third grade, but he tried to present himself as highly educated, always carrying Nahj al-Balagha or a poetry book. It turned out he borrowed these books from others. Akhavan also became a source of

jokes and laughter for us. We could not let on that we knew what was going on, but we joked and laughed about him among ourselves. Sometimes we would ask him to read Nahj al-Balagha for us. He would say, 'This book is not just readable; it must be read with the heart and faith. I have memorised it all!' We insisted he read it, but he would evade and say he did not have *wudu*. Sometimes I would give him a book and ask him to read a section, and he would say the books I read were not good and that I should not read too many novels and histories. Then he would leave on some pretext.

Eventually, he left the command, and a new commander named Kak Maruf, a Kurdish Chahardouli from Saeen-Dej, but of Shia faith, replaced him. Like governments that come in and clear out the previous administration, Kak Maruf immediately dismissed the Hamdani secretary. When he learned I was Kurdish, he asked if I was educated. I replied yes, and he said I should become his secretary. I felt he had a sort of Kurdish prejudice and had joined the army out of poverty. It was clear to me that, although Kurds might be Shia, they were not fully accepted by the Iranian Government, especially in an institution like the Revolutionary Guard, which viewed them with suspicion. For many, Kurdish identity was a red line for the Islamic Republic.

Thus, I transitioned from being an RPG gunner to a medic and then to a secretary overnight. It was a very high position, and I gladly accepted it. As the battalion secretary, everything changed. Although being a medic was good, those who have experienced military service know that being a battalion secretary entails managing short-term leaves, writing duty rosters, and organising supplies and equipment. It involved corresponding with the battalion for rations and other matters, which meant leaving the base and getting a breath of fresh air. In essence, it meant having a degree of authority. When I took on this role, people's behaviour toward me changed. I no longer stood in line for food, and I enjoyed the best meals. I had no duty or guard shifts. Those who had previously looked down on me because of my education or financial status now tried to befriend me and sought to get close to me. This is one of the institutionalised traits of military service, which I later realised is prevalent throughout society.

Before this experience, I had not encountered the way people's behaviour changes so drastically once you hold an official position. People who had previously excluded me from their circles now sought my presence. I do not remember exactly how I interacted with them – whether

I settled scores or not. However, it is human nature to have some pride and arrogance, and it is possible I displayed some unpleasant behaviour during that time. After all, one's position always affects one's personality and performance.

Frozen Socks

Let me take you back to a funny memory from before I became the battalion clerk. In the autumn of the year when I was a medic, we were stationed in the Shamat area of Mahabad, in the village of Qom-Qaleh. One of the soldiers from the area around Miandoab fell ill. He had a problem with his intestines, and, despite trying every medicine I had, his condition worsened. I told the battalion commander, 'We need to transfer him to the hospital.' I wouldn't have minded going to the city with the patient and seeing the beautiful Mahabad again. The commander said he wouldn't give us a vehicle for just one person; we needed at least one more patient! It was funny, but we managed to find another patient, making us three: two patients and one medic. The first soldier was genuinely ill, and the second was a Shakkak Kurd[1] who often suffered from stomach aches due to overeating.

We went to the Mahabad hospital. The first patient was admitted for a few hours. The end of his treatment coincided with dusk, and the vehicle had returned to the camp. I suggested we go to Aunt Zeynab's house, which made everyone very happy. I was so eager to see Aunt and her children that I didn't realise it wasn't polite to visit someone unannounced. Aunt was thrilled to see us and offered us one of their rooms. They were busy with a neighbour's wedding ceremony and paid little attention to us. My cousin, who was just starting her youth, kept coming and going, preoccupied with her new Kurdish dress. I looked at them with envy, seeing how much fun they were having, while we were just bald-headed soldiers.

1 The Shekak Kurds (or Shikak Kurds) have a distinct dialect that sets them apart from the Sorani Kurds, who are more widely known. They primarily inhabit the regions surrounding Khoy, Salmas and Urmia in north-western Iran, specifically within areas such as Anzel, Sumay Baradust, Targawar and Margawar. The Shekak community is characterised by its relatively closed clan system, which plays a significant role in its social structure.

Apparently, when we took off our boots, the smell from our feet filled the entire house. Aunt said, 'Kameel, your socks have been in your boots for so long that they smell terribly. Even though you are in a village, you should maintain cleanliness.'

We explained that sometimes we even live in mosques and don't have hot water. Aunt insisted that we take off our socks so she could wash them. Reluctantly, the two soldiers, feeling quite embarrassed, removed their socks. Aunt told my cousin, Monira, to wash them. After months without television, we became glued to the screen before dinner and bedtime and didn't think more about it.

The next morning, I asked Aunt for our socks so we could leave. She suddenly disappeared, and I later saw her whispering in another room, waking Monira and asking her questions. Monira had soaked the socks in a tub of warm water, but Aunt had forgotten them in the bathroom while she went to visit a neighbour. It was winter, and the bathhouse was outside the house, so the socks and water had frozen. Aunt was too embarrassed to give us the frozen socks. We kept asking for them, and Aunt kept saying, 'Have another bite to eat. Drink another tea.'

When we said it was getting late, she laughed and blushed, saying, 'Kameel, Monira and I forgot to wash the socks. They're frozen!' They had put the socks, frozen stiff, like skeletons, on the oil stove, but they didn't dry in the short time we had. We put them on, still damp and frozen, and set off. This story became a joke that we always laughed about and reminisced over.

Shopping in the Village and, Again, Information Security

During the period when I was the company clerk, I sometimes went with the commander on patrols around the village. Although lighting a lantern in the tent was prohibited, he often did so and would say to me, 'Take care of the glass of this lantern; it's worth as much as a son to me!' I wondered why he kept repeating this phrase, until we became closer and he revealed that he wished he had a son, but he had five daughters. Perhaps this was why he paid special attention to me – among the soldiers, I was the youngest and seemed to him like the son he did not have.

My presence also had other advantages for him: I knew the region and the local dialects and could speak with people in their own languages. He

was a good person, but they said that, because he was Kurdish, they were suspicious of him, and he was soon transferred elsewhere.

Our group was also moved to the villages of Mirabad and Sardasht. They set up a temporary base for us in the mountains, which even lacked a road. Sometimes a bulldozer would come, build a road and create a new base for no particular reason. Occasionally, we were questioned about small, routine matters. The local military personnel frequently summoned the local soldiers for questioning about where they had been, what they were doing, how many days of leave they had taken, which tent they were sleeping in, who their friends were and so on. Since similar things happened to others, as well, I thought it was part of the routine in military service in conflict zones.

One day, when I was no longer the clerk and two other soldiers and I were on road security duty, we were stationed on a remote road in Ghevrik,[1] Sardasht, overlooking a village at the end of a valley. We decided that, since there was no significant news and no guard post, we would go to the village to have some cold cake and soft drinks. We also wanted cigarettes, and the only thing we had with us was a local, strong and unpleasant-smelling tobacco. We thought we might find smuggled cigarettes there. These cigarettes were cheaper, came from Iraq, and were often found in the village. With this thought, we went down into the valley. The village appeared to be close from a distance, but it took a long time to reach it. The dense, wild trees and the rugged paths made the journey even longer.

It took a while to find a shop. We were lucky and bought both cake and drinks as well as cigarettes from an old woman who had turned a corner of her kitchen into a shop. The village headman and villagers were surprised by the presence of three soldiers without support and asked us what we were doing there. I was familiar with their accents, and we chatted a bit. In the end, we asked them not to mention that they had seen us there, and we returned the way we came. Nothing happened until a few days later when there was a clash between the Sardasht Special Forces and the Peshmerga in the same area. One of the Revolutionary Guard, who was an

1 The Ghevrik people inhabit a geographical area located within the triangle formed by the cities of Mahabad, Sardasht and Bukan, with the Khalifan district in the outskirts of Mahabad being the largest village of the Ghevrik community.

official Guardsman, was killed, and several others were wounded. When the news arrived, a state of alert was declared. The main base, which was called a 'company', aimlessly fired mortars around. Almost all the surrounding mountains were shelled and bombarded.

A day or two later, I was called by the battalion's human resources. When I arrived, the usual person and another started asking questions. The questions were not the usual ones. They asked where I was on the day of the clash. I said I was on road security duty. They asked with whom, and I named them. They called them, and they came and confirmed my statements. They then asked where my post had been three or four days earlier, and we said it was right there.

The situation was that, after the clash, the Sardasht Information Security Division went to the surrounding villages, and the villagers reported that three soldiers had come there a few days before the clash, one of whom spoke Kurdish like them and wore glasses. Based on the signs and a review of the road-security-post dates, they came to us. After this questioning, I was put into a Toyota vehicle and handed over to the Sardasht General Guard.

I was terrified. Deep down, I knew that, once my case reached the Information Security Division, they were going to attribute something to me that I had no role in.

The interrogations began. When they asked a few questions, I realised that they had also brought out my so-called 'repentant' file and had it on the table. As they flipped through the file, I saw a letter from the Naqadeh Guard and realised that they had included the false case from Naqadeh in my file. I was very upset because that Kurdish official from Pasveh who, with a bribe, had freed my father from the Revolutionary Guard's prison had promised and sworn that there would be no more cases and that they would not pursue me, and a Naqadeh guard had said he would not report my arrest to the IRGC, but he too had sent the file. What a world of insecurity and deceit surrounded me! Both had lied.

I knew they would not easily drop the matter. No matter how much I insisted that I had no role and that we had only gone to buy cake, drinks and cigarettes, they did not believe me. I was severely mistreated and spent several days in detention, experiencing intense psychological pressure and torture. For example, they would sit me blindfolded on an empty barrel and threaten that, if I did not confess, they would execute me. Then

someone would suddenly cock a gun, and another would kick the barrel to create a loud noise, simulating a gunshot. Although I realised after one or two repetitions that their actions were not serious, it still caused me additional shock and fear. The nights I spent there were filled with nightmares, and I would wake up in terror.

After spending several horrifying days in the Information Security Division detention centre, I finally signed a commitment paper that they did not even let me read. When I returned to the base, everything had changed. I was disarmed. Every position I had was taken away. My tent was changed, and I was moved to another company. I was completely alone again – except for my friend Hammeh Saleh from Saqqez, all the soldiers who were my peers and spoke my language kept their distance from me. Everyone's behaviour had changed. Other soldiers had heard things about me and were afraid to come near me. Anyone whose case went to the Information Security Division was automatically boycotted. This misfortune happened to me again and again. The changes in behaviour, the boycotting, the ostracism and being made a scapegoat seemed to be my constant, unwarranted lot.

The Zombies of the Devil's Valley

The loneliness had returned. I was going through a situation like the days following my release after I was arrested by the Revolutionary Guard for joining the Democratic Party. Once again, the people around me were distancing themselves and leaving me alone. I had committed no crime and did not deserve such bitterness. When they confiscated my weapon, they sent an unwelcome message to those around me that I was dangerous and to be cautious! Even though I was relieved of guard duty, I retreated into my shell and returned to reading books. Sometimes, I would peel potatoes and onions in the kitchen or clean in front of the tents and command posts. I performed logistical and service jobs, emptied cargo and occasionally washed pots and cleaned the toilets. In short, I was assigned every menial task. I was not allowed near the command room or the armoury. I was never to approach anyone of rank, and they were not supposed to speak to me.

This situation continued until my second year of service, when the troops were redistributed and sensitivities lessened. We returned to Saeen-

Dej and went with another group to the famous and mountainous area of Sarshakhan. Its name, meaning 'above the mountains', was quite fitting. Sarshakhan was in the heights of Piranshahr and Mahabad, a strategic and mountainous region connecting the rural territories of three cities: Mahabad, Piranshahr and Sardasht.[1]

Moving from Mahabad and Piranshahr, we passed through the village of Likben[2] and arrived at the rugged area of Sarshakhan, which lies along an old castle called Qalat Shah.[3] On the high mountains overlooking the region of Lajan and Likben, the villages of Ahmad Gharib and Babakarabad were also located. Ahmad Gharib had a few families, all of whom were Seyyeds and related. Babakarabad was a larger village, but both lacked proper roads. Beyond Likben, the road turned into a dirt track, and travel was difficult, except by military vehicles, desert jeeps or tractors. Thus, perhaps only a few vehicles would pass through there during the

1 Geographically, part of Lajan is in the Mamesh region, separated from the Mangurs. Until 1984, this area included 11 villages, which became a base for the Democratic Party, Komala and other opposition groups after the 1979 Revolution. The Democratic Party's radio station and hospital operated from the village of Kani Zard. However, ongoing conflicts led to the destruction and depopulation of villages such as Kili, Kani Zard, Shaybersi, Bazargah, Dilke, Hawshin, Seyyidabad, and Kuluka. Their residents became displaced, seeking refuge in Lajan and the cities of Mahabad and Piranshahr. Today, only Ahmad Gharib, Babakarabad, and Ibrahim remain in Sarshakhan, which also features notable archaeological sites like Qalat Shah, Bard Mafu and Qalat Mustafa Beg.

2 Likben is situated along a river flowing from Sarshakhan in the south, joining a branch of the Little Zab River on the village's western side. It serves as the northern gateway to Sarshakhan, connecting it via the Gelo valley to the Lajan plains along the Pasaweh-Mahabad road. Until 1984/85, Sarshakhan and its surrounding villages had no vehicle-accessible roads. Residents relied on mules, donkeys and horses for transportation. Military tactical roads were later built to facilitate troop movements, occasionally used by locals. Historically, and even now, Sharshakhan has been a base and transit point for Peshmerga forces.

3 The Qalat Shah Fortress, dating back to the 1st millennium BCE during the Median period, is in Mahabad, in the eastern region of the Mangur area of Piranshahr. This structure was officially listed as a national heritage site of Iran on 7 June 1956 (registration number 1237). Situated near the village of Dagheh, the fortress stands on a massive 80-metre-high mountain, strategically built to protect against enemies, as it could only be accessed from one route. Although much of the original structure has been destroyed over time, remnants such as water reservoirs, two corridors and large rooms indicate its former grandeur. Archaeologists suggest that the fortress's foundation dates back two thousand years before Christ and was expanded during the Median era (Binandeh, Rezaei & Sorkhabi, 2023).

week. After Likben, a deep and dark valley began, known as the Devil's Valley. It was possible to reach Ahmad Gharib from the valley by mule or donkey, but it was dangerous alone. It is hard to believe, but until recent years, they even lacked electricity.

At the highest point of Ahmad Gharib, there were two bases that we took over. The soldiers stationed there, who were leaving, resembled the zombies we see in movies – people in tattered clothes with long beards, constantly saying, 'May God help you. He didn't help us!'

Their words were strange. Such beauty and pristine nature, yet such bitterness . . . It was spring, and the village was full of beautiful flowers. What tulips grew in those mountains and plains! The view was extraordinarily pleasing to the eye. When we remarked on this, they responded that it was just the beginning. Staying here meant being cut off from everything and losing access to the outside world. We would go insane. In winter, you had to practically shut the door and stay in the base's basement for months. From autumn onwards, birds wouldn't fly here, and only then would you see what was going on. As the Kurds say, 'This is just Lilith, and the real horror is yet to come' – implying that you haven't yet faced the real problem.



Image 131: Longing for civilian clothes and taking a keepsake photo with them. Ahmad Gharib village, spring 1990.

We took over the bases, located on both sides of the village and on the summit, and started organising guard duties and tasks. Gradually, we realised that we had no access to anywhere. Babakarabad was distant, and Ahmad Gharib was down in the valley. We had neither a

telephone nor any other means of communication – the desert radios were for military use. There were about fifteen of us at one base, and if one fell ill, I, having returned to medical duties, had to assist them, traveling between the two bases. Sometimes it took up to a month for the supply vehicle to arrive, and our connection with the outside world was maintained through letters.

We had a large underground food store, mostly consisting of canned fish, beans, dried meat and rice. The previous troops had left us some things to do, such as planting vegetables and crops around the base. A few individuals who knew farming started the work. We also pooled money to buy sick sheep or goats from shepherds. We had a cook from Sardasht who would cut up the meat and hide it in rocks and under bunkers so that wolves and foxes wouldn't find it. The rest of the food was canned. We had a generator that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't. Usually, lighting was by lantern. We brought water from a spring near Ahmad Gharib by mule. We had an outdoor shower that was difficult to use, to the point where we sometimes skipped it and settled for a simple wash with soap and spring water.

We had a soldier from Varamin who, unlike everyone else, liked to go on road supply and guard duty. He was always volunteering, and we happily let him take our turns to guard at the last point of the mountain toward Babakarabad. This continued until, one day, the battalion commander, who we saw only every few months, arrived unexpectedly with a vehicle equipped with a mounted machine gun. We saw them bring the short Varamin soldier into the base courtyard, where he was beaten and kicked. He was crying and eventually said, 'I planted it! It was me.'

The story was that, during this time, he had planted a small poppy garden and was enjoying it.[1] They said that a sheep from one of the shepherds ate from it and fell ill. The shepherd traced the cause of the sheep's illness to this garden and, not recognising the plant, showed it to the lord of Babakarabad. He identified it as opium poppy. They then informed the Babakarabad base, and our soldier, who had been constantly

1 The local name for the poppy plant is *koknar* or *tortori*, and it has a history spanning over 4,000 years. Globally, this plant is known for its use as a narcotic substance. The poppy is an annual plant, and more than 200 species have been identified so far. In addition to its many species, it also has different subspecies and forms. Some believe that Asia is its primary region of origin.

around the poppies and watering them, was found. He was sent to a military court. We were sent to destroy the poppy garden.

It seems unlikely that the shepherd from Ahmad Gharib wouldn't recognise the poppy and know that opium is derived from it. Wild poppies are found in the Sarshakhan mountains during spring and summer, and it has been known for a long time that opium comes from this flower. However, since they do not know how to process opium in Kurdistan, they do not pay much attention to it. Additionally, opium from wild poppies lacks the high, and goats and sheep that consume it do not fall ill; rather, they get quite fat. It is likely that the shepherd and the lord set up the Varamin soldier and fabricated the story about the sheep's illness.

Although this base was truly the end of the world, with no contact with anywhere, many interesting and exciting things were happening beneath the surface. There was no fighting in this area; the situation was secure. When the main base commander changed, the two commanders had a confidential meeting and discussed things in detail. The departing commander introduced several villagers to his new counterpart. I had always sensed a system of exchange between him and the few elder villagers. Sometimes he would take medicine from me and give it to the villagers or, when I was on guard duty, we would see fires in the mountains through the binoculars, and sometimes we would hear noises. I always wondered what was happening there and what was going on beneath the surface of the area, until our Sardasht cook, who was close to the base commander, secretly told me, 'Kameel, this is a passage where sometimes the Peshmerga pass through to the Mahabad and Sardasht areas.' He explained that the commander secretly took supplies from him and delivered them to the Peshmerga through intermediaries. They had agreed to keep out of each other's way, but, if anyone found out, the commander's skin would be at stake!

Strategic and under-the-table dealings for survival between the Peshmerga and some base commanders had existed since the beginning of the war in Kurdistan against the government centres (in 1979) and so were not new. Apparently, the army also had such dealings with the Peshmerga, but for us, the soldiers, these unexpected and strange occurrences were quite remarkable.

Our neighbour in Piranshahr was a distant relative of those Seyyeds living in Ahmad Gharib. When I arrived at this base and had no access to

anywhere or to leave, my father had asked the Seyyeds to look after me. After a while, when they realised I was the son of Kaka Karim, they established a good connection with me.

One of the Seyyed elders always mockingly said to me, 'Rola Gyan, siyasat zor qula', meaning 'My son, politics is very deep.' I had heard this famous phrase among the Kurds many times. We would give them the supplies they wanted, and they would provide us with security; we helped each other survive. Our commander was extremely afraid of the Peshmerga and did these things to stay alive, saying, 'I don't want my daughters to become orphans.' If the battalion knew, it would tear everyone apart! Sometimes I think they might have known, too, but no one would admit it.

It was autumn when my father finally came to visit me, and what a great visit it was. During my entire military service, this was the only time he came. The road was difficult, and they hadn't heard from me in a long time, so he rented a car and came with my brother Rasul. It was such a surprise; I couldn't contain my excitement. I had missed Rasul, who, with an anxious but sweet face, said, 'Oh, Kameel, how do you live here?' I laughed, and that sentence sticks with me.

When my father noticed I didn't have warm underclothes, he took off his thermal trousers behind a rock and gave them to me, and I wore them right there. It was a special moment because he had never shown such affection before. I could feel the warmth of his body in those trousers for a long time after that. The memory is vivid. The sun was setting, and the driver of the jeep warned they would be stuck in darkness if they didn't leave soon. I wanted them to stay longer, but the road ahead was winding and unsafe, so they had to leave while it was still light. The visit was over in a flash. From the base bunker, I watched them through binoculars, pushing the car downhill, and felt a strange sense of loss.



Image 132: Qalat-e Shah

Before the snow started, I had a little adventure in

Ahmad Gharib. Below our bunkers was a minefield through which there was only a narrow path cleared. No one ever went near it, but I did! The risk thrilled me, and I'd often volunteer for dangerous tasks with excitement. I'd slip past the barbed wire, lay a blanket on a rock overlooking Devil's Valley and enjoy my solitude. I had made myself a little hideaway, where I could read in peace, knowing no one would come near. I had even found a few people to bring me books from the battalion library or buy them from Mahabad for me.

The battalion postman came once a month, bringing letters. I usually had two – one from home and one from Parvaneh, the girl I was arrested over during conscription. The letters from home were always predictable, written by one of my sisters: 'We're fine, Mum's fine, Dad's fine, Grandma's fine. Everyone sends their regards. We miss you. How are you? Are you eating well? Grandma and Mum are asking if you're eating meat. Goodbye.' These letters weren't much in content, but they were filled with the scent of home and longing. Parvaneh's letters, however, were more exciting. It was common back then to take sections from books or stories for the greeting and goodbye parts of letters, and Parvaneh did the same, but then she'd also add her own thoughts and stories. Even the way she sealed her letters felt sweet and different.

I wrote back, too. My letters were varied, filled with everything – from my daily experiences to my emotions. My family was already worried about how far away my service was, so I avoided writing about the hardships. With all the free time I had, I wrote to everyone: Habibeh, Sabir, my father, Mahbubeh and Parvaneh. Interestingly, when I went on leave, I'd collect all these letters and keep them as memories of those lonely days. I still have them.

My father used to joke, 'Don't send these letters. Just read them to us when you come home because we can't understand your handwriting!' My terrible handwriting was a running joke, and they'd often save the letters for me to read aloud when I visited. Even now, my handwriting remains a source of laughter.

Winter Time

Snow began falling in mid-autumn, and the roads were closed. For nearly three months, we were unable to drive nor see any strangers. The

snow piled up so high that we had no access to water and everything froze. Sometimes we melted snow in kettles and large pots. The situation got so dire that we even started collecting lice and bugs from under our armpits and on our bodies – not out of hunger, but simply to clean ourselves and stay sane in those unhygienic, frozen conditions. We had covered all four sides of the base walls with blankets, and it was so cold that we couldn't go outside. We didn't have anyone on guard. We used a shovel to create a path to the toilet and came back the same way. We all slept in one large room and kept the other rooms closed to try to keep that room warm. Even the base commander slept with us. We had no fresh food or fruit. Apart from rice, the rest of our food was canned beans and tuna. Our onions and potatoes either ran out or spoiled over time, and the meat went bad quickly.

This situation continued until early spring. We hadn't left the base, and we'd communicated with other bases only via radio. When spring arrived, we emerged from our 'den' like bears. The cold had prevented anyone from shaving or cutting their hair, making us resemble zombies, like those who had left the base as we arrived and claimed it was hell. We could see their faces, and though they had said how terrible it was, we hadn't understood what they meant!

Toward the end of my service, during spring, I managed to get transferred to Piranshahr through pleading and favouritism. At that time, one of the perks of serving in the military was that you could transfer to your hometown toward the end of your service. After much effort, I was able to make use of this opportunity. I was sent to the Piranshahr headquarters and stayed there until the end of my service, but I only had exhausting guard duties. During the day, I went home and helped in my father's boutique.

In the final days, I went to Saeen-Dej for settlement to get signatures from the finance, asset and armoury departments for my clearance. When I reached the logistics and armoury department, an old Basij man refused to sign my clearance. He said a Kalashnikov was registered under my name that I hadn't returned. No matter how much I argued that it wasn't in my possession, it was useless. As you know, losing a weapon meant military court and a lot of trouble. I thought I should find out what the issue was until I remembered . . .



Image 133: Ahmad Gharib winter wedding.

We had spent some time in the mountains of Jandaran and experienced living in various villages. One day, in a mosque in one of the villages in Sardasht called Mawlu, our platoon commander asked, 'Who is Mohammad Ahmadi?' I stepped forward. He asked if I was born in Naqadeh and lived in Piranshahr. I said yes. He then mentioned he had heard my father owned a luxury store. I confirmed this. He asked a few more questions and left. I was curious about his intentions. My mind was on my file, which I knew was with them, and they were aware of its contents.

A few days later, he drove to the mosque door and told me to get in. He informed my commander that he was taking me with him. No one dared to object. Once we were on our way, he told me, 'I'm going to Saeen-Dej. Since you're from Piranshahr, I'll send you on leave for a few days and take you there myself. I need to travel the same route, and I don't want to be alone.'

I was pleased, but didn't understand why he was doing this, until later. He would find soldiers with good financial standing who were locals, take them to their homes and say he had granted their son leave. He would enjoy a lavish lunch or dinner and receive bribes.

Instead of going home, he took me straight to my father's shop. My father, delighted, wrapped up perfume as a gift and a scarf for his wife. Such practices were common and seemed obligatory. My father then called home to arrange a substantial lunch.

That day, the commander told me he would take my weapon and personally hand it over to the battalion's armoury. It took a while to locate it, and they discovered that, although the commander had returned it, it wasn't properly recorded.

During my final two days at Saeen-Dej for settlement, another incident occurred. One day, everyone was called to assemble, and we lined up. Two young men were brought to the centre of the morning parade ground and strapped to a metal bed with belts, receiving about twenty or thirty lashes each.[1] They were accused of sodomy – it was reported that they were engaged in sexual relations. In environments like military camps and prisons, due to the constraints and pressures on all fronts, such relationships often form, whether voluntary or forced, and are dealt with harshly if exposed. It was embarrassing for many, and people turned their faces away. Everyone was silent, heads down. A negative atmosphere prevailed.

The crime was severe: a cleric, presumably the military court president of the camp, continuously cursed and condemned the two soldiers, saying they should be stoned to death; it was a pity that the system had its hands tied and wouldn't allow it! Although the two soldiers denied the relationship, the cleric didn't believe them and insisted they should serve as a lesson to others.

Usually, in such cases, sexual relationships are revealed through control systems or informal means like informants. Despite the prevalence of such cases, officials continue to focus on punitive measures rather than prevention or mitigation. There are changes that could be made to organisational rules and regulations, such as leave policies or alterations in architectural design and organisational space, among other solutions, but the situation remains the same. There are no preventative measures, only space for punishment, labelling and humiliation. Generally, everyone is treated the same way as those two soldiers were. They are publicly shamed

1 In rare cases, the judge may sentence defendants to a *hadd* punishment under Sharia law, which could involve much harsher penalties, including execution or stoning.

and criticised, which instils feelings of shame and inferiority in them, while others experience a mix of shame, criticism, fear and threats, and suggestions that similar treatment awaits anyone who commits such acts.

Essentially, it's a power display intended to instil fear and terror in others. Such practices have occurred in the past in other places, but the world has changed. Unfortunately, in Iran and some other countries, these outdated mechanisms are still in use. These challenges are also related to the developmental state of society in various dimensions. From another perspective, these issues and harms can be viewed functionally in institutions like military camps and prisons.

No further explanation was given. The soldiers were harshly flogged in front of our eyes. Their cries grew louder, and they fell to the ground with bloodied backs. Then, a medic arrived. Without hesitation and based on my first aid experience, another soldier and I bandaged them. As they had fainted, they were later given IV fluids.

When I settled my account and left the camp, I felt an immense sense of relief. I reflected on how difficult and long those two years had been. Years later, whenever I see and hear complaints and protests from men's-rights groups on social media, I am reminded of those harsh times and think about how human-rights issues, beyond gender and prevalent stereotypes, should be addressed globally. Military service is an example where power is exercised over men. Criticisms of violations of human rights, often focused on women, are not adequately addressed when it comes to men. Mandatory military service is a violation of the rights of men and youth and even infringes upon the rights of women, who are separated from their husbands and loved ones due to conscription. Moreover, the prohibition of military service for women is an injustice to those who wish to pursue a professional military career.

When I got home, my father, still smiling, insisted, 'You must have run away! It's impossible that your service is over.' But, eventually, my discharge card arrived, and he looked at it with a smile.

When I applied for a new electronic discharge card, I noticed that, since I had enlisted at seventeen, the dates of my entry and exit had been slightly adjusted to comply with international laws, so it wouldn't appear as if Iran

had child soldiers.[1] I had started my service in the spring of 1989, but the card stated that my service began in 1990.

Family Changes During My Two Years of Military Service

During the two years of my military service, there were significant changes in my family. My parents decided to have more children, and Kamyar and Kani joined our family. My cousin Habibeh, who was like a sister to me, got married, followed by my own sisters, Tabibeh and Mahbubeh. The most unusual change was the addition of the new children, as marriages for girls at that time were not extraordinary. My parents' decision to have more children came at a time when Mahbubeh and Tabibeh were of marriageable age and I was about to go into the army.

Suddenly, when I was sixteen, my younger brother Rasul was around twelve and my sisters were older, a crying infant arrived in our home. It was unexpected and bewildering. People laughed, wondering why my parents wanted more children at that age. During my absence in the military, Kamyar grew a bit older and Kani was born.

I first saw Kani when I came home on leave. I was puzzled by the arrival of another baby, and I even joked about how our share of inheritance was shrinking. Because I was leaving soon, I felt relief that my parents were occupied and somewhat glad they had new distractions. I thought that, since I was about to leave for abroad, Mahbubeh was married, Tabibeh

1 Throughout the political and military history of nations, children have not been spared from the effects of armed conflicts. Along with women, they make up a significant portion of the victims. However, due to their age and mental, emotional and physical states, children are far more vulnerable than adults. In addition to being victims as civilians, children are also directly or indirectly involved in armed conflicts. The protection of child soldiers was first addressed in international humanitarian law through the 1977 Additional Protocols I and II to the four Geneva Conventions, both of which protocols prohibited the use of children under the age of 15 in armed conflicts. With the expansion of human-rights treaties, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, became the most widely accepted international human-rights document. The establishment of the International Criminal Court (the 'ICC') on 17 June 1998, and its entry into force in 2002, criminalised the recruitment and active enlistment of children under the age of 15 in armed conflicts. According to its statute, the ICC recognises 15 as the age of childhood, which contrasts with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines anyone under 18 as a child (see Sharifi, 2014).

would also leave and Rasul would grow up and pursue his life, my parents would be busy with the new children, which eased my guilt.

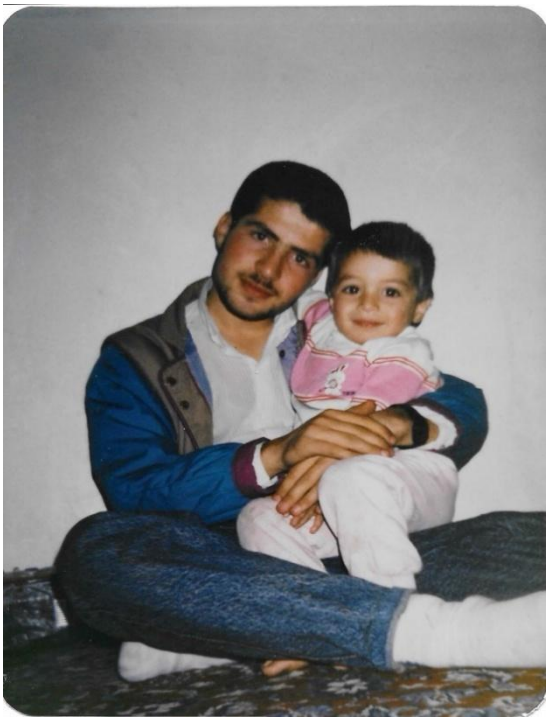


Image 134: On leave – me and Kamyar. 1990.

Habibeh's wedding was similar to my sisters'. We were like siblings and close friends. She married a distant relative who was significantly older than her, and I wasn't entirely happy about it. In our culture, cousins, especially those who are of the same age and were breastfed together, are considered like siblings, and this feeling is genuine. Habibeh had stipulated that she wouldn't allow the ceremony to take place until I could come on leave. At that time, it was customary for the father or brother to escort the bride to the groom's house. Since I was the only male cousin and still a child, my uncle expected me to be present at the ceremony. When I managed to get leave and come to Piranshahr, the ceremony took place.

I remember winter that year was harsh with constant snow. For the first time, I felt that being the brother of the bride made me a focal point of attention. Aside from the attention, it was customary to receive gifts at such ceremonies, and being one of the few men who could easily enter the women's area, which was full of women and girls, made the experience quite different from that of an ordinary wedding guest. The groom's family usually follows your wishes without question on such days. It was also customary for the brother to sit next to the bride in the wedding car, which was a significant honour.

The groom's home was in Naqadeh, and when I sat next to Habibeh in the car, I saw she was very sad and crying. I knew she wasn't happy about the marriage. Although it was arranged by the family and she had given

her consent, at her young age, what did consent really mean? Habibeh was seventeen and essentially a child bride. I understood the discomfort and implications of child marriage, especially for someone I loved like my sister. I knew she didn't want to move to Naqadeh, but, in our culture, brides are expected to appear sad when leaving their families, as if showing happiness would imply they were glad to leave their families. Habibeh's tears were very painful for me, and I tried to make her smile with jokes during the journey. I told her that she was growing up and leaving us, and it felt like losing a lifelong friend.

A few months later, my sister Mahbubeh married. The groom, who is now as close to me as a brother, was also a teacher, and they met at the Urmia Teacher Training University. Due to Mahbubeh's wedding, I took a three-day leave and returned to the barracks later than expected, resulting in fifteen extra days of service. I used to joke with Mahbubeh that I suffered fifteen extra days because of her wedding.

In this ceremony, I was again the brother of the bride, and the attention I received was even greater than at Habibeh's wedding, but it was still difficult. A kind sister who was always present and supportive suddenly disappeared, and her absence was hard for all of us, especially for my



Image 135: Habibeh's wedding. From right: Habibeh, me and my cousin Mahnaz. Naqadeh, winter 1991.

father, who had a special affection for her – I mentioned before that Mahbubeh was my father's favourite.

When I returned to the barracks a few days late, I was summoned to the military court. A letter had been sent stating that Haj Agha Seyyed Ali, an imam with two secretaries, questioned why I was absent for three days. He said, 'You had fifteen days of leave, and now you're missing an additional three days?!'

I explained it was due to my sister's wedding. He replied, 'You have abandoned your service to the sacred Islamic Republic in the Revolutionary Guard for a wedding, which is entirely contrary to our principles and involves mixed dancing! If you had any other reason, I might have forgiven you, but not for this. I'll impose an additional fifteen days of service.'

I didn't dare to speak and was not given a chance to explain; he warned that even a single word would result in thirty extra days of service.

Kuykha's Kin and the Forced Family Connections

A short time after my military service, Tabibeh got married. She was the same sister who initially worked as an auxiliary nurse at the city hospital, then became a nurse and later took a position in the family-planning department. During that period, she was ambitious, cheerful, beautiful, modern and contemporary. Before her marriage, we had a good relationship and shared similar viewpoints. Compared to Mahbubeh, who was more conservative and traditional, we were the modern members of the family, which brought us closer together.

We learned that she had started a romantic relationship with the brother of a man whose book traces I used to mark at the library. The brothers were the nephews of a man known as Kuykha, the village chief. Kuykha-Hola (Abdullah) was from the village of Kasa-Karan, 17 kilometres from Piranshahr. During the Shah's reign, he was appointed by the Government as the chief, known in Kurdish as *kuykha sjel*. Kuykhas were responsible for reporting deaths and births to the civil registry and issuing death certificates or identity cards, as well as identifying conscripts. Kuykha-Hola succeeded the head of our family, Kuykha-Khalil, who was the chief of that village and another nearby village, when Khalil moved to the larger village of Shinabad. In the region, he was known as Kuykha-Hola of



Image 136: Mahboubeh's wedding. From right: our groom Kak Hossein Pashaei, Mahboubeh, me, Tabibeh. Piranshahr, 1992

Germian. His father had migrated from the Germian region of Iraqi Kurdistan to Iranian Kurdistan and was from the Mangur Bab-Rasu clan.[1] He later became one of the leaders of that clan, and, over time, most of the Bab-Rasu clan residing in the area followed him. Early in the Revolution, he joined the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran with some of his relatives, but, due to disagreements with several commanders, one of whom was Mangur, he left the Party. He spent some time in Iraqi Kurdistan before returning to Iran with some of his clan members after Kurdish Party forces withdrew from Piranshahr. After expressing regret and repenting, he joined the Revolutionary Guard and later the Intelligence Agency, turning his house, located directly opposite the Mandi building (the city's Intelligence office), into a base, complete with guards and equipment.

As a tribal chief, he wielded relative power, and his proximity to the Government helped solidify his position. His status in the city and region was such that, in case of security issues with the Revolutionary Guard and

1 The Bab-Rasu clan is separate from the well-known seven tribes of the Mangur confederation and resides on both sides of the Iran-Iraq Kurdish border.

the Intelligence Agency, ordinary people would go to him for help in resolving problems.

The locals had a dual perspective on him: on the one hand, he helped resolve certain issues, and on the other, he was loyal to the security forces. They would say Kuykha-Hola, while potentially harmful to the Kurdish people, sometimes did good as well.

At that time, it was customary for influential families to benefit from both the people and the ruling system. This could be measured by the extent to which people sought their help and the number of sheep and goats and the amount of money they received in donations. Essentially, they acted as intermediaries benefiting from both ends.

Kuykha-Hola was a constant fixture in encouraging families and mediating for individuals and families with Kurdish Peshmerga members, who, in exchange for security and avoiding condemnation, would lay down their weapons and join the repentant. Additionally, he was one of the experienced interrogators of the Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence, using his knowledge of the region and its people to extract confessions from prisoners, especially Peshmerga captured alive. After my arrest and the capture of the Piranshahr city team members like those from Oshnaviyeh and Naqadeh, Kuykha-Hola, accompanied by Sadra, the deputy head of Piranshahr Intelligence, interrogated some individuals.

Our future in-law had a father who was a respectable and humorous man engaged in farming – i.e., selling wheat and barley – and had no connection with his brother's activities nor supported them. However, ultimately, the younger members of the family leaned more toward their powerful uncle.

When the marriage proposal for Tabibeh and this young man was brought up, our family strongly opposed it. My parents were against it, and I was adamantly opposed. Our reasons for opposition were that they were affiliated with the Government and armed, and that there were familial and cultural mismatches. Typically, non-Mangurs and especially Mangurs from the feudal class did not marry each other's daughters due to significant differences in customs and cultural practices. Additionally, the groom was younger than the bride and was a soldier and unemployed at the time. However, through his uncle, he completed his military service at home and translated the Kurdish news from the Democratic Party of

Kurdistan radio broadcast daily at noon into Farsi, which he submitted to the city operations headquarters for analysis by the Intelligence Agency.

Despite our logical objections, Tabibeh's insistence and the power of love overcame everyone. They were married in a traditional ceremony and quickly prepared for the wedding and starting their life together.

The Pain of Family Assassination and My Sister's Bitter Wedding

On the morning of 18 September 1992 (27 Shahrivar 1371), one of my father's cousins brought the news that our relatives, Kak Fattah and Dr Sharafkandi, had been assassinated in Europe the previous night. We were all in shock and disbelief. Questions and phone calls proved futile. We all went to the home of my father's cousin and Kak Fattah's mother, who we called 'Hajar' in Kurdish. She and her two daughters sat in the middle of the garden, throwing dirt over their heads and wailing. Haji Hassan, Kak Fattah's father, wept quietly in the arms of a relative from Oshnaviyeh.

There was no doubt about the authenticity of the news. Soon after, Taha, Kak Fattah's brother, arrived at the house. Two cousins held Taha on either side as he cried out loudly *Wey Bararo* ('Oh, brother!') in agony, and his lamentations made us all weep.

The people of the city were also grieving and had closed the market and shops for several days in protest. However, our families were not allowed to hold mourning ceremonies. We couldn't even mourn properly. The Revolutionary Guard and the Ministry of Intelligence had declared that any form of mourning or commemoration for this event was prohibited, and we were not even permitted to hold a small family ceremony. Occasionally, during lunch and dinner hours, we would secretly gather at Hajar's house under the pretext of eating and quietly cry and wail. The people could not come to offer their condolences, but the grief had taken over the entire Kurdish region. The Government had deprived us of the opportunity to mourn and express our sorrow. The only black Paykan car in the city, belonging to the Intelligence service, was parked in front of Hajar's house day and night, monitoring the movement of people. The phone line at their house, and probably those of most of the family, was under surveillance.



Image 137: The funeral of the Mykonos restaurant victims at Père Lachaise, Paris. From right: Homayoun Ardalan, Sadegh Sharafkandi and Fattah Abdoli. (Photo: PDKI.)

Unfortunately, just days before the assassination, the wedding invitations for my sister were distributed by the groom's family, and the wedding day was announced. Even in that state of mourning, thinking of anything other than the wedding, which was another event intensifying the conflict between the two sides, was impossible. In these circumstances, the groom's family or, more precisely, the groom's uncle, who had selected most of the wedding guests, ruthlessly and even maliciously insisted that the wedding should be held on the scheduled day.

We were caught in a horrifying dilemma, having to marry into a Government-affiliated family that, especially at that time, was seen by the city's people as being no different from the assassins of Kak Fattah and Dr Sharafkandi, and now they insisted on holding the wedding. It was a significant challenge for us and deeply hurt our feelings, stirring our anger. Few had initially supported this marriage. We wanted the groom's family, or rather the groom's uncle, who had complete authority in family matters, to cancel the wedding due to our mourning. They, however, were obstinate, saying, 'What does this political matter have to do with you?' They insisted on proceeding with the wedding without any fuss. Their messages were salt in our wounds.



Image 138: The bloody scene after the Mykonos restaurant assassination. From right: Nouri Dehkordi, Sadegh Sharafkandi, Fattah Abdoli and Homayoun Ardalan. Berlin, 1992.

We couldn't speak to the older members of our family about these issues. The eldest of our clan, Mam Hawla (Uncle Abdulla), was in and out of the situation. His son, Kak Morad, was a Party commander and thus also targeted by the Government. Sometimes, I silently watched the sorrowful faces of the family elders, including Hajar, Mam Hawla and my father, who were cousins, as they spun their rosaries in the desperate assembly and sighed quietly, while my mother, despite her sorrow and shame, took on the responsibility of preparing the mourning ceremony to make amends.

In the end, they imposed their will on our clan, insisting that the wedding could not be cancelled or postponed, even though we all knew it was possible. The family elders had no choice but to comply, and, despite my objections, they sent a message to come and take the bride.

My sister's wedding was one of the most sorrowful I remember. As the elder brother of the bride, I was supposed to take her hand and treat her in a traditional and cultural manner, like Habibeh and Mahbubeh, but I couldn't. Everyone, especially my uncles, pleaded with me, saying it was a disgrace. They said that, in our culture, the brother of the bride must perform his role correctly, and not holding my sister's hand would be an insult to everyone. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't. The behaviour and words of their family were not only an insult to our family, but also to

us as mourners and to all the people who were mourning and protesting the regime. Of course, I cannot disregard the impact of the nationalistic atmosphere and my own and my family's political beliefs in making this decision.

I believe I bade a cold farewell to my sister and watched from a corner of the yard with the other male relatives, not sending her off in the traditional manner. She was taken away quietly, with no cheering, music or beautiful Kurdish dance. Uncle Ali took her hand instead of me, and she disappeared through the doorframe.

This issue remained in our hearts for years – that we could have prevented the wedding from taking place at that sensitive time but didn't. The fair thing would have been to postpone the wedding, not to cause bitterness or shame in front of our relatives. All of us, especially my parents, could not hold our heads high in the family for a long time because of shame. We were somewhat boycotted and directly or indirectly criticised for this issue, both by the people and by supporters of the Party, some of whom were our relatives or had played roles at that time. I, my father and many others had become displaced, imprisoned and tortured due to the Democratic Party and had lost our possessions in Naqadeh. Yet, such a marriage had to happen, especially when our relatives, who were among the leaders of the same Party, had been assassinated. It was truly a misfortune.

Although my sister's situation was understandable – she did not have the power to resist these events in a male-dominated society and surely did not wish to begin her marriage with tension – if she had had more agency or fundamental convictions, the ceremony could have been postponed. Both the bride and groom could have acted in a way that preserved mutual respect and avoided such resentment. However, they were in the midst of their love affair. For my sister, the wishes of her husband and his family were paramount.

In summary, for a long time, some family members regarded us as blacklisted, and my sister could not hold her head up in the family for a long time and was not invited to some ceremonies. It was a harsh blow, and my pride as a young man was deeply hurt. For several years, if any discussion arose in gatherings, I would withdraw — people would say things like, 'You're related to the groom,' or 'You're practically part of that family, the regime's agents . . .' Such remarks worried and distressed me.

Worse still, shortly after the wedding, problems began between my sister and her husband, and her life was filled with violence, fear and threats, despite having two intelligent and smart daughters. After years of conflict and the distress caused to those around them, especially my father, they separated in 2010.

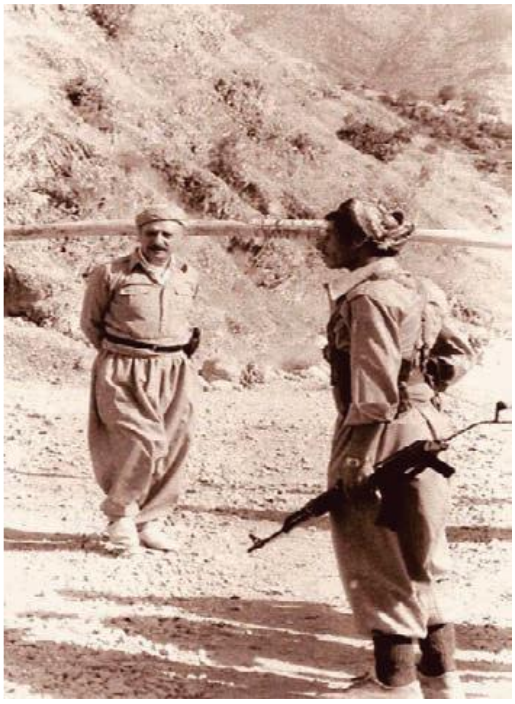


Image 139: Kak Morad and Dr. Ghassemlou, Qandil, 1983.

About a year after the wedding, our famous uncle was mysteriously killed. Kuykha-Haula, with his armed men, along with Sadra, the city's Intelligence deputy and some local personnel and employees of the Revolutionary Guard and Intelligence, went fishing. They threw dynamite into the water to kill large numbers of fish. It was said that the Intelligence operatives had tampered with the dynamite, causing it to explode earlier than usual.

Kuykha-Havla's power in the city and region had reached such a height that he even carried out personal vendettas under the guise of his position, and in public places. A person named Kake Sen (Hassan), a regional landlord from the Mangur tribe of the Zarin clan, had killed a man from his own clan – a member of the Qaderi group – over a financial dispute, and then sought refuge in the city's court for protection and legal recourse. Kuykha-Havla, for this reason, assigned one of his armed men, Havla (Abdullah) Ashnavar, to murder Kake Sen inside the Piranshahr court building. Following this murder, Kuykha-Havla and Abdullah Ashnavar were imprisoned for two months and fourteen months, respectively, then proudly released. The poisoning of some Peshmerga fighters of the Democratic Party in the Misha Dasht Valley was also attributed to Kuykha-Havola.

After his death, the entire structure he had built collapsed rapidly, and the remaining family and group were of no use even to the Government. On the other hand, with the changing attitudes of the younger generation and the social and political transformations gradually taking hold in Iran and Kurdistan, such systems were also being diminished and eliminated. Surviving individuals have now been integrated into the Revolutionary Guard and Intelligence services in more formal capacities, playing crucial roles in regional suppression when necessary.

Chapter Ten:
Unwavering Determination to Leave

When a person is young, they think of everything except surrender. Their perseverance is linked to the importance of their goal, which tells them how much they must push themselves. I had set a goal for myself and had to reach it: leaving Iran. Where to? Anywhere. I had to start from scratch. From the very beginning.

I should no longer have been afraid. I had restarted from zero multiple times. I had migrated many times, moving from one place to another. It seemed that moving and leaving were important parts of my life – intertwined. My childhood and adolescence were characterised by continuous departures, mostly due to the compulsion of war and politics.

Perhaps my experiences constantly called me to leave and kept me away from stability and from settling in one place, even for a short while. These departures were not limited to the spatial or geographical; rather, they had become so ingrained in my soul and my psyche that I always had the determination to move, as if I had become accustomed to it and wanted to experience as much as possible through it, despite the hardships.

In fact, it seemed that some humans step onto this path at birth. As Akhavan-e Thaleth, the twentieth-century Farsi poet says, sometimes it's an irreversible path. This time, I had to set out with a backpack to shape my destiny elsewhere in the world. Strive to change what I didn't want and create what I did want. I was raw and inexperienced, and the path was tough and challenging, but it felt as if the road was calling me and whispering promises of change in my ear.

Marriage as a Contract: Moving to the Next Stage

Once my military service was over, my family, as expected and according to the prevalent culture of that time, entered the next stage of preparations for my future. The plan for my marriage had already been proposed and approved in public. They had chosen the options and prepared everything for us to go around seeking proposals.

However, I had gone to serve in the military with the intention of coming back ready to leave. I wanted to study in another country, work and build a different life. I had endured enough hardship and displacement in Iran. I had experienced imprisonment and torture in my youth, witnessed various forms of discrimination, mingled with many different groups and read numerous books. All these experiences suggested that life might be better elsewhere, and it was definitely worth trying my luck.

In traditional and small communities, when a young man finishes his military service, families typically focus on marriage or, as they say, 'settling him down'. If the young man has the reputation of his father, a job and an income, so much the better; he can quickly sit down at the wedding table. The reality is that the situation thirty-something years ago was very different from today. Military service marked the beginning of a new stage in a young man's life. Marriage was still somewhat like the old days, with tradition guiding all the decisions. It was considered an internal matter, managed by the families, who introduced and arranged the marriage between the boy and the girl. However, today, with social changes, many have adopted aspects of the global lifestyle, and such marriages have decreased, especially in large cities. We now see other forms of marriage, including cohabitation, for which community and family oversight is minimal or non-existent.

In summary, the topic was a serious one for my family at that time. They were constantly searching for options, and some acquaintances, when shopping at my father's store, even offered marriage options to get discounts! In the back of my family members' minds was the notion that I might want to leave Iran, so they tried to tie me down with marriage. They said, 'If Kameel got married and had children soon, he would settle down here!' Sometimes, I had to empathise with my family and eventually give

reasons not to marry a particular person. I had no other choice but to keep them occupied this way and buy myself some time.



Image 140: My own shop, Piranshahr, 1992

At Kurdish weddings in the Mokrian region, as in other parts of Kurdistan, people dance together, mixed and hand in hand. The custom is that, if the girl wishes, she can come and dance beside the boy she likes. However, the boy is not supposed to initiate this; it's specific to the girls. At weddings, they would often do this with me, arranging for a girl to stand beside me to encourage a connection and eventually marriage. But they didn't know I was only thinking about how to gather money for migration.

After my military service, I quickly started a business on my father's advice. I wanted to open a jewellery store, thinking it would be easy to sell the jewellery and leave when the time came. My father's only option was boutique management, and since I needed money and investment from him, I had no choice but to accept. I told myself, 'You're only supposed to do this for a year, so start and earn as much as you can!'

My father lent me 350,000 tomans, which was a significant amount in 1990. We went to Tehran together and made purchases. He rented a shop for me across from his store in Freedom Square, under a hotel named Saba, and I am forever indebted to him. He changed my destiny and life path.

My approach to running the store was different from others', including my father's, and I tried to follow Tehran boutiques. A few of us brought chic and modern goods, and our models were on par with those from Mahabad, which was then the centre of Kurdish fashion. We had several boutique owners competing, and we actively advertised in the city. I was younger, which made it more appealing to girls and young women. They also liked the way I managed the boutique. I advertised, gave gifts and implemented interesting ideas from Tehran boutiques in my store,

constantly coming up with new ideas and updating. For example, I would say, 'If you purchase a certain amount, you'll receive a free perfume.'

Gradually, with the trust I built with people, I also began offering instalment sales, and my business thrived. However, this innovation didn't sit well with many, including more traditional and experienced competitors, which led to disputes.

There was another aspect to the story: when I opened the store with my father's help, the issue of marriage became more serious. Some relatives or acquaintances would contact my parents with marriage proposals. Others even sent their prospective candidates to shop at my store, hoping to open the door to acquaintance and potentially marriage.

The War of the Green and Yellow Scarves

Three months after opening my shop, I embarked on my first foreign trip. I finally arrived in Free Kurdistan, or Southern Kurdistan – we Kurds refer to it as 'Bashur'. At that time, Iraqi Kurdistan did not have an official border with Iran, and Kurds crossed back and forth illegally. The ruling party in the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah provinces was the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, while Duhok and Zakho were under the control of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Crossing the border was relatively simple: if you were Kurdish, you could obtain a written permit at the first border checkpoint, enter the Kurdistan Region, stay for a week to ten days, and extend your stay in Erbil or Sulaymaniyah if needed.

Let me tell you about my first trip, which occurred after the events of 1991 in Southern Kurdistan, or the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Opposite my shop was a bicycle mechanic who worked with bicycle sellers in Erbil. He usually smuggled bicycles via the mountains by horse and porters and did most of his business with one family. The third son of this large family, named Kazem, later became my friend and passed away in Sweden a few years ago due to a previous attack. He used to travel to Iran for purchasing and would go to Tehran. One day, my shop neighbour, who was married, fell in love with a girl during one of his trips. Not wanting to go alone, he took me along. We travelled a route similar to the one I used in 2021 to escape and exit Iran, entering Iraqi Kurdistan through the mountains and reaching Erbil. This was my first trip outside Iran, and I saw a completely different world, from the style of housing to infrastructure and urban



Image 141: The 1991 popular uprising (Intifada)

planning. This trip made me feel the story of Samad Behrangi's *The Little Black Fish*[1] very vividly and showed me how much bigger and different the world was than I had thought.

After hours of walking, when we descended from the mountains overlooking Haji Omran, we were delighted to see a spring near the road and ran toward it. We drank the cool spring water and splashed it on our faces. Three young girls, seemingly from the local nomadic tribes, as their tent was nearby, approached the spring to fetch water. My shop neighbour, who was smitten and heading to meet his beloved, sang songs on a hilltop above the spring. The girls, enjoying his singing and the songs of Mohammad Mamle, smiled and approached us.

Shortly after, two armed men with unhappy expressions approached us. One of them threatened us, displeased with my friend's singing. When he realised we were Kurds from the other side, he addressed my friend, saying, 'Do you think this is Iran, where you put your hands on your hips and sing for our girls? Hey, Iranian pervert [*êranî hîz*]!' I had heard this term often, sometimes used derogatorily about Iranian Kurds.

1 *The Little Black Fish* is a children's story collection written by Samad Behrangi. He wrote this book in the winter of 1967, and it was first published by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults in 1968. The titular Little Black Fish embarks on a long journey to gain new experiences and achieve freedom. Many regarded this fish as a symbol of the revolutionary and intellectual young generation. The story's symbolic language has inspired numerous writers and poets, resulting in many poems and texts being written in its praise.

I was a bit

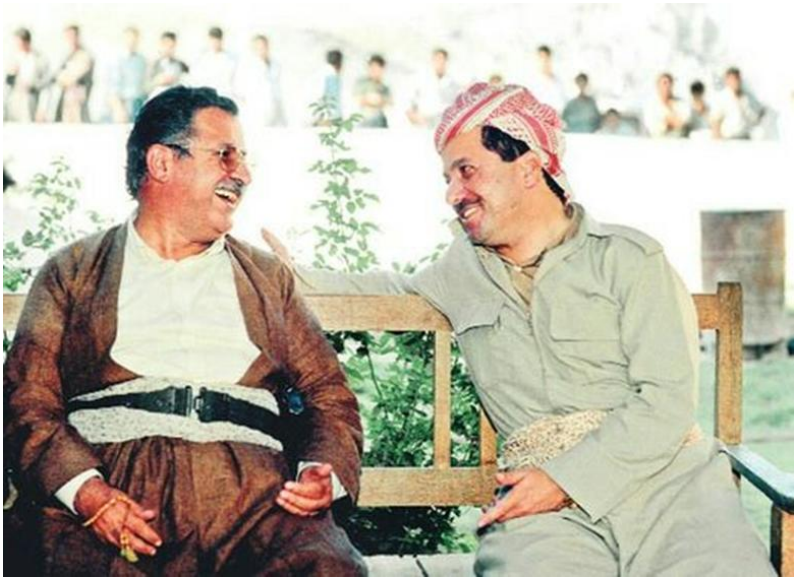


Image 142: Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani.

farther away and sensed the situation was tense. I hadn't sung anything and cautiously called for calm, explaining that my friend was soon to be married and was just in high spirits with no ill intentions.

This sharp encounter made me realise that there were cultural differences and sensitivities I needed to be aware of. They viewed gender, tribalism and honour more strictly, and the widespread presence of weapons among ordinary people exacerbated certain situations.

There was a sort of colour war in Kurdistan: Barzani supporters had yellow flags, while Talabani supporters, who were from the PUK, had green flags.

In Erbil, or as we Kurds call it, Hewlêr, my friend introduced me to Mam Salah's family, whose son Kazem frequently travelled to Iran. This acquaintance forged a lasting friendship between us that continues to this day. Mam Salah was a staunch supporter of Barzani and the veteran Peshmerga of the KDP. When we visited his home, he jokingly refused to eat green vegetables, saying, 'Because it's green, I won't eat it!'

Mam Salah's home was filled with photos of the Barzani family. Some images showed him as a Peshmerga either alongside them or alone. Everything was yellow, even the furniture!

I will never forget a scene I witnessed in one of Erbil's streets. A wedding caravan passed by, and young girls and boys in the minibus waved scarves out the windows as if the bus were split in two halves: one side had green scarves for the Talabani supporters, and the other had yellow scarves for the Barzani supporters. Both sides chanted slogans for their leaders: 'Kaka Kaka Kaka, Biji Kaka Masoud' and 'Mama Mama Mama, Biji Mam Jalal'.

On my travels to the Kurdistan Region and on other trips, I took many photographs. The conflicts and differences I observed were deep-rooted, demonstrating how entrenched certain disputes were, to the point where even families would clash over the issues!

Erbil, now the capital of the Kurdistan Region, was under the control of the Talabani forces and later fell to the Barzani forces, with the help of the Iraqi Government, on 31 August 1996.[1]

Ramadan, Mam Salim's eldest son (not to be confused with Mam Salah mentioned earlier), was leftist and sometimes found himself in the midst of daily disputes between Kurdish parties. Another of his sons and his second daughter were Barzani supporters, while his youngest son (and some of their relatives) was a Talabani supporter, leading to challenging discussions with his father and brothers. Overall, there was a lot of disagreement in the city and among families regarding who was aligned with which party.

During that period, the internecine war between Barzani and Talabani groups became notorious.[2] It was rooted in border disputes, geopolitical

1 The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan considers this day as one of treachery by the Barzanis against Kurdistan, as they sought the help of Ba'athist forces to retake Erbil. In response, the Democratic Party views events such as those in 1966 or on 16 October 2017 as days of betrayal by the PUK against Kurdistan.

2 In addition to words like 'displacement', 'bombing', 'massacre', 'military campaigns', 'Anfal' and 'chemical bombardment', which have become an inseparable part of Kurdish history over the past century, phrases such as 'fratricidal war', 'suicidal war' and 'civil war' have also become intertwined with the political culture of Kurdistan. Kurdish armed movements and parties in the last century, throughout their struggles, have frequently engaged in bloody conflicts not only against central governments to assert Kurdish rights, but also among themselves. Many parents still await news of children lost in these internal conflicts. After the fall of the Shah's regime, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, which had effectively disbanded following the execution of Qazi Muhammad and the dissolution of the Republic of Kurdistan, re-emerged as one of the main players in the Kurdish political landscape. In this context, Komala, established a few years before

issues and financial matters. It resulted in armed and bloody conflicts that lasted for years. Ultimately, the Brotherly War ended in 1998 through the mediation of the US and the initiative of then-US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.[1]



Image 143: Sons of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Masoud and Idris, and their Peshmerga.

When traveling from the Barzani region to the Talabani region, we witnessed tragedies. Anyone traveling from one of these two areas to the other was subjected to insults and accusations such as 'You have set foot on the soil of those filth! Don't you have pride and manhood? What kind of Kurd are

the 1979 Revolution, publicly announced its presence in the Kurdish political arena to operate as the second-largest party in Iranian Kurdistan after the Democratic Party, striving for its goals. While these two parties managed to control most Kurdish areas together for a time due to the particular situation, including threats from the Central Government, they maintained fundamentally different and opposing views and ideologies. The Kurdish Democratic Party advocated for 'autonomy for Kurdistan and democracy for Iran', aligning with the Western bloc, whereas Komala represented was a leftist, communist organisation. Their cooperation against a common enemy did not last long.

1 Since 1990, when the Kurds of Southern Kurdistan managed to gain relative control over their own affairs, Kurdistan has been consistently divided between the two main parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party, known locally as 'Parti', and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Each has had its own distinct territory. Despite this, they officially refer to themselves as a single entity — the Kurdistan Regional Government (the 'KRG') — with a unified leadership, parliament, executive and judiciary. Initially, after the establishment of the KRG, Erbil was under the control and influence of the PUK until 2003. The late Jalal Talabani, who later became President of Iraq, once said they would not allow even the voice of the KDP to reach the city. During that time, Iran's Revolutionary-Guard-affiliated 'Ramadan Headquarters' operated in the PUK-controlled areas, including Erbil. Between 300 and 350 Iranian Kurdish opposition members were assassinated within the KRG during this period. In such conditions, the KDP, with the backing of the United States and France, and in cooperation with the Iraqi army, managed to drive PUK forces out of the region, pushing them back across the Iranian border and dealing them significant, irreversible blows. Although the Talabani faction later returned, with Iranian support, they permanently lost control of Erbil, and their influence was subsequently confined to Sulaymaniyah.



Image 144: Jalal Talabani and his comrades.

you that you have no honour – eating the food of those informers of Iran or the Ba'athist Intelligence or Turkish MIT spies?' The other side would hurl similar accusations back. There was no physical violence, but humiliation and insults had become systematic. Perhaps the entire thing could be translated as 'Why did you allow yourself to go to that side and bring that filth with you, which is more disgusting than dog's blood!'

The deep-seated hatred between these two political groups led individuals to kill each other in the conflict zones and keep the flames of animosity burning.

On my subsequent trips to the Kurdistan Region, I felt deep regret. They could study in their own language, had newspapers, had more freedom for political activities than us and could advocate peacefully, yet they were at odds with each other. They had everything they needed to form a strong alliance, but, due to disputes, narrow-mindedness and the interference of countries like Iran, Iraq and Turkey – all of which had significant Kurdish populations – they could not unite and live together with declared independence. In Iranian Kurdistan, we had political competition. Although we did not have space for political activity and advocacy, we had more unity. In Iraqi Kurdistan, they had everything except unity!

The animosity between the two ruling parties in the Kurdistan Region, shaped by blood and with a political history of several decades, will not



Image 145: Kazem's wedding. Erbil, Kurdistan Region.

easily fade away. In addition to the regional governments, other smaller and larger Kurdish parties have, each for their own reasons, entered the fray of these blind hatreds. For example, occasionally the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) would undertake military actions against the KDP on behalf of the PUK. Similarly, Kurdish Iranian parties sometimes intervened in these disputes. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, although it tries to cover it up, shows evidence that some of the old cadres of Iranian Kurdistan democrats are deeply opposed to the PUK. Given the culture of dependency and lack of independence of Kurdish parties in all four parts of Kurdistan, it is not unlikely that these disputes could spread to other regions. For instance, after 2014, this issue spread to Rojava (Eastern Kurdistan) and Syrian Kurds. At that time, I was young and inexperienced, looking at the situation idealistically, wondering if such conditions would ever arise in Iran, where parties might regain power and similar conflicts might occur. Is it possible that even between the Democratic Party and Komala, who had a history of armed conflict, there could be clashes and our people would lean toward different sides?

My second trip was arranged a few months later through the efforts and encouragement of my friend Masoud Pirma, who now lives in Finland. Later, I also became friends with his brother Jamal, a talented stand-up comedian. At that time, Masoud and I shared similar ideological views, and his clerical uncle lived in Erbil. When he learned of my interest in visiting there again, he made arrangements, and we went.

With Masoud, we visited various places in Sulaymaniyah. There, I saw statues and busts of great Kurdish poets, politicians and nationalists, including Sheikh Mahmoud, Haji Qadir Koyi, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, and Qazi Muhammad. I took photographs of them. Books were still a significant matter for me, so I bought several leftist Kurdish books. It was important to me that education and literature were being pursued in Kurdish there.

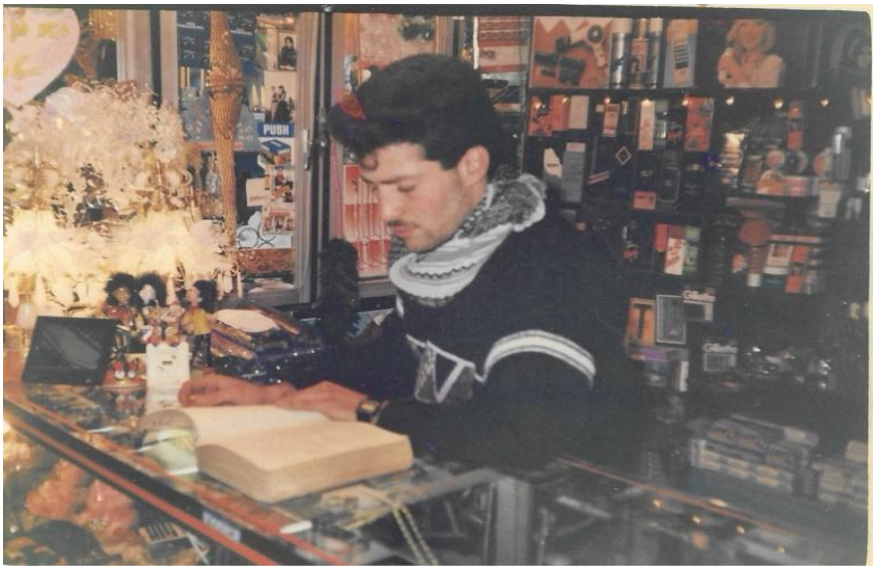


Image 146: At the shop. Piranshahr, 1992.

The trips to the Kurdistan Region marked the beginning of a fresh perspective on the world for me. It changed my views and demands regarding nationality, identity and ethnicity and raised numerous questions and ideas. These journeys made me realise that the issue of Kurdish identity and nationality transcended borders, and that motivated me to learn more and delve deeper into the subject. It encouraged me to read and strive to see the broader picture. The Kurdish issue was not confined to Iran; we were four separate parts, yet our general problems and desires were closely related.

As I mentioned, the internal situation in Kurdistan was quite unstable, with each region controlled by different parties. The two main parts of Kurdish geography were under the control of the Barzani and Talabani forces, while other areas were held by Islamists, Salafists or communist and leftist parties, all of which were in constant conflict and maintained separate checkpoints. In 2003, the Islamists lost their last stronghold in the Halabja region to the combined attack of the US and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Many of them fled to Iran or were arrested, although some were later released. They now engage in political activities under Islamist parties.

Of the books I bought, not many made it to Iran. Each checkpoint had issues with some of them. The Islamists burned leftist books, and others discarded different ones. One of them, like the Islamist parties, threatened to turn us over to Iranian Intelligence. They were connected with Iranian Intelligence and the Revolutionary Guard and were financially and militarily supported by them. Since we had entered illegally, we were terrified and yielded to their threats and demands. However, three months later, we repeated the journey with another illegal trip to Iraqi Kurdistan. It was worth the hardship!

At that time, the Salafists and, in general, the Islamists in the Sharizor region, centred in Halabja, had established an Islamic Government and had severe clashes with the PUK. They were often engaged in skirmishes. The massacre of a group of PUK Peshmerga in the village of Khili Hama by the Mojahedin of the Islamic Movement and the beheading of these Peshmerga led to US involvement in the matter. A long-range missile killed more than eighty members of the group, who were stationed in a cave in the Oramanat region. Simultaneously, the PUK attacked their territory and captured and cleared the city of Halabja. This move by the PUK ended Islamic control over Sharizor permanently.

While the Islamic movement group ruled in Sharizor, they handed over seven Peshmerga members of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran to Iran with their hands tied. Six were executed, and only one survived.

Later, I went back to Southern Kurdistan, not only to see and explore, but also to visit the UN office in Erbil and try to find a legal way out of Iran for further studies. However, I was given the wrong address. The UN's work in Kurdistan was not what I had hoped for. There was a Black woman there. With my limited knowledge at the time, mostly derived from movies, I was surprised that there wasn't a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman there, like Sherry Jones or Catherine Smith. The Black woman said, 'We are here to support governmental and non-governmental agencies. If you want to study, you need to go to your own country and proceed through its embassy.' Seeing that I was quite clueless, she also guided me on how to send documents to universities and obtain admission. She provided some information, but, on the way back, one of the Islamist-group checkpoints tore it up. This trip made me reflect on how to make my aspirations a reality.

From Iraq to Oman

Gradually, I learned to stand on my own feet and grasped the principles of business and trade. I could now work and trade independently of my father. I frequently travelled to Tehran to make purchases. One day, in the Tehran bazaar, I asked an acquaintance how I could emigrate.

He said, 'Go to travel agencies and inquire about the conditions. But if you have money, things will move faster.'

Not long after, I visited an agency on Takht-e Tavous Street. The woman there spoke to me in a condescending manner, as if I were an uneducated provincial kid, unworthy of serious consideration. Bluntly, she said, 'You're not in the right circumstances or age to go. It requires a lot of money, and I don't think you can handle it.'

I went to another travel agency, where a different woman explained how I could leave and emphasised that everything depended on giving her a good commission. She said, 'There are two ways you can go. First, we can get you a tourist visa for Greece, and from there, you can reach the country you want. The second way is we can get you a student visa from here.'

She asked about my education level, and I replied, 'I've completed the first year of middle school.'

She laughed and said, 'With that level of education, where do you think you're going? No school or university will accept you!'

She also asked how much English I knew, to which I responded, 'Very little.'

She was older, and, after I paid a consultation fee, she spoke to me in detail, explaining that continuing my studies wouldn't be possible with my current qualifications. She suggested forging my high school diploma and asked if I had the money for that. She also mentioned that getting a visa wouldn't be easy; we'd have to bribe several people at the passport office, airport and police, which would also require substantial funds. After calculating everything, she said, 'It will cost you about one million tomans just to get to this stage.'

At that time, the capital of my shop, which had grown through profits from my business, had doubled to 700,000 tomans. I told myself, 'Kameel! Somehow, you need to raise the money and leave . . . a lot more than you have right now.' So, I started working hard again to gather more money.



Image 147: Oman. Winter 1992.

I approached suppliers of goods that were popular in our region and a couple of sellers in Mahabad and Bukan. Sequins, beads and jewels were commonly used in our area for embroidering scarves and decorating Kurdish clothing, so I could rely on those products being in demand. I proposed a partnership to the sellers. I would travel to southern Iran to purchase items, which were being imported in bulk from Dubai, and bring them back. They agreed, and we decided to work as partners. One person from our city, a wholesaler from Mahabad, another from Bukan and I pooled our money together. Away from my father's eyes, I also borrowed money from my grandfather, Uncle Qader and Uncle Ahmad, with my mother acting as an intermediary.

Now that I owned a shop, people trusted me and lent me money as my business grew. For my first trip, I went to Qeshm Island, which had recently gained attention economically, where goods were being imported from Gulf countries like Qatar, Oman and Dubai. Buying from Qeshm was cost-effective and profitable for shopkeepers. Before my military service, my father had travelled to Dubai and Iraq several times, so I knew how profitable it was. The market was full of cheap foreign goods, and smugglers brought in items illegally by boat. Some Kurds from our region had gone there to work. When I met them, they told me about a city in the Sultanate of Oman called Khasab. They said I could get there by speedboat or dhow from a village called Soza on Qeshm Island.

After my trips to Iraqi Kurdistan, which were my first experiences outside of Iran, I travelled to Oman. This time, I went illegally. The smugglers transported baby camels and goats from Iran and brought foreign goods back. They would tie the baby camels' legs and lay them down on the boat, fitting one or two in each boat. The smugglers wouldn't take strangers, but since I was Kurdish and shared their Sunni faith, after friend vouched for me, they agreed to take me along.

We set off at night, speeding toward Oman. For the first time, I saw a fully Arab country. Oman was very different from Iran and Iraq. Its urban development and the cars people drove reflected a high level of wealth. The atmosphere was pleasant: luxurious hotels, foreign cars, Western-style houses, beautiful sandy beaches and people who, despite being traditional, lived peacefully and enjoyed music and entertainment. The goods I bought there were much cheaper than those in Qeshm.

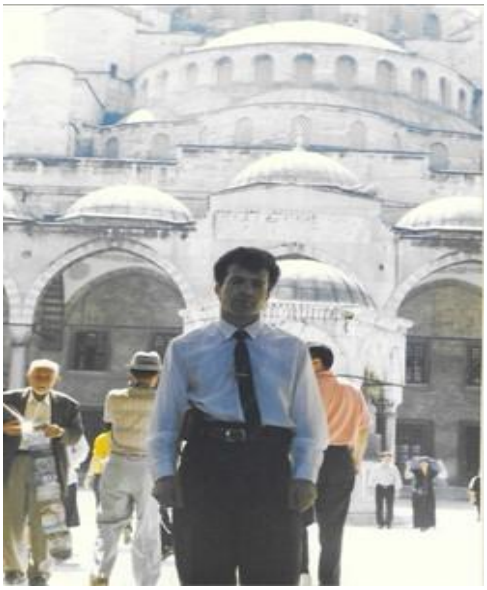
Journey to Istanbul

My brother, Rasul, had reached adolescence and wanted to work in my shop, which was considered more modern and stylish. This led me to make some promises to him that allowed me to focus on my travels.

My third trip abroad was to Turkey – a journey that greatly changed my perspective on life and made my decision to leave Iran more serious. Istanbul was significantly different from the places I had seen before. It was modern and up to date, with a large population of European tourists. The freedom, attire, music and food I experienced in Turkey seemed like gateways to a new world.

Gradually, I also visited Ankara and Kurdish regions of Turkey, such as Van, Hakkari and Dogubayazit. These trips were legal, as I had a passport after completing my military service, eliminating the need for smuggling.

My first trip to Istanbul was by bus, which took several days. At the border crossing in Bazargan, the authorities made things quite difficult for me and a few other young travellers. They suspected we were going for leisure and intended to make us suffer. Back then, border inspections and customs in Iran were mostly handled by the Revolutionary Guard and military forces, who had limited travel options. Some of their officers were resentful and treated everyone poorly. This trip was a bitter experience and a significant lesson for me. They told me I couldn't carry more than a certain amount of money. Since I had more, I entrusted some of it to a fellow traveller sitting in the front seat. Once we crossed the border, I asked for my dollars back, but he denied having any money. Despite my pleas, he refused to return it. The driver said, 'Young man, your dollars are no different from anyone else's, and you can't prove you're right. Even if you complain to the Turkish police, they'll take your money and deport both of you.'


Image 148: Istanbul. Autumn 1992.

It felt like I was travelling with an enemy. We were seated just one row apart on the bus. He had stolen my money and fallen asleep in the front seat, while I felt as if I could have been stabbed and wouldn't have bled. I was helpless and unable to do anything. His companion, who seemed newly married, saw me give the money to her husband and was too embarrassed to look up. They were from the villages in the Tilleko district of Saqqez, and I later learned they were heading to seek asylum. Perhaps this experience was necessary for me to realise that not everywhere is like our own town, where people often knew and trusted each other. I needed to understand that, among Kurds, there were diverse attitudes, cultures and backgrounds. For instance, it was quite common for my father to entrust his overcoats to people on a bus, trusting that they would return them honestly. This experience, while not pleasant, was certainly necessary. Even though I still tend to trust easily and sometimes faced the consequences, it's not my fault – one can't live without trust.

After traveling to Turkey, I became more determined to leave Iran. I was a young man from the 1950s, having experienced various restrictions such as war, displacement, arrests, imprisonment, torture and the Komiteh's oppression for wearing a t-shirt or listening to music. Now, in Istanbul, I encountered street music, dance, bars, festivals and the voice of Ibrahim Tatlıses. All these experiences showed me how much better and freer the world was outside. I continued these trips, taking pistachios and other goods from Iran and bringing back beads, sequins and embellishments.

I no longer visited the shop frequently. I earned a good income through those travels. During my trips to neighbouring countries, my English improved. I secretly had a private tutor and was always studying the language. I was attending computer classes with Masoud Pirma, which had recently started.

My capital had grown enough to cover the cost of a student visa. I went back to the same travel agency, which secured admissions for me at several universities. They mentioned that entrance exams and documentation would be required when I arrived. If I knew the language and had studied, I could make a better impression. I corresponded with two colleges in London, which was my only choice. They said that, given my situation, I couldn't go directly to university; I would need to complete a preparatory course and A-levels, costing several hundred pounds. They also said I could work part-time alongside my studies and wouldn't pay taxes as a student.

I applied to two colleges and to the British Embassy. However, I was rejected in the first round of selection and interviews. When I asked why, a female translator at the embassy whispered, 'It's because of your age. You're too young. They know you'll go and not return. And since you say you don't have much money, it makes them more certain. But you can file an appeal.'

I filed an appeal but was rejected again. They suggested applying to another country, but I insisted I wouldn't give up on England!

At the Time of Farewell

I told my family that I wanted to change my profession and start working as a goldsmith. Everyone was shocked. My father said I was lying, but how could he prove it? He enlisted a few people, including my uncle, to dissuade me. By now, everyone was convinced that I intended to leave Iran. They knew it was unlikely I would want to change my career after my shop had become so well-known, but they didn't realise that I had tried every possible way to leave. I had gone to Tehran, the United Nations and everywhere else, only to face dead ends. The only option left was to go to Turkey and apply for a student visa from there with my Iranian passport. I had heard that my chances were slim, but I was determined to find a way.

In the final days, I visited Gerdashavan, Naqadeh, Mahabad and the village of Gol to see my aunts. My behaviour had changed. Secretly, I was saying goodbye and seeking forgiveness. It was very hard to leave those I truly loved. I watched my grandmother closely every day, my heart burning with anguish. I looked at my mother, my brothers and my sisters. I visited my uncle's house and his family. I saw my friends, and everyone

felt that I was leaving, though no one dared to speak it out loud. I wrote a farewell letter, asking for forgiveness from everyone. I took out several photos from my albums and wrote that my library should not be touched, which they honoured – my books remained untouched for all those years, watched over by my grandmother and my brother Rasul. I wrote that these books were my only possessions, and it was important to me that they remained in their place. I also divided my inheritance in the letter, specifying, for example, that my cassettes should go to Rasul, the tape recorder to someone else, etcetera.

When I closed the shop, I had a lot of money, which I converted into dollars. I set off secretly. I travelled by bus from Tehran to Istanbul. At the border, I seemed suspicious to the authorities and faced some harassment. My military service documents, numerous photos and similar items seemed to arouse their suspicions.

I need to selfishly point out one thing: at that time, I was very proud of myself. I had not only returned the 350,000 tomans my father had given me to start the business, but also I had earned a lot for migration. Although my father's support was a stepping stone, I had truly worked hard for it. When I returned to Iran in 2009, I realised the widespread, prevalent culture among adult and young children of systematically relying on parents' wealth. I saw people among my acquaintances who depended on



Image 149: Sheikh Rash, Oshnaviyeh, 1991.

their families, or at least their fathers, not just for startup funds, but for most of their lives. This destructive trend has a negative impact on individuals' self-confidence and financial independence in the current generation.

Finally, I crossed the border and arrived in Turkey. In Istanbul, I chose a hotel for accommodation. It wasn't much of a choice; I didn't know any places and went to a hotel recommended by the bus. I spoke with a few people, but I didn't understand Turkish, or Istanbul Turkish, very well. I could only understand that they said I didn't meet the required conditions. Many Iranians had warned me to be careful, as my money might be stolen, which added to my worries. And, indeed, this happened – not by thieves or extortionists, but by the Istanbul police, who I had heard were quite corrupt. Two police officers called me and, under the pretext of checking my ID, forced me to empty my pockets. They calmly took half the money I had and divided it among themselves but had the decency to return the rest to me. Luckily, they didn't find the full amount I had hidden in my underwear.

It was just after Necmettin Erbakan came to power with Turkey's first Islamist Government in 1996. The high number of sex workers present in the city centre was surprising to me. Sex workers from various foreign countries, mostly former Soviet countries, were particularly numerous. Many of them collected money through sex work to buy goods and bring them back to their countries. In the first few days, like any foreigner, I was astonished by many behaviours and occurrences: hotels renting rooms by the hour to sex workers and their clients and the frequent surprises caused by Islamist behaviour. The hotel in the Aksaray area where I stayed was noisy from morning till night, with loud music, sex moans and laughter. The hotel had a disco that usually dealt with fights and brawls until nearly dawn.

Sheikh Osman Naqshbandi

At the beginning of the Islamist Government's rule, the police were pursuing sex workers, and some residents of the Sultanahmet and Aksaray neighbourhoods, where I was staying, were saying, 'May God curse Erbakan! We've never had such problems before. He's ruining our business and our lives.' To me, these comments felt surreal. Having lived

in Iran and seen that sex work was formally regulated within the judicial system, I was surprised to find that people in Turkey were blaming the Government for interfering with the work.

After two days, I decided to call home. With anxiety and hesitation, I finally made the call. Since the day I had disappeared and my shop had been closed, everyone had been in the dark. When they saw that two days had passed with no news from me, my uncle was sent here and there to search for me. When he couldn't find me, my grandmother called my aunts and said, 'Come here! You've brought shame upon yourselves! You're sitting in your homes, and no one knows if Kameel is in the mountains or in prison.' She gathered everyone at our house to find a solution.

When I called, there were about twenty people there! My father picked up the phone, and I said, 'It's me, Kameel.'

My father, with excitement and a lot of longing, shouted, 'Hêtiwe sagbaba ewê le kûyî?', which translates to 'You bastard son of a dog, where the hell are you?'

I replied, 'I'm in Turkey, Istanbul. I called to say I'm sorry for leaving without notice.' Then I began to explain, 'I'm sorry, but this is the path I've chosen. My presence there had become pointless. I wanted to leave Iran and study. Don't worry, I won't get involved in political movements. I'm really here to study and go to university.'



Image 150: Sheikh Mohammad Osman Seraj al-Din Naqshbandi.

Everyone wanted to speak and was crying, but the phone costs were high, so I had to hang up soon.[1]

After this call, I missed them terribly. I was so restless that I spent hours in the Aksaray neighbourhood by the sea, consoling myself with thoughts like, 'You've stepped out of your comfort zone, and a difficult, bad and uncertain path lies ahead; you must strive and move forward and not lose hope.' After that, I called every few days, and they repeatedly asked what plans I had for the future and where I wanted to go.

In the hotel, I met an Iranian tourist, and we rented a place in the Taksim area together. I started searching for a way out of Turkey. I was told that one of our locals might be there and could potentially help me. He was a tailor and wasn't very familiar with what I needed, but I sought him out. He said, 'The only way you have is to go to the outskirts of Istanbul, to Sheikh Osman's house. Sheikh Osman[2] is a well-known Naqshbandi Sufi, originally from Oramanat and from the village of Biyare. That's why he is known among the Kurds as Sheikh Biyare. People who visit there might be able to help you.' He mentioned a specific person and gave me the address.

Sheikh Osman had a large *zawiya* ('spiritual retreat') there, and you should have seen the grand reception he received from Turkish and Kurdish Sufis, and even people from other countries! His house was several stories high, by the sea, and far from the city. It took a while to find

1 This type of communication may seem amusing now, but at that time contacting family and loved ones was a challenging task. It was not only expensive, but also many households lacked telephones. Typically, only a few homes in each neighbourhood had phones, and they would often share them with neighbours who had relatives far away. Whenever a call came for that neighbour, they would be summoned so they could speak with their loved one. In the context of the traditional, community-orientated lifestyle of that era, where neighbourly cohesion and solidarity were stronger, such relationships based on cooperation and assistance were even more pronounced.

2 Mohammad Osman Naqshbandi, son of Alaudin Naqshbandi Biara and grandson of Omar Ziauddin Naqshbandi, was born in 1896 in the village of Safiabad near Javanrud. His mother, Noori Jan Khanum, was the daughter of Mohammad Sadiq Vaziri. With connections to high-ranking officials in the Pahlavi regime, Naqshbandi formed the Rizgari ('Salvation') group after the 1979 Revolution in opposition to the Islamic Republic, allegedly with assistance from Iraq. The Rizgari group had 2,000 armed forces stationed in the Oramanat region. Following military clashes with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the army and opposing parties, this faction was defeated. Shortly after the Revolution, Naqshbandi initially fled to the village of Biara on the Iraq border and later moved to Baghdad, where he passed away on 30 January 1997 in his monastery in Istanbul.

the place. When I arrived, they wouldn't let me in. They said I wasn't a pilgrim and needed to go around the back of the building and find the person I was looking for there. At the back, a group of about twenty people were in tents and shacks down by the sea. I asked for the person I was looking for. They said he had gone inside the Sheikh's house and that I would have to wait.

Sheikh Naqshbandi's house had several sections. Those who came for pilgrimage had nightly sermons and chanting sessions. Most of those outside in the tents were also Kurds. During mealtimes, they entered through the back door of the house to eat but were not allowed inside the zawiya.

I waited for the man to arrive. Eventually, he came with his entourage. He was young, from Marivan, and had a few escorts. I approached him and said that a tailor had introduced me and mentioned that he could help me get a visa. Laughing, he said, 'Boy, what visa? I'm a smuggler. I can take you to Greece by sea quickly. Your passport is useless.' He then said I had to give a certain amount of money to the Sheikh's cook. When he delivered me to Athens, I would contact the cook and tell him to give the money to the smuggler's man, who would be at the zawiya.

I didn't have such a plan and said, 'I don't want to go illegally.'

He said this was the only (recently opened) route and was a temporary opportunity, so it was up to me.

I refused and stayed in Istanbul.

The more I visited various student- and visa-facilitation companies, the fewer legal ways I found to migrate and reach London. The only legal route available was to stay in Turkey, get a work and residence visa and, after some time working, paying taxes and residing as a language student or guest student in Turkey, apply to the embassies of European countries for a student visa. The other option was to give up on legal migration and take the risk. It was a difficult decision, but I eventually agreed to it.

The Smugglers Await

The smuggler from Marivan was right: I had no other options, and the legal process could take months or even years. When I visited a couple of private student agencies and applied, they either took my money or, to put it more accurately, extorted it from me! So, I turned back to the smuggler. He

promised to take me himself and not hand me off to anyone else. He then asked why I, not being an Iraqi Kurd who would go for labour, wanted to go abroad. I explained that I was going to study.

He laughed and said, 'You're the first client I've had who's going for education and university. Are you crazy? Go to Germany, make some money, and then follow your dreams!' He then candidly added, 'You seem like an innocent but foolish child, so I'll cut you a deal on the price and take you myself. Don't worry.'

Because of what I had heard about smugglers, I couldn't help but be worried. However, he turned out to be a good man, and through a route that had recently opened at the Greek border, he took us to Athens, the capital of Greece. A teacher from Marivan and I were his favourites, and since we had paid well, we were always at the front of the caravan.

He moved quickly. Much of the journey was on foot, making it even harder. The smuggling operation involved taking us from Sheikh's house in several vans to a truck, into which about thirty of us were crammed. The truck had a canopy, and after we boarded it was loaded with goods. Space was extremely tight – we barely had room for our legs – making movement difficult and causing numbness.

The Kurdish Iranian teacher and I stood out from the others, who were mainly Iraqi Kurds and a few Turks, all of whom had rough demeanours and were eager to reach Germany for work as soon as possible. At that time, Germany had simplified the acceptance of workers and immigrants and needed additional labour due to its booming economy.

We were then taken to a riverbank, where we waited by a large tree for several hours. The smuggler, who was the authority there, handed shovels to the stronger ones and instructed them to dig. The smugglers had hidden inflatable boats. After we unearthed them, we took turns inflating them.

At night, we crossed the river. The wind was strong. We were told to keep our heads down and be completely silent, since border patrols from both Turkey and Greece were nearby. Although the route was still unknown, the horrific stories we had heard about mistreatment by both Turkish and Greek border authorities made us naturally fearful and cautious. If caught, illegal immigrants risked having their money and belongings stolen, being beaten and then being thrown back across the border.

Upon reaching the other side of the river, we buried the boats again and split into two groups for the remaining journey. We walked on foot, with the smuggler leading one group (which included me) and another smuggler leading the second group. We maintained a distance of about two hundred metres. We had entered Greek territory, and the rest of the journey was through forests and mountains. We walked by night and slept by day, and the constant running, climbing and lack of sleep made it extremely challenging. I was not used to walking with a backpack for such distances, and I hadn't brought suitable shoes or clothing.

The Kurdish Iranian teacher and I looked more like tourists than people fleeing illegally; among all those robust, strong men, we were the weaklings. We were always limping along, slowing down the caravan's pace and constantly lagging due to exhaustion and smoking, which drew complaints from the others. I found it fascinating how they knew exactly how many hours it took to travel from one resting place to the next and precisely how long it would take to get there. Along the way, we saw discarded cigarette butts on the ground, evidence that other caravans had passed through before us. The Greek government had built concrete shelters for shepherds and sheep to take refuge in during floods, and sometimes we slept in these shelters, which smelled of manure and decay.

At the same time, another group behind us on the route was caught by the Greek border police. We were lucky they didn't see us. Later, when we met them at the Athens camp, they told us they had been severely beaten after their arrest and had their money taken. They were sent back to Turkey via the river route and suffered another harsh beating by Turkish police before finally making their way back to our side.

We reached a small town where a van driver, who was Turkish, picked us up from the forest and dropped us near a train station. He showed us how to buy tickets and board the train. For a long time, I didn't realise the man who had driven us was an old Turkish immigrant living in Greece – such people were not few. It took four days to travel from the place where we got into the van, near Sheikh's house, to the train station. I wasn't prepared for such a long march and journey. My feet were blistered, and I didn't know what was going to happen to me. After many hours, I arrived in Athens, the ancient capital of Greece, with a small group. In my mind, Athens was the place I had read about in books — a city with three thousand years of urban history, a mix of historic and modern attractions,

the cradle of philosophy where Plato and Aristotle once lived. It had many books, philosophical debates, sculpted stone figures, grand white buildings, and was the birthplace of the world's first democracy. I was eager to visit its famous rocky hill, the Acropolis.

The Acropolis and a Gay Greek

I expected to encounter the Athens and Greeks I had read about in history books. I many vivid images in my mind. I eagerly anticipated visiting the historical site of the Zeus Temple and the famous rocky hill of the Acropolis, as well as other city landmarks.

In Athens, we were escorted to a hotel under careful watch. For the smugglers, it was crucial that we contact the Sheikh's cook the next morning to inform him that he should pay them. The person who had brought us invited me for breakfast at the end of the trip, and I had one of the best yoghurts of my life there. Large barrels of thick, creamy yoghurt were placed in front of the shops, and Greeks would come with buckets to buy it in the mornings. It was so delicious that it became clear to me why Greek yoghurt is renowned worldwide and remains one of Europe's most popular and flavourful yoghurts.

After breakfast, we made the call to confirm our arrival, and the money was exchanged. The smuggler told me, 'I need to return to Turkey. The person who can help you lives in a camp outside Athens. I've told him which hotel you're at, and he will come to see you.'



Image 151: Athens Museum. Spring 1995.

I called home and informed them that I had arrived in Athens. I knew how proud my father must have been, orchestrating the scene as he told everyone how Kameel had left Istanbul and reached Greece within a few days. News of my migration had spread throughout the city. Of my generation, I was one of the first to emigrate. By coincidence, several fellow townsfolk had approached my father to ask if Kameel could guide them as well. Some of them, whose names I recognised, were people I never thought would consider migration. Since I had not settled anywhere, I had no idea where I was along the path and had no choice but to leave my fate to chance. How could I provide guidance or answers to them?

I stayed at the hotel for a few days. An elderly Swiss man who was gay lived in the hotel. He was a writer, kind and sociable, and treated everyone well. For me, seeing people like him was unusual, but for him, seeing people like us had become normal.

He would talk to us, bringing tea and wine, and since I knew a little English, I could have some conversations with him. He frequently invited us to his room to show us his books. During each visit, he would either

touch his own face or the arm of the Kurdish teacher from Marivan, who was well-built. For someone raised in an Eastern culture like me, the meaning of these signals from an elderly man was not easily understandable, and interpreting such behaviours was somewhat alien to my socialisation process. One time, when I went to his room, he immediately asked me to tell my friend to befriend him. His attention was on the Marivan teacher, who was strong and had a moustache. I asked what he meant by being friends with him, as I hadn't yet grasped his intention.

That was when he humorously and even disparagingly talked about his homosexuality. Understanding and meaning were not easy with my limited English. I had read about homosexuality in Greek literature and knew some things about statues and deities related to homosexuality. The old man seemed to be discussing the same deities with me and amusingly showed me books where the sexual organs were sculpted from stone or men were depicted in intimate situations.

I told him I couldn't talk about this with my friend because he might harm me! I laughed and advised him not to mention this to the Marivan teacher, as he might get angry and cause harm.

He was a good man – a novelist and journalist who lived in his own world with his beliefs and lifestyle, which were somewhat accepted in Greek society. Later on the journey, in Italy, I saw homosexuality and related incidents in a broader and more explicit manner.

Greece was a good experience. I visited most tourist sites like the National Museum and the famous Plaka neighbourhood. Tickets were expensive for me, but considering I paid for my hotel night by night, I felt good. The feeling of being a foreign tourist was sweet.

When I entered any space, I saw myself as a free tourist rather than a refugee. There is a fundamental and significant difference between a tourist and a refugee. The biggest difference is freedom: one is free, while the other is bound. One is a traveller seeking to understand culture and tourism, while the other is traveling out of desperation to escape an inefficient or oppressive system. The former is esteemed at their destination because they represent economic and social value, whereas the latter is seen as a burden that imposes costs on the country and is often regarded as a second-class citizen, initially lacking full citizen's rights and typically assigned to menial and unskilled labour.

When I left these environments, I was abruptly reminded of the uncertain future awaiting me and that I had no idea what would happen to me the next day. I kept all my assets in dollars hidden in my underwear, constantly worried that they might be discovered or damaged. My travel companion found it odd that I kept my money in my underwear. He kept telling me that the money I spent on historical sightseeing equated to the amount spent on the daily food and expenses of those currently living in camps under tents. While he considered my spending a waste of money, I had lived with these names and places during my childhood, and it was important for me to see them up close.

After staying at the hotel for a few days, the man that the smuggler had mentioned found me. He was an Iraqi Kurd from the Raniya area and said the hotel was expensive. They had a camp, and he was in charge of the logistics. It was arranged that I would stay there, as my journey would continue from there. I preferred to stay with the new smuggler. We agreed, and the next morning a car came to pick me up.

PKK Camp

The refugee camp was located outside Athens and housed several hundred migrants from various countries, including Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and even some from Africa. However, the majority of the people in the camp were Kurds from the Kurdistan Region. These individuals had chosen to migrate due to the ongoing internal conflict in Kurdistan and the economic upheaval.

It was my first time closely encountering the Kurdistan Workers' Party (the 'PKK') and seeing how the organisation operated and what their ideologies were. Although I had previously seen some of their bases and locations in Iraqi Kurdistan and had a general understanding through their television channel, this was a more direct experience.

In the camp, everyone lived in tents. The camp administrator had arranged us in such a way that we were grouped with fellow townspeople or, as he put it, with our 'drinking buddies'. One side of the camp housed families, while the other side was for singles.

There was only one television in the entire camp, and its remote control was in the hands of two or three people who constantly tuned it to Med TV, the channel of the PKK. Their political office was in Brussels, and their

military bases and Peshmerga forces were stationed in the Qandil Mountains. Med TV was the world's first Kurdish-language satellite channel and was heavily political. This indicated to me that the camp was under the control of this party.

One time, I changed the channel, and the reaction of those holding the remote was interesting. They were angry, and one of them, speaking broken Sorani Kurdish, asked how I could be Kurdish and not want to watch Kurdish television after all the sacrifices made. At that time, I didn't understand the language of the channel well, which was mostly Turkish and only in part Kurmanji Kurdish, and I had no interest in watching the political programming of another group. Perhaps this feeling reflected my fatigue and disillusionment with the political struggles that had occupied my childhood and adolescence. It was striking that even watching a regular film seemed to them like an act of betrayal.

Years later, as my interactions and familiarity with the PKK grew in Europe and Turkey's Kurdistan, I found it curious that almost all of them spoke Turkish together. I witnessed the relatively radical behaviour of this group, which had its own reasonings and political takes.

A few days later, in the camp, I was offered the position of representing Iranian Kurds. Each nationality had a representative who attended nightly



Image 152: In the camp. Athens, 1995.

meetings with some Greek leftist groups, discussing and deciding on existing shortages and issues. The number of Iranian Kurds was very small, and some of the older ones had left before we arrived.

Following the suggestion of a committee member from Sulaymaniyah, I accepted the position. This was my first organisational and structural experience after my political activities as a teenager, which I always credit to the PKK's organisational framework.

Voting began – more than ten of us were candidates in the camp. I was elected, but I don't remember the details of the process clearly. This first democratic process I witnessed at the PKK camp had a significant impact on me. Although I became a representative for a role I didn't fully understand, I attended official meetings, learned to take notes, ask and listen to others' opinions, advocate for needs and convey opinions. With my limited but improved English, I helped camp officials communicate with Greeks, who brought clothing and food supplies for migrants. Many vehicles arrived daily to deliver second-hand items and charitable goods to the camp.

Working in Athens and Houses with Red Lights

The camp period offered me new experiences. There, we were instructed on what to say, how to thank people and what to ask for. I learned a few Greek phrases, which I repeated regularly. Representatives from seasoned Greek leftist groups frequently visited; they had strong connections with the PKK due to their shared leftist ideology. Additionally, the longstanding conflict between Turkey and Greece contributed to this alliance. The modern societal organisations and institutions were new to me, and this was my first experience with global structures outside Iran.

However, it didn't take long for me to realise that there was not much for me here. Initially, I was intrigued and motivated to stay and help the organisation, but I soon understood that everything was transient or, better put, just a passage I needed to go through and move on from.

I needed to research and figure out what to do after leaving the camp. I was advised, 'From here on, if you trust anyone, they will take your money. There's only one way left, though few people choose it. It's risky but potentially the best option: take a map and a backpack, and go like a tourist with your head down. Traveling with a caravan increases the risk of being

caught.' Some went to Italy via that route, but the sea route seemed challenging. They said, 'It's really a tough stage, and many have been caught here.'

I was concerned about the risk of arrest. I asked what the alternative was and how I could minimise the risk. They advised me to reach one of the port cities in Greece and find a way to board a ship going to Italy or other European countries.

I don't know how I convinced myself that there was no other way and that I had to embark on this adventure, risking my life in the process. Despite having money, I didn't feel secure. I was scared. I saw many people working for months to cover their travel expenses.

One day, I joined workers who gathered in an area of Athens in the mornings. I thought I could earn money and gain experience at the same time. People would come by car or motorcycle to pick up the workers they needed. When the employer arrived, we all rushed to show ourselves, thrusting our chests forward to appear stronger in hopes of getting a job. Later, upon returning to Iran, I encountered similar scenes in Tehran and other places: child labourers, Afghan workers or migrant Baloch standing at intersections, blocking cars and looking for work. Seeing these similar scenes later reminded me of my own days as a worker in Athens.



Image 153: Hanging Lamps, Athens

In the early days, I returned home feeling defeated. After a few unsuccessful attempts, a particular employer arrived on a motorcycle, and everyone rushed at him. I don't know why he chose me and a boy from Iraqi Kurdistan. There

were stronger individuals, and perhaps he felt sympathy for us. We didn't know Greek, but he spoke English. Through gestures, he indicated that he wanted us to help lift some goods. We hopped onto his motorcycle and went with him. He took us to a store with several refrigerators for a bakery, suggesting that he was moving the equipment.

We had to carry the refrigerators from the basement and load them onto the truck. It was a tough job: the refrigerators, though small, were heavy, and we had to carry them up the stairs. Fortunately, the man and the driver helped us. He was also concerned that the refrigerators wouldn't get damaged or the glass wouldn't break. By the end of the day, we had moved two or three refrigerators and some other items. He paid us in Greek banknotes, which felt very gratifying and gave me a sense of security. Even though I had money, the fact that I had earned enough for a few days of living there was reassuring. The next day, I went back, but on the third day, the boy I was working with tricked me. He knew that if I didn't go, he would get double the pay, and therefore he preferred to go alone. He arranged to meet me somewhere but didn't show up. He knew the new shop's location, but I didn't. Despite searching the streets, I couldn't find the place where we had worked the previous day. I wandered around until I was lost. Eventually, I managed to make my way to the city centre and from there back to the camp. When I arrived, I had a serious argument with him for leaving me alone.

In Greece, to catch a bus to return to the camp, we passed through a legal red-light district.[1] Houses with red lights hanging in front were where sex workers lived, and you could enter. Some asylum seekers worked during the day and spent their earnings in these places at night. They described it to us: 'When you go there, you knock on the door and wait in

1 Legalising sex work means equating it with other professions, permitting sexual transactions, including the buying and selling of sexual services, and freely establishing centres and agencies for it. This is part of the policy of some governments in addressing the issue. Discussions surrounding the legalisation of prostitution and related concepts – such as the freedom to establish brothels, decriminalisation of the sex industry and mandatory health checks for women working in the sector – have garnered both supporters and opponents worldwide. Governments that consider sex work a legal profession generate significant economic contributions from the industry. Some consequences of legalising it include the proliferation of pimping, increased trafficking of women, its expansion, a rise in street work, increased child exploitation and the development of sexual tourism.

the hall, decorated with red fabrics and lights, until the number of visitors reaches the minimum. Then, you wait for the entry of the sex workers, sometimes even male sex workers, guided by an older woman. They line up. It's almost like a slave market. You approach the girls, exchange a few words, and they put on a bit of false charm. You make a deal and choose one. You pay on the spot and disappear into one of the narrow hallways of the house.'

Although I had seen sex work and its organisation in other countries, I had never seen it so systematic and legal. My increased understanding of environments outside Iran and the formation of my social beliefs changed my view of sex work, which is known as one of the oldest professions in the world, whether rightly or wrongly. I believe that when it is voluntary and legally protected, even if harmful and difficult, it may be less detrimental than illegal and underground practices, with its negative impacts potentially controlled.

However, I find the living conditions of both the sex workers and the asylum seekers, who spend months there and are sometimes trapped in bars and brothels or entangled with drugs and crime, lamentable. The tendency of asylum seekers toward these two areas, sex work and drug use, suggests a meaningful relationship between sex and drug addiction – a relationship that may be due to their profitability and their beneficial role in capitalism, which turns them into profitable vices.

Hiding Under a Lorry to Italy

Eventually, I decided to go. With no friends or companions, I set out alone for the train station. I bought a ticket to Patras Port and boarded the train. Without a visa, I knew that if I were stopped, my journey would be over. I had to look like an ordinary tourist. I dressed neatly, shaved and put a camera around my neck, wearing sunglasses to mimic the tourists I'd observed.

After a few hours, I arrived in Patras, a port city filled with ships. Many trucks, and occasionally buses, were boarding the vessels with passengers. I had heard that people who sneaked onto these ships could end up in Italy, America or even Africa, so it was crucial to know where the ship was going to avoid ending up somewhere unintended. There were stories of travellers accidentally ending up in Africa or even Israel, which were often recounted

with laughter. I was afraid to ask questions, worried it might make me suspicious. Eventually, I spoke hesitantly with an elderly couple, who confirmed they were heading to Italy. Although I didn't understand much, I showed them Italy on a map and they confirmed with a *si*, which I knew meant 'yes' in Italian.

I wasn't sure in which Italian city I would end up, but reaching Italy was my goal. Now, I needed to figure out how to board the ship. When the lower decks of the ship opened, trucks began to board. Without the proper documentation, I couldn't buy a ticket. I had heard that trucks were the only way for me to get on board. I had to find a way to either hide in a container or conceal myself under a lorry. It was getting dark, and after the passenger cars had boarded, the trucks lined up for their turn. Officials checked the drivers' cards and freight documents before allowing them to board. I saw my chance and, terrified, I disguised myself as a lorry assistant, pretending to check the tyres with a tool that resembled a screwdriver. I managed to get close to the line of lorries.

In a moment of opportunity, I hid under one of the lorries. I knew that if I were caught, I would face a beating, a fine and even deportation to Turkey, and from there to Iran. The stress and anxiety were overwhelming, but I stayed put. The lorry had a large gearbox, with a thick rod connecting the engine to the rear wheels, creating a gap where I could sit and stretch out. I positioned myself carefully, making sure not to fall off due to the lorry's movement.

I had a bottle of water and some biscuits in my backpack. As the lorry started moving, my heart raced with fear. The lorry's vibrations and the sounds of its brakes were unsettling. I could hear my own heartbeat as the driver handed over the freight documents to the officials. Finally, the lorry slowly boarded the ship, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I had passed this stage safely. With the trucks parked closely together and the overpowering smell of diesel and exhaust, I felt suffocated. It took a while for the drivers to leave, but the area eventually became quiet and cold. I felt I could finally come out. Exhausted and terrified, I sat on the cold, metallic floor of the ship, unable to sleep, my fear keeping me awake. I noticed two others who had also hidden on the ship, and although their presence was somewhat reassuring, we didn't dare approach each other.

In the morning, the ship was still moving. As it slowed down around midday, I returned to my hiding spot on the gearbox. I needed the toilet



Image 154: Athens, 1995.

but couldn't move from my position. I hadn't thought about this problem and didn't have an extra bottle. I couldn't urinate on the ship's floor because the drivers would notice, so I had no choice but to use my water bottle. By that time, I was left without water. I feared that if the journey took several more days, I would have to drink my own urine and keep reusing the bottle. The stress made such thoughts more frequent.

Eventually, the ship arrived at port and anchored. The rear gate opened. I was in the middle of urinating, and the bottle was full. I desperately needed to relieve myself but had to stay on the gearbox. The customs officials checked the freight documents again. After the ship's journey was over, I had to disembark before the lorry set off for the road. I didn't do this because I was unsure what to do if I got off too early and couldn't board again, and the lorry was moving too fast. I stayed hidden until it sped onto the motorway. I couldn't do anything but hope it would stop soon. The lorry moved at high speed, making me dizzy and afraid to look down. Any mistake could mean being crushed under the lorry's wheels. I tried to keep my legs dangling but was so close to the tarmac that even a slight slip could be disastrous.

Terrified, I prayed for the lorry to stop so I could relieve myself. I regretted coming to Italy, feeling deeply remorseful. Eventually, I couldn't hold it any longer and, lying down, I unzipped my trousers, urinating at over a hundred kilometres per hour. The powerful wind carried my urine back onto me, which had been accumulating for hours. I was hungry,

thirsty, and the unpleasant smell and warmth of my urine made me feel nauseated. But there was no choice. The strong wind soon dried the moisture and smell.

It must have been nearly an hour before the lorry finally stopped for refuelling. It was the hardest hour of my life, right in the heart of Europe. I waited until the driver went into the petrol station office, then managed to get out. A few people at the station, including other drivers, stared at me in disbelief, but I didn't say anything, and neither did they.

Now, I faced a bigger problem – not knowing which direction to go. I spotted a nearby farm and hurried toward it. Climbing a hill, I suddenly saw the sea.

I looked at myself in a mirror from my bag and was horrified by my appearance. I understood why people had stared at me at the petrol station. I felt both amused and frustrated. I was lost, unsure where to go with my dishevelled appearance. My face was smeared with soot and oil, as if I had emerged from an oil pit. I made my way to the sea and tried to clean myself with soap, but the cold, salty water only made things worse. I cleaned my face as best I could with some nearby plants and, against the direction I had come, headed along the coast toward the port, knowing I needed to return to the harbour. I reached the motorway and walked along it on a local road used by tractors.

The only people I saw were farmers. Occasionally, we waved to each other from a distance. I didn't know Italian, so I could only say *ciao* to everyone. It must have been unusual for them to see a young man covered in oil and dirt on a rural road.

I was hungry, had no food and my feet ached from walking. I was tired and sleepless but had to keep going. I set off around midday and reached the port by early evening. Later, I learned it was called Brindisi. I searched for the train tracks, followed them and found the main station. I freshened up in the station's toilet, cleaning myself as best as I could, and set out to explore the city. I ate and bought some supplies for my bag. That night, I slept under a bridge near the city centre and, early the next morning, went to find a map of the station to locate my route to Rome.

Naturally, I was anxious and didn't ask the officials for help. I struggled to get directions from people but eventually managed to buy a ticket to Rome. The train was scheduled for the afternoon, so I had to wait, but the situation was relatively better now. I had spent one night motionless on the

ship's floor and another under a bridge. Boarding the train, I felt that my dream was coming true: I was in Europe. Everything looked more European, stylish and orderly, just as I had imagined. Interestingly, I hadn't considered Greece as part of Europe or felt its European essence. The train I was on, the people, their accents and the way Italians spoke were all delightful, like pieces of music. I had heard French was considered the most beautiful language, but, to me, Italian was much more beautiful and elegant.

The next day, I arrived in Rome at the Termini station, disembarked . . . and didn't know where to go.

I reflected on the past days and had to accept that I was in Rome, the capital of Italy! I had spent ten days in Istanbul, and the Kurdish teacher had stayed with me until Greece but lacked the courage for such a journey and had stayed there. We had spent just a few days together in the hotel, and then I camped for about a week and worked in Athens for a few days. Everything had felt so temporary, so I hit the road. I never regretted my travels, but the journey to Italy, especially the ship and lorry ride, was tough, and for the first time I had felt remorseful.

When I arrived in Rome, I called home to say I had reached Italy. My father was thrilled and boasted about how quickly I had acted and how clever I was. Stories of my journey spread and were exaggerated. However, I didn't mention that I had hidden under the lorry or the challenges I'd faced during the long journey. It was better that they didn't know the extent of the difficulties and pain I had endured.

Part Four: This is Europe

Introduction

Europe. I had finally arrived. After all the hardships that had nearly broken me, I was in Rome, this ancient capital. But my true destination was England. I'd come this far, and I was determined to finish the journey.

Italy taught me much; I stayed, observed, and reflected on the world. I thought about how religions had become political tools, used by those in power as instruments of conflict and bloodshed.

Italy is a fascinating place; there, you can savour the world's finest pasta while pondering how we reached a point where faith, once meant to unite and uplift humanity, has left us divided. In Italy, I studied theology and attempted to speak Italian, yet my journey was not complete – I still had ground to cover, risks to take and ambitions to realise. I persevered until, at last, I arrived in Britain.

Reaching Britain marked a new beginning. It was an effort to rebuild my life from scratch – a life that stood in complete contrast to the one I had known. A life free from displacement, war and destruction. A place where politics and its turmoil would leave me be, where I could work and study in peace. My dream was a fresh start, one that would not resemble the life of my family, endlessly uprooted by wars that swept in like tempests to tear my father's hard work from the earth, scattering it far and wide.

I wanted to start anew, though I was unsure what lay ahead and knew that, even if I succeeded, some things would always remain beyond my control. People might try to bury memories, pushing painful thoughts aside, telling themselves it's all in the past, that now they have a clean slate. One might set out on that path, but can it truly be sustained? No, I think not. In the end, the past follows us, or perhaps there comes a point when we begin chasing it. The past and the future are so intertwined that, for me at least, it's impossible to say which has the stronger hold.

Chapter Eleven: The Long Road from Italy to London

As the train rolled toward Rome, I began mentally reviewing what I knew about the city, eager to know if it was as beautiful as the photos I'd seen. Along the way, I reflected on my knowledge of Italy – though it was limited, I knew something of Italy's role in the First World War and had read a bit about the fascist era under Benito Mussolini and his alliance with Hitler and Nazi Germany in the destructive Second World War.

I knew about the gladiatorial combats in ancient Rome – how they served as both entertainment and spectacle. People would crowd the vast arenas, the noblemen and noblewomen seated in reserved rows, watching as gladiators and slaves savagely fought each other in brutal duels.

In the East, Italian neorealist cinema was recognised, particularly *The Bicycle Thief* by Vittorio De Sica and *Rome, Open City* by Roberto Rossellini. *Lion of the Desert*, which depicted the Italian military in Algeria, also struck a heroic chord for me and drew my interest toward Italian culture.

My thoughts drifted through Italy's fascinating and controversial aspects, but, like many people, I was especially captivated by its art and architecture and longed to see Rome's famed marble statues up close.

The final stop was at the heart of Rome. The moment the train halted, I was spellbound. A stunning and historic city, filled with polished stone buildings and beautifully carved statues – it was as if I'd stepped into one of my dreams. Athens had been beautiful too, but the grandeur of Rome was on another level; it was like leafing through a richly illustrated art book.

I had been told that, when I arrived in Rome, I should head toward the central train station and seek out some of the rough sleepers there to ask for directions to the American Church. They said that some Kurds were staying at the church, and I might be able to ask them for help. Another group, mostly African migrants, had set up near the train terminal. Each night, charity vans would come by to bring them food and clothes. Contrary to my expectations, there were many undocumented Black migrants in Italy, frequently clashing with the police. Later, I understood that their proximity via sea routes to Italy, as well as the colonial history some of their countries shared with Italy, meant they spoke the language and some even identified as African-Italian.

I witnessed all this just outside the station, yet I saw no sign of the rough sleepers. My arrival in Rome coincided with Italy's national Republic Day celebrations when for three days the city was shut down. The migrants were absent, and the charity vans didn't come by to distribute food. That first day, the station was buzzing, but it grew quiet and calm over the next two days. Not knowing where to go, I stayed at the station, waiting for the people I'd been told about. The first day passed without incident. I walked



Image 155: Rome Central Station, 1996.

around, studying the place and scouting for a suitable spot to rest. Gradually, I noticed some people sleeping on the station benches. Most, like me, were single and alone, and I later learned they, too, were migrants. On the first day, there were only a few of us, so there was no trouble, but by the second day our numbers grew, and the game of hide-and-seek with the police began. Each time we tried to sleep, the police would disperse us, although they didn't check our IDs or take any further action.

I was worried about being arrested and deported, but apparently these scenes were routine for the police, who didn't seem to care as long as we didn't sleep on the benches.

One odd experience I had at the station was the sight of elderly men, many of them dressed as priests, frequenting the toilets. While using the urinals, you would occasionally find yourself being watched over the shoulder by these older men, both clergy and laypeople. They would laugh and gesture in conversation. It happened a couple of times, but I initially shrugged it off as harmless. On one occasion, a young Arab man nearby was swearing under his breath as he relieved himself, cursing, 'Kalb ibn kalb!' ('Dog, son of a dog!') Still uncertain what was happening, I asked him in broken Arabic, and he explained, using gestures, that these men were *ibn-ibneh* or, as he put it, homosexuals. From then on, I avoided the urinals, opting for the privacy of a stall. They would watch everyone, especially the Black migrants, whom they referred to as *Sarseeya*, a term meaning people from the Middle East or, broadly, 'migrants'.

In Catholic churches, and nearly all Christian denominations, priests and nuns are prohibited from marrying. This strict rule had led some priests toward homosexuality, with some resorting to satisfying their desires by merely watching other men. Over time, their physical capabilities waned – many reportedly became impotent – and they often engaged in passive homosexual relationships. I later observed this phenomenon more clearly in Vatican City, where older men approached younger men in the toilets, striking up conversations. Priests would pay young men and go off with them. This practice had turned into a rather sad joke, one tinged with a streak of homophobia. The young men would mock each other, saying, 'If you're short on cash and need to get out of Italy fast, head to the train station and start "working" – you'll make a month's worth in a day or two!'

The Church Without Religion and Father Michael the Gay Priest

I spent the public holidays for Italy's Republic Day at the train station. I had no fixed place to sleep, so I would rest on the floor or on the waiting benches, moving around whenever the police came by. Once the holiday ended, the migrants I'd been told about started to appear, ready to guide me to the church. I asked where the 'American Church' was, and an African man who spoke French, Italian and some broken English led me to St Paul's Church. After a ten-minute walk, we arrived at a relatively small but beautiful church. Entering the courtyard, I saw a large crowd of young migrants from different nations and backgrounds, many of whom were en route to Germany for work. From a distance, I could hear some speaking Kurdish, but I was the only Kurd from Iran, or what is known as Eastern Kurdistan.

I was to meet Father Michael, a middle-aged and openly gay priest. He often chose the youngest, best-looking and strongest migrant to stay with him in his room above the church. Once Father Michael 'selected' someone, that person was often ridiculed and shamed by others.

Father Michael took down my name and asked the usual questions: where I was from, how I'd ended up there, where I'd learned English and so on. When I told him I wanted to study, he welcomed the idea, saying, 'We offer language classes and various support programmes here. Stay



Image 156: Santa Maria Church. Rome, Italy, 1996.

with us for a while, and our teachers, most of whom are native English speakers, will help guide you.'

I explained that my goal was to reach London, and he replied, 'The routes to your next destination are illegal and just as tough as what you've already been through.' He gave me a few warnings about avoiding the police and refused to discuss any specific illegal routes, saying I'd pick things up from others. He handed me over to the camp manager, who would see to it that I had food and a place to sleep while I sorted out my next steps.

The church's lower level had a recreation area with a pool table and shelves full of books. English classes were also held there. An American woman taught us, but the lessons were elementary – mostly letters and basic vocabulary. I quickly grew bored, so I told Father Michael I wanted to learn Italian. From the moment I arrived in Italy, I'd been charmed by the musicality of the language and wanted to pick it up. Father Michael, surprised, said, 'You're the only one who wants to learn Italian.'

He sent me back to the same English teacher, whose husband happened to be Italian. They agreed to help me study outside the regular classes, teaching me Italian for half an hour each day, followed by English.

We had lunch at the church every day. At six in the evening, we would walk to a centre run by an Italian charity near the Italian Senate. The church and the centre were sister organisations. At the centre, someone would prepare delicious pasta in huge pots. The cook was a soldier serving his military term in Italy, where some soldiers are assigned to charities and NGOs. I loved this concept. Later, I even wrote about it, suggesting that, since military service is mandatory in Iran, it would be beneficial if some soldiers could work with charities instead of idling in barracks.

Joseph, an excellent cook, knew English, which helped me improve my language skills. He'd learned to cook from his mother and said he was passionate about it. In the evenings, we'd have dinner at the charity and watch an American series dubbed in Italian, which helped with my Italian comprehension. Afterward, we'd board a bus back to the camp for the night.

Riding the bus was its own adventure for migrants. Italian buses had a small machine where you were supposed to insert your ticket to mark the time as proof of travel. We migrants rarely bought tickets, so we always feared getting caught and fined. If a conductor found you without a ticket,

you wouldn't be let off without paying the hefty fine. Early-morning or late-night journeys were less stressful because we'd post one or two of our own as lookouts, whistling if they spotted a conductor at an approaching stop, so we could all disembark together.

The charity camp was managed by soldiers, and much of the camp's equipment appeared to be provided by the army. The bunks were military-style, arranged dormitory fashion, though I later learned that the facilities belonged to the charity. Inside the camp, migrants divided themselves by ethnicity and nationality. Kurds had their own section, while African groups hung flags or coloured fabrics around their areas, marking off their spaces. I stayed in the Kurdish section, mostly with migrants from Iraqi Kurdistan but a few from northern Kurdistan, or Turkey's Kurdistan. It was there that I met Fouad Geely, whom I called Geely. He was from Kirkuk, educated and well-read. Beyond our shared Kurdish heritage, we had another connection: we were the only two in the group planning to continue our studies in the UK. In a crowd mostly bound for work in Germany, this shared ambition became a significant bond between Geely and me, and we decided to make the journey together.

My Time at the Vatican

Patti, our teacher, quickly noticed Fouad's and my eagerness to learn. Since I already knew some English, joining additional classes was simpler for me. Patti suggested, 'Once you strengthen your language skills, consider enrolling in the Vatican's Philosophy of Religions course. It's taught in English and would be an excellent opportunity for you.'

Initially, I thought the Church would try to impose its beliefs on us, brainwashing everyone into converting to Christianity. But as I began attending the classes, I found this was not entirely the case. The atmosphere was more liberal than I expected, with limited religious indoctrination. This approach likely stemmed partly from Europe's broader policies toward migrants and partly from its relationship with nations that typically send migrants to Europe.

The course focused on examining and studying monotheistic religions, and I had expressed my interest in studying so often that Patti felt this programme would suit me well. Due to my progress in English, I accepted the challenge. I also thought that, if I were accepted into this programme, I

might stay on at the Vatican to continue my studies. Contrary to my initial hesitation, I began to hope they would allow me to participate in the theology programme, although I knew that, given my language limitations, the course might be challenging.

After some time in our intensive joint classes, Patti told me, 'They've agreed to let you attend part time on a charitable basis. You can review what you don't understand with me in the afternoons.' I was overwhelmed with gratitude, but Patti brushed it off, saying, 'It's nothing. They're actually quite interested in having a Muslim in the course, as it opens discussions to those of different faiths.'

And so I became a student at the prestigious Vatican Academy, at no cost, realising a long-held dream of studying, learning and seeking answers to life's most pressing questions. Questions had long been in my mind, shaped by the world I had experienced – a world that was harsh, insecure and wracked by war and political strife. In Iran's schools, I quickly realised that asking such questions in a system so steeped in ideology only led to marginalisation and exclusion. But here at the Vatican, I could explore these intellectual challenges as part of a formal academic programme. I registered and was even issued a student ID.

You may have heard of the Vatican, a small state nestled within Italy. The Vatican is an independent country with its own borders and customs officials. Upon entering its borders, even in a symbolic way, you must show identification or a passport. Apart from border customs, the Vatican has its own laws, an independent budget and a unique government. Crossing from Rome into the Vatican feels like stepping into a different nation.

The school I had enrolled in was an extraordinary place, filled with sacred paintings, sculptures, vibrant miniatures and exquisite stone carvings that made it unlike any mosque I had ever seen.

Architecturally, the school was similar to most Catholic churches and seminaries: vast and labyrinthine, adorned with unique, centuries-old wall paintings that vividly depicted the history of Christianity. Various ceremonies were held here, the most significant of which was an occasional evening gathering led by the Pope, which we attended a few times. When conditions allowed, the Pope would conduct Sunday prayers and blessings in the main square and outdoor courtyard, offering prayers for the city's residents, pilgrims and visitors, particularly on religious holidays.



Image 157: With a classmate. The Vatican, 1996.

From there, the Pope issued statements on global issues linked to the Vatican. You've probably seen news coverage of world leaders visiting him. Imagine my position: a Kurdish migrant from a small, remote town in Iran, now standing in the heart of one of the world's most powerful religious, political and economic centres. During the day, I was immersed in the academic world of the Vatican Seminary, and at night I returned to the migrant workers' camp, surrounded by individuals from across Asia and Africa.

While at the Academy, my time was consumed by studies, debates and group discussions. In the beginning, I could barely keep up, feeling inadequate compared to students from Europe and America. But Patti, like an angel of guidance, patiently repeated everything I struggled with until I understood.

Oddly, the more I learned, the more I felt confused by religion itself. I found myself lost in a sea of questions: why are there so many religions that bear such similarities to each other? How much have they borrowed or even copied from one another? Was it imitation or something deeper? To grasp these complexities, one needed to understand the historical, logical and scientific connections between religions. Naturally, being embedded in a Catholic institution with religious, ideological and political

ties, there was a bias toward Catholicism. The instructors encouraged us to see through a Catholic lens, yet philosophical circles allowed for the questioning of nearly every subject – except the sanctity of Christ and Mary and the existence of God.

The central library was astonishing, likely unmatched anywhere in the world. It held everything from some of the earliest copies of the Quran, the Torah and the Bible to essential reference texts for religious studies. Some books on other religions were reportedly seized, possibly during the Crusades, and even adherents of those religions no longer had access to these rare texts. These works, the cultural heritage of their respective nations, by moral and legal standards should have been returned to their rightful owners, though I doubted this would happen any time soon.

In the Vatican's main library, there were some parchment copies of the Quran thought to vary slightly from the standard version. According to certain historians and independent scholars, early Quranic texts were compiled by various scribes, memorised by reciters and then gathered during the caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar. Later, Uthman's era saw the formal copying, and Ali's era introduced diacritics and points. Interestingly, some interpretations in the Vatican collection referenced



Image 158: Colosseum, Rome, 1996.

passages that, if voiced openly today, might be considered blasphemous. I lacked the expertise to pinpoint exact differences, nor could I definitively assess the dating or the reasons behind these discrepancies. However, there is a school of thought suggesting that certain parts of the Quran were originally borrowed from the Torah, with some Quranic stories echoing those in the Torah.

This phenomenon wasn't limited to Islamic texts. The Bible, for instance, had undergone multiple revisions and alterations over time. Older and newer versions of the Bible contained modifications; a pattern also seen in the Torah. We were granted access to these reference texts once a week, at a designated time, with specific protocols in place. We wore special robes and gloves, and some handwritten pages were displayed under glass, accessible only by the librarian, to prevent damage.

Studying monotheistic texts, it became evident how closely they resembled one another, as though drawn from a single source. The striking similarity between the Torah and the Quran stood out to me, especially considering the centuries-old conflicts between their followers. It's paradoxical that, while adherents of monotheistic religions believe their source is singular and each religion claims legitimacy over the others, followers of the Quran and other sacred books often affirm their sacred text's content as a continuation of previous texts. This only deepened my confusion, as I struggled to understand the basis for the profound divisions and endless conflicts between them. Here, political and economic motivations seem to overshadow religious ones, yet many conflicts continue to masquerade as religious wars, underscoring the ideological and legitimising role of religion in political and economic realms throughout history.

Much of what I write here wasn't part of the Academy's formal teachings, but those months at the Vatican provided the foundation for my future reflections. Years later, when I pursued higher education in England, and even during subsequent visits to Italy and the Vatican for further research, these insights stayed with me.

Our class included students from a range of nationalities and religious backgrounds: Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and even two Muslims, a young Algerian and me. In our limited English we communicated with each other, coming to realise, little by little, the shared roots of the religious conflicts that plagued the world. More importantly, we understood that if

people could embrace tolerance, dialogue and rational relationships, many historical wars and much destruction could have been avoided.

The Vatican student ID was valuable, often giving me access to places that might otherwise have been off-limits. With this ID, I could make repeated, free visits to museums, where my card was recognised and respected. Even during one of my trips to the surrounding cities, when I mistakenly purchased the wrong train ticket and faced a fine, presenting my Vatican ID earned me respectful treatment and leniency from the officer.

These few months were also enriched by field trips. We visited museums and toured the Italian houses of parliament, meeting various individuals. For someone new to Italy, these experiences were invaluable – initially thanks to the American Church and Patti. She was genuinely delighted by my progress, often breaking into a smile when I achieved something.

While I tried to forget the painful memories of the past and focus on learning, I sometimes couldn't help but compare my experiences at the Vatican with the chaotic, oppressive educational environment back in Iran. Those memories of instability and violence in Iran's education system haunted me, as it's hard to forget such harsh extremism and brutality. Even one such encounter would leave lasting scars on any child.

I was learning conversational Italian with Christopher, Patti's husband. My writing and reading in English had improved, and this contributed to my growing confidence. That experience demonstrated to me the strong, direct link between learning a new language and the enhancement of self-esteem and confidence in individuals. Having lived in a multilingual environment since childhood in Naqadeh, where the languages of instruction in schools were Kurdish, Turkish and Farsi, it felt as if my brain were wired to absorb additional languages more swiftly. As the saying goes, learning more languages allows one to travel farther in life.

Even after all these years, I still maintain contact with Patti and Christopher, whose marriage has sadly unravelled, and they often inquired about my wellbeing during my years working in the region and Iran.

During the few months I spent in Italy, I also had the chance to visit Pisa and Venice. Of course, these trips incurred costs that might seem extravagant for someone in my situation. Fouad, much like that teacher

from Marivan in Turkey and Greece, frequently admonished me, saying, 'You're mad; you shouldn't squander your money on tourist trips!' Yet I have no regrets; it was a worthwhile experience. I gained a deeper understanding of the Italian people and made a genuine effort to converse in Italian, switching to English whenever I struggled.

A Short Stay in Paris

Everyone who saw us assumed we'd soon be exploring the museums and cafés of Paris. But beneath our calm, tourist-like façades, we were full of nerves. I knew I had to suppress my longing to stroll around Paris and postpone that dream for another time. Right now, there was something more pressing: I wanted to reach the city of my grandmother's songs, and Fouad, sitting beside me, shared my dream of studying in London. We had spent a few months in Italy, and now, with my studies at the Vatican complete, we were scrambling to find a way to continue our journey.

During those months, whenever I spoke with my family, they would ask why I hadn't left yet. I'd keep saying 'soon' or find some excuse. I didn't want to tell them I was caught up in studying theology at the Vatican and distracted by something outside my original plans. In our traditional town, such a topic might raise sensitivities, so it seemed best if no one knew. If my father found out, he'd speak about it animatedly, and soon the whole town would hear. My migration story had turned into a thrilling tale that the townspeople followed eagerly.

Fouad hadn't taken part in the course, but he stayed on because of some potential benefits they promised all participants. He had another reason to delay as well: though his English was better than mine, he hadn't wanted to make the journey alone, preferring to wait so we could go together. I'd mentioned that I had relatives in London who could put us up, if necessary, which reassured him.

Our plans were serious, but, to continue across Europe, we at least needed valid IDs. Fouad introduced me to an Iranian boy who made fake IDs. 'Since you know Farsi, you talk to him,' he said.

The boy had a drug habit and was always high. He'd been in Rome for a few years but was not in good shape. I asked him why he hadn't moved on, and he replied, 'I'm stuck here now.' He wasn't wrong – they had their own gang and were busy with their work. Alongside some Moroccans and

Algerians, he'd go after tourists and steal their documents, so they had access to a wide range of IDs and passports.

He brought us two photo IDs, forged as poorly as possible. I think he'd made a stamp from a potato and used it on the cards – it was unreadable! These IDs, shoddier than any school craft project, cost us about two hundred dollars. We'd been duped, but there was nothing we could do.

The funny part was that Foad's ID read 'Mary' instead of his actual name. I pointed out that Mary was a girl's name! The boy just laughed and replied, 'They won't understand. Just call yourself Mariana. That'll sound masculine enough!' He laughed at us in his haze. Until we reached England, those fake IDs were a source of both stress and humour for Fouad and me, although I never had to use mine – my Vatican student ID came to the rescue again.

Reaching London was an adventure. We knew enough English to pretend we were carefree tourists with backpacks and cameras, and off we went, travelling across Europe back when its borders were far less regulated than they are today.

We took the train to France without any issues. Before leaving, I called my family to tell them I was heading to France. My father had given me the number of Kajal, the wife of our late family friend Kak Fattah Abdoli, who was living in Paris. I called her and said I'd see her in Paris.

She was thrilled but set me an interesting challenge: 'Let's make a bet. If you win, I'll treat you to a full French breakfast; if I win, you'll have to buy mine.'

I asked what the bet was, and she replied, 'Your cousin Fattah was sharp – he became the Party representative here in Europe and learned French so quickly that he was giving speeches in parliament. I want to see if you're as smart as your father says you are.'

It had been a few years since Kak Fattah and Dr Sharafkandi, the secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, were assassinated at the famous Mykonos restaurant in Berlin, but I could see that Kajal's memories of him were still alive.



Image 159: the Mykonos trial – court hall after the final verdict**.** From right: Kajal Abdoli (in tears), Shahreh Badiyi, Hamid Nozari and Hans Joachim Ehrig, the defence attorney.

Finally, Kajal posed her 'test of wit'. She said, 'I'll give you the address of a café that's not well-known. You'll have to find it and meet me there.'

I didn't know what to say, but I agreed.

At the end of the call, she laughed and added, 'I know you might not have much money with you, but if you lose, I won't go easy on you – you'll pay for breakfast!'

We arrived early in the morning at the main station, Gare du Nord. To avoid losing the bet, we immediately boarded the Metro, asking directions along the way until we found the station closest to the café, which was a small one near her home and the station. We arrived early, and she joined us about five minutes later.

Over breakfast, I asked her, 'You're a fellow native of Naqadeh and have been living here for years. Any advice for me?'

It seemed to open a floodgate. 'When you get to England, follow the path you took in Rome. Study from day one, and don't get involved in political or Party activities. I've spent years in the Party, I've been a Peshmerga for so long, I lost my husband to this cause and I know that if you dive into party or political work from the beginning, you'll never get anywhere. You're young; at this age, you can achieve anything you want. You're like soft clay, and you can shape yourself in any way you choose. But if you get into politics too soon, you won't fully understand London's

environment or European culture, and, more importantly, you won't even learn the language well, because you'll be spending all your time with people who speak your own language.' She smiled and added, half-joking, 'Take your time. Many believe the Islamic Republic will be around for a long time, so there's no rush for you to go back. But I hope that's not the case. So don't rush. Focus on your studies, and you'll go far.'

Thinking back on that conversation and everything that happened later in my life, I realise that I did, to some extent, take her advice to heart. Perhaps my previous experiences had given me the perspective to understand Kajal's words that day, steering me away from politics and toward other pursuits.

Kak Fattah's wife had an interesting life story. Years after his assassination, she married Ahmed Shirbeigi, the Kurdish Democratic Party radio announcer. Shirbeigi came from a political family in Mahabad. I've spoken before about his powerful, stirring voice and the impact it had on Kurdish youth, inspiring many to join the fight. Many considered his voice as impactful as Sadegh Ahangaran's, with some government officials even dubbing him the 'Kurdish Ahangaran'. Ahangaran's voice also captivated people, and many joined the Iran-Iraq War because of him. For a time, I was deeply influenced by Shirbeigi's voice, losing myself in his dramatic recounting of battles, courage and the honour of the Peshmerga fighters. Initially, some family members weren't pleased with Kajal's marriage to Ahmed Shirbeigi. Eventually, though, Kajal and Kak Ahmed married in France and later moved to Switzerland.

The first time I spoke with Kak Ahmed Shirbeigi was around 1998 or 1999. I asked him to read some news for me. He always began his broadcasts with the words 'This is the voice of Iranian Kurdistan.' Hearing this again brought back so many memories. While writing this autobiography, I also spoke with him to verify some details of his life, and though his voice had aged slightly, it still carried its strength and authority.

Meeting with Kajal was wonderful. After breakfast, just before saying goodbye, she asked me to reach out if I needed money or guidance. We thanked her, and she laughingly paid for the breakfast she'd lost in our bet.

Just as I knew Italy from its wars, I also knew France from the World Wars and admired its prominent place in modern history due to the French Revolution, its renowned thinkers and, of course, Charles de Gaulle, the hero of the Second World War. Unlike Italy, which had allied with

Germany, France had opposed the Nazis. I'd seen many documentaries about how Nazi Germany occupied France during the war and how, when they were eventually defeated, Charles de Gaulle triumphantly returned home after years of struggle. I'd always admired him, picturing him in my mind as he entered Paris with dignity, the people gathering to welcome him.

The history of occupied France, its resistance movements, and Free France remains a fascinating subject for artistic, cinematic and literary exploration. I eventually convinced Fouad to visit the Eiffel Tower. When we arrived at the base of the tower, even before looking up at its grandeur, two things caught my attention: empty wine and champagne bottles scattered on the ground and young African street vendors who worked late into the night and slept beneath the trees. French wine has a worldwide reputation, so we bought a bottle to drink on our way to Belgium, curious to compare it to the wine we'd had in Italy, though I couldn't detect much difference. It made sense: discerning wine quality requires a trained palate. In short, I didn't stay in France long enough to truly experience Paris.

We followed our plan – travelled to Belgium and spent the night in a small hotel in the port city of Ostend. The hotel was run by a Pakistani couple, which I found both fascinating and surprising. In our small room, we turned on the TV and, like two happy tourists, watched Belgian programmes all night. The next morning, we boarded a passenger ferry bound for England from Ostend's harbour. It was similar to the ferry I'd boarded secretly under a truck in Greece. In just a few months, my circumstances had changed dramatically, and I felt proud.

Even more amusing was that I boarded the ferry using my Vatican ID, which the officers mistook for an Italian identity card, as they didn't recognise every European country's IDs. The European Union hadn't yet fully formed, and each country still had its own ID cards and passports. Fouad, who was nervously holding his 'Mary' ID, managed to get past the officers, and we boarded. The ferry was lovely, with a large hall featuring various slot machines, games and a luxurious bar for alcoholic drinks.

Our destination was Ramsgate, on England's western coast. Although one more challenge lay ahead, I wasn't as anxious as before. Fouad, however, was worried, frequently saying, 'What if we get caught? What will we do if we're deported back to our countries?' To ease our nerves, I grabbed large glasses of cold beer and went up to the deck. Sipping my

drink under the soft midday sun felt wonderfully refreshing. I leaned back and tried to focus on my dreams, on how each moment brought me closer to the land of my dreams, where I could finally study, work and have a different life. A normal life.

We disembarked at Ramsgate. Fortunately, the control procedures weren't as strict as we'd heard. People simply held up their ID cards and passed through the gates, and we did the same.

I could hardly believe it. I had finally reached the country I'd always dreamed of living in. The first thing that came to mind was my grandmother's song: 'I see you abroad, in London, as an engineer.' Now she could see me in London. I was so happy I jumped around in the street.

Fouad, still worried, kept saying, 'Calm down, man! They'll catch us!', but I replied, 'It's over, Fouad. We made it!'

I called our relative, Kak Mustafa, from a public phone. He was my father's cousin, and we called each other *ben-amooza*, as is customary in Kurdish. Less than a year earlier, he had moved to London from Turkey to join his wife and children. I told him we were in Ramsgate and headed for London, and he gave me his address.

We boarded one of those old Victorian trains with wooden doors. These trains are out of service now, but back then they were still around and reminded me of the ones I'd read about in Jack London's stories. They had wooden benches facing each other, and some of the compartments were more luxurious or, as we'd say today, 'first class'. My happiness was beyond words. I was filled with excitement.

Many years have passed since that day, but remembering it still brings me deep joy. I looked out at the fields, houses and streets. It felt as if I'd seen them all before – as if they were familiar.

Finally, as we crossed the River Thames and entered London, I opened the train window and shouted with joy. Fouad kept saying, 'Lower your voice! You're embarrassing us!', but I couldn't care less. The whole world had to know that I had achieved my nearly impossible dream!

When we reached the grand Victoria Station, we hailed a taxi. I hadn't realised how expensive London's black cabs were. London has some of the priciest taxis in Europe, and the ride cost us dearly to reach our family's house in West London. It was close to the year-end holidays, however, so there was nothing else to be done. We stayed with Kak Mustafa and his kind wife, Amine Khanom, for a week.

London and the Challenges of a Fresh Start

Kak Mustafa and his family lived in a council house, a property owned by the municipality that was allocated to those without a home. Some people would wait for months or even years to secure one of these houses. In stories, London was filled with charming red-brick houses topped with gabled roofs, yet around Kak Mustafa's home, I mostly saw apartments resembling those in other large cities. These buildings dated back to the 1960s or 70s, remnants of Margaret Thatcher's era of privatisation. During the week we stayed with our relatives, we slept in the lounge each night, as they had no spare rooms. This was the first time since my earlier experiences of displacement and temporarily living in other people's homes that I had stayed long-term with another family. The added difficulty was that I had brought my friend along. Although they welcomed us warmly, I felt like a burden, which troubled me.

We both claimed we had come to further our studies and would soon be seeking legal work. They advised us to visit the Kurdish Cultural Centre in West London after the holidays for legal advice. The head of this centre, Kak Fazel, hailed from Iraqi Kurdistan. It was Christmas and everywhere was closed, but Kak Mustafa managed to find Fazel's phone number. He was kind enough to open his office in the middle of the holidays just to hear our story. He was from the areas around Erbil and Kirkuk and was a fellow townsman of Fouad. This connection positively influenced our situation, as Fazel offered us more understanding and support. He explained, 'You have entered the UK illegally, and obtaining legal residency is unlikely. That means you cannot enrol in college through legal channels.' I was unaware of such important legal matters and assumed that if you had money and worked to earn it, you could study.

Kak Fazel added, 'You need a job to live here, and for a work permit, you must have legal residency.' I hadn't given this much thought. Along the way, I encountered people intending to go to Germany, who claimed that that country needed cheap labour. They said that, upon arrival, Germany would grant them legal residency. I thought Britain might offer similar opportunities or at least conditions akin to that.

Fazel had been in charge of the Centre for many years and was thoroughly familiar with legal and asylum issues. He asked about my and Fouad's backgrounds in Iran and Iraq. Most of his questions were

purposeful; he knew what details to gather to appeal to immigration officials. He guided me to recount my life events in Iran in great detail. For instance, he inquired whether I had encountered problems with the authorities and if I had ever been arrested. I mentioned I had been detained several times and had a case against me. I had not been allowed to work in government offices, and I had been pushed toward leaving school, which meant that, as a young person, I had not been afforded the same opportunities as others. Kak Fazel connected these points, and a case began to form from them. He said, 'If we articulate these issues in detail, we can do something for you.'

I knew nothing of Article 8 of the Human Rights Act and did not think that the challenges I faced in my home country would qualify me for legal residency and support in another country. Fouad's situation was even more complicated than mine. The Kurds in Kirkuk had long been persecuted under Saddam, and their identity was perpetually threatened. After hearing all this, Fazel promised to assist us with our residency application.

On the 4th or 5th of January 1996, the first day after the holidays, Fazel took us to the newly established and well-known Home Office building in the outskirts of London. On that cold, rainy day, we submitted our asylum application.

We arrived just after the conclusion of the general election in Britain in which John Major had lost and Tony Blair had become prime minister. In my mind, I compared the electoral processes of the two countries. The scale of campaigning in urban spaces was nowhere near what I had seen in Iran. In our country, electioneering was characterised by wastefulness, noise and bureaucratic clutter, while in London it seemed to be conducted with environmental considerations in mind, with no extensive posters or similar materials in sight. Elections in Iran are chaotic and often lack genuine competition, yet I observed that, in England, there was no exaggeration; the electoral process was civil and structured. The differences in the electoral campaigning mechanisms between a developed country and Iran were starkly evident.

I hardly remember the steps we took at the Home Office; Fazel handled everything. He filled out numerous forms, occasionally asking a question and then writing down the answer in several paragraphs. The issue of my date of birth became problematic here as well. According to my second

birth certificate, I was born in the second month of 1972 (although, as I clarified earlier in the book, I had only recently discovered my birth was in the month of Bahman, making this date incorrect). The official asked for my date of birth, which we needed to convert to the Gregorian calendar. In a quick calculation, we settled on 2 July 1972. The official was not from Iran and, as I perceived, was unfamiliar with converting Persian dates to Gregorian ones. As a result, the identification details and passport information I provided differed from my date of birth on the British documents. I later realised that such errors were quite common and had happened to many people. In any case, we were in a hurry, and everything progressed swiftly.

That day, we were issued temporary residency documents. With it, we could apply for language training and seek housing from the municipality. Unaccompanied individuals were placed in semi-independent housing supported by Social Services and the council, and if they were very young, a social worker would also be assigned to them. Given my relatively young age, I was placed in a group designated for individuals requiring monitored housing by caretakers. These types of homes were referred to as 'supervised housing'. Though I was not considered a child, since I was not under eighteen, the support range determined by social workers varied from eighteen to twenty-two years, and occasionally they would place individuals in supervised accommodation based on their discretion. Fouad was younger than me.

A social worker took us to a guesthouse in the Shepherd's Bush area. They provided us with a double room to begin our semi-independent living experience. Our accommodation was close to a traditional market, and there was an agreement with the local council for what they referred to as 'bed and breakfast'.

We bought a television from the Somali area's second-hand market and spent our days and nights watching English films to improve our language skills. Those days were fraught with challenges, but Fouad had an additional significant concern: he could not contact his family. It was during the civil wars in Iraq, and Kirkuk was under Ba'athist control. Following the war and the escalation of Western sanctions, many phone lines in Iraq were down. This situation genuinely saddened him. He visited call centres daily, so much so that he often hurt his fingers on the old telephones and had to bandage them.

He missed his family deeply and was under immense psychological pressure. Whenever I spoke with my family, I felt embarrassed. He often asked how my family was doing, and I awkwardly responded. I understood how difficult it was for him to be out of touch with his.



Image 160: London, 1997.

When he came back one day beaming with happiness, my heart genuinely soared. He exclaimed ecstatically, 'I finally succeeded!'

Contacting his family was a complicated and time-consuming process. He had to connect to Baghdad's telecommunications centre and then to Kirkuk. From there, he called his neighbour's house, which was just two streets away, and asked them to fetch his parents. He said, 'I heard my mother and father's voices, and I could even die happy now!'

As I mentioned, Fouad was far better at English than I was. This skill helped him forge a friendship with a Sudanese girl, which marked the end of our time as housemates. The primary language among Sudanese is Arabic, and Fouad also spoke fluent Arabic, but they had agreed to communicate solely in English. Fouad told me he met her at the call centre, and they became friends. Gradually, I lost Fouad to her; he spent more time with his girlfriend and often didn't return to the guesthouse at night. It wasn't long before he moved out and found a job at a branch of Pizza Express. He quickly became independent, later going to college and university to study computer science. Eventually, he became a skilled IT engineer and married a Colombian woman, with whom he had several children. Until I returned to Iran, we maintained a close relationship.

Language Practice at the Tavern

After Fouad left, I was alone. Since the guesthouse where we were staying didn't have a single room available, I was sent to another hotel nearby. During this time, I enrolled in a college in the Hammersmith area, where I still live today. Attending college made learning the language more serious for me, as I needed to learn it not just for living and working, but also for entering university.

Our teacher was an elderly Englishman who would get angry quickly. He was particularly sensitive to loud noises and rap music, reacting negatively whenever he heard this genre from cars passing near the college. He considered it utterly improper and completely antisocial! He often expressed his confusion about how much the British way of life had changed, lamenting the degradation of music, the ignorance of young people about social norms, and the loud noises from cars.

It had become routine for him to talk about these matters every day, followed by stories of his experiences living before and after the World Wars, reminiscing about the goodness and simplicity of that era. He was so traditional that he couldn't accurately grasp the lifestyle changes of the younger generation.

During breaks, he would drink tea with us. One day, I asked him to tell me the fastest way to learn the language and reach a university level. He replied, 'You need to strengthen your spoken language skills and learn reading and writing at a professional level. The first step is to visit different neighbourhoods and go to pubs. Most of the daily customers are elderly men and women, so buy a pint of beer for one of them. They will talk to you for hours, sharing everything from their poignant memories of the wars and famines during World Wars I and II to tales of their first loves, first sexual experiences and essentially all of their life stories.' He would laugh, saying that, by doing this, in just a few months, not only would I become fluent, but also, if I had the talent and interest, I'd pick up a smooth West London accent. 'Then,' he said, 'watch TV every night, and in the mornings when I teach you. When you combine these three elements, you'll improve quickly.'

I took his advice to heart, and for a long time part of my money was spent this way. This arrangement actually benefited all parties: they

enjoyed free drinks and filled their loneliness, while I made significant progress in English in a short period.

Labouring in London

Two weeks had passed since I arrived in London. Even if I had the wealth of Croesus, it would eventually run out. I couldn't rely solely on the substantial amount of money I had with me and ignore the future. I needed to search for work and, aside from earning an income, give my life in this new situation a more formal shape. I was accustomed to working, and I was sure that if I had a job I would think and act more confidently about other matters, as well.

I was in a situation with limited choice. Like most immigrants, I had to start with manual labour.

With the help of Kak Mustafa and another worker, the three of us dug up a garden and planted flowers and other plants. Kak Mustafa introduced me to the foreman where they worked, so I could be used for their other jobs, as well. The foreman was from the Barzani family of Iraqi Kurdistan, so I soon became part of the work cycle.

My first week of work was in one of the affluent areas of North London. We were supposed to dig up gardens in several houses, clean their pools and repair their walls. The hardest job was assigned to me, since I was young and fresh. They said, 'Dig the gardens', which was truly hard work. Those first few days, my hands were blistered, but I had no choice and had to keep doing this until I found something better.

A while later, from the workers' conversations, I learned that Diana, the former wife of the eldest son of the British Queen, had been involved in an accident and killed the previous night. I knew Diana only to the extent that she had been a bride of the royal family. The workers present spoke of her with a kind of disgust, even saying, 'Good that she died!', because she had fallen in love with an Arab man outside the royal family and wanted to marry him. I recognised the two people who made such judgements. At the forefront was one of our acquaintances. It puzzled me! Why would they be happy about what happened to Diana? The roots of the thoughts, sensitivities, beliefs and biases that are planted in people through their experiences growing up in various societies are so deep and strong that they continue to flower even after immigration!



Image 161: Hammersmith Train Station, London, 1997.

Although I quickly distanced myself from that work environment, I still had interactions with those individuals from time to time. A few years passed, and one day at a poetry reading I saw one of the two who had more extreme viewpoints. He spoke well of Diana, and his perspective had become more moderate. People's attitudes and mindsets change when they become truly part of the society they live in. I couldn't help myself and pointed out that a few years earlier he had judged Diana differently, even using the term 'English whore' in reference to her. He denied this, but seeing how much positive change he had undergone made me happy.

Diana, who held the title of Princess of Wales, divorced her husband Charles, the heir apparent, after several years of marriage when she realised the presence of another woman in their lives. For a while, she was in a relationship with Dodi Al-Fayed, her Egyptian boyfriend. Al-Fayed's father owned the famous Harrods department store in London. At the time of writing, he has recently passed away. The two were seen together several times until one night in Paris, when paparazzi reporters and photographers were trailing them for pictures. The couple got into a car to escape the cameras, but, due to its high speed, the car crashed and both lost their lives. It seems their driver was also drunk. Various stories are passed around regarding the roles of English security forces, the royal family and the Queen. These stories have not been proven, but many believe the royal

family was unwilling to accept the previous bride marrying and possibly having children with a Muslim. Many attempted to emphasise the religious and cultural dimensions of this event, highlighting the conflict with Muslims.

During those days, I became acquainted with members of a company that specialised in repairing and servicing pools. I took their phone number in the hopes of working with them. Digging was incredibly difficult for me, and I couldn't manage it. A short time later, I called that company: the available job involved scraping the pool's floor clean from algae using a spatula and rake and then washing it down with high-pressure water. Working on pools was easier than digging, but more dangerous. The floor of the pool was slippery, and we constantly fell. I hit my head on the bottoms and walls of pools so often that I became accustomed to it. Some nights, I had to use a hot-water bag to ease the pain in my neck. Interestingly, I gradually got used to falling! Even now, there are some bumps and hollows on my head – remnants of that period.

On the days we cleaned the pools of luxurious houses, we were treated to lavish meals. The homeowners would give us good food and sometimes chocolates and beer. We had longer breaks for lunch, and they served us tea in the English style, always accompanied by milk and biscuits.

To clean the pools of those lavish and aristocratic houses, we had to wear chest-high boots, apply chemical substances to the floor and walls of the pool and wash them down. Most of these houses were in the northern parts of London, which had a predominantly English community. However, some residents were Orthodox Jews, who had more traditional outlooks, and their men and women dressed more modestly than other sects of Judaism. Apart from the (mistaken) general belief that all Jews are wealthy, I observed that the Jews living in that area were indeed wealthy. Interestingly, anti-Jewish sentiment is also found in Kurdish and Farsi cultures. Perhaps the main reason is that there have always been some wealthy Jews across the world: for instance, my grandmother would often say, 'So-and-so has as much money as a Jew', implying that they were richer than others. In Kurdistan, it was well-known that some Jewish peddlers who sold jewellery and gold lent money under specific conditions, like a bank. In the houses of Jews in North London, I often noticed that they possessed valuable gold and jewellery or were jewellers and bankers.

The relationship and perspective of London Jews toward my Iranian identity, my being from the Islamic Republic and my Kurdish heritage were interesting. As soon as I mentioned that I was from Iran, most would withdraw and avoid facing or talking to me. They held preconceived notions about Iranians that were not particularly favourable. The repercussions of years of anti-Jewish sentiment from the Iranian Government were evident. However, as soon as I said I was a Kurdish Iranian, they would become friendly again and say that, as a marginalised minority, I was also struggling against government discrimination.

After cleaning the pools, I engaged in other jobs as well. I got acquainted with a recruitment agency and found temporary job opportunities. Since I had a work permit, I quickly bade farewell to informal and black work. Although having a formal work permit deprived me of the benefits and services that unemployed immigrants were entitled to, I didn't want to engage in black work to avoid paying taxes and receive public services. 'Black work' does not imply illegal work but refers to jobs where employers pay wages in cash, which are usually temporary and informal. For the initial jobs I did, I was paid cash, but at that time I didn't have much information about UK labour law and taxes. Most manual and physical jobs that engage the body more than the mind and spirit are considered black work. Since there is no room for intellectual growth and development in these types of jobs, they are generally regarded as low-level jobs in the ranking system. In any society, first-class citizens typically do not take on such work, and most refugees and early immigrants engage in these jobs because, after all, they are second-class citizens and foreigners, so working at these levels doesn't pose a problem for them. I should also mention that the support system, services and social welfare, such as unemployment benefits and financial and educational support for children and families provided by agencies like Social Services are truly excellent for starting life or depending on during difficult times – unemployment, illness and so on. The UK has one of the best systems, which should be appreciated, and it is very appropriate for those in need.

On the advice of some more experienced individuals, I refrained from engaging in black work. Some mocked me, questioning why I should pay tax on part of my income, but it was important to me to maintain my dignity. Workers in black jobs are often mistreated. Employers know that these workers have no legal means to complain about them and will resort

to various methods to exploit, oppress and disregard workers' rights. This issue remains significant sociologically in immigrant-receiving countries.

The work method of the agency was that they would contact you and say, for example, that there was work available at a particular factory for a few days or a week, and you could work either the morning or night shift. I took several jobs through this agency. One of the jobs involved assembling CDs and video cassettes. The shifts were eight hours long, and we had to stand continuously on the production line. The factory also offered benefits for the workers. If the workers performed well, they would become section foremen, which provided opportunities for career advancement. This job had another significant advantage for me: most of the individuals who came to work were from different nations, held work visas and spoke relatively good English. I was also able to speak more English because I was in that environment, which was beneficial for me.

For a time, I also worked in a factory producing ready-made meals. They had huge pots, and we climbed short ladders beside the pots to stir the food with shovels. They prepared all kinds of food, ranging from Indian curries to spaghetti Bolognese. We were often sick from the heat, especially during summer. The factory was located near a railway station in London. I often saw that the trains would come and go without stopping for passengers, and the sound of their whistles echoed. During my work at the factory, I met many people from different countries, especially those from Eastern Europe and Africa. There was a young girl from Tanzania, and she spoke English fluently. She had also been accepted into a university to study law. She worked in that factory to support her tuition fees. Her determination was inspiring. I thought I could do more for myself, too.

In addition to my assembly-line work, I spent my evenings at the local library. I borrowed books, and, since I had developed a certain level of language skill, I managed to read more advanced materials. My thirst for reading and learning had not diminished despite my struggles. My interest in understanding the West, its history, culture and relationship to my own culture kept me motivated.

I started to work for a bookshop in North London. I was responsible for cataloguing books and helping with inventory, and for a while I enjoyed that work. I was now close to the field I loved. I hoped that one day I could have my own bookstore and promote literature. I even dreamed of an idea

for a bookstore in which I could create a café environment for readers. With time, the dream started to turn into an exciting possibility in my mind.

With the presence of Kurdish women and men in the community, I gradually formed a connection with them and began volunteering with Kurdish organisations. I offered English classes to Kurdish children and young adults, and the first few weeks went well. Many parents enrolled their children in classes. Those initial experiences and interactions significantly improved my own language skills and confidence. I realised that I could bring something meaningful to my community while also benefiting myself. I felt proud to contribute to my culture and society, as this was something I valued.

After a few months, I received a letter from my family. They had sent it through a friend visiting England. I opened it with trembling hands, and my heart raced. My brothers and my sisters were fine. I discovered that the family was still managing to maintain their connections, despite the tough circumstances. I was relieved to know that they were safe, and I couldn't wait to hear about their stories and experiences in person.

As time passed, I started feeling more comfortable in London. I realised that I was gaining control over my life and could shape my future. Although my early experiences were full of challenges, they played a pivotal role in my adaptation. I worked hard to make a name for myself, and, eventually, I began to feel at home in my new surroundings.

After about six months, I moved to a different part of London, where I found a room to rent in a shared house. The owner was an English woman who rented rooms to various immigrants. I became good friends with her and occasionally helped her with household chores. Living with her was a pleasant experience, as I had the chance to immerse myself more in English culture. I made an effort to improve my English and even joined a local discussion group where we discussed various topics. The friendships I formed there opened my eyes to new ideas and perspectives, and I started feeling more integrated into society.

Looking back, those early days in London were not easy, but they shaped me in ways I could never have imagined. Each struggle brought me closer to my goals, and each encounter enriched my understanding of the world around me. As I continued to grow and evolve, I found myself increasingly motivated to pursue my dreams and contribute to the communities I had become part of, whether they were Kurdish or British.

Transgender Scot, Irish Patriot

When my hotel in Shepherd's Bush changed, I was sent to another hotel with a triple room, and later a quadruple room. Naturally, I didn't know anyone there. The manager was a stout Englishwoman with several noisy German Shepherds. She came off as quite stern or, rather, harsh. I didn't understand why initially, but later I learned that this hotel and several others lacked any ranking and primarily worked with government and municipal organisations.

One of my roommates was Dragan, a tall young man from Yugoslavia with whom I am still friends. He was a few years older than me and spoke good English. He was always absorbed in his drawings and designs. On the first night, he didn't speak to me at all, and when we eventually became friends, I expressed my annoyance at his silence. The second bed was occupied by a man named McKenzie. We didn't know his first name, but I later discovered that McKenzie was predominantly a Scottish surname. He would often return to the hotel between five and six in the morning, and I would see him in a state of half-sleep.

On my first night at the hotel, it was quite late, and I hadn't yet seen McKenzie. Around five in the morning, someone entered our room making a loud ruckus, singing. To call it 'singing' is a stretch; he was practically howling and was clearly drunk. He had long, red hair, very prominent breasts, and wore a short skirt, colourful, striped stockings and bright canary-yellow high-heeled women's shoes.

I was taken aback. I had seen gay people on my travels, but I had never – neither in Iran nor abroad – encountered a transgender person, especially in such a flamboyant guise. But now, here was one right before me!

Dragan was jolted awake by McKenzie's arrival and began to grumble. When McKenzie changed his clothes, I turned away, thinking he was a woman. Eventually, I took a peek and realised that his prominent breasts were no longer visible. He had fashioned a bra that he filled with rice, which became one of our many headaches. Rice grains would always spill out, and the next day we'd have to gather them up, stuff them back into his bra and sew it up again. Every day, he would shave his legs, leaving wounds all over, and his bedding was usually stained with blood. When drunk, he was jolly, but when he was sober, it was impossible to have even a brief conversation with him.

He was knowledgeable and well-read, with a wealth of information about the histories of nations. When we discussed Britain's wars, he had a comprehensive understanding. I wanted to talk to him for a long time, but he was quite impatient. He would frequent bars and clubs at night. Dragan claimed he was a sex worker, and there were nights when McKenzie wouldn't return. In general, apart from the mornings, he didn't bother anyone. Later, I discovered that he also used crack cocaine and had pockets full of condoms.

The fourth bed, which was later added to our room, was occupied by a young Irish man. It was about a week into my stay when the door opened and a young man introduced himself as Peter. He mentioned he had been working in Italy but had lost his job and so returned to Britain.

I felt a strange sense of homesickness. It was my first experience sharing a room with strangers from other nations. Wherever I had been before, I encountered people who spoke my language, but being in that room was truly a bizarre experience!

The newcomer was from Northern Ireland, and, as I got to know him better, I realised he harboured negative feelings toward other nations. He had interesting viewpoints, and this was my first encounter with racism in England. Interestingly, he and McKenzie didn't like the English, either, considering them plunderers of their countries.

During all the years I spent in Britain and the West, apart from a few superficial and inconsequential instances, I did not experience mistreatment or racially charged encounters with individuals. When discussing this with other friends or migrants, they were often surprised that I hadn't encountered much trouble. Some friends would laugh, suggesting it might be because my skin is a bit fair, I have light eyes and my English accent isn't too bad, which has led to fewer such experiences!

As time went on, I became more aware of the issues of exile, anti-immigrant sentiment and racism in society. I began to read about them. During my work as a translator and in various advisory roles for law enforcement, I encountered cases involving anti-immigrant sentiments. However, I still see British society, with all its shortcomings, as a successful example of cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism, and I take pride in my British identity. Perhaps this is because my lived experience in England has demonstrated that this society has greater cultural relativity and acceptance. In other words, it has embraced cultural differences and has

emerged as a relatively good host for migrant communities. As a migrant, I have seen a high level of tolerance and acceptance of diverse cultures in this society.

Despite Irish newcomer generally having a decent disposition, he was unabashed about saying that, because of people like us being there, he was unable to find work and would have to return to Italy. Implicitly, he told Dragan and me that we were occupying his job space. Though he phrased it politely, it struck me as odd. In his conversations, he constantly referred to Britain as 'our country', despite his anti-English sentiments and strong opposition to the Government. He claimed that he faced discrimination for being Irish and Catholic, which is why he went to the heart of Catholicism – Italy.

His thoughts were rife with contradictions and strange political and religious conflicts. He had a problem with England, which had colonised Ireland for years, but when it came to immigrants his perspective shifted: he labelled us as nuisances and considered this land his own. His analyses were opportunistic and, to some extent, illogical. He would say, 'The English see the Irish as surplus mouths to feed', but changed his stance whenever it suited him. I would later witness similar scenarios many times,



Image 162: London, 1997.

and perhaps some of these experiences led me to study anthropology at university.

I had been there for a few weeks when one day my social worker returned from leave and came to check on my new situation. She was extremely angry and said, 'This is no place for you!' Then she asked about the room's condition. When I shared everything with her, she looked at McKenzie and said, 'If you don't leave here soon, you're going to get contaminated.'

I assumed her reference to contamination meant addiction to drugs. It was interesting to see my social worker take an interest in a young man my age.

She had decided to take me with her when Dragan interjected, insisting he wanted to come, too. My social worker explained to him that his case was not her responsibility, but Dragan insisted.

My social worker angrily told him, 'You're not an interesting person.'

I stared at her in surprise; she was a woman of considerable age.

Dragan protested, 'Why do you want to take Kameel with you when I have been here long before and have suffered in this wretched room?'

Dragan failed to realise that this woman was my social worker and that he likely didn't have a social worker because of his age, and it seemed that they had a history of quarrels.

Wimbledon: The Starting Point

My helper rushed me away from there, saying, 'In this area, the municipality has no place for you. If I send you elsewhere, you might end up as an addict or a criminal, and that would be a waste. You need to go to a healthy environment. The only place I know is a distant area called Wimbledon.'

She explained, 'Wimbledon is a beautiful and affluent neighbourhood, and we have a contract there. We send peers your age until we can secure a place for all of you in our area and bring you back together.' She acknowledged that it was far but promised to give me a student discount card for transportation, so that the distance wouldn't be a hindrance and I could attend my classes.

Wimbledon is one of the exclusive districts in London. My new home was very beautiful, nestled in the woods at the edge of Wimbledon Park,



Image 163: Wimbledon, London, 1997

near the famous tennis courts. Although it was quite a distance from the central station, I was given a lovely room. It was clear that the house had once belonged to an aristocratic family, featuring a large and beautiful yard. I shared the room with a Muslim boy from Bosnia, and there was also a Croatian boy who would occasionally argue with him, despite their youth. It was late in the war between Croats and Muslims in Bosnia. They had fled from each other, but there in Wimbledon they crossed paths in a beautiful green room.

The place had a hostel-like feel. We were provided meals. It had a large room with a pool table and television, and there were other recreational facilities. I would return home after class during the day and work late into the evenings. My first cohesive, routine way of life began in Wimbledon.

Wimbledon has a train line called the District Line, on which Wimbledon is the last station. Back then, not all stations had ticket machines, and only some of the first and last stations had staff present. We had learned through experience that certain stations would be unmonitored at various times of the day, but there was a tall Black officer who sometimes accepted bribes from a few of us. Later, I heard that he had extorted others, too. He seemed to recognise us, or maybe our faces were conspicuous.

Interestingly, he never spoke a word to us. As soon as we disembarked and headed toward the exit, he would discreetly extend his hand, and we would place in his palm half a pound – fifty pence. He charged us half a pound for the outbound trip and another half for the return. We felt we



Image 164: Graduation ceremony. Putney College, December 1997.

were gaining a pound in profit and walked confidently to and fro, having bribed him.

Offering bribes was not foreign to me; I had encountered similar situations in Iran, especially with the issues surrounding American jackets during my youth. However, as I gradually acclimated to this new environment, I realised the strange and dangerous thing we were doing. Perhaps he knew that we lacked the language skills and experience to complain, which made it easy for him to take bribes. I wondered how he wasn't worried about losing his job.

My father had an acquaintance in London named Kak Khalid, who was a dentist. In fact, this man's brother was friends with my father, and this connection led him to look out for me and assist me in finding work. I expected him to suggest I come to his dental practice, which I didn't want to happen at all. I contacted Kak Khalid, and he invited me to his home. He lived in North London and welcomed me warmly and paternalistically. He introduced me to one of his friends named Eric, who was also Armenian.

In England, there's a well-known pizza brand called Pizza Express, which has branches throughout the country. Eric had been contracted to handle all the repair work for Pizza Express stores in central and North

London. One of Eric's relatives was a senior manager at Pizza Express who had helped him secure this job. After around 11 at night, when the pizza shop closed, he would go to work. If a light or a faucet was broken or a wall needed painting, he would fix it. He offered me about £20 a night to work with him, but we worked until around five in the morning. After that, I could catch the first train back home.

I accepted and began my apprenticeship with him. I was always there to assist him until I learned the intricacies of the job. Eric handled the technical work himself. I later became more independent with the repair tasks. Every night, we would get keys from the restaurant managers, and they would provide the alarm codes. Sometimes, when Eric was absent, I would finish my work, lock up and leave. Many nights, I found myself alone in those indistinguishable pizza shops, locking the doors and starting my work. I would listen to loud jazz music, which I loved and was typically found in the collections of these restaurants. Around five in the morning, when the first train started running, I would head out and doze off the entire way to Wimbledon.

College classes began after ten in the morning. I would sleep for a couple of hours and then set out for college. If a class started earlier, I would still sleep on the train for the entire journey. In the college courtyard, I had found a hidden corner where I placed a cardboard box and an old sleeping bag. I would lie down with my head resting on my knees until my class started. Mornings on which I went from work to college, I would usually be the first to arrive. I even postponed washing up until I got to college, and I then had breakfast at the college cafeteria before heading to class. In the beginning, while working with Eric, I would sometimes doze off in class in the mornings, becoming a source of mockery for my classmates. On the other hand, some of them were impressed by me. Lack of sleep is something one eventually gets accustomed to, however.

Eric was supportive and forward-thinking. From the very start, he taught me the basics of life as an immigrant, advising, 'Try to make use of Social Services as little as possible. Don't collect unemployment benefits, as it will make you lazy, it will rob you of your abilities and you'll find yourself not searching for work because of a few pennies a week. Before you know it, years will have passed, you'll gain weight and fall into depression. Ironically, when you're unemployed, you end up spending

more. Most importantly, if you don't go to work, you won't learn the language and you'll stagnate, making no progress!'

In short, people like Eric gave me invaluable, real lessons that I applied at various stages of my life.

After a while, when I returned from Wimbledon to West London, I rented a room in the same area that I had grown accustomed to.

Permanent Residency in the UK

I had submitted my application for permanent residency to the Home Office. Kak Fazel recorded the details I shared in my file, and I gathered a collection of documents related to my activities, including photos from gatherings, various collaborative efforts and some of my published works, such as writings, poems and translations. Thanks to a relative, I also acquired several forms and handed them to my lawyer.

At that time, the number of asylum seekers was limited, and the asylum system was still in its infancy, with many individuals languishing in uncertainty for years. I feared how long I would remain in this state of limbo. To pursue higher education, I needed legal documentation, and education advisors insisted that I acquire legal residency.

Many people believed that education for immigrants in England was free, but that was not the case. If you were a student, you would take out a bank loan, and after graduation your salary would be reduced to pay off your student debt. Approximately four or five months after arriving in England, I received a letter from the Home Office granting me permanent residency. I hadn't been interviewed, nor had anyone come to check on me. I believe they saw no need for an interview due to my overall situation and the nature of my application. I was overwhelmed! My life had suddenly changed: I was now a citizen.

As time went on, I came to understand that British citizenship was never just a piece of paper with a legal seal or a British passport for me. To my mind, the rights and privileges of citizenship were what I learned over the years in this country. I considered myself part of this community from the start, and this country and its geography embraced me. This acceptance was immensely valuable for young Kameel, who in his previous world was deprived of some natural rights due to his thoughts and nationality. It

provided him with a sense of social belonging and, of course, social identity.

This beautiful multicultural society is my other home, and I chose it for my life. I lived with the dream of it throughout my childhood and adolescence. I truly loved it and felt a sense of belonging. I spoke and wrote about it often. Sometimes I faced criticism from immigrant and refugee groups and even from British people. However, I believe citizenship is not something granted; it must be earned, and one must strive to integrate into the host society. For me, the experience of becoming British was a combination of everything this country had to offer, which was distinct from merely being English. I considered myself British – loyal to it, and even somewhat passionate about it. Here, I first learned the principles of human rights and citizenship, and I gained a deeper understanding of civility. This does not imply that these values do not exist in other countries; rather, it indicates my fondness for this country, where I learned principles of human dignity. When I returned to Iran, I aimed to instigate change with these values in mind – particularly the positive and effective aspects of its democratic system, though I am also aware of its shortcomings.



Image 165: Hammersmith, London, 1997.

Throughout my years living in England, I maintained my spirit of protest and inquiry, opposing war. On International Workers' Day, which falls on 1 May, I would always be in the ranks of demonstrators, and whenever conflicts erupted in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq or Palestine, I did not overlook that Britain was invariably involved. Having spent my childhood and adolescence in war, I am acutely aware of its consequences and sufferings. I have felt this profound pain deeply, and I will always respond to this issue.

During the time I was searching for work and residence in London, my home in Iran was filled with crying and lamentation. Later, I heard many stories about this from my father and others. My grandmother would say, 'Kameel, you went and broke my back. I never thought you would leave one day.'

When my father learned I had gone, he went to my shop. I had left the key with a relative who had accompanied me to Tehran. My routine in the shop each morning involved turning on the main circuit breaker, because I controlled the shop's electricity through the meter. My father opened the shop and turned on the meter, and my favourite singer, Nasser Rezazi, was still playing on the tape recorder.

My father fainted, and an ambulance was called!

I had never imagined my father would react that way; he was not an extroverted person and did not often show his affection. Although we had little tension after his military service and got through everything with smiles, he often pressed me to get married, citing that I didn't contribute to household expenses. During the last year I spent in Iran, I bore part of the family's expenses. Perhaps it was then that I began to care about independence, or I got a taste of independence despite the circumstances around me – a taste that would serve me well in the subsequent chapters of my life.

My mother always did the shopping, and relatives would half-jokingly say that Amine was the man of the house! This comment was somewhat heavy but did not concern my father much. My mother would come to the street where my shop was located. I would pay for her purchases, which was my financial contribution to the household. Occasionally, I would buy household items and flaunt them, as well.

When I came to England, I continued to support my family and regularly deposited money into an account my sister opened for my

grandmother. She had given me love for years that no bank account could even remotely repay.



Image 166: My parents.

Additionally, I sent money regularly to my father for him to help needy families. Upon my return, I discovered that he had given this money to his sisters and relatives. When I asked him for an explanation, he said, '*Rolegyan* ["beloved child"], the light that is lawful for the house is forbidden for the mosque!' I did not understand his meaning at that time, but, when I returned to Iran, I finally grasped what he intended. He always said, 'Send those damned pounds over here, son; I've found several families in dire need!' Later, I learned that he always smiled mockingly over the phone, saying he would put one over on Kameel in the name of God.

According to my father's perspective and culture, the right action was to start his charitable contributions with his close ones. In societies where support organisations systematically and impartially assist the poor and social justice is upheld, such actions may not be necessary. However, in a country like Iran, where even support organisations act ideologically and where aligning with the regime's policies and being part of ideological bodies such as the Basij and the Foundation for the Oppressed are vital for receiving State support, individual assistance and personal methods become more useful. This is particularly true given that the level of support for religious and ethnic minorities is diminished to nearly non-existence. Therefore, it is crucial for financially better-off individuals to direct their assistance correctly to address this significant gap. Naturally, in these conditions, helping relatives and first-degree acquaintances who are struggling with poverty takes priority. In summary, I now better understand my father's actions and strive to follow in his footsteps. After his passing, I continued his approach on various occasions such as Ramadan and Newruz celebrations.

Rasul's Marriage and My Guilt

My father compelled my brother Rasul to marry. Rasul had just returned from military service, carrying a particular sharpness in his demeanour, and, in my view, he needed more time to find his footing. But this forced marriage only tightened the noose around him.

Rasul's arranged marriage was driven by the common concerns of that time – fears that were even more prevalent in that era. In a period when local traditions and social structures were shifting, fears of youthful waywardness and addiction were widespread, and Rasul became a casualty of these anxieties. Sometimes he would joke, half-seriously, 'Kak Kameel, I paid the price for your trip abroad! Everyone expected that, as the older brother, you would marry first, but you didn't, and then you took off . . .' The entire family longed to see me as a groom, and when I let them down it became Rasul's duty.

Around that time, I bought my first mobile phone. I called my father, hoping to dissuade him. I asked him to let Rasul be, but he seemed distracted or wanted to dodge the conversation. He kept asking, 'Where does this cordless phone of yours connect, and who gets the bill?' Despite my pleas for him to stop meddling in Rasul's life, he paid me no mind.

The elders found Rasul a bride from a distant branch of the family, and everything proceeded exactly as they wanted. At last, my father had realised his dream: to host his son's wedding at his home – to stand at the door and proudly greet each guest as the groom's father.

Rasul's wife was also young – even younger than him. Their marriage didn't last a year, and the only outcome was my nephew Pouya, who was raised by my mother with the help of my brother. I have a deep love for Pouya, but I also feel an emotional, unreasonable guilt when I think of him.

Sometimes I wonder if this all happened to my brother because I failed to fulfil my family's expectations. I think about a society like Iran, where young people and their families are typically bound by mutual dependence, which is a barrier to forming mature and independent personalities. Even if someone like me seeks independence and decides to build a life on their own terms, they are, in the end, judged for choosing differently and face guilt for going against the tide.



Image 167: Rasul in his shop. Piranshahr, 1998.

In Iranian society, traditional beliefs and values still hold sway. Many parents find it difficult to accept their children thinking or living independently. That's why, if one child strays from the family's idea of the 'correct' path, parents often take swift action with the other children to prevent losing their hold entirely.

Encounters with the Presidents of Iraq and Kurdistan

I tried to keep my promise to myself to steer clear of political involvement, yet, now and then, I attended left-wing political gatherings and inevitably followed Middle Eastern affairs and the associated news.

At that time, the left hadn't yet fragmented into so many factions, and, at my age and in my circumstances, attending their conferences and congresses was fascinating. In Iran, we were not permitted to speak against the Islamic Republic's views, so, after experiencing such a closed environment, being present at these gatherings and hearing communist and socialist perspectives was intriguing. I even attended some poetry nights at which poets like Sherko Bekas and Ismail Khoi performed, and I'd take part in May Day events and anti-war protests, keeping my associations with these circles casual.

When I was moved back to central London from Wimbledon, my social worker informed me she'd found me an independent room to rent. The landlord required a reference letter from tenants, so my social worker wrote one on my behalf. The room was in a building that during the Second World War had housed nurses and local healthcare staff. I was thrilled to finally have a space of my own, free from the crowded shared rooms. Living with fourteen other people was difficult. I lacked the independence I sought. Dragan had been transferred there before me, and it was here that our friendship deepened. He constantly spoke about the Bosnian wars and the atrocities committed, the massacres of Croats and Muslims by each other in their devastating civil war – I knew the details of his life by heart.

My new accommodation was in the city centre, near Hammersmith train station. I lived on the fourth floor of Abercorn House on Bute Gardens. It was a peaceful, lovely area, with mostly professional residents, each with their own room. A plaque at the entrance noted that Queen Elizabeth's mother had inaugurated the building, which was a neat, well-kept place and far better than the previous ones I had lived in. Most residents were single, but on my floor were mainly younger tenants.

I spent around nine months at this address. During this period, I remember a few notable experiences. I got to know the Kurdish Cultural Centre (the 'KCC') in Oval, South London and enrolled in computer classes held at another local community centre called Komelga, where they taught



Image 168: KCC Elections. Oval, London, 1999.

common programmes like Word and Excel. Before migrating, I had learned some basic computer skills with my friend Masoud Pirma, who also had plans to come to Europe, but I joined the classes to deepen my understanding.

The teacher taught in Kurdish and Arabic, which helped me learn better. In the evenings after college, I would go there and meet groups of Kurds who had recently arrived in the UK or who had decided to continue their studies post-migration. Most were Kurds from Iraqi Kurdistan, and all but one of the centre's managers were from the Kurdistan region. The repercussions of the civil wars in Kurdistan, or what was called 'the fratricidal war', had even reached London. The centre would periodically switch hands: for one stretch, it was managed by the Barzani faction, and everyone there would be affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Then, it would pass to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and the entire crowd would shift. When I started going, the PUK was in charge, and most people there were from Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah.

That's where I twice met Former Iraqi President Mam Jalal Talabani. Over time, I came to understand and analyse his character more thoroughly. At that time, he was the leader of the PUK and from 2005 to 2014 served as president of Iraq. He was more capable and modern in his political approach than other leaders, especially compared to his rival Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party – a rarity in the Middle East. The Barzanis and Talabanis had long been engaged in a war that claimed hundreds of lives.

Mam Jalal, like Barzani with the KDP, never relinquished the presidency of the PUK after its founding. He held onto his position. His wife and family faced accusations of financial corruption. While his political reputation became more favourable in the last decade of his life, he was often seen as a pragmatic politician who many Kurds considered an unreliable partner due to his shifting policies. Some Kurds even jokingly called him *Adas*, meaning someone whose true intentions are difficult to discern!

Mam Jalal was witty and a skilled orator, and one of my memories of him involved his visit to this Kurdish Cultural Centre in London. The KCC's director, Mr Mazhar Khaleghi, a Kurdish singer and Mam Jalal's brother-in-law, had arranged for everyone to line up in the hallway to greet him. Many at the front had Kurdish nationalist names, some of whom were

his old comrades. As the Centre representative introduced people – 'Master Hiersh, Teacher Shoresh, Kak Hiwa, Sanger, Helmet' and so on – Mam Jalal, halfway down the line, joked, 'What's all this "Hiersh" and "Miersh" nonsense, and where did it come from? Judging by our ages, we were all born around the same time, and I remember some of you from the days we fought in the mountains. Back then, these revolutionary Kurdish names didn't even exist! I'd wager that all your birth certificates actually say Rasul, Taha, Mawlud, Haji Othman, Mohammed and Hussein. As for me, I'm still just Jalal, though you all had to add *Mam* to it out of pity!' Everyone laughed, and he moved back to the start of the line, saying, 'Let's start here, and everyone give their real birth name.'

Years later, when Masoud Barzani was president of Kurdistan, I was working in media and attended a press conference with him and his nephew Nechirvan Barzani at the renowned Chatham House. I was covering the event, which focused on Article 140 and the fate of Kirkuk, the oil-rich city that Kurds considered part of Kurdistan, for the well-known site *KurdishMedia*. When I asked Barzani, in English, about Article 140 and Baghdad's failure to provide the guarantees needed to implement it, his vague answer left me unsatisfied. I pressed him further, and it was clear from his and his companions' reactions that they weren't pleased – not with me, and, more importantly, not with *KurdishMedia*, which at the time was run by Dr Ribwar Fattah, a friend. It was one of the few independent, English-language, Kurdish news sites. The next day, both Ribwar and I received letters from the Office of the Kurdish President in London expressing their dissatisfaction with our handling of the event and our related analyses.

In the computer classes, I made friends with several people I still keep in touch with. My good friend Shwan Rashid is Kurdish, born into an educated family, but he grew up in Baghdad and tended to avoid Kurdish and political matters. He soon immersed himself in technology and pharmacology, married an Englishwoman in the south, and had quite a few children. I also met a brother and sister visiting from Norway, along with some young doctors from Kurdistan.

We formed a small group. The brother and sister were Iranian Kurds but had lived in Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad for years before moving to Norway. They had come to London to stay with a relative and were preparing to attend university, just as I was. We became friends, and it was

arranged that Ronak, along with her cousins and friends, would come to my room at Abercorn House for a small gathering. We were four girls and two boys, all around the same age. I'm not sure how it came to be that they decided to gather at my place.

It was my first time hosting friends in London, and I wasn't much of a cook. Though I was excited, I was also nervous. I had a simple, single room. I liked this girl a lot. Her name even felt beautiful to me, meaning 'light' or 'brightness'. I was stumped about what to cook for four people, so I went to a small Indian shop on Hammersmith's King Street and bought a few dishes and glasses, a pot, a lamp and a rug. I even borrowed some chairs and plants from neighbours to give my room a bit of polish for the evening. The last touch was a painting I borrowed, and when I hung it on the wall, I felt everything was ready. The smell of food filled the room, reminding me of life in Iranian Kurdistan. I made rice and an okra stew, a dish I'd learned from an African migrant who prepared it with goat neck. Though primarily an Arabic dish, it's also popular in Iraq.

Everything was ready, but at about 7 pm, they called to say they wouldn't be coming after all! They said they were in central London, that it was getting late and they'd decided to head elsewhere.

I was both hurt and relieved. I wasn't sure how to host them and was nervous about whether the food and the room's appearance were up to par.



Image 169: Cooking for friends. London, 1999.

That same evening, I returned my neighbours' things and kept my distance from Ronak for a while, though later we became close friends. She, her brother, and their cousin eventually came to my place, and we continued to meet at events outside of classes. After my arrest in Iran in 2020, we even spoke on Facebook, and we still check in with each other now and then.

When finalising this text, I sent her this section, explaining that it was more of a reflection on myself and the unfamiliar way of life I was learning to navigate, and how even such simple social interactions felt like new experiences. After reading it, she apologised. I told her I'd kept the memory inside all these years, and she admitted she too had felt bad about it but was too shy to bring it up.

I did like her, but not to the extent that anything would happen between us. Around that time, one of the doctors attending the classes had taken an interest in her, and I knew our lifestyles were too different to be compatible. So, I never tried to take things beyond friendship, but it left a bittersweet feeling, a little like that teenage heartbreak when the girl I loved chose someone older and seemingly more suitable. It felt like history repeating itself!

Under-Delivering while Reciting the Quran in London

Another memorable experience from my time at Abercorn House was meeting a Kurdish friend from Sulaymaniyah. A few months into my stay there, I was glad to find a fellow Kurd. He studied part time and worked in South London.

At that time, I was working with Eric, but during quieter seasons or holidays when restaurants were less busy, work would slow down or be temporarily halted. I asked my new friend to let me know if he came across any job openings. After a while, he said, 'I have a job where you could join me, though I'm not sure it's the right fit for you. But if you're interested, come along and give it a try.' He was working in a Pakistani butcher's shop in Brixton, in the fish section. I agreed to give it a go. He warned me, 'It's hard work and smells bad. We have to haul boxes and clean and cut fish for customers.'

Brixton is an area in South London, once known for its revolutionary vibe, where many older African and left-leaning Londoners lived. In the

past, the area was also known for protests and marches against racial discrimination, and it had a large market selling nearly everything. At the time, Brixton had a growing Muslim community alongside the African population, so large shops sprang up, including a few butcher's shops with separate sections for beef, lamb and fish.



Image 170: Meat and fish shop, Brixton, London.

So I joined him in the fish section, but worse than the smell and the tough work was that we had to wake up early, taking the first train at 5:30 am to get to work. Working with Eric, I was used to being up all night and then catching the first train home, but here the routine was the opposite.

On my first day, we started by unloading fish shipments. Meat trucks pulled up, and the workers ran back and forth. My first task was to help the other workers haul frozen and fresh fish up to the store's second-floor freezer, but my main duty was to cut and clean fish.

Most of the fish were frozen, so we'd put them in a water basin to thaw, then scale them with large hooks, cut off the fins, tails and heads with a sharp knife, and gut them. Each customer preferred a different cut: some, for instance, were African customers who ate the fish heads, while others didn't even want theirs gutted. We had about twenty types of fish, plus prawns, oysters, crabs, eels and more. Our hands were constantly getting cut.

The first few hours each morning began with unloading the shipments. It surprised me how the shop was busy from morning until 8 pm, and we were on our feet all day, especially on weekends. There was no sitting allowed, and only a fifteen-minute break for lunch. One worker would mix different types of meat together with lots of spices and serve it with rice – our lunch for this hard day's work, which earned us about £30.

The shop's owner didn't have a moustache, but he wore a henna-dyed beard. He would stand on the steps overlooking the shop floor, loudly playing the Quran from 8 am to 8 pm. It was a sound I had been distant from during my time abroad, and it felt out of place with the customers and the shop's atmosphere.

One day, the owner called a young Latin American boy up to him. We heard yelling and hitting sounds. My friend told me, 'Keep your head down and just focus on work.'

I asked, 'Is he really hitting him?'

The boy came back with a bloody face. The owner had caught him taking money from the till, so, as he put it, he'd 'disciplined' him and then fired him.

Every weekend, the owner would call us over to give us our wages. He had a good memory and knew all of us by name. After a few days, my friend said, 'The boss wants you to work on the scales since you speak better English.'

This was a promotion of sorts – a unique opportunity, as the scales meant less work or, rather, no fish to clean. I gratefully accepted. We had an electric scale where we'd weigh the fish and display the price. Unlike other shops, where prices were fixed and discounts were rare, there, the prices were initially set high and then 'discounted' to the real price.

While training on the scales, I caught on to what was really going on. A price was agreed with the customer, but by selecting a different weight unit on the scale, we'd shortchange them. Apparently, everyone except me and other newcomers was aware of this. My friend, once again, told me to keep my head down, but I couldn't.

I said, 'This boss listens to the Quran all day and then steals from people – and, worse, asks us to do the stealing!'

He replied, 'If you want to work on the scales, keep quiet and just do the job. The boss says if we don't do it, he can't pay us. The sin is his to bear.'

I admit I kept quiet that first day – besides, I wasn't yet fully trained on the scales. But that night, I lay awake, feeling too exhausted and guilty to sleep. Having grown up in the market due to my father's work, I'd been taught that the scales were sacred, and I couldn't accept short-changing people. The next day, I returned and told the boss I didn't want to work on the scales. I explained that I couldn't deceive some poor pensioner who

was spending her limited income on fish. I told him I'd rather go back to my old job . . .

That was my last day. By nightfall, I was let go. I suspect he was worried I'd cause trouble for him. He said nothing as he paid me, but, on my way out, my friend told me the boss said I shouldn't come back.

Working in the fish section was hard. On weekends, on the train back, I'd see groups of young people heading to parties or out drinking. I'd try to distance myself from everyone, and if the carriage wasn't empty, I wouldn't sit. I'd experienced it before: I knew that the smell of fish would make people look around and eventually trace it back to me. Then, they'd either mock me or move away, which was the hardest part of that period in my life.

Years later, while supervising a research project on child scavengers in Tehran, a young female field interviewer returned from speaking with one such child and said, 'The smell of rubbish was awful!' Her words and expression upset me and brought back memories of my time working with fish. I realised that my empathy toward people in such circumstances was grounded in my own experience. If this young woman had gone through similar things, she'd probably approach the topic with more understanding and compassion. Although it's not easy, I've often tried to put myself in others' shoes to gain a deeper sense of empathy and understanding.

A Man's Home is His Castle

Several months had passed since I moved into Abercorn House, and I was on the waiting list for more suitable housing when a letter arrived. I'm not sure if it was expedited by that social worker or if my turn had truly come, but I think it was the latter since, in Britain, things usually proceed transparently, without the influence of special favours. The letter stated that I could move into affordable housing, with an option available, and included the address so I could visit the property. I went to the given location and found a small one-bedroom flat on the upper floor of a two-storey building, not far from King Street in Hammersmith.

The entire building belonged to a British family, who years ago had donated part of it to the Church of England, leaving the rest to their children. A large housing agency had acquired this house and others like



Image 171: Friends in Hammersmith, London.

it at auction for a lower price on a long lease. They had converted each floor into a separate unit. The flat offered to me was about fifty square metres, with a small bedroom, a sitting room and a kitchen. With two reference letters from my previous landlord and social worker, I went to the agency and rented it, feeling that I'd got more than I could have hoped for. Its central location was perfect, and being close to the train station was a major benefit. It was unfurnished, so once I'd moved in, I began buying items for the house.

Years later, as a master's student, I had the right to buy the property under the exceptional and remarkable scheme supporting first-time buyers from low-income backgrounds, one of the most successful and socialist housing systems in the world. Because I had lived there for years, I had the first option to buy. With a bank loan, I purchased it. It was an achievement that felt like a dream – a dream, though, that people like Eric and my father's dentist friend had set in motion.

Many of my friends laughed at me, saying I'd taken on a heavy mortgage, tying myself to the bank for about twenty-five years. They told me this was the time to explore, not to settle down and buy a house. But Eric saw things differently. He always said I should do everything to become a homeowner because, until I owned property here, I hadn't truly

achieved anything. He had a traditional outlook, and every time he paid me, about half of it went into a savings account he'd helped me set up for my mortgage. I often wondered what the point of this was until I understood its value when I bought the house.

The monthly mortgage payment was similar to what the rent would have been, making it an excellent decision. For someone new to the country, it was a bold step. I didn't have a stable job and wanted to apply for a student loan to continue my studies. In the end, I took a big risk, but I became a homeowner. The English have a famous saying, 'A man's home is his castle', meaning a home is a haven and a place of comfort. Owning a home was a strange feeling, knowing I now had a key that could be mine forever. I felt both happiness and fear. Beside the utility bills and daily living expenses, I now had a monthly mortgage to cover. It was tough, but I had faced harder challenges, and I knew I could handle this one, too.

This was my first time owning a home, fully independent, and I had another concern: furnishing it. When I moved to Abercorn House, I saw it as temporary, so I hadn't bought much, but now things were different. For a long time, I didn't have a washing machine, television or many other items, but I took on extra work shifts and gradually bought everything, and my home slowly took shape.

As soon as I became a homeowner, the families I knew began treating me differently. Friends and acquaintances brought me gifts, seeing that I was putting down roots. My address had frequently changed before, but now I had a fixed home, and the old idea of marriage started to resurface. When my family back in Iran learned about it, they brought up marriage with renewed intensity, saying at least I should marry while living there. The pressure wasn't as strong as when I was in Iran, but for a while this topic became important to them again, and they pursued it once more.

Onward to University

After I secured my permanent flat and became independent, I enrolled at a college in Wandsworth, in the heart of London, where a study opportunity had opened for me.

To enter university in the UK, students typically must complete one of two preparatory courses: GCSE or A-Levels. Due to my age, I didn't qualify for the GCSE track, but with certificates from language courses and my

time at Hammersmith College, I was able to join the A-Level programme. My social worker explained the process, and I applied for several fields through entrance exams.

One of my choices was Graphic Design, Art and Design. I was partly drawn to this subject to avoid a heavy language barrier, as I worried I might struggle with the technical English required by other subjects. However, I still had to complete English and maths courses, meaning I had to confront subjects I had avoided my whole life!

Our maths teacher, Peter, was a light-hearted man who helped alleviate my fear of maths. The educational approach here was supportive rather than authoritative, unlike in Iran. During A-Level English, I met an Iranian girl who had recently moved from Germany. We grew closer in our maths and language classes and, later, I became acquainted with her family and would visit them. Both of us were newcomers and felt out of place; our shared language, culture and geographical background naturally became a powerful bonding force in this new life. Her presence became important in my life, even influencing my choice of university degree.

Her father owned a large printing business in Tehran and printed some of Iran's most popular newspapers, often travelling to Germany or the UK to buy printing machinery. When I eventually attended the London College of Printing, I accompanied him to a few international trade shows, helping with purchases and pricing inquiries. This family's link to publishing and printing left a strong impression on me, and I was keen to pursue it as a field of study. However, I later realised it wasn't my true interest, although I did complete a graphic design course at the same college to test myself in art, design and graphics.

In that course, we began with pencil drawing and moved on to animation. It was my first time trying drawing and design, and my talent in photography proved useful. I had a strong interest in photography, having worked as an apprentice for a photographer in my teens, where I learned to develop photos. That put me ahead of many others. Before long, after completing a supervisory course, I was put in charge of the college darkroom. I knew the forms and formats for photo development and was skilled in printing and duplication, but my design skills weren't as strong.

In Iran, art classes were treated as little more than a break, with no real teaching or encouragement of our skills or potential. There was a misguided belief in Iran that only the untalented pursued the arts. This



Image 172: Drawing for my son while in Evin Prison. Tehran, 2019.

may be because neither the education system nor many families recognised or valued art, meaning little importance was placed on talent identification and development in the arts.

The only memory I had of school drawing was sketching a house with a pitched roof, an antenna on top, a lamp between two windows with a door below, a water basin beside it, a road in the background with two cars coming from opposite directions and a few birds in the sky. That was the extent of my drawing throughout my life. Perhaps it was inspired by my environment, or perhaps it reflected a wish for a house with a red, sloped roof. When I was recently in Evin Prison and wanted to draw something for my son, that's all I could think of to sketch, and I gave it to him at our first visit.

During the graphic design course, I realised that, while I was weak in drawing, I excelled with a camera.

Working in a Hotel and Student Unemployment in Iran

At long last, I fulfilled a childhood dream and bought a moped. In the UK, it's known as a scooter – like a small Italian Vespa with a modest 50cc engine and a low speed. I later traded it in for a 125cc model.

During this period, I was continuing my work with Eric in a stop-start fashion. Eric was ill and couldn't come in much, so, in the end, he entrusted nearly everything to me. However, I wasn't experienced in all aspects of the job, so mistakes happened from time to time. We decided I would work with him two nights a week, and he would hire someone else for the other nights. We kept up this arrangement for a while, and then, through an acquaintance who was a doctor and who I had met on a computer course, I was introduced to a hotel in Victoria, one of London's tourist hotspots.

This area was filled mainly with tourists, especially Americans. A few wealthy Pakistani businessmen had purchased a chain of hotels and appointed an elderly man, a former general in Iran's army, to manage



Image 173: Victoria Hotel, London, 2002..

them. He had passed the management of Victoria Hotel – one of the best of their properties – on to his son.

This four-storey hotel was near Victoria Station and had recently started offering online booking. Most of the guests were foreign visitors coming to see London's landmarks and the royal palace.

My shift at the hotel reception ran from 6 pm to 10 pm, after which I would hand over to the night shift. The General's son had a strange obsession with perfection. If a guest form had the slightest mark or if a signature was even a centimetre outside the box, he would tear it up and have it rewritten from scratch. He arranged the pens on the desk by colour, meticulously organising the reception area and saying, 'Everything must be in its place.' If we didn't meet his standards of order, he'd become upset, and his childish manner made it even more noticeable. This obsession with order may have stemmed from his upbringing by a military father, as people in the army are often hyper-attentive to discipline and can be quite strict. It's said that their children frequently develop similar fears and compulsions.

The old royalist general was a short man. He lacked his son's meticulousness but solely focused on profit. Losing a single guest was unacceptable; if the hotel was only 20% vacant, he'd threaten to fire us. He spoke to me in Farsi. I think, besides his wife, I was probably the only one who could speak to him in his own language. He was entirely disillusioned with Iran and Iranians. He would often reminisce about his time during the Shah's reign, sharing stories that were sometimes even unsettling, such as tales of the power he wielded, riding in a Jeep with twenty soldiers following and the respect everyone supposedly had for him. He would say, 'We and the Shah served the Kurds and others, civilising everyone, and I just can't understand why they threw us out.' This was his daily litany.

Shahram, the general's son, was supposed to train me in managing guest arrivals and other tasks, but his compulsive nature made it impossible for me to learn from him. He was unwell for a few days and missed work, leaving me unsure what to do. When he returned, I told him, 'Shahram, if you want me here, you need to teach me the basics; otherwise, when you're not around, I won't know what to do or how to check guests in and out.'

I stayed at that hotel for quite some time, earning about £20 per shift, which, as a student, I received tax-free – a huge help. Once my work with Eric ended, I asked for a night shift position in the same hotel chain.

They sent me to the Embassy Court Hotel in Edgeware Road, an area populated by wealthy Gulf Arabs and Saudis. I would arrive from Victoria by tube or scooter after my other shift. Until about 11 pm, I'd study in the guards' room; then I would draw the curtain to sleep until morning. I wasn't supposed to sleep through the night entirely, but with the downstairs door locked and guests rarely coming and going, I managed to rest comfortably until 6 or 7 am, have breakfast, and then hand over my shift to Abdul, a Moroccan man, before heading to university.

At that time, I was hardly going home except at weekends. Often, during the week, I'd only manage two or three nights at home, spending most of my time between university and the hotels. Throughout my studies, I was working and studying full-time.

Upon returning to Iran, I struggled to understand why so many students relied on their families financially and didn't work while studying. Student unemployment in Iran is a multifaceted issue, with cultures, families and individuals all responsible. Naturally, in a society with high unemployment, it's difficult for students to find part-time work. Although organisations have recently been more accommodating of working students, many families don't insist that their children work. This lack of expectation can lead to laziness for both the student and, indirectly, broader society.

My social life was limited, and I rarely went out. Emotionally, I was still detached from Iran, so I spent most weekends with a few friends. I've mentioned before that I met a young Kurdish man named Hawal ('Friend') during my college days; he was from Ranya and remains a close friend to this day. Occasionally, I'd spend weekends with him, my other friend Shwan, and an English friend named John. Hawal worked in Brixton and was a couple of years younger than me. He had a blend of modern and traditional views. His grandfathers were Kurdish Jews, and when he later discovered this, it created a unique internal conflict. He once told me, 'When the civil wars in Kurdistan erupted in the '90s, we moved to Israel. We were a traditional religious family, so my parents didn't abandon Islam, and when Israeli social workers came to check on us, my mother

would hide her prayer mat.' I still joke with Hawal about him claiming to be Muslim while his people treat Muslims in Palestine poorly.

In my early years of knowing Hawal, we met two older men during a summer course at a college in Putney. These two brothers were from the Babekir Agha family, a prominent landowning family from Ranya and Pashdar in Iraqi Kurdistan. After getting to know them, I realised they knew my father. When Kurds from Iraqi Kurdistan sought refuge in Iran following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and then Kurdistan, this family had stayed in our city, buying the first colour photo lab in partnership with Tohid Photography. This is why they had become well acquainted with most of the shop owners in town.



Image 174: With Hawal. Bath, 1998.

Years later, this family made a terrible decision, executing one of their daughters in a horrific honour killing for leaving her husband and having a relationship with another man. They put her body in a suitcase and buried it in the garden of a house in another city. At the time, I was working part-time with the London Metropolitan Police and Social Services, providing cultural recommendations, writing reports and doing translations. For a short period, I was assigned to analyse the cultural aspects of this case, which later became one of the most notorious honour

killings in England and Europe – the Banaz Mahmod case. The Babekir Agha sons and three other perpetrators received life sentences and remain imprisoned in England. Later, Banaz's father, through a mutual friend, complained to me, saying, 'Your father was our friend; why didn't you support us in the case?' There's more to tell on this topic. In recent years, honour killings in Iran have persisted, particularly in marginal, insular border areas. Additionally, other forms of family-related killings have increased, such as child and spousal homicides.

Associate and Bachelor's Degrees, and New Horizons

After a challenging and lengthy pre-university period, I finally reached the stage of choosing a field of study. Given my background and the path I had taken, both I and my advisors saw printing, publishing or design – or something along these lines – as the logical choice. Yet I knew that this field might not completely satisfy me. Perhaps I lacked other options or the right advisor, but, in the end, I enrolled at one of the most reputable universities for printing and publishing, located in the Elephant and Castle area of London. I began with a one-year Higher National Diploma programme, which is roughly equivalent to an associate degree. Unsure how far I would go in this field, I chose the associate degree path as a starting point, reasoning that if it didn't meet my expectations, I could switch fields with less time wasted.

Having left school in the second year of middle school and even attended classes at Naqadeh University for a while using a fake student ID, I could now actually attend university in the UK and have a genuine student card! I admit, initially, just being a student felt more important than the field itself. After all those years away from education, I was studying again, and being a university student was the best feeling in the world.

After completing the two-year associate degree, I faced two options: continue to a bachelor's degree or change my field entirely. Changing fields meant exploring something unrelated to what I'd studied thus far. There were certain classes I wasn't keen on – many were mechanically orientated or engineering-based, including those on the composition and formulas of colours. Some subjects and classes were simply beyond my understanding, or my English and technical knowledge weren't strong

enough to keep up. Most of my classmates were British and grasped the material with ease. We international students would frequently approach them for help, pleading for their assistance. I struggled with the theoretical parts, particularly economics and marketing analyses, often spending hours after classes with Japanese and Spanish students in the library, going through supplementary books related to the course. It was a gruelling routine.

I had a somewhat better grasp of topics like environmental economics and publishing law, but I found the maths and formulas challenging. In the early years, everything was exam-based, so we had to memorise everything. I spent countless nights awake, cramming formulas into my memory that I've never used since. I still don't know how I passed the maths exam, but somehow I managed!

In the bachelor's programme, I faced a new challenge in the specialised courses: I lost my original group of friends. New classmates joined, most of whom were part-time employees in British media and publishing. They all had technical understandings of the industry. I faced not only the stress of unfamiliar subjects, but also the challenge of building connections with these new students, who took some time to accept me.

In those years, many print-and-publishing-industry exhibitions were held across Europe, some of which we attended. I visited Heidelberg, Germany several times, as it's the birthplace of industrial printing machines. Many journalists visited the university to deliver lectures, and we were regularly taken to major media outlets, including the BBC and Channel 4, as Publishing Law students. There, I met professionals from the fields of publishing, printing and journalism, as well as industry giants in British printing, whose influence has since faded with the rise of digital printing. Back then, the power and impact of print were profound, with newspapers and the media shaping the public outlook, and even dictating the rhythm, direction and style of life.

As British political parties each had their own loyal newspapers, I gradually became familiar with the various publications, understanding which were right-leaning and which were run by the left. For instance, when I saw someone reading *The Daily Mail*, I understood they were likely on the right or possibly nationalist, while *The Guardian* reader was typically anti-war and left leaning. Now I know those assumptions weren't always

accurate, but it was during my bachelor's studies that I learned to make these distinctions.

Observing how news was produced, watching the editorial teams arrange stories, and gradually hearing and learning analytical methods helped me understand which types of news analyses aligned with the different political factions. I also learned about media tycoons like Rupert Murdoch and his newspaper empire.



Image 175: Associate and Bachelor's Studies. University of London, 2000.

Thanks to our visits to printing-industry exhibitions, we were occasionally offered jobs and invited to join TV stations or newspapers after graduation. This period marked my blossoming, as I began to understand Britain and the Western media, and I saw the 'white' industry I was entering.

As I mentioned, 'white' was a term used by immigrants to describe British society. This industry remained very white, meaning immigrants had little to no representation within it. For a migrant, this raised many questions and concerns. Could I truly enter this space and become part of its inner circle?

After finishing my bachelor's degree, I was uncertain what to do next. I visited a few places and received job offers. Marius, my Polish-English

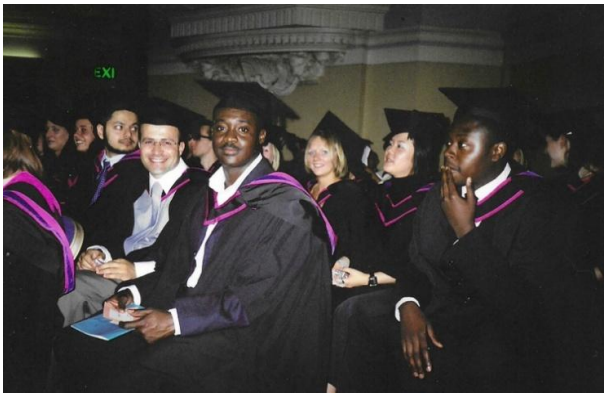


Image 176: Graduation. London, 2002.

neighbour and a respected librarian and writer, whose focus for many years had been the Middle East, especially Syria, often gave me career advice. Marius, his Canadian wife Bobbi, a university carpet-weaving professor, and their two daughters had lived in the flat below mine since the 1960s. Marius told me, 'If you study in one field but work in another, years will pass before you truly settle. So, instead, dive straight into your field. This industry is divided into two: printing and publishing, and journalism. Try both for a while; then decide. If you enjoy it, pursue your master's and doctorate in this field. If not, continue your career with your current qualifications. Here in England, it's not all about the degree. It's mostly about practical experience.'

So that's exactly what I did. Once my bachelor's was complete, I entered the workforce, spending a brief period at a print shop before moving into journalism.

I had only ever spoken to my father's cousin, who lived in Sweden – we had never met. He'd recently remarried to a Czech-Romanian woman (Romanians are known as *Koli* in Iran and *Qarahchi* in Kurdistan). Kak Youssef had fascinating memories of my grandmother, his own mother, and his father. Once a Peshmerga with the Party, he had joined its ranks after his sister Mina, who also supported the Party, was arrested. In the early 1980s, he'd come to Europe, severing ties with Iran.

He came to London with his family to visit his wife's relatives and to attend my graduation ceremony. He was thrilled, carefully filming the moment I received my diploma with the iconic graduation cap on my head.

I found it interesting to see Kak Youssef filming so earnestly, as if he were not only my family, but also wanted to look out for me. It was clear he wished he could be in my position. Opportunities for education hadn't come his way, and he often spoke about it with regret, always encouraging me to study further.

Chapter Twelve: Striving For A 'White' Life

I had promised myself I would stay away from politics. As my life in London began to settle, I occasionally visited Kurdish centres in the north and south of the city, but I gradually cut back on these brief visits to separate my path entirely from politics. I even began distancing myself from Iranian and Kurdish gatherings. My connection to my past culture was now mostly limited to Kurdish Newruz celebrations and the occasional Farsi and Kurdish poetry night.

I had put all my effort into living, as immigrants would say, 'white and English' – to work, spend time with my peers and embrace this new life. I had left to change my life, and, despite all the hardships I had endured, I'd succeeded in building a new world for myself, one that I didn't want anything to disrupt.

This approach had both positive and negative effects. I found a better footing and peace in this new environment, but the emotional divide between myself and my past began to widen. I even limited contact with my family, calling them only once a month. The cost of long-distance calls was high, but this went beyond mere expense and other such concerns. I wanted to make a fresh start without my past – a 'white' life without politics or the weight of yesterday. I wanted to be present in the here and now and to live in a completely new way . . . but I hadn't realised that it's impossible to escape your roots and identity. You may try to erase it all, but with the slightest incident, the past can come rushing back to encompass you.



Image 177: With friends at a music festival. Scotland, 2004.

They Kidnapped Apo!

In February 1999, I was returning from my job at a hotel in Edgware Road when I encountered a small, angry crowd in Notting Hill. Police cars rushed in to stop the group from scaling the walls of a building. Amid the commotion, I heard Kurdish being spoken, which intrigued me even more. I approached and asked what was happening. One of them, his face covered with a keffiyeh, yelled out, 'They kidnapped Apo!'

He was speaking in Kurmanji Kurdish, which I didn't fully understand. Baffled, I watched as this group of Kurds clashed with the special police forces. It was a strange scene for such an early morning. I asked a few journalists who had just arrived what had happened. To get more information, I explained, 'I'm also Kurdish, but I don't quite understand what they're saying.'

A young cameraman told me, 'Turkish Intelligence kidnapped Abdullah Öcalan, their leader, in Kenya last night. This group claims that, due to Turkish pressure, Greece expelled him, creating the conditions for his abduction, with help from the CIA and other foreign security agencies. That's why they're trying to storm the Greek Embassy.' He went on to say

that Öcalan's supporters had stormed Greek embassies in several countries, including Israel, and even taken hostages.

Though I had little knowledge of the PKK or Apo, the situation stirred something in me. I saw my fellow Kurds struggling to scale the embassy walls, refusing to accept the unjust capture and arrest of their leader under police batons. I skipped college that day and stood with the crowd.

As time passed, more Turkish Kurds flooded in. In a bold move, they blocked the main street by sitting down. Some Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds joined them, and by day's end the crowd had grown even larger. By the time the police arrived, twelve people had entered the building and symbolically taken two embassy guards and a storekeeper hostage. The next day, the police promised not to send these twelve to jail if they released the hostages. While they seemed to keep their word, it appears that each of those individuals was severely beaten during the handover and had anti-terrorism cases filed against them.



Image 178: Apo's Picture in North London Kurdish Centre.

For several nights, my friends and I went to the protest site, singing Kurdish anthems and dancing around the fire late into the night. The residents of that street complained about the noise, and Kurdish television and satellite channels broadcast live coverage each evening to other countries. One of my father's proudest moments was calling my mobile while sitting with relatives watching the live sit-in broadcast and telling me to wave to the camera. He frequently expressed frustration, asking,

'Why aren't you all shouting and doing more?' He seemed to believe that our actions could alter the political landscape in Turkey. Initially, Öcalan was sentenced to death, but European protests and threats led to a commutation to life imprisonment. Since then, he has remained the sole prisoner on the small island of İmralı, serving his sentence in complete isolation.

Serial Killings and the University Campus Incident

I was mostly preoccupied with my British life, yet each time something happened, I found myself stepping outside this inner circle, my attention drawn back to events in Iran or issues affecting the Kurds.

During this period, two tragic and shocking incidents occurred in Iran: the serial killings and later, the Koy University incident. Iranians and Kurds living in London continually discussed the serial killings. Among those who were horrifically murdered, I only knew Dariush Forouhar. He was a member of the Peace Committee and had come to Mahabad during the internal conflicts in the Kurdish regions with a well-known peace delegation. During that time, my mindset and thoughts had shifted, so political matters held little significance for me; however, the manner in which Forouhar and his wife, Parvaneh, were killed would break anyone's heart. They had been brutally slaughtered with knives.

During the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, with Ali Fallahian as minister of intelligence, a fearsome gang emerged within the Ministry that was primarily focused on eliminating and assassinating dissenters and political figures who opposed the regime. All analyses suggest that the murders they allegedly committed stemmed from the disputes of the early Revolution and were carried out with a green light from the highest political authorities in the country. Although this perspective has always been denied by the Islamic Republic, such behaviours and denials are commonplace for the Iranian Government. After the assassinations of Dr Ghassemlou (1989), Shapour Bakhtiar (1991), and Dr Sharafkandi (1992), they denied their roles in those events, too.

During Khatami's presidency, domestic reformists who were fed up with the impudence of the security gangs exposed the serial killings, but the reformists were part of the same regime and preferred the system's interests over transparency, covering up the Islamic Republic's



Image 179: Dariush Forouhar in Kurdistan. Sanandaj, 1980.

involvement in the killings of intellectuals. However, the reformists' disclosures required domestic sacrifices, so some senior officials in the Ministry of Intelligence, like Saeed Emami, were accused of orchestrating the murders, and with this ploy they managed to wrap up the matter. After some time, to avoid implicating the main pillars of the regime in the serial killings, the key figure in these incidents, who many believed to be Saeed Emami, was eliminated in prison. It was claimed he had committed suicide!

Seen in the light of this series of events, the Tehran University dormitory incident is the most significant event of that period. 'The events of 18 Tir' (9 July), or 'the attack on Tehran University dormitory', refer to the unrest and clashes that took place between students, law enforcement and individuals known as plainclothes agents from 18 to 23 Tir 1378 (9 to 14 July 1999) following the suspension of the newspaper *Salam*.

Human-rights activists in Iran believe that seven people were killed in this incident, but only the identities of Ezzatollah Ibrahim-Nejad and Fereshteh Alizadeh have been confirmed. The Council of Protesters confirmed the death of Tami Husseini in a statement on 26 Tir, and Saeed Zeynali has been missing since his arrest by agents. One student lost an eye due to a bullet, several others suffered broken limbs and many students

were beaten and arrested. Names such as Akbar Inanlou and Seyyed Mohammad Fazel Hashemi also appear among those injured or detained during the crackdown. This incident is regarded as the greatest challenge to the student movement in Iran since the 1979 Revolution.

After the revelations regarding the serial killings, many Iranians abroad protested and went on strike in front of Iranian embassies. One of these gatherings took place at SOAS University in London, which I also attended.

During this period, while I was trying to escape politics, something else interesting happened. The head and representative of one of the branches of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran lived in London and was an acquaintance of ours. Sometimes he would call to say, 'If it's all right, I'd like to come over for tea and a chat with a few people.' I would occasionally be at home and agree, but at other times I was out and would decline his invitation. One day he called and said, 'Kameel, the secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran is here. If you're around, we'll come to your house!' Kak Mostafa Hijri, who is still the secretary-general of the Party, had come to London to commemorate the Party's anniversary and give a speech, and, of course, I wanted to see him. He was the third secretary-general of the Party, following the assassinations of Dr Ghassemlou and Dr Sharafkandi.

Mr Hijri was from Naqadeh, my hometown, and was our neighbour. He didn't know me, but I knew he was familiar with my father and relatives. When we spoke, he remembered my whole family. I drove him to the speaking event in the small car I had recently bought. He had a return ticket for the next day. Everyone wanted him to be their guest, but he laughed and said, 'I'll stay with Kameel, as I see he's single and has no responsibilities.' He spent the night somewhere else, though.

One of my first political involvements in London coincided with Mr Hijri's visit during the series of killings. A memorial event for the Forouhars was also scheduled to be held. It was there that I met Alireza Noori-Zadeh for the first time. His wife was from Sanandaj, and he knew Mostafa Hijri and his entourage. Many political figures and activists were present, but I found it intriguing that the delegation from the Democratic Party commanded the attention and respect of the attendees. It seemed that the Party's political stature was higher than that of other parties, and their representatives were at the leadership level in this gathering.



Image 180: Anti-war protest on Afghanistan/Iraq. Central London.

It was agreed that all parties would present a statement of protest during the memorial for the Forouhars. The representative of the Party in London and a few others told me, 'There are many Farsi speakers here, from guerrillas to Mojahedin, leftists and Tudeh. We have been out of Iran for years; we can't speak Farsi well and have thick accents. You read the statement!'

I had never experienced reading a statement to such a large audience. Several hundred people were in the university's large amphitheatre, and numerous media representatives were present. Apparently, even members of parliament had come. Reading the statement in that environment was challenging for me, and I was extremely anxious. I thought I wouldn't be able to manage it. When Noori-Zadeh noticed, he said, 'My son, you're Kurdish, and this is your share in the struggle! You also know Farsi and, as a representative of your people, you should be able to read it well, so you can do it. Many non-Farsi Iranians have been out of Iran for thirty years and perhaps don't have the capability to read a text in Farsi like you do.'

So I found myself standing behind the microphone, reading the statement as a representative of the Party. I was facing the crowd and the cameras, reading the Party's statement. It had been a long time since I had

spoken Farsi in public, and I hadn't even had the chance to read from the statement once before. At times, I stumbled over my words. Out of fear, I avoided looking at the audience and kept my head down. When I finished, the audience applauded, and, as I came down, several journalists rushed toward me. I was wide-eyed, but Noori-Zadeh and a few others came to my aid, saying, 'If you have questions, the party officials are up there', and they pointed the reporters to their programme manager.

I still have the statement and the recording of the conference. That day, I felt upset that I had been placed in such a position. I had mixed feelings about the incident: I both liked and disliked what had happened. Later, when I watched the recording of the session, the trembling of my hands and my voice made me even angrier, and I regretted doing it! Everyone thanked me and praised my reading, saying I had done well, but I wasn't satisfied with myself. One person remarked, 'I wish you had held your head up, but you certainly read better than us!'

I think I stayed no more than five minutes. I couldn't handle the atmosphere. I called one of my friends, Hawal, and said, 'If I tell you what happened, your head will spin.'

Hawal, a Kurd from Raniya in Iraqi Kurdistan, had little fondness for the parties, especially the political parties of the Kurdish Region. He and my Iranian friend used to tease me about the Kurdish parties, calling them 'doll parties', implying they just sit around, eat and talk without taking any action. After hearing the story, Hawal said, 'Kameel, nothing comes out of these doll parties!' Then he asked, 'What's your role in the Party that you're reading a statement for them?' He added a lot of anxiety to the situation.

For some time after reading this statement, I shied away from political issues, but a few years later, I returned to them in a more formal manner.

A Mop and a Broom for Weapons

The Party's anniversary programme took place in the sports hall of the White City area. The deputy representative of the Party, who was from my hometown, asked me and another younger boy to stand guard at the entrance for security, to prevent any attacks or assassinations.

I replied, 'With what are we supposed to guard? If someone intends to carry out an assassination, they can easily kill us at the door and walk in.

Whether we are outside or inside, we're powerless with our bare hands. Our presence or absence makes no difference!'

The lack of proper planning in relation to the Party's status, the absence of legal support and the lack of police escort for a diplomat or a political figure who is the secretary-general of an opposition party to the Islamic Republic were glaringly evident.

Ultimately, they came up with the absurd idea of placing a mop and broom beside us, thinking it would be comforting to have them available for defence in case of an attack.

We stood at the door, but after half an hour we became disheartened. By that time, the Kurdish parties from Iran had already laid down their arms and, following agreements with the Kurdish Region and the Iranian Government, no longer conducted military operations on Iranian soil. In effect, they had become homebound, residing in camps and bases within the Kurdish Region. Occasionally, the leaders of these parties held seminars for their members.

The background and understanding I had of the Democratic Party starkly contrasted with what I witnessed outside Iran, where they had suddenly laid down all their weapons. Many had migrated to Europe and integrated as citizens. In just a few years, two secretaries-general of the same party had been assassinated on European soil, and here we were, guarding the next secretary-general with broom handles! The situation was tragically comical. The changes that had occurred affected my mindset and raised a question: why don't the security systems of host countries provide police escorts for secretary-generals of political parties?

When I juxtapose these events with the assassinations of Dr Ghassemlou in Austria and Dr Sharafkandi in Germany, I can only reach one conclusion: part of the issue is the weakness of the Kurdish parties in their lobbying efforts. During the Battle of Chaldoran and the wars between the Safavids and the Ottomans, the geography of Kurdistan was divided into two parts, never to be unified again. After World War I and the disintegration of the Ottoman Caliphate according to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, this geography was further divided into four sections. According to the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, Kurdistan was supposed to become autonomous, having the possibility of independence after a year. However, the intensive lobbying by the Turks, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, nullified the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres, and with the

Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the independence of Kurdistan turned into an unattainable dream.

Throughout those years and in subsequent periods, the Kurds did not have a strong lobby among the superpowers and, at the same time, were significantly divided among themselves. There are many similarities between Kurdish and Jewish histories, and the Jews, if they stand where they are today, owe it to their tireless efforts and lobbying in centres of power, along with their material resources. The West feels some guilt regarding the tragic fate of the Kurds in the post-World-War-I negotiations and considers itself partly responsible, but the lack of unity, the presence of tribal and religious structures and the absence of Kurdish lobbying power have prevented Kurds from capitalising on events such as the Anfal genocide and Halabja to persuade the Western world and the superpowers to support Kurdish independence. The Kurdish parties, which officially represent the vast Kurdish population, have been caught in debilitating weakness and have lost some of their most effective political figures with alarming ease. They have not been able to be sufficiently demanding and inquisitive, and consequently they have failed to hold accountable the governments and regimes that oppress them. Their naivety and weakness when organising certain events such as demonstrations occasionally reveal shortcomings that stem from the ineffective and sometimes misguided actions of the parties.

Anthropology in a Hotel and as a Pizza Delivery Rider

The environment in the West transformed me entirely. I experienced various jobs and encountered a multitude of people. Interacting with different nationalities, including Kurds from various parts of Kurdistan, brought about significant changes in me. As I distanced myself from politics and strived for a new life, I took on jobs that taught me how to observe and understand people.

Around this time, after a few months of working at the hotel, I changed my job again. I saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a pizza-delivery rider position at Hot Pizza. Since one of their branches was near my home, I applied for the job. After a brief interview, I was accepted. I had a motorcycle licence, which meant I could earn a better income with that role. I bid farewell to the Victoria Hotel and started my new job. I chose my

working hours, which allowed me to deliver pizzas after university, earning £3.50 an hour. In the beginning, it was a tough transition for me – moving from sitting behind a desk in a hotel to being a delivery rider.

There was more work toward the end of the week, and sometimes I delivered food for parties, celebrations or family gatherings and received tips. When customers ordered large quantities of pizzas, it indicated a party was underway. After I delivered the food, they would usually slip a few pounds into my hand, which felt good. I soon learned when someone was pretentiously reaching into their pocket to say they had no change and when a tip was likely. Through this job, I became acquainted with certain behavioural traits of people: I could discern who was able to tip and who had saved all week just to treat themselves to pizza, as well as who was genuinely kind and would offer me sweets or something similar.

As I made deliveries, I encountered various family and cultural environments, which often left me yearning to be with my own family. When I visited the homes of non-English people, I tried to guess their nationalities from their appearances and the decorations in their homes,



Image 181: Pizza Delivery Service

apart from their faces or accents. This period felt like a course in anthropology and semiotics to me. During my few hours on shift, I would visit about twenty homes, observing different lifestyles and interesting happenings. I saw a woman with a black eye who clearly had been mistreated; people who were abusing substances or were drunk, speaking harshly; couples who were happy together; families enjoying time together; an elderly lady who came hobbling to settle her bill, nearly gasping for breath; groups of young people at a party dancing and asking me to leave the pizzas in the kitchen; and kitchens that were chaotic, littered with empty bottles of alcohol and beer, and sometimes drugs. This job was primarily a student gig; I didn't stay long and eventually changed jobs again.

Single Beds and the Organisation of Japanese Sex

I had previously worked in a hotel and knew it didn't offer much, but if I could enhance my position there, what was the harm in trying again? I picked up a few professional hotel-management magazines, read their content and searched for job opportunities. Most places required a hotel-management degree, but I decided to take a leap of faith and approached one of the nearest hotels. It was very close to my home, and I could even walk there. The hotel – which has since been converted into a Premier Inn – had twelve floors and was always bustling with American, European and Japanese tourists. Its location in the city was ideal for tourists, as it provided easy access to central London.

I walked in and requested a job application form. I was invited for an interview and spoke with the manager, a strong-built man named Rashid, who was an Arab from Egypt and had a wife from southern Britain. As soon as he saw me, he asked where I was from. I replied that I was Kurdish. For a moment, I felt his demeanour change, but he quickly returned to his formal, serious self. He was a mix of a traditional Arab and a professional English hotelier, which was somewhat intimidating. He interviewed me twice and said, 'Since your language skills are good and you have experience in hotel management, I'll hire you.'

He started me off as a receptionist. He mentioned that if I performed well, I would be promoted to the reservations department. It was a smart

job, and I left my previous role in pizza delivery, where one of the managers had been a kind Iranian, on friendly terms, to work in the hotel.

At first, my job involved checking guests in and out of rooms, and I became familiar with the latest technology in hotel management. In my previous hotels, tasks were performed manually, but here we had an electronic system, email and computerised registration. We wore uniforms, attended training courses and participated in various meetings and ceremonies that taught us a great deal about hospitality.

The best part of working in this hotel was the opportunity to engage with different nationalities and their cultures. The hotel environment felt like a miniature world to me, where I could observe people from various nationalities and communities, learning about their behaviours, manners, feelings, customs and taboos. Guests came from everywhere in the world except Africa and the Middle East, and I was constantly in contact and conversation with them. There was no longer any word from Shahram and none of his restrictions, and I was content.

I typically worked evening and night shifts, which allowed me to interact with different parts of the English-speaking world, becoming acquainted with people from Australia and New Zealand and gaining a better understanding of America. My interactions with Asians, particularly the Japanese, also occurred during this time, leading to an incident for which I was reprimanded. Japanese tourists always arrived at the hotel in two or three neatly organised buses from an agency called Galileo. We would register the tour passengers one by one and assign them rooms. I was still new when the tour manager came to me to reserve the rooms. I was alone, entering names into the system. I had noticed that the hotel manager typically assigned Japanese guests to specific floors, while French guests were sent to another floor, but I had never questioned why.

About a month later, the tourists arrived. That day, I wasn't on shift and was at home when a colleague called, saying, 'Get over here! You've messed up!'

I hurried to the hotel, which was just down the street from my house, and saw a group of Japanese tourists waiting, while the hotel manager, Zubairi, was yelling and looking furious. He was romantically involved with the hotel's second manager, a Frenchman named Thierry, and they were in the midst of separating because of their problems. The hotel staff wanted to handle their relationship in a modern way, but they couldn't,

and they always whispered about them, especially a few devout Christians from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Zubairi was an Algerian Arab, born in Germany and raised in France.

When I arrived, Zubairi shouted, 'Kameel, what on earth have you done? Why didn't you give these guests the special Japanese rooms?'

I replied, 'What do you mean, special Japanese rooms?'

He said, 'Don't you know you shouldn't give double beds to Japanese guests? They usually sleep on single beds or even on the floor sometimes.'

I asked why nobody had told me this. He said the reason could wait for later.

We started rearranging rooms and placed them in rooms with single beds. We had to tell some that they would receive a room with single beds on the second night, since we had no more single beds available. I didn't know that most Japanese people insisted on their own beds, and many urban dwellers, as well as some middle-aged individuals, believe sleeping in a double bed disturbs the other person, affecting their performance the next day. Many even sleep on the floor, much like many in Kurdistan. When it comes to intimacy and sex, they share a bed before returning to their own. This custom appeared to be a standard point of hotel-management knowledge – known to everyone except me!

My Housemates

Working in the hotel impacted my lifestyle and changed my social relationships. The hotel environment was multicultural, with staff from various nationalities. I made new friends, some of whom I'm still close to. My first friends at this hotel were Spaniards. One was Jordi, who later became a well-known lawyer and married another lawyer named Silvia. Through Jordi, I met Peko, and later another Spaniard named Jorge, who is now a champion in athletics. Jordi and I quickly became close with two girls from East Germany, Manuela and Deniz.

After a while, I learned to live more modestly and rented out my bedroom. This situation was common for students in Britain. We shared a kitchen, using the living room and bedroom as two separate bedrooms. After this experience, I often had housemates – sometimes a girl, sometimes a boy, sometimes a couple and sometimes flatmates of the same gender.



Image 182: Me, Jordi, and his sister Blen. Barcelona, Spain, 2005.

Jordi was my first official housemate. After a while, he mentioned that one of his friends had just arrived and was looking for a place to stay, asking if it would be all right for him to live with us for a short time. I said he could bring him to his own room, since we had no other rooms available. Peko came over, but Jordi didn't let him into his room because he snored and was quite a hefty guy. Years later, when we were invited to Peko's engagement ceremony with a man, we learned that he was gay, which surprised us. He had managed to conceal his sexual orientation with great care. Contrary to our expectations, this issue remains unresolved for many in the world. Those years were much more conservative than today, and in southern European countries, people had not yet come to terms with it.

One afternoon, I returned from work and found Peko lying on a mattress in the narrow hallway between the living room and the bedroom. Jordi was in his room with his girlfriend. I went to the kitchen and saw that Peko was soaking his socks in the sink to wash them. I was so angry that Jordi was scared to come out of his room.

I'm not usually sensitive or fussy, but his behaviour was unbearable. I told Jordi, 'What kind of friend have you brought into our home? He's been saying he's looking for work for weeks, yet he hasn't found anything in

this massive city! He's just lounging around, smoking and watching films.' I angrily left the house, and when I returned, Jordi told me he had kicked Peko out.

I felt guilty and upset. Peko didn't speak English and had no job or income. I couldn't leave him to fend for himself. We tried calling him multiple times, but his phone was off. We searched until we found him, sad, at the Hammersmith train station. We kissed his face, bought him a cold beer, a hamburger and chips, and brought him back home. He became one of our best friends.

Chapter Thirteen: New Experiences and Rebuilding

It is hard to know which of our life experiences we are responsible for – the results of our choices – and which just fall into our path. For instance, I know that, while studying in England, I took on various jobs to manage my expenses, and during the summers I decided to travel to Africa with Oxfam to help others lead more comfortable lives. However, I never imagined that these journeys and my efforts to engage in humanitarian activities would become significant parts of my professional life and open new pathways for me.

Now that my career in journalism had also begun and I was striving to look at everything analytically and critically, environments far removed from my quiet life in London increasingly captured my attention. I became more and more engaged with my surroundings. Witnessing poverty, displacement, war, cultural abuses and many other issues in Africa was a different experience for me now, as a European.

I had grown up in a similar environment and changed my living conditions through numerous hardships and a risky journey, but many Europeans did not have direct experience with such challenges. Some of them kindly tried to help improve the situation in other countries, but I found myself increasingly embroiled in my past in addition to my efforts to assist. Everything replayed in my mind but through a different lens. I was no longer passive regarding the place of my birth and its events and challenges. I was seeking to analyse what had transpired and what was currently changing.



Image 183: Me in a t-shirt: 'Give Peace Another Chance'.

My Experience with Oxfam

Near my home, there was a charity shop called Oxfam that sold second-hand goods. People donated items and clothes they no longer wanted to Oxfam and similar charities. The clothes were sold at low prices and sometimes distributed to those in need. They also ran summer programmes that sent volunteers and aid workers to African countries for plumbing, house-building, irrigation and empowerment, among other tasks. Besides doing voluntary work in the shop, I accompanied them for several summers, travelling to Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria and other countries. Coincidentally, one of the charges against me in my recent arrest was my involvement with this charity. My interrogators insisted that Oxfam served as a cover for espionage and sabotage operations around the world!

The plan was to provide aid in one country. If there was already a similar programme within the chosen area, we would move on to a second country. On these travels, we built houses, cut timber and engaged in carpentry. Alongside this work, we became acquainted with the religions and cultures prevalent in those countries, essentially engaging in cultural exchange.

This period was a unique experience for me – a life entirely different from the European work style and systems, allowing me to see social issues

more clearly, to feel them and to form accurate pictures of them in my mind.

These trips significantly influenced the formation of my research ideas, revealing issues and challenges from different perspectives. It was during these journeys that I first became aware of the issue of female circumcision, or female genital mutilation/cutting, as I saw organised groups from the UN and UNICEF conducting workshops in villages with equipped patrol vehicles to inform people about many harmful customs, including female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage.



Image 184: Oxfam relief work. Central Africa, 2003.

In these programmes, they gathered women and men in the village square, trying to educate them about the harms of these traditional practices. They also spoke with religious leaders and sought to open dialogues with village chiefs and social leaders.

The existing culture was not unfamiliar to me, and I could easily connect with it. I had previously experienced many of these community issues in Iran and the signs of them were familiar to me. Female cutting occurred in

some areas of Kurdistan and even in my own family, and child marriage was a familiar topic I had witnessed many times within my life. These trips provided direct observation of familiar subjects, leading to the development of some of the ideas and approaches for my field research.

Thus, my travels influenced my academic and professional trajectory, steering me toward report writing and journalism with ethnographic and anthropological analyses. Although I lacked the confidence to write about my experiences in Africa for mid-tier British newspapers, I began freelance journalism, writing notes and articles for Oxfam and a few other websites. Each journey I took to Africa generated content, which was published in various places. One of my preferred outlets was a socialist leftist website called *Indymedia*, which was an independent media source suitable for young people with leftist and socialist views. Over time, other media outlets emerged, and, gradually, I published articles in Kurdish media, primarily those belonging to Iraqi and Turkey's Kurdistan, as I continued my work in journalism and aid in Africa.



Image 185: The border between Sudan and Egypt, 2003.

A few years prior, the abduction of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the Kurdish Workers' Party (the 'PKK'), had intensified my concerns about nationality and identity. While I was happily distracted by my travels, I was also learning to incorporate the larger Kurdistan, meaning the Kurds residing in Iran, Syria, Turkey and Iraq, into my analyses. My new friend Iqbal, who was of Bulgarian-Turkish descent, encouraged me to pursue such analyses. He held somewhat nationalistic and pan-Turkish views, which sometimes led to conflicts between us; as he would say, he was waking me from my slumber and tickling my consciousness.

During this period, I felt it was better to write about things related to the place I came from. Then I realised that I had been separated from my original environment for years and had little connection to it. It was the same year that the war in Afghanistan occurred, leading to a protest by several tens of thousands in London. I constantly thought about ways to reconnect and establish an inner link with my past. Something inside me was preoccupied with the desire to return to my past, in contrast to the promise I had made to myself. I had intended to stay away from politics, yet it seemed to call me indirectly.

Returning to Roots

Kak Morad, son of Mam Hawla, lived in America. He longed to see his family, but as a former commander of the Democratic Party, he could not set foot in Iran. I, too, lacked the courage to return, knowing that, upon my arrival, I would have to answer the question of where I had been all these years. I must admit, however, that the main issue was something else entirely. Returning to Iran was neither a priority for me nor something I had considered. I had grown accustomed to my life and was satisfied with the current circumstances. So, we discussed it and decided to meet our families at Kak Jesim's home. He was a political refugee in Turkey, living in Van, which was not far from where our families resided.

When I reached Turkey, the world was in turmoil. The night before, the events of 11 September had unfolded, and the Twin Towers in New York had collapsed. I had a ticket to fly to Van that very night, but Istanbul was locked down, and I struggled to reach the airport. The currency exchanges were closed. There was a general disorder in the world. Like most people,

I was bewildered by what had happened and knew nothing about the Twin Towers. I just wanted to reach Van quickly.

When the plane landed at this small airport, I was filled with excitement at the thought of seeing my relatives and family. It was the first time in years that I would see them, and I had imagined that everyone would be there to give me a grand welcome.

I disembarked the plane and entered the terminal. No one had come! It was a disheartening feeling, reminiscent of my bitter memories from military service when no one came to visit me. When all the passengers had left, I noticed something amusing. They had come, but, because there were so many of them, they'd stood outside behind the barbed wire, at a distance from the runway, waiting for me to disembark. Even funnier was the fact that they didn't recognise me and thought they had mistakenly come for another flight. As they put it, I had become too foreign-looking! I can only wonder what they imagined; perhaps they thought I would descend the stairs from the plane wearing Kurdish attire.

As I approached them, they were debating among themselves. One was saying that I wasn't on the flight at all, while another insisted that I was. I read the flight number on my boarding pass.

'That's it!'

Another added, 'I can't read, but you must be right, so what should we do now?'

Suddenly, from behind them, I greeted them loudly and excitedly, and they rushed toward me. Kisses, hugs and even pinches; the warmth of embraces, the scent of my mother – but amid all this joy, there was something else entirely: a feeling I couldn't name – something deeper stirring inside me.

From Mam Hawla's family, nearly everyone had come. From my family, my mother, Kamyar, Kani and Aunt Zeynab were there. My father joined us a few days later.

When I left Iran, Kani was a baby, but now she was a sweet, mischievous little girl whose conversation with my father amazed me. It seemed my father had relinquished all authority to her. He wanted to spend a few days with me and Kak Morad in Istanbul, saying we could have a 'men's trip'. When Kani found out, she threw a tantrum. She didn't have her own passport and was added onto my father's. In a childish tone, she said, 'If you go, I'll break your leg!' If my father were to come to Istanbul, Kani

would have to stay with Kak Jesim's family, and my mother intended to return to our hometown. So, Kani would have to be left alone, and, naturally, she didn't want that to happen.



Image 186: The moment of reunion with my father after many years. Van, Turkey's Kurdistan, 2001.

The first signs of change in culture in Iran perhaps emerged in the simple behaviours of Kani and my brother Kamyar. I had never dared to speak to my father like that, but Kani could, and it was perfectly normal for my parents! During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, significant social changes had occurred in Iran, but I had little interest in knowing what was happening and had drifted away from both Kurdish and Iranian societal news.

I missed my parents terribly and could not get enough of seeing them. I kept looking at them, taking Kani and Kamyar out for walks, teaching Kamyar how to take photographs . . . It was delightful to converse independently and man-to-man with my father; I had matured and changed. I could see how much more confident I had become around him; I was not the same person I once was. It was a pleasurable transformation for both me and my father.

On the second day, Kak Ismail, Kak Morad's brother and the eldest son of Mam Hawla, called from Iran to say he wanted to come and see us. Night

fell, but he didn't arrive. Everyone was worried, and to spare Mam Hawla any concern, we whispered and spoke quietly. It was decided that the next day Kak Morad and I would search for him. I didn't want to go, but I had no choice. After years, I was seeing my family, and I only had a few days, but the circumstances did not allow me to leave Kak Morad alone. We set off together and searched along the Iran-Iraq border for him. We did something no sane person would do! A former commander of the Democratic Party, wandering along the border with a young man who had left Iran and hadn't returned, searching for another! If they had found out Kak Morad was around, they would have put a bounty on his head.

It was the peak of the war between the Turkish Government and the PKK, and both Turkish and Iranian Kurdistan were playgrounds for the forces of that party. According to an intelligence-sharing agreement between Iran and Turkey, the Iranians would capture PKK forces on their side and hand them over to Turkey, while Turkey would kidnap Democratic Party members and political refugees and return them to Iran. They had a serious trade, exchanging people like sheep!

Unaware of the level of danger, and perhaps recklessly, we ventured to the border cities. We even made it as far as the border line near Urmia, engaging with anyone we thought could help us and giving them money. We spoke with everyone, from members of parliament from small border towns, to municipal employees, to armed Kurds.

By chance, Kak Morad found one of his old Peshmerga comrades there. He was originally Turkish, had joined the Peshmerga ranks in the early Revolution, but later separated from the Party and had now become a spy for the Turkish intelligence agency, MIT. He was utterly distraught, crying and depressed. He was drinking heavily, shouting, 'I'm a traitor! I'm a traitor! Do you know that, to get accommodation and money, I sold the Peshmerga of these parties to the Turkish Government? Do you know how much torture and perhaps execution the Peshmerga and guerrillas I handed over have suffered? Those I handed over to Turkey have been sentenced to twenty years in prison in Ankara and Diyarbakir.' When he was drunk, he spoke of his crimes and betrayals. I don't know how much of what he said was true, but we were caught in his web, and I couldn't believe he would help us find Kak Ismail.

Finally, on the second day, he informed us that Ismail had been arrested and that we would need to pay a few people to secure his release. He knew

from which countries we had come and took a considerable amount of dollars and pounds from us.

As night fell, this former Peshmerga, now trafficker, took us to a hotel. I said to Kak Morad, 'How on earth did we trust him? Logic tells me he's a trafficker and will surely betray us as well.' We were terrified. The room we were given had no windows. We requested several times for a room with windows, but they said, 'No, that man said this room is good for your safety, and we don't have another!' Behind the room was a river, and Kak Morad and I thought, if anything happened, we would throw ourselves out of the corridor and into the river.

We did not sleep that night, taking turns to keep watch every two hours. I said, 'What's the point of our watch?' I recounted the time I kept watch during the Party leader's speech in London, saying that this watch was just as ridiculous as that time: unarmed!

Kak Morad joked that the upside was, one of us was awake and could wake the other, so at least we wouldn't be stolen in our sleep.

Then we laughed about our situation, saying, 'Ey Ismail, Chavoshin, Ey . . .' ('Oh Ismail, Blue Eyes') jokingly referring to Kak Ismail, who was known for his liveliness and spirited nature, attributing all the family's mischief to him. The next day, we hired a taxi and fled from that man, because he kept turning around with a different story, to collect more money from us.



Image 187: At farewell time, Kak Morad and I surrounded by parents and relatives. Van Airport, 2001.

We were left feeling defeated as we went to the next border town, where we found someone who worked for the military intelligence agency. We gave him some money to bring us news.

He returned and said, 'Ismail was arrested three days ago at the zero border point and is now in the Turkish Intelligence headquarters in Diyarbakır. Even God can't help him now! Go, and don't waste your money for nothing! If he's guilty, it's over; if not, he'll be back.'

We returned, exhausted, anxious and hopeless. We couldn't understand why he had been arrested. He had never been interested in politics and had always focused on his own life. That night, we remained unable to sleep, thinking of Ismail and his family, but also reflecting on the absurdity of life.

It was night when we reached Van. To our surprise, we found that he had been released before we arrived. He had been beaten so badly he was dazed and broken. He said, 'They staged mock executions on me. They'd put me on large oil barrels or inside a safe, hitting me with blank bullets or rifle butts just to make a sound.' These tortures were all too familiar to me and my father, as we had endured similar beatings ourselves. We stayed up late into the night, sharing our prison experiences with each other.

Kak Ismail's arrest story was that someone had entered Turkey using a stolen passport belonging to another Ismail Ahmady. Turkish Intelligence was looking for an Ismail Ahmady connected to the PKK, and they mistakenly arrested our Ismail. Once they realised this Ismail was not the one they sought, they released him – after extracting several signatures and commitments from him and threatening him not to speak or file complaints.

He said, 'Who would I even complain to?' He described how he was blindfolded from the moment he was arrested, and after all the beatings and torture, they threw him out of a van blindfolded on the outskirts of the city.

This trip had another dimension for me. I'd always wanted to document my family's genealogy and pick up my old idea of writing our family tree. When I planned to visit Van, I called Mam Hawla and asked him to answer my questions about our family history. The first sparks of my autobiography or, rather, my family tree compilation, started forming in my mind back then.

The weather in Van was warm, so I wore shorts. When I sat down next to Mam Hawla, my mother gestured for me to join her in the hallway, looking almost upset. She said, 'Kameel, I don't care what you wear or do abroad, but you can't sit in front of Kake Hawla with bare legs!'

I laughed and said, 'Mum, these are comfortable clothes and don't show any disrespect. My knees are covered.' Ignoring her, I returned to sit beside Mam Hawla, but she brought a scarf and placed it over my legs. Then she called my father, who was on his way to Van, and asked him to bring me a pair of loose, traditional Kurdish trousers. Until the trousers arrived, I'd obediently drape the scarf over my legs whenever I sat with Mam Hawla. It was amusing that no one mentioned it or acknowledged it directly.

The Van trip was a return to my roots. After years of separation, I was with my family again, a reunion that reminded me of my identity. Seeing Kak Ismail's condition and, in general, the signs of poverty and war in Turkey's Kurdistan reminded me that I was still Kurdish. Misery and hardship were still present and ongoing.

My mother had brought local spices and dried herbs. She insisted I make Kurdish stew with her herbs, even coaching me on the recipe at Kak Jesim's house. My father brought me several small wall carpets: one with an image of the renowned Mahabad singer Mohammad Mamli and

another of a Kurdish Mokriani girl pouring tea next to a samovar. When I returned to London, the scent of my mother's herbs and those two tapestries deepened my longing and strengthened my bond with the past.

Not long after I returned, the US attacked Afghanistan, and anti-war protests in London intensified. A massive protest took place, and I joined with friends like Iqbal, Manuela, Jordi and several others. At that time, other events in the region were also impacting me. The dawn of the third millennium was marked by crises and wars: the Afghanistan war, the presence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and later the Iraq invasion. All these events rekindled my connection to the Middle East. My changed life brought me closer to my past.



Image 188: Anti-war protest. England, 2002.

Before these crises, I was becoming more 'English' or, at least, that's what I thought. My taste in music had changed, and I mainly watched English TV shows, theatre productions, plays and series. I listened to radio stations popular with my age group, like Capital FM, Kiss FM and Virgin, and I watched TV shows like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and social-comedy shows with the famous comedian Ali G. I frequented clubs and bars, followed music festivals like Glastonbury, went to various museums, listened to world music, enjoyed stand-up comedy, and travelled

frequently. I'd even backpacked around the world multiple times, spending summers in Africa and Asia and winters in other parts of the world. All these experiences had brought great insight.

The reform era in Iran and events like the University Dormitory protests and the Berlin Conference gradually sparked my interest in social and political issues in the Middle East and the Region. Before long, I found myself attending international conferences as a journalist, and issues that hadn't meant much to me earlier regained significance. Poets and singers like Nasser Rezaei, Mohammad Jaza, Omar Dezai, Dariush Eghbali, Shahwan Parwar, Ebi, Sherko Bekas, Moein, and Abdollah Pashio (Pashio) once again became prominent figures for me. These were the icons of my childhood and youth. I wanted to meet them in person, so I attended their concerts, took photos with them and observed their behaviours and speech. Later, in more intimate settings and at political and cultural events, I met figures like Nasser Rezaei, Shahwan Parwar, Mohammad Jaza and Sherko Bekas and, at times, I even worked with some of them in limited capacities.



Image 189: Artists. From right: Nasser Rezaei, Mazhar Khaleqi, Shahwan Parwar, Omar Dezai, and his daughter.

Humans are strange creatures, filled with hopes and dreams to meet someone, only to feel a little let down after the encounter. While meeting someone shouldn't diminish the greatness or beauty of their art, the human mind is forever judging and insatiably drawn to new pursuits. Inside, I was restless – a constant whirlwind of change, always searching for ways to express the different worlds I'd experienced – worlds deeply connected to my soul.

Words, observation and reflection: I believe these three concepts can profoundly change our world. If someone takes these from you and you don't pursue them, then perhaps much of life will feel like destiny, or fate. I don't deny destiny; I acknowledge there are unchangeable things in our lives. But with those three powerful words and by following their path, a lot can be changed.

Suddenly, I found myself on a path where things were inevitably changing, erasing the solitude and peace I had risked so much to gain.

Work and Activity: Engaging with Politics

I became more familiar with the Kurds of Turkey's Kurdistan through their networks and organisations in London. Of course, I had knowledge about the Kurds of Iran and understood that, due to their small population, they were limited to a few areas in London, without a specific central location. The two Kurdish centres in London were both linked to the Kurdish region of Iraq, as I previously mentioned. Political parties took turns to manage them. This left the Kurds from Turkey and Syria. The latter still lacked the necessary potential and position to make their presence known and, due to their shared language (speaking Kurmanji), were more affiliated with the Kurds of Turkey and the PKK. I had been visiting the Kurdish centres from the Iraqi region, and now it was time for me to engage with the centres of the Turkish Kurds to understand their mindsets and aspirations.

One event I attended was the commemoration of the Forouhar family, which was held the following year as well. I was on the email list for invitations and saw Mr Noori-Zadeh again. I asked if he remembered me, and he replied, 'Yes, I know you. What are you up to? Have you finished your studies?'

I told him I hadn't completed them yet, but I was interested in doing an internship in media. He said, 'If you're interested in Iranian issues, contact me', and handed me his business card.

When I entered the journalism field, I recalled Noori-Zadeh and did contact him. He mentioned that he sometimes worked at *Keyhan* London, located on King Street in Hammersmith, which was just a ten-minute walk from my home. I went there and asked what I should do.

He said, 'Your Farsi is good, and I have a Farsi programme on the municipal radio. I want you to help me with it. It's in South London, and if you don't have a car, you'll have to take a bus across the River Thames at night and come back home around one in the morning.' He meant that programme location was in north-east London, specifically in Hackney, which was quite far from where I lived.

I was so eager that I said it was no problem, and I would come. I worked at the radio station for a short period. Every few hours, there was a programme in a different nationality or language, and the Farsi programme was from 10 to 11 in the evening. From the start until the weekend, I was in charge of scheduling and coordinating the programmes and inviting guests. It was there that I became more acquainted with the Kurds of Northern Kurdistan. They had a two-hour radio programme – one hour in the afternoon and one hour in the evening. Due to our previous common acquaintances, we quickly connected, and they introduced me to the Helk Awî centre in Dalston. They had a good capacity and structure, and I found it interesting how committed, ideologically driven and organised the people involved with the PKK were. They had lived in London for many years, yet they were vibrant and dynamic, operating their mechanisms in line with the party's principles. As they put it, I was a Kurd from Rojhelat (Eastern Kurdistan), and my English was also good.

They drew me in and offered me a position as a new member. My circle of connections changed rapidly. Gradually, leftist nationalists, socialists and Turkish Kurds replaced my European friends. I tried to learn the Kurmanji dialect and made new friends within this group. These were dedicated individuals whose thoughts revolved around politics, and, after all my evasion, they reconnected me with the subject.



Image 190: Working at the radio station. Hackney, London, 2003.

At first, when I tried to learn Kurmanji, I admit that I understood very little, sometimes only grasping a few words from news bulletins on television. It was confusing to me how you could say both Kurmanji and Sorani were Kurdish, yet I couldn't comprehend what they were saying, and I had to resort to English.

As someone who later underwent specialised academic training in Kurmanji at SOAS University of London and worked closely with Kurmanji-speaking centres for years, spending time in Diyarbakır and other regions of Northern and Southern Kurdistan (or Syrian Kurdistan), I can honestly say I learned Kurmanji in the field. Now, I can confidently say I speak Kurmanji well. There is no exaggeration in asserting that, while Kurmanji and Sorani have significant similarities, they are distinctly different languages. If any Kurdish speakers have not been exposed to or spoken with speakers of the other dialect, they will undoubtedly struggle to understand one another. They are more akin to two different languages, one comparable to Italian and the other to Spanish.

Kurmanji and Sorani have experienced relatively better growth in the literary and media domains. If we examine this topic objectively, devoid of

Kurdish nationalistic sentiments, we can assert that Kurmanji and Sorani are two independent languages with a shared root. There are numerous grammatical and linguistic differences (such as word forms, pluralisation, subjunctive moods, passive voice and verb conjugations). According to most Kurds, Kurmanji serves as the communicative language for 75–80% of Kurds.

Visual Anthropology: A Different Way of Seeing

One of the other centres for Kurds from Turkey was in North London. There, I met a woman named Sara, originally from Canada. She was a student of anthropology at the University of Kent, working on her PhD thesis about the Kurds of Turkey's Kurdistan. We discussed her work, and she explained that her focus was on the elements and features that Kurdish restaurants use in their décor to attract customers. She intended to analyse Kurdish nationalism and identity through visual elements. Meeting her and learning about her thesis offered me a fresh perspective and even inspired me to pursue this field.

Sara came from a leftist background and had a unique upbringing. For years, she had lived with her family in communes where they grew their own food. She had a keen interest in environmentalism and leftist movements, including the PKK. She had overcome a lesser-known illness for which she had been undergoing treatment for many years. Familiar with hospitals and pain, she had undergone multiple surgeries on her left leg and could not bend it.

I was resolute about pursuing a master's and a PhD in Political Science, but she carefully considered my interests and concerns and shifted my intellectual trajectory.

One day she told me that, after becoming more acquainted with my writing, photography, life and background, she thought I would be more successful in the field of anthropology. When she outlined her reasons, my longstanding interest in visual ethnography from my teenage years came to mind, and I felt she was right.

Sara prompted me to initially explore visual anthropology. She opened for me a new window onto further studies, and I can say she played a significant role in helping me find the right path in my academic life. With her encouragement and guidance, I applied to the prestigious University

of Kent in Canterbury, where I spoke with her supervisor and a few others. They reviewed my photographs and writings and suggested I begin my studies at the master's level in Social Anthropology and Visual Ethnography, and subsequent specialise in research.

I quickly commenced my studies in this field, and my life, my work domain, my trajectory and even my perspective transformed.

My time at the University of Kent coincided with working at a hotel near my home. Gradually, I also started professional translation and work in the courts. Additionally, I became involved in Kurdish activities.

I felt immense joy in returning to my roots. After a long disconnection, it felt like a rebirth. I was falling back into radicalism, reminiscent of my teenage years, leaning toward leftist views close to those of the PKK. They acknowledged and valued me in the Kurdish centres in Turkey – I was speaking and giving talks at parliamentary lobbying sessions, offering consultancy and sharing everything I had learned with key communities there. They invited me to their television programmes, namely Roj TV in Brussels, the same station and programmes I had first watched in a camp in Greece, which was, of course, called Met TV back then.



Image 191: Guest on Roj TV. Belgium, 2004.

In the London centres for Kurds from Turkey, a few individuals were proficient in English or held British passports. Those individuals could travel outside the UK and attend PKK festivals, which were often held in Germany, with tens of thousands in attendance. I was one of those individuals, so I quickly received invitations to expert programmes, such as those analysing the US elections or discussing anthropology books about Iranian Kurdistan on Roj TV. During this period, I was also invited to the city of Diyarbakır in Turkey's Kurdistan for the Newruz celebrations, as a representative of the London Democratic Youth Committee.

Everything had changed for me once again. I had effectively entered a revolutionary and leftist path, albeit a modern version. In Diyarbakır, I witnessed the discrimination and oppression that were prevalent throughout Turkey's Kurdistan, and that was profoundly distressing. For a time, I lost my critical perspective and entered a black-and-white phase. It was a period where I was creating content and doing news work, and simultaneously becoming interested in political anthropology. Although I was still a novice, I was enthusiastic.

Midway through 2003, while I was studying at university, I travelled to Iraq (contrary to all advice), which was then embroiled in a devastating war. Some referred to the war as 'liberation', while others labelled it an 'occupation' of Iraq.

My university in Canterbury offered an environment in which everything was questioned and critiqued. Views were not easily accepted, and we frequently found ourselves in disputes and debates. My predominantly nationalist perspectives from the Middle East were regularly challenged by professors and fellow students, including Sara, prompting me to react. It was there that I realised our minds are shaped by geography, traditions and cultures, and through our actions and behaviours we reproduce those spaces and structures. This is a cycle that extends in perpetuity. Perhaps in my education and the community where I grew up, there was no foundation for critical analysis and the correct skills to navigate the challenges of critique.



Image 192: Hookah and tea in Najaf, Iraq. 2003.

My mindset had become relatively radical due to my background and connections with leftist political groups and the series of wars occurring worldwide, yet the academic environment occasionally positioned me against my own extreme views. Before this confrontation, I believed I knew a great deal and was justified in my beliefs, but I realised that no viewpoint or domain – be it culture, tradition, religion, identity, ethnicity, gender or even human rights – should be so sacred that it cannot be critiqued, analysed or questioned.

So I acknowledged within myself that I didn't know much at all. My mental resistance broke down. I became ready to accept and understand diverse beliefs and perspectives. As the poet Sohrab Sepehri wrote, 'The eyes must be washed, and we must see differently.' I endeavoured to cleanse my eyes and view the world in a different light. In this washing and seeing, the university, the humanities and especially social anthropology aided me greatly.

When this critical perspective began to form within me, I recognised how superficial our view of minorities or nations was and how, throughout history, powers at local, regional and global levels have utilised minorities and their identities as tools. Gradually, I understood that if I wanted to

approach political subjects through a lens of the humanities, I would encounter complex and contradictory discussions.

My perspective broadened. I began to examine phenomena such as minority discrimination not only on a small scale, but also on larger, systemic levels. I no longer viewed everything merely from a political angle; I started to consider other social, cultural, legal and economic dimensions, as well.

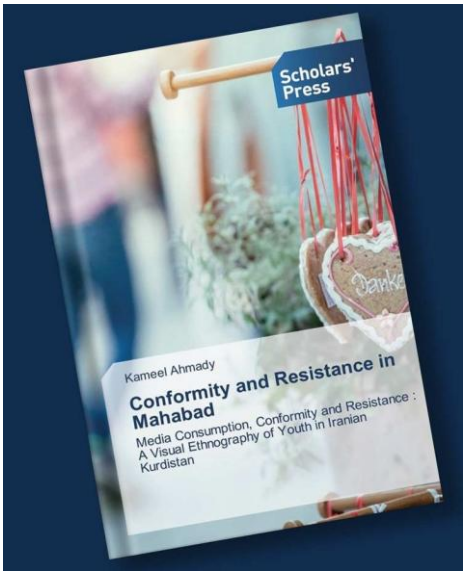


Image 193: Cover of my master's thesis book: *Adaptation and Resistance in Mahabad*, Mehri Publishing, London.

Although anthropology and ethnography encompass various disciplines, classical anthropology is the meticulous study of language, music, clothing, customs, traditions and cultures. Each of these areas opened a door to a wealth of knowledge, and it was then that I realised, if I wished to work in the fields of anthropology or visual ethnography, I needed to stop deceiving myself and redirect my focus to Iran and the East. I needed a more academic and scientific approach, entirely different from my previous viewpoint. Because of my lived experience and my passion for my homeland, I felt I had much more to contribute, and that's precisely what I did.

With my ideas and the significant advice and support from Sara, my master's thesis at the University of Kent became 'Youth Culture, Protest Perspectives and Analyses', which was later defended under the title 'Adaptation and Resistance in Mahabad. The Impact of Media, Gender Differences and Resistance among Youth: A Visual Ethnography of Iranian Kurdistan'. It was published in 2021 by Mehri Publishing in London and subsequently in digital format by Avaye Bouf Publishing in Denmark, in both Farsi and English. Recently, Daneshfar Publishing in Erbil, Kurdistan Region published it in Kurdish, and 49 Books Publishing in Sweden also released it.

From Media and Translation to Legal/Criminal Domains

During the period when I was interested in journalism, I wanted to be behind the scenes of news programmes. I have loved them since my teenage years, and they were always exciting for me. I aspired to be the programme director or to be behind the camera, producing content. My photography stemmed from this same passion. Eventually, I became interested in war journalism, but my professional journey took a different direction.

In this new phase of my life, photography played an important role. I invested a lot, purchasing a Canon camera and its accessories, which I packed into my backpack. I attended several professional courses and obtained my press card from the British Journalists' Association. Wherever I went, my camera was with me, capturing photos and filming various gatherings.

I tried to realise the relationship between art and society through photography – by depicting and critiquing the community. I attended events in Britain and other countries for International Workers' Day, G8 conferences, and protests related to Palestine and the war. Gradually, I moved from behind the camera into the spotlight in front of it, where programme presenters interviewed me and I provided my analyses.

At this juncture, I had to choose a field of study while doing news work and working at the hotel. Suddenly, I realised I could leverage my multilingual abilities to make a lucrative profession. I was asked to arrange several interviews for one of the BBC channels. Since I was fluent in Kurdish and Farsi, I managed the task well. Initially, they wanted me to introduce a few people to discuss the serial killings and to serve as a translator. They offered me good money for this, and later extended opportunities for further collaboration. They asked, 'Do you want to be our fixer?'

A fixer is someone who coordinates interviews and takes care of other logistics. I accepted and worked in that capacity for a while.

Eventually, I entered another realm of translation work. I knew that professional translators, after completing courses and obtaining certifications, worked in law offices, the Home Office's immigration department, torture-survivor foundations, refugee councils, Amnesty International, the police and welfare services.

At one of the protests of the Socialist Workers' Party, I befriended a Palestinian man who said he worked for welfare services and was looking for a Kurdish translator. It was a full-time daily job; I had to travel across London for less than an hour of interviews. Initially, I wasn't very keen on it, but as I entered the university process, I realised it was much better than clocking in at a hotel. They would call me, and, if I was free, I would accept. I decided to rewrite my CV and send it to companies looking for translators. I quickly found work, partly because my English was relatively good, but also because of my familiarity with the media, politics and welfare services. Years of living in London had acquainted me with the system. My knowledge of other languages, alongside my experience in significant fields like media and politics, significantly contributed to my career growth. The number of languages I spoke was also an asset. I had learned Kurmanji through interactions with Kurdish centres and individuals in Turkey, was familiar with Sorani Kurdish, Turkish or Azerbaijani, and Dari; I had even attended classes for Arabic and spoke it relatively well. Most of my travels to Africa and the Middle East were in Arabic-speaking countries, and knowing these languages had provided me with good job opportunities.

I soon participated in the examination of the Association of Legal and Judicial Translators and passed, enabling me to work with all government entities, the judiciary, the police and the immigration office. It wasn't long before I transitioned from standard translation to legal consulting. For this, I took an exam, obtained my bachelor's degree, and registered with a company that provided legal and lawful legitimacy to my work. I collaborated as a legal advisor in the presence of a lawyer. Occasionally, they would send me as their representative to the Home Office, and I was well compensated for this. I obtained representation and declarations and, over time, learned the laws related to immigration and the welfare services associated with it. While I was representing cases, I hired a translator and worked alongside several private lawyers in this field.

It wasn't long before I became more involved in Social Services, working on cases of families and children who had been abused or subjected to violence. As my studies leaned more toward the humanities, these issues became increasingly pronounced for me. Gradually, my work situation improved, and I began receiving calls from the Royal Court and police

departments to help prepare specialised reports on social issues like family disputes, domestic violence, child custody, honour killings and more.

I gradually reached a point where I wrote specialised reports for lawyers. For instance, cases involving children who had been beaten and whom welfare services intended to take away from their families would be referred to lawyers. If the lawyers were unfamiliar with certain families' cultures, the cases would be referred to me to provide social and cultural reports, outlining how the upbringings of these children, who mainly came from immigrant and newly arrived families, were affected culturally, traditionally and religiously by their home countries. What were the reasons for the continuation of certain forms of violence and misbehaviour? What solutions were available for reform and the protection and support of such children?

Typically, the person writing these reports would also appear in court as a witness. Gradually, my work expanded beyond mere immigration and translation to encompass the criminal, judicial and legal domains of the police and other related departments, such as the Ministry of Justice. I was already on their list before I entered the field of criminology, which holds a special place in developed countries. Occasionally, I would receive calls late at night or even at midnight to attend scenes of disputes and, on several occasions, even for murder cases. This segment of my experiences opened up a vast new world for me.

In my cultural-report writing, which directly connected with the traditions and customs of the areas where I had lived, the knowledge I had from the social domain aided me and became a source of inspiration for some of my academic articles and topics. It was a new and professional endeavour with a higher income. Additionally, it granted me more freedom to pursue the things I desired and loved – the so-called heart aspect of life. I conducted my writing and office work at home, having equipped part of my room with necessary tools like a fax machine, printer and computer. I continued working part-time self-employed.

The Roast Swans of the Queen

Language is humanity's most vital means of communication. Whatever language one speaks, one thinks in that language, too. For someone who is multilingual, thoughts tend to occur in the language they are most

proficient in. I mentioned that growing up in the culturally diverse city of Naqadeh coupled with the monolingual education system that enforced Farsi from a young age led me to learn three languages: Kurdish, Turkish and Farsi. Over time, I added other languages and dialects such as Dari, Istanbul Turkish, Kurmanji and Arabic. It seems that my brain, accustomed to acquiring new languages from childhood, found it relatively easy to learn even as I grew older. However, there were moments when my mind would suddenly freeze, as my body language would unconsciously align with whatever language I was speaking at the time.

Through years of translation and communication in various languages, I amassed vast amounts of information and experiences across many fields, including criminal justice, security and social issues. I can confidently say that, because of my work, I was one of few individuals who gathered such a wealth of information. Every day, I interacted with English speakers in highly professional and administrative settings. In a short period, I became acquainted with the intricacies of various legal and administrative issues related to crimes, asylum and even political matters. As my translator friend would say, in a year, we learned as much as one would in a doctoral programme. I had visited numerous hospitals, maternity wards, police departments and prisons, participated in criminal and asylum interviews, and could often gauge the outcome of a session, decision or case from the very beginning, estimating the decisions of officials, judges or juries.

I have one unforgettable memory from my time as a translator. One night, around two-thirty, I received a call from the police station. Such occurrences were not uncommon, particularly on weekends when street fights and domestic disputes tended to escalate. That night, I didn't recognise the number calling through the interpreter agency's switchboard, so I suspected it to be from a small, remote town. To be honest, I wasn't in the mood to engage at that hour. After they gave several attempts, I finally answered. A police officer from a small town in northern England introduced himself. It was a town so small that one would have to search through a detailed map to locate it.

He quickly informed me that a major fight had broken out, the situation in the town was dire and they had called for backup from the neighbouring city. 'Hurry here! There's no one to speak with these people, and you're one of the few official translators who knows Farsi, Dari and Kurdish. The individuals causing trouble are from that language group, plus migrants

from Albania, Kosovo and other places.' At that time, many migrants from the Balkans, fleeing war conditions, were arriving in England, most of them young, single men.

When he provided the address, I realised it was about a five-hour journey from where I was. I replied, 'Even if I leave right now, I might not arrive until ten in the morning!'

He assured me, 'We'll cover all expenses; in fact, we'll double your pay!'

I thought to myself that this must be a serious matter. So, I set off and arrived just before noon. It was evident that tyres had been set ablaze the night before. Bricks and stones were strewn across the streets. Exhausted police officers were visible in various spots. A few groups of angry young men stood near the town square, smoking as if they were chimney stacks. There were three groups: the first comprised Eastern and Middle Eastern migrants from countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Turkey; the second included Albanians and Kosovars, along with Bosnians and others; and the third group consisted of local English people.

I was taken to the Eastern migrants, who had a representative, or rather a spokesperson. The police officer explained, 'We've already engaged with the Albanians and can understand them, as their interpreter arrived last night. We were waiting for you to come and find out why these people are fighting. We've already spoken with the locals, and we just need to hear the Eastern group's perspective.'

The Eastern migrants, all newcomers, expressed their grievance: 'When we arrived in Britain illegally, we were taken to an abandoned World War II barracks filled with rats, cockroaches and insects. We protested, but conditions did not improve. Along with the Albanians, we set the place on fire to avoid returning, and now we are left homeless.'

It seemed they intended to remain in the area, but insisted they no longer wanted support. Subsequently, they established their own camp in the woods, like the Calais camp that had been set up near the Channel in France for years. These migrants spent the day in the town but slept in the woods at night.

One day, in a moment of extreme hunger, a few of them decapitated swans in the park – birds that, in Britain, are considered the personal property of the Queen – and calmly roasted them right there. Park rangers and passersby witnessed this act and could not tolerate it. The affection many people, particularly in small towns, hold for the royal family and

their property created tension between the local populace and this group of migrants. Additionally, the Albanians were incensed, questioning why the Eastern migrants had eaten the swans without notifying them. When they realised that the locals had found out and that hunting swans was no longer an option, their anger intensified. There had been previous altercations between the two groups, and the Easterners' solitary swan meal had provided the perfect excuse for settling scores.

As I explained this situation to the police chief, I couldn't help but chuckle. Leaning toward the Kurdish group, I quipped, 'Didn't it occur to you to at least refrain from cooking in the middle of the park and creating a cloud of smoke? Did you not think these swans had owners?'

One of them responded, 'The swans came and went as they pleased. They were well fed and plentiful while we were starving.'

Another added, 'Do you know why we killed the swans? Because I disliked them immensely. A few people are responsible for taking care of them, feeding them three meals a day while we starved, watching!'

The situation was both tragic and humorous. They justified their actions in a way that only added to the absurdity of it all. I also observed the English locals, who were divided into two groups: young and old. The younger ones held beers and shouted obscenities, visibly offended that their sacred traditions had been violated, a sentiment compounded by a growing animosity toward refugees. The older group, consisting of elderly men and women, stood together with placards, modernly protesting that the Queen's possessions were a source of pride and deserved respect.

On the same side were two groups: one having decapitated and consumed the swans; the other feeling cheated out of this feast. It was a bizarrely tragic scene.

Ultimately, the migrants were told they must apologise to the townspeople.

The migrants insisted, 'There's no way we're going to apologise. We might buy them a swan instead!'

The town officials responded, 'You can't just buy a swan', and a city officer handed me a text of laws dating back hundreds of years, written in archaic English. I struggled to read parts of it, let alone translate it. This was for migrants who had little understanding of urban and royal laws and who were voicing their hunger. They simply couldn't grasp that, for example, the old lamps and swans in public parks, as well as the whales

and dolphins, were considered royal property and were, according to specific laws, reserved for the Crown. This became one of the most challenging translations of my life, with the migrants responding, 'Who's the Queen? Tell them we're hungry! Today we ate this, and tomorrow we'll eat something else!'

Their comments and jokes hinted that they had once eaten fox, as well. I couldn't tell whether they were trying to provoke further outrage or if they had genuinely done so. Fox meat is permissible in Islam, and eating it is common in some parts of the East, but I refrained from mentioning it to the police for fear of escalating tensions.

As time passed, I learned that this issue had grown complex in the town. Animal-rights groups had protested since the previous day. In England, there has long been a contentious debate between fox hunters and animal-rights advocates, and now it seemed the migrants had also feasted on foxes! The advocacy groups became enraged, posting extreme reactions online, which turned into jokes such as 'We have fox-eating migrants', 'The Queen's swans have been pillaged', 'Call the royal army from Iraq to protect the royal swans', or 'Find worthy opponents for the fox hunters'. The serious faces of those advocating for animal rights, alongside the expressions of migrants who had likely enjoyed their swan and fox feasts after a few cheap drinks, remain vivid in my memory.



WHO KILLED OUR SWANS?

Community anger at pointless destruction of wildlife

Two swans who have made their home on the lake in Middleton Park over recent years were found shot on Thursday 30 November.

A spokesperson for Leeds City Council said: "Staff at Middleton Park were alerted ... to a dead swan and one injured swan on Middleton pond. Having investigated, the team contacted Yorkshire Swan Rescue who attended site and took both birds. We are now working with the police to establish the circumstances."

Unfortunately, the female later died at the rescue centre.

Charlie, one of the people who found the swans told South Leeds Life:

"It was very sad to find them.

"I'm angry that people which we should have this mentality, to do this in a space which we all enjoy safely. This threatens us, our park and everything in it and I hope the police find them very soon."

Alan Shaw, Chair of the

The swans on Middleton Park Lake. Photo: Charlie N

protected birds so you can message us and we'll pass it of the investigation and will about the incident is al

Image 194: Newspaper headline: 'Who Killed Our Swans?'

One refugee, evidently educated, conveyed through me to the police officer, 'Once, the East and its people held a sense of dignity. Their lands were cradles of civilisation, knowledge and wealth. Today, as a result of centuries of colonisation, civil wars, tyranny and injustice, they await a chance to escape!'

One held a placard urging the protection of the Queen's swans, while another brandished a knife, asserting that, by decapitating the Queen's swan, he was preventing its slow demise . . . and I stood, bewildered amid this duality.

The Killers of the Kurdish Girls

Earlier, I mentioned a girl from a Kurdish Iraqi family living in London. Her name was Banaz Mahmod, and her father and uncle were acquaintances of ours. The Mahmood family belonged to well-known Kurdish aristocracy from Pashdar. Tragically, it was her own family – through the collusion of her father and uncle – that orchestrated her painful murder by hiring several young men as their mercenaries.

This shocking news broke in January 2006, and I became involved to a limited extent in the aftermath. Subsequently, several media outlets reached out, asking me to comment as a media activist from the Kurdish community. The London homicide department also contacted me, stating that an honour killing had occurred and requesting a report for the court from me as a socio-cultural expert on the matter.

In such situations, the police's task is to send the case to court after preliminary investigations. However, due to the gravity of the situation, they asked me to visit the Metropolitan Police headquarters and later transferred me to a division dealing with serious crimes in the Lewisham area of London.

Upon my arrival, I discovered that a team of translators was already working on the case. The summary of Banaz's story, based on evidence and documentation, revealed that she had been in a relationship with a boy from Sardasht. Previously, she had been forced into marriage, but had eventually divorced, after persistent pressure.

Banaz encountered difficulties with her father in relation to her friendship with this boy. When she realised her family would not relent, she briefly fled with him, only to return after her family made certain

promises. She had reported these issues to the police, stating that she was being threatened by her family. It seemed that the police had not taken her warnings seriously.

The family members, who were somewhat well-known in the Kurdish community in London, decided to defend their honour in their own way. They hired several young men, including one from the area in Kurdistan who I happened to know, to carry out their plans.

The girl went to her grandmother's house at her father's invitation and was confronted by this group. According to a police wiretap of one of the killers, they first tortured and abused her. Then, they strangled her, placed her in a suitcase and buried her in the yard of a house in Birmingham.

The police provided me and the other translators with most of the family conversations and video recordings of the victim. I listened to these conversations, in which they assured the poor girl that no one meant her harm, while they were plotting her murder.

This case prompted me to reflect more critically on gender studies. Faced with it, I had to follow professional and ethical principles and declare my acquaintance with the family, to avoid any conflict of interest. Although I genuinely held no supportive views toward her father and had taken a stand against them, I was legally obligated to state that I had some knowledge of them. This had not occurred to me initially, nor did I know I needed to report it. Later, when the case went to court, I submitted a report regarding similar cases in Kurdistan – honour killings – and the societal and familial perspectives on these crimes. The lawyers for Banaz's father and uncle exploited this vulnerability, claiming that my familiarity with the family made me an unsuitable consultant for the case, which led to my dismissal.

The killers of Banaz did not grant interviews to the media. Years later, I suggested through an intermediary that her father speak with me as a reporter for a media outlet, so that his story could also be told. He was displeased and conveyed through his wife, 'I never expected the son of Kaka Karim Ahmadi to suggest I tell my story to an English newspaper instead of supporting me.'

I responded, 'I am not in a position to support you. The court will decide your case. However, if you wish to talk about it, we can have a conversation.'

After my involvement in the case ended, I was free to discuss it with the media, as there were no legal prohibitions against me.

Later, I attended short courses and workshops on gender equality and children's rights, including at SOAS University. I should also mention that my participation in these short courses, which sometimes lasted a day or two, was included in the list of charges against me during my arrest in 2019 by the IRGC. They accused me of being trained in support of feminism and soft coups by SOAS, which they regarded as a sanctuary for intelligence agencies.

Not long after, in April 2007, a similar murder occurred that also impacted my professional life. It took place in Shekhan, near Shinjar, within the Nineveh province of Iraq, which is home to the Yazidi Kurds, and it garnered significant media attention. A Yazidi girl named Du'a and a Muslim boy had fallen in love, and since their marriage was impossible (according to Yazidi beliefs, they do not marry Muslims), they decided to flee. The girl's family and relatives tricked her into returning and, with the help of the locals, stoned her to death.

The footage of her murder was shocking. In the final moments, one of the men picked up a cinder block and smashed it over her head. These scenes, filmed on mobile phones, circulated widely. One Iraqi activist sent me the

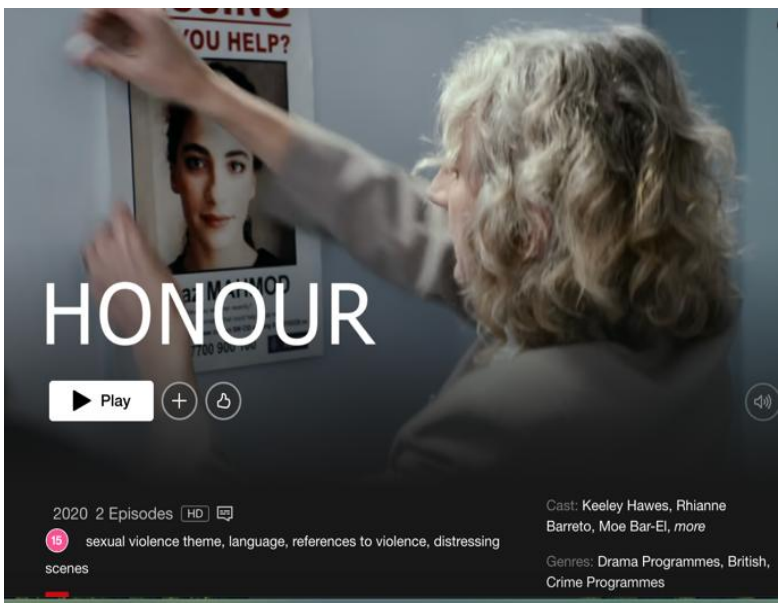


Image 195: The series *Honour* on Netflix.

video, having translated the audio, and I reported on the incident. When this happened, Iraq had just been liberated from Saddam Hussein, and foreign troops were present in the country and region.

Interestingly, a dramatised film based on the true story of Banaz Mahmod's murder was produced in England and has recently been released on Netflix, which was a jarring experience for me.

During that period, another aspect caught my attention: the role of gender in the selection of subjects for these two consecutive murders! The male perpetrators faced little scrutiny, the girls were the victims, and the honour killings were justified by the killers.

Even on a lower scale than murder, a similar pattern emerges. Although many of these communities have undergone significant changes, if boys commit actions contrary to social norms, it often leaves little blemish on their social lives and records. Traditional society is sensitive to women's attire, speech, laughter, grooming – nearly all their actions – and uses these issues as tools for their oppression. The discrimination and gender distinctions that arise from the binary division of male and female, along with mechanisms that portray women as 'the other' and marginalise them, have led to women paying higher costs or facing broader consequences in relation to many social issues than do men.



Image 196: An article I wrote for a newspaper about the Yazidi girl.

Until that time, I had focused more on social and political issues and had not examined closely this dimension of the problem. With 'dos' and 'don'ts' and encouragement from my friend Sara, along with another friend named Hekati, who was Greek, I published this news and produced my first significant piece of reporting by disseminating the video and providing a brief analytical report on my website. I expected it to make waves, but I had no idea that twenty-four hours later it would become the leading story for some major media outlets. Several media organisations requested follow-up interviews, and even the British station ITV asked me to travel to Mosul to provide a comprehensive report on the incident. The volume of coverage and inquiries was so extensive that Google rated my site highly, significantly impacting its ranking.

KCC and the Experience of Reprimand

As I became involved with the Kurds of northern Kurdistan, I sensed they held a more modern and advanced perspective on the issues facing Kurdistan and its political landscape. I still believe that the PKK, despite some radical views and military actions that attract human-rights criticisms, is one of the most modern and structured political parties in all four parts of Greater Kurdistan. It has managed to establish connections with some parliamentary representatives and foreign European politicians, garnering support from various global leftist groups. However, this very aspect leads many to view the PKK not as a Kurdish nationalist party but as a leftist internationalist one, accusing it of prioritising the party's interests over those of the Kurds and Kurdistan on a regional level. They argue that it focuses solely on issues concerning Turkey, seen through a leftist lens, and is occasionally willing to compromise on matters affecting Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan for the sake of party interests.

The PKK is one of the few Kurdish parties that boasts a significant number of foreign members. I was always surprised to see individuals from other countries among the party's ranks, some even serving as Peshmerga or guerrillas, venturing into the mountains of Qandil or deep into Turkey to fight. This was particularly pronounced during that period, as they presented themselves as a modern European political organisation. They had active women's and children's groups, with little to no perceived discrimination or gender inequality in their forces. All these factors set the

PKK apart from other parties in the Middle East. It was an extraordinarily well-organised, structured and ideological entity. Each summer in Europe, many families would send their children to centres that were ostensibly cultural hubs but were, in fact, managed by the PKK. These centres provided training and recreational activities for teenagers and young adults during summer camps outside the city. They even took children to camps in Germany, where they received lessons on socialism, rights, women's rights and the environment, and heard ideological and party-related addresses. Young foreigners born in Europe were also recruited. Some even ventured to the mountains of Qandil to become Peshmerga.

When I, as a young person with potential, entered the KCC, the Kurdish Community Centre in North London, I was immediately drawn in. I felt I could represent them and engage with other Kurdish communities. Shortly thereafter, I participated in the board elections. Seven elected members managed the KCC for two years, and ostensibly many processes were democratic. I was already recognised as a Kurdish Iranian, a sympathiser and a supporter, and I garnered a high number of votes in the election. Among us were a lawyer, a student and a journalist, and we took charge of the KCC, one of the most significant Kurdish centres in Britain. I worked in communications and soon realised the underlying dynamics and organisational structure at play.

Many Kurds believed that the weakness of the Kurds in Turkey was their lack of proficiency in the Kurdish language or their reluctance to speak it. They faced such discrimination in their education system that many did not even converse in Kurdish at home. I never accepted this and was always critical of those who demanded rights for Greater Kurdistan yet failed to speak their language or strive for its revival and education. The Centre offered a few limited Kurdish language classes, but these were not widely attended. This became a point of contention used by other Kurds against the PKK. It allowed them to capitalise on the party's lack of emphasis on Kurdish nationalism and label it as a follower of outdated leftist policies.

During those years, to fund the Centre, most Kurdish businesses from Turkey were informally pressured to contribute annually, essentially paying a form of protection money. If they refused, after a few warnings, they might find their shop windows smashed! Everyone was aware of this and preferred to avoid confrontation. They were willing to part with a few

hundred pounds each year to keep the peace. I believe the intensity and insistence of this practice have diminished now, and many of these dynamics have changed. However, for many businessmen and the public, the amounts contributed were not substantial, and there were plenty who willingly donated due to their support for the PKK. It's also worth noting that the supporters of the PPK backed some businesses and companies, which in turn contributed well to the party. Occasionally, Eastern European and Albanian mafia groups operated in North London, extorting money from the public. If they ever targeted a Kurdish shopkeeper, PKK supporters would intervene, even resorting to violence to defend them.

The PKK played a crucial role as the legal and formal representative of the Kurds in parliamentary elections, local councils and municipalities, influencing a large number of Kurds to vote for specific individuals in local, parliamentary and federal elections. In fact, all these groups and centres operating in various countries were subordinate to a political centre known as the Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê, or Kurdistan National Congress (the 'KNK'), which was headquartered in Brussels. A significant portion of the Kurdish population from Turkey resides in Germany, where they have a well-organised and precise structure. Their centres were connected with the KNK, then with the People's Democratic Party (the 'HDP') in Turkey, and ultimately with the PKK in Qandil. They received directives on which demonstrations to participate in, what political activities to conduct and where, what aspects of Turkey's domestic and foreign policies to protest, and the issues about which they were to gather outside the Turkish Embassy, including their expected conduct while there. Suddenly, a fax would arrive with orders, and everyone would unite for a march or assembly at a predetermined hour.

During my tenure at the KCC, we were inexperienced, and once we made a rather foolish yet well-meaning mistake that almost led to our disgrace! The situation unfolded like this: we, as students and educated youth, did not possess an ideologically rigid perspective and believed that Kurdistan belonged to everyone. We thought, ultimately, we were all part of a Greater Kurdistan, and the distinctions between the Kurds of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran were meaningless. In the middle of the main hall of the KCC hung a massive photo of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader. In that picture, Öcalan, dressed casually, raised his hand as if saluting his troops, a smile on his face. It seemed that, through Photoshop, a few flying doves

had been added to the image. A small photo of Sheikh Said Piran, one of the revolutionary leaders of Kurdistan in Turkey, along with several other images of young boys and girls, whose identities I was unaware of at that time, adorned the walls on either side.



Image 197: Newruz Festival. Berlin Stadium, Germany, 2003.

We found it puzzling that this party and movement, claiming to represent Greater Kurdistan, had no photo of Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Iraqi Kurds, or of Ghassemlou, or of Qazi Muhammad, the only president of the Kurdish Government. Where were the leaders of the Syrian Kurds? Some of their photos were stored away. We decided to bring up this issue at the board meeting held on Friday nights and seek approval to install these photos ourselves. We agreed that, while Öcalan's photo would remain, we would place images of other leaders on the walls as well. We gathered the existing photos and distributed them elsewhere. We carefully arranged the photos of the leaders from other countries in a row, ensuring that none was positioned higher than the others. Unfortunately for us, the day after we installed the new photos, a significant meeting was scheduled with prominent political figures attending. Some parts of these meetings were held behind closed doors, and the public would join for the final session.



Image 198: Photos of Apo and other PKK members at KCC.

Around eleven in the morning, my friend Ilhan called and urged me to hurry over because a disciplinary meeting had been called. When I arrived, I saw someone who commanded considerable respect, and whose smile I had never seen before, was present. I realised the issue was about the photos. The disciplinary committee met in a tense and uncomfortable atmosphere, sitting in a way that made one feel as if they were a military tribunal. Everything was being documented and recorded, and the proceedings were meticulously organised.

For the next part of the meeting, several trusted individuals and families – referred to as 'the families of martyrs' – had come. They protested, demanding to know when this meeting was convened, how the changes and relocations of the photos were voted on, how many voted in favour, and what justification we had for this act. We explained that we were the administrators of the KCC and had democratically reached this decision unanimously, with five out of six members signing off on it. They countered, asking if we knew who the individuals were in the photos we had removed and placed on the other wall. We replied that we did not, but

our intent had not been to show disrespect; they were simply no longer in that location; we had merely rearranged them.

Some family members present became agitated and angry, saying, 'These are our sons and daughters who are no longer alive. We sacrificed martyrs and shed blood for you to display the photo of Barzani, who has killed hundreds of PKK members in a fratricidal war, or his son Masoud Barzani, who sold them to the Turkish army? What about the Iranian Democratic Party's Peshmerga – when were they ever in the trenches with us that their leaders are displayed here? They can't even bear to see the PJAK party, and what does it mean to display the leader of the Syrian Kurds here?'



Image 199: Inauguration ceremony for election victory to join the board of directors. Haringey, London, 2004.

We were aware of these sentiments and cautiously responded that if we had put up the photo of Mustafa Barzani's son, they might have had a point for objection, but we had placed images of those who were the historical political leaders of that region – individuals who had fought long before the PKK was established.

In the end, however, the concept of martyrdom and the superiority held by these families triumphed over our rationale. Ultimately, it became clear to us that, in the political arena, only one photo was allowed to shine among the others: that of Abdullah Öcalan.

The meeting was overwhelmingly biased against us, and we were swiftly reprimanded, handed our first and last warnings, and expelled from the Centre, just as we were threatened to be from our jobs. After the meeting, it dawned on me that it was not worth attempting to reform a political party that was inherently riddled with contradictions and incapable of functioning democratically. I realised I had no place there, for I could not ignore the identities of the different Kurdish peoples who had all fought valiantly for their rights.

The enormity of this reprimand was immense, and in the next few months, we experienced severe backlash and criticism from our own community. In a local newspaper, I was labelled a traitor! Over the subsequent months, I resigned from the KCC and moved on to pursue my studies at university. I shifted my focus to other Kurdish organisations and began investigating the Kurdish issue through my studies and research. I returned to Kurdistan and spent years immersed in the realities of the people, delving into various layers of the Kurdish struggle. This act of reprimand became a defining moment for me. I realised I was no longer merely an outsider looking in; I had emerged as a contributor to a new dimension of the Kurdish narrative, paving the way for a nuanced exploration of the peoples' multifaceted history, identities and aspirations.

Chapter Fourteen: I Set Out on Long Journeys

In Eastern cultures, they say, 'If you want to know someone, travel with them or share a meal.' I say, if you want to know yourself, take many journeys. I'm not talking about the quick, conventional tourist trips that are so common these days. No – one should visit countries in peace and tranquillity, but also those fraught with conflict, struggle and poverty. Witnessing how different people live, their cultures, their ways of thinking, even their clothes: these experiences can change a person. Even if you aren't an anthropology student, seeing the world through the eyes of others is essential to grasping the complexities of our world, with its blend of diverse societies and cultures. Only travel can fulfil this need and broaden our outlooks.

During my years living, working and studying in London and Europe, I circumnavigated the globe twice, from America and Canada to Africa, Iraq, Turkey and East Asia. Whenever I could, I seized the opportunity to travel to other European countries and gain experience. In my early days, during my diplomas and undergraduate studies, and later in a more professional capacity, I would pick up my backpack and set off. At university, we were constantly encouraged to connect with people from other countries and cultures and seek a deeper understanding of life in different cultural contexts. I travelled from country to country, and when the costs of travel mounted, I would work along the way. Just as I had done during my childhood and youth in Iran, I picked apples in orchards, irrigated fields and gardens, and even worked on farms and in dairies – all to pursue my desire to see the world. I willingly endured the hardships and challenges of the road for the joy of meeting people and witnessing

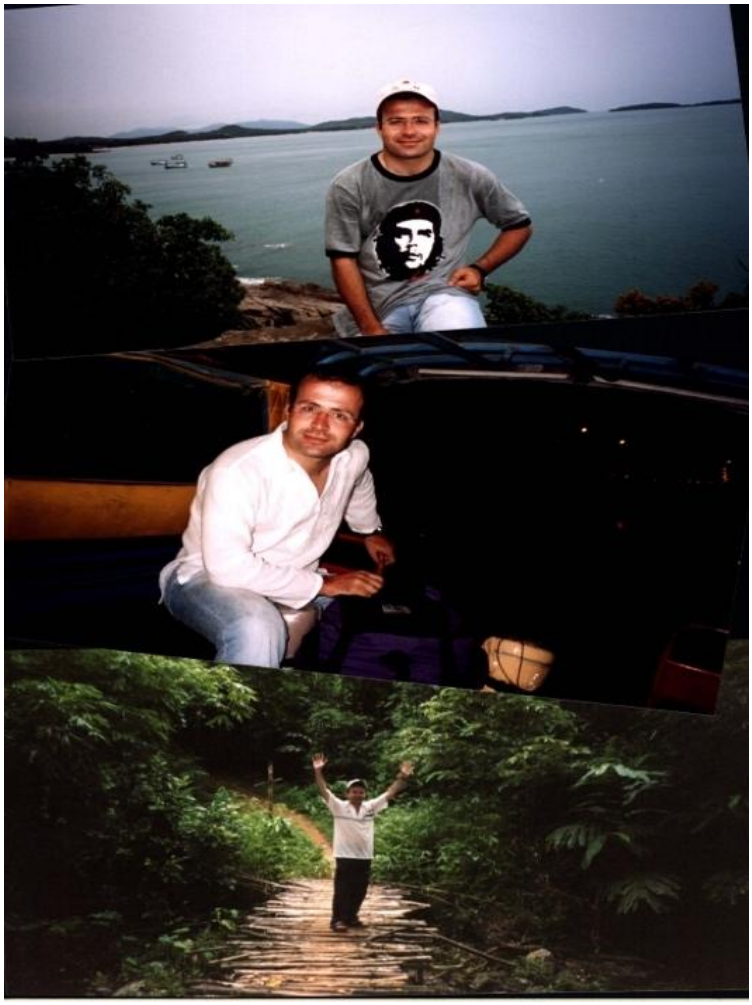


Image 200: World travels.

their lives, their worries and their hopes – both their inner worlds and their external realities. I came to see the world in a richer, more profound way and was able to interact with it more meaningfully, finding a deeper peace with it . . . and with myself and the life I was living.

Prague, Touched by Tear Gas

In the autumn of 2000, I travelled to Prague, and it was an interesting trip. My visit coincided with the G7 summit and the World Bank meeting in the

Czech Republic. I usually took part in these kinds of left-leaning protests, and there was to be a multi-day demonstration in Prague.

Flights to the city had been booked out for weeks, and people from all over were arriving by bus. I managed to make it to the protest while visiting my father's cousin Youssef and his wife in Sweden. They came along too, and we stayed with her family, kind Roma folk residing in the Czech Republic. We visited a few historical sites, including forced-labour camps and crematories from the Hitler era, before going our separate ways.

According to plan, I joined the protest. The police met the young protesters at the front of the march with harsh force, firing tear gas at us, even though we were marching calmly and peacefully, and they arrested hundreds, myself included, with complete ruthlessness. My hands were tied behind my back, I was forced down onto my back and they beat me with batons. The experience stirred memories of imprisonment and torture from my youth. Unlike Iranian prisons, the Prague police acted brutally in full view of the public, reporters capturing it all on film. It was astonishing to me that, with all their rhetoric on human rights, they treated protestors in this way. This kind of police brutality is evident in much of Europe, generally justified under the guise of maintaining security.

They hustled us onto police buses and, as the city prison was full, took us to a sports stadium on the outskirts of the city, where, under a court order, we were quarantined for two days 'for punishment', as they called it. Those who had sleeping bags slept in the stadium seats; the rest of us shivered through the night and broke whatever we could get our hands on. We made fires in the middle of the stadium grass, chanted all night, graffitied walls and danced. If things got too rowdy, the police water cannon came to the gates and sprayed us down. After this, I and several other Brits were mass-deported and temporarily banned from travelling to the Czech Republic.

During my time in London, I also made a special trip to the Qandil Mountains. I had mentioned earlier that I was invited to the media centre of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in the Qandil Mountains for the annual conference. Several members of European parliaments and representatives of foreign media had also been invited to the meeting, where future party strategies against the Turkish Government were to be announced. I was collaborating with the KCC at the time, and they asked me to join as a reporter and lead one of the groups. Journalists from everywhere were

present – from CNN and the BBC to Reuters – accompanied by representatives from European organisations and centres.



Image 201: On the road to Qandil, hosted by former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş, now imprisoned. Diyarbakır, 2003.

We flew from London to Turkey. The Turkish Government was none too pleased that we were visiting their adversaries, but, because of the diplomatic immunity granted to MPs and NGO representatives, they had no choice but to assign police to escort us as far as the Khabur border. After this, Barzani's Peshmerga, who were also at odds with the PKK, took over and escorted us to the Makhmour camp. Turkish Kurds closely allied with the PKK had been living in this camp for years.

After two days of waiting, they transported us in small groups up the Qandil Mountains in off-road vehicles. We switched cars twice along the way, and our cameras and mobile phones were taken from us. Security was so tight that for part of the journey we were even given PKK-provided equipment in place of our own gear, which was surprisingly up to date. At a certain point, vehicles could no longer go on, and we continued by tractor, horse and mule until we reached the main headquarters of the party's armed forces.

What struck me most was the PKK's level of organisation and professionalism. They had state-of-the-art military training, claiming to

have received training and knowledge from groups like the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, Cuban forces and even, at one time, the Irish Sinn Féin. They had longstanding links with guerrilla and partisan forces in Latin America and had adopted survival techniques and principles from these international groups. I had not seen this level of external support and collaboration among Kurdish parties in Iran or Iraq. Though the PKK's lifestyle was guerrilla, it was highly professional. They had dug out sections of the mountains to create homes, shelters, offices and weapons storage, and within their camps they had built libraries and separate dormitories for men and women. Due to heavy winter snowfalls, they would seal off the area and reopen it in spring. They had considered everything and ensured these camps had more than just basic facilities.



Image 202: Diyarbakır, 2002.

We also met with some senior PKK leaders, and I saw a friend from London who had recently become a guerrilla fighter. When I asked to see him, they thought I was family and even denied his presence at the camp. Family visits with guerrillas are generally restricted to avoid any weakening of resolve. Personal needs and emotions were often

subordinated to party goals and were controlled and suppressed accordingly. This restriction has long been a human-rights criticism of the PKK, similar to the one faced by the Mojahedin-e Khalq in Iran, but neither organisation has addressed these criticisms. When I clarified that I wasn't family, they cautiously took me to him.

On the second day, as we strolled around the camp, my friend shared a disturbing story. He said, 'A while ago, with a visiting friend, we happened to come across some young men and women buried up to their waists under a tree, with guards stationed over them. Exhausted, they groaned, but the guards ignored their suffering.' His friend had been curious and asked what was going on.

'Don't look at them too long,' was the reply. 'I'll explain later.' Eventually my friend shared the story with his friend. These guerrillas, it seemed, had been secretly engaging in romantic and sexual relationships while visiting medical centres in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil. After a military trial, they were punished in this manner to set an example and afterward were likely to be separated and sent to distant fronts within Turkey and Syria. The party strictly prohibited romantic or sexual relationships between members, and, by an unwritten rule, marriage was also forbidden. Even the party leaders did not marry, although there were always exceptions.

For many Kurdish families, the guerrilla and Peshmerga life is a nightmare. At least in the beginning, it was rare for family members to see their children. This practice has persisted, and many guerrilla families still cannot visit their loved ones at all. Over the years, I've heard from countless parents who have travelled across Kurdistan, pleading to see their children, only to be told, 'Your children have gone on operations in remote areas. They're not in Qandil.'

The PKK has an Iranian branch, the PJAK, operating in Iranian Kurdistan, along with branches and parties in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan. In such politically charged and conservative contexts, even small personal choices can be scrutinized. During this trip, a female journalist originally from Diyarbakır, who was with our group, recounted an incident. The female dormitory supervisor had told her to cover up the pink bra strap showing under her t-shirt. She quietly said to her, 'Please cover up the strap,' not because of any personal discomfort, but to prevent trouble from the supervisors.

For the guerrillas, it was all too clear that if they remained in Iran, they would be limited to being guerrillas forever, and they were tired of it. Like other Kurds in Iran, they wanted to enjoy the simplest of rights: to read books, hold parties, celebrate Newruz and study in their native language. This is why some of my friends stayed on in the PKK, eventually making it their home, and others sought their own paths.

Visiting the Most Horrifying Event of the Twentieth Century

During that period of my life, I embarked on numerous trips across Europe. Some German friends invited us to their hometown of Dresden, a city almost entirely flattened by British air raids in the Second World War. Jordi and I set off for Germany, then continued to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and beyond.

This part of Europe was new to us. As two young people carrying only backpacks, we roamed and explored it on a circular journey. We ventured through more remote areas and eastern regions, trying to connect with the cultural surroundings, which held a particular appeal. In Eastern Germany, the scars of World War II were still visible; memories of films I'd watched as a child about this conflict resurfaced vividly. However, the true



Image 203: Hallway of Death. Theresienstadt Camp, 2002.

pinnacle of our journey through Eastern Europe was visiting Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where we confronted the grim reality of the Holocaust's crematoria and were struck by the inhumanity we witnessed in Auschwitz, a chilling reminder of war's unimaginable brutality.

The construction of crematoria and the production of soap from human fat, carried out by prisoners who themselves faced the same fate, speaks to the horror that transpired here. Over the years, it has often been said that Hitler was anti-Semitic and carried out mass murder against the Jews. Those who doubt the extent of this atrocity should visit these camps in person to see the harrowing crimes inflicted on other human beings. Hitler's ideology extended beyond the Jewish people: the disabled, the Roma and other vulnerable groups were also systematically killed under his doctrine.

Witnessing the gas chambers and forced labour camps brought to mind *Means Without End* by Giorgio Agamben, in which he powerfully states,

> The camp is the place that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule. In the camp, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the law, acquires a permanent spatial arrangement that remains outside the normal legal system.[1]

I was also reminded of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She notes,

> What is revealed in the camps is the same principle that guarantees totalitarian domination and which common sense stubbornly refuses to acknowledge: namely, that everything is possible. In the camps, indeed, everything is possible, only because the camps create a kind of exceptional space, a place where the law has been completely suspended.[2]

1 Agamben, 2011.

2 Arendt, 2015.

Those who entered the camps found themselves in a zone where distinctions between inside and outside, exception and rule, permissible and impermissible were obliterated – a place stripped of any legal protection.

I won't delve into the sensitive debate on the actual numbers of Holocaust victims – whether it was indeed eleven million Jews or otherwise – and whether it's accurate to say that a hidden 'little Hitler' lies dormant within all of us. However, it is undeniable that a vast majority of the victims were Jewish, and that advocates of this faith have leveraged this tragedy for political purposes, focusing the narrative on their suffering alone. It's crucial to remember that large groups of people, including Roma, the disabled, political dissenters, LGBTQIA+ people and even some Black individuals, perished in these camps and in other scattered, lesser-known locations – tragedies that often go unmentioned. A researcher's mind should always probe deeper, questioning figures and motives to understand the broader picture.

Recently, I was reading newly released documents from declassified Allied files in the British Library. These records described how, after Germany's fall, the Allied armies imprisoned thousands of Germans, including men, women and children, in the same camps on charges of being Nazis. Following Germany's defeat, countless women in Berlin and elsewhere endured horrific assaults, leading to pregnancies. Many of these children were subsequently abandoned, and many were unable to identify their fathers.

The extermination of Jews, the disabled, the Roma and Black people reflects the deep-seated racism of Hitler and the Nazis. These are prejudices that have yet to be fully eradicated in the Western world. Post-World War II, extensive campaigns were launched against racism, and while these have helped, the twenty-first century has seen a resurgence of xenophobia. Waves of migration from the Middle East and North Africa have sparked a renewed rise in anti-immigrant sentiments and the popularity of far-right ideologies in the West.

Hitler and other racists were strongly influenced by Darwin's 'natural selection' and Herbert Spencer's 'survival of the fittest' doctrines. They believed that 'superior' races should prevail in the struggle for existence, while weaker, 'inferior' ones were destined for extinction. The tragic outworking of this belief is when people like the Nazis, led by Hitler, seek

to accelerate and target this 'natural process' by systematically exterminating groups they deem unworthy of life. The Nazis executed a systematic purge, eliminating socially vulnerable groups by using dualistic classifications to draw rigid boundaries, separating those they viewed as insiders and outsiders. By labelling these groups 'foreigners', they worked to marginalise them and exclude them from mainstream society. They confined them to labour camps, stripping them not only of their physical rights, but also, to a great extent, of their spirits. In time, they forced these individuals to become soulless tools of their inhumane, totalitarian system.

Journey to Iraq Amid the War

During a phase of intense interest in journalism and photography, I was constantly seeking newspaper headlines and keen on getting behind the scenes of events. Every opportunity to experience a thrill was one to be seized.

In 2003, at the height of the Iraq War, I set out for that country against all advice. The following year, when the university was on break, I made my way back again. The news agencies I was working with warmly welcomed these trips. Few dared to enter the heart of war, facing bombs and suicide attacks. They encouraged me to send back whatever I could from Iraq: photos, videos, travel notes, reflections, analyses or even short video clips. Given my previous limited collaborations with them, I managed to secure some recommendation letters from ATN and Channel 4, which eased my work in Iraq. By 'eased', I mean I was given access to restricted and conflict-ridden areas for interviews and news coverage, as war journalism has its own inherent difficulties.

Through Turkey's Kurdistan and the city of Cizre, I entered Iraqi Kurdistan, reaching areas under Kurdish control. From there, I travelled sequentially through Zakho, Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, encountering a people jubilant over the coalition forces' victory and Saddam Hussein's ousting. They believed this event would pave the way for full Kurdish independence. Kurdish flags were raised everywhere in an almost exaggerated display of nationalist sentiment. As a Kurd myself, this celebratory atmosphere deeply intrigued me. I even briefly considered abandoning London to settle in Erbil or Sulaymaniyah, perhaps teaching or working somewhere connected to my interests.

During that and subsequent trips, I interviewed with several radio and television stations in Kurdistan, discussing various topics including life in the UK. Upon returning to London, I shared my Iraq experiences with media outlets, detailing my impressions after the American invasion. My first English-language interview was with CNN, one of the media giants that played a significant role in covering Iraq's situation.



Image 204: My bodyguard teaching me how to arm a Kalashnikov. Baghdad, 2003.

Talking about the elections and the political future of Iraq's Kurds on CNN was nerve-wracking. I went with my friend Sara, who had inspired me to study anthropology at the University of Kent. Sara often told me, 'The secret is to appear confident. That way, the audience will think everything you say is true.' She said my confident posture and presence would convey to both the presenter and the audience that I was saying something truly important.

Early that morning, we stepped out of the taxi in front of a Starbucks branch across from CNN's building. We talked about confidence as we waited for the interview. She pointed out the commuters bustling to work, the nearby bus stop crowded with passengers, and the cameras and guards around the television network, café and other nearby businesses. Casually, she walked over to a crate of milk bottles outside the café, took one and drank from it as though it were the most natural thing. 'See?' she said. 'Since I took it confidently, no one thought it was wrong. Anyone watching would think I must be one of the café managers chatting with a colleague.'

The lesson was that even a challenging action could be done with ease if you approached it confidently. The principle applied even more to tasks less difficult than stealing!

Her approach seemed amusing, but I took her main point to heart. My interview focused on Iraqi Kurdistan. I had recently returned from there, and my perspectives, if not groundbreaking, at least offered a contrast to those of the other guest, who had never set foot in Iraq. I looked at Iraq's future through a non-nationalist lens, expressing concerns about the presence of military forces, particularly the Americans, and worries over the rights of Arab, Turkmen and other minorities in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq as a whole. These viewpoints stood in stark contrast to the enthusiastic nationalism of the Kurds at that time, which drew some criticism.

That era passed, and Kurdistan didn't achieve full independence; instead, it became a loosely federalised state. The independence referendum scheduled for 2014 was postponed to 2017 under pressure from Iraq, Turkey, Iran and other foreign powers. When independence finally garnered substantial support, the Kurdish Government lacked the courage and means to implement it. The neighbouring countries, as well as Western powers, hardened their stances, arguing it wasn't the right time. In a murky, short-lived military confrontation, Kurdish forces who

had control over Kirkuk – the future budget cornerstone of Kurdistan – eventually abandoned the city, yielding it to the Popular Mobilisation Forces without resistance.



Image 205: Sky News interview.

Today, Iraq and Baghdad still treat the Kurds, the country's largest minority, much as they did in the past, occasionally exerting pressure tactics against them. Nonetheless, Kurdistan maintains a more humane relationship with its religious and ethnic minorities. Although its political system remains far from ideal, often familial and tribal (with power split between the Talabani and Barzani families), many foreign observers deem it more democratic than the central government.

Before, I had visited my parents in the city of Van, witnessed Newruz in Diyarbakır, and travelled throughout Kurdistan. Over the years, I made several trips to Kurdish regions in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and elsewhere. These encounters diversified my perspectives, and while in Iraqi Kurdistan I decided on an adventurous journey to Baghdad, Basra and predominantly Arab cities. Even in the midst of warfare, explosions and executions, I ventured to Baghdad. From there, I travelled on to Karbala, Najaf and Samarra.

A Kurdish friend I met in Sulaymaniyah questioned my decision, given that I came from a Sunni family and had no religious inclination toward

these pilgrimage sites. I replied, 'I'm an anthropology student and an adventurer. I want a fuller picture of Iraq, not just Kurdistan.'

My passion for journalism spurred me on, as I journeyed with just a backpack and camera, comfortable going wherever I wished. A portion of my confidence, admittedly, came from having British letters of introduction and a passport, and I knew I couldn't let this opportunity slip away. From Erbil, I travelled to Kirkuk, where, with the help of a Londoner friend's family, I rented a car with Baghdad plates and made my way to Baghdad. Leaving Kirkuk and entering the war-torn heart of Iraq was nerve-racking, as security felt reassuring in Kurdish areas but became fraught in Arab regions.

In chaotic Baghdad, I saw all the places I'd only known from television and photographs: the fallen statue of Saddam Hussein, the famous Qadisiyyah swords beneath which Saddam once reviewed his troops, the Sadr District, Rashid Street, Amariya, the Tigris River banks and many other notable sites, all of which I documented carefully with my camera. I spoke with both civilians and officials, aiming to offer a more authentic picture of life in this city under siege. From there, I continued to Najaf, Karbala and Samarra, witnessing the devastation wrought by war and the guerrilla tactics still in effect in various areas. Coalition forces had seized parts of the country, and this chaotic situation left people anxious and fearful.

I had also hired a translator, a Kurd from the city of Mesif in Salah ad-Din, who helped me understand the mindset of Iraq's Arab population. Our driver, a cautious Kirkuki, brought moments of levity as we tried to lighten his nervousness along the way. The advantage of being with these two was that they knew someone in nearly every city, allowing us to avoid hotels, so we felt safer, and I could learn firsthand the diverse perspectives of people in their own homes.

Although there was always the looming threat of kidnapping – a common occurrence then – our journey went smoothly. At checkpoints, we presented my British press credentials, bearing the stamp and emblem of the British Journalists' Union, to American or British personnel, or, when facing Iraqi guards, my translator and journalist companion showed his local press ID.

The Road to Karbala and Watered-Down Petrol

We took both Arab and Kurdish clothes with us in case we needed to change along the way. A large brown Chevrolet with Baghdad plates was a sensible choice, and our appearances drew no attention. The sheer scale of destruction – from war, pillaging and theft – and the sight of people – rich and poor alike reduced to dire conditions with even the most basic necessities beyond reach – were heart-wrenching. Petrol stations were inoperative, and children lined the roads, selling petrol in soda bottles and large containers. With no electricity or fuel and much of the city's infrastructure ruined, daily life had become nearly impossible.

On the road from Baghdad to Karbala, we stopped to buy petrol, making the vendor swear repeatedly that it was real fuel. He reassured us, but five kilometres later, the car ground to a halt. The petrol we'd bought had been diluted with water and dyed for appearance. We pushed the car to a nearby base belonging to coalition forces from a South American country. The Ecuadorians stationed there rescued us, and, at the insistence of our persistent driver, we lodged a formal complaint. In the absence of local police, the Ecuadorians took matters into their own hands, travelling to the village to track down the petrol seller and help fix the vehicle.



Image 206: Pilgrims en route to Karbala, riding carts and wheelchairs along the Najaf-Karbala Road. Iraq, 2003.

After considerable to-ing and fro-ing, we found the seller, only for his entire extended family to rally behind him, which eventually led to a hearing in the local village court. These courts, often run by village elders, are a form of tribal peacekeeping, handling community disputes. In the end, they apologised and we reached a reconciliation.

The mechanics cleaned the car's carburettor and painstakingly drained the tank, but the funny twist came when we had to buy more petrol . . . from the very same deceitful vendor! This time, with the elders intervening, he sold us pure fuel, and finally we set off again.

In Karbala, I witnessed sights both intriguing and unusual. Although I hadn't come specifically for a pilgrimage, my memories of time spent in Iran among Shiites, watching the Muharram ceremonies, tied me to the experience. I was curious to see the shrine of the third Shia imam and to get a sense of the atmosphere.

Growing up, I'd watched Shiites attach great significance to the Karbala incident and the Government using Muharram both religiously and politically, composing poetry and eulogies for Hussein and his companions. Like the great myths in other religions, the Karbala story has its share of embellishment. Even during wartime, the famous slogan 'The road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala' was an inseparable part of the cityscape. The Iranian Government has spent considerable resources trying to establish Karbala as a symbolic site akin to Mecca. Shia Muslims are a small minority globally, and Shia Islam itself is inherently critical, holding onto this aspect throughout history. I was curious to see what Karbala held that commanded such reverence among Shiites – a reverence comparable to the esteem that Sunni Muslims hold for the Prophet and Mecca.

While it's not often officially acknowledged, many Iranian Shiites entered Karbala illegally during the war, crossing the borders through Kurdistan to reach the shrine. Some even transported the bodies of the deceased, carrying them by mule or on the backs of smugglers over the mountains to Karbala for blessing and burial.

In Iran, Shia Muslims derive a sense of identity from the story of Ashura and participating in religious rituals. Such events transform into myth, becoming timeless and placeless. As a result, imaginative elements and superstitions find their way into the stories, adding layers over time. Interestingly, myths not only prolong the duration of an event, but also stretch it across all preceding and subsequent times. This also applies

spatially, with events expanding across many places. Not only does this multiply the time and space of the incident, but also it swells the number of individuals present at the event. All these transformations turn a historical event into a dense tale, making it increasingly challenging to distinguish fact from embellishment.

This phenomenon applies to the Karbala incident as well. A meta-historical and even post-historical view has led some to believe that Adam and Eve, for example, sought forgiveness from Imam Hussein for their sins, or that Noah recited lamentations for the imam on his ark. There is even the story of the Prophet Muhammad, who, despite having passed away years before the Karbala incident, is said to have foreseen it, weeping and mourning in anticipation. These narratives serve to extend the Ashura event beyond its time and place, encompassing eras and spaces long before its occurrence.

The Rotten Corpses of Karbala

In Karbala, I encountered an Iranian man from Yazd who told me he had smuggled his father's corpse across the treacherous mountains surrounding Marivan, finally reaching Karbala on a mule, just to pray over the body and bury him near the shrine. I was intrigued, wondering what could compel him to take such a risk in the middle of the all-consuming 2003 Iraq War. It was astonishing, truly. Smuggling a deceased body through unforgiving terrain, across regions engulfed in conflict, just to reach Karbala. It was an action brimming with meaning, although perhaps only an Eastern anthropology student could grasp its hidden depths.

Pilgrims from Shia-majority countries such as Lebanon, Yemen and Iran had gathered in Karbala, and it was fascinating to find that some shrine staff and market vendors spoke fluent Farsi. This wasn't all that surprising, of course, as Iran and Karbala had long shared religious ties, with countless students travelling between them. For many, this might bring to mind the exile of Ruhollah Khomeini to Najaf, along with the lives and studies of other Shia leaders in Iraq. Looking at recent history sheds light on this phenomenon. Years of deprivation under Saddam saw Karbala's Shiites banned from religious rites and many killed for their faith, while Iranian Shiites were barred from visiting Karbala. To some degree, this climate of restriction could explain the intense devotion evident here.

Pilgrims, hoping for blessings, would tie cloth and scarves to the lattice surrounding Hussein's tomb. This custom isn't unique to Karbala. I carefully untied a green scarf from a crowded section of the shrine that was thick with cries and woven with cloth. I knew my grandmother would appreciate it. She didn't care deeply for the Shia-Sunni divide yet would be pleased by my gesture. Occasionally, she would fast for a few days during Muharram, taking us to see Ashura processions in Naqadeh's Turkish areas, where she'd quietly pray under her breath. When I later saw her in Erbil, I presented her with the scarf, telling her it was from Karbala. Her eyes lit up with joy.

In Karbala and Najaf, I also observed something else – a phenomenon I'll call the 'grave trade'. Enormous cemeteries like Wadi al-Salam held special significance for Shiites, with many wishing to bury their dead here. Hundreds of thousands lay in these cemeteries, which, without police or any law enforcement, resembled something out of the Wild West. Many businesses operated here, selling graves. Violence, shouting, gunfire and fistfights seemed commonplace, and I heard stories of agents who would sell the same grave to three different people, giving each a certificate. They would all arrive with their deceased for burial, only to confront each other, leading to . . . well, the inevitable. Back then, the graves weren't layered as they are today. Old graves were emptied, the bones disposed of overnight



Image 207: View of Wadi al-Qadim Cemetery. Karbala, Iraq, 2003.

and plots prepared for sale by the cemetery brokers who dominated the local marketplace.

In this chaotic setting, many neighbourhoods were controlled by mafias, and armed groups imposed their own checkpoints and regulations. One of Karbala's major issues at the time was the sheer number of checkpoints. Each requiring identification cards or references, they could be problematic because the rules at one checkpoint often differed from the next, which might belong to a separate Shia authority or tribal leader.

On the journey back, we would sometimes stop to eat with welcoming villagers. I found these visits captivating, as they offered my first real insight into Iraqi-Arabs' lives. Although brief, these interactions allowed me to observe their customs, understand their interactions and gain a people-focused perspective that enriched my reports.

On the return journey to Kirkuk and Erbil, I encountered a young American soldier. There he stood, on an empty stretch of uphill road without any checkpoint, harassing passersby. With local police absent, foreign forces handled security, and he'd lined up cars, allowing them through one at a time. Speaking to a friend in English, he hurled insults at the locals, laughing: 'Let these mule and camel riders sit and stew! Let them through one by one till dark. We'll have our fun with these worthless . . .' With our car windows down, I overheard. I was shocked at the way this young man – barely twenty, armed to the teeth and bolstered by this false sense of power – was flaunting himself in the road.

This soldier's behaviour highlighted how much room Iraq had for exploitation. At the time, people would say every Iraqi could be a potential bomber, but I saw firsthand how attitudes like this only fuelled resentment. While his actions didn't necessarily represent the entire US Army, what I witnessed should never have happened. I couldn't stay silent. I approached him, saying I'd heard his words and asking why he spoke that way.

He responded, 'Mind your business! Interfering with US military matters . . . I could have you arrested!'

I replied, 'Instead, I'll report you at the next base or checkpoint.' I insisted he'd answer for his behaviour.

A confrontation ensued, others intervened and, though we moved on, I didn't let it go. At the first American military base we came to, I reported his behaviour. They assured me courteously they'd look into it, but they

may have done nothing, making my effort futile. Still, I couldn't turn a blind eye to the distress I saw in people around me. In my later travel memoir on Iraq, which was partly published in England, I wrote extensively about these American soldiers' behaviour.

Meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair

After my travels through countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, I felt like a changed man, and London no longer held the same appeal. Life here was orderly, a cohesive and peaceful European existence that felt worlds apart from the scenes I'd witnessed elsewhere. In contrast, much of the Middle East, particularly Kurdistan, seemed to be stirring from a long slumber, ready to undertake plans for economic reform and progress – a hope for the future that its people had never relinquished, even in the harshest times.

I deepened my involvement with the Kurdish cause, expanding my ties with Kurdish and research organisations. A referendum was planned to allow the Kurdish people to voice their desire for independence from Iraq. Most were in favour, and a 'Yes' outcome was expected. Naturally, that spurred reactions from Iran, Turkey and Syria. This led to the birth of referendum-support campaigns across Europe, and I believe it was the first time in years that the two main Kurdish parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party – worked together on this scale.

In London, I found myself drawn into the referendum campaign. My background in media and my familiarity with Kurds from Turkey and Iraq positioned me well as a bridge between the groups. I became involved and managed to garner increased interest in the referendum from influential Kurdish figures in Turkey, many of whom were affiliated with the PKK. Soon, rallies supporting the referendum began to take place in London, other European capitals and Iraq.

The situation in Iraq and Kurdistan was a point of intrigue for foreign media, and I became one of the consultants supplying them with insider information. This role gave me insights into the workings of the media, a collaboration I hadn't fully explored before.

One major focal point of the referendum campaign was a petition with tens of thousands of signatures, which we presented to the British

Parliament and spent months lobbying for. Through this work, I became somewhat acquainted with lobbying at the legislative level, taking short courses at the University of London to deepen my understanding of the process. On a rainy morning, we brought the signatures and a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair's office, requesting the ruling party's support for the referendum, and I was among the six campaign representatives present to deliver it.



Image 208: Speaking at a referendum rally. Trafalgar Square, London, 2004.

Not only on this occasion, but again, during another meeting with social leaders and board members from Kurdish centres, I met Blair dressed in traditional Kurdish attire known as *rank wa chogha*, one of the oldest and most authentic Kurdish outfits, which is woven from goat hair. When soaked by rain, it has a distinctive scent of goat. On that rainy London day, wearing the rank wa chogha, I noticed a hint of the smell. Upon entering 10 Downing Street, Prime Minister Blair remarked, 'I know that scent well. I've had numerous trips to Kurdistan and meetings with Messrs Barzani and Talabani. Back then, I was intrigued by the smell on rainy days and, after asking, learned why.' Our short meeting began with light-hearted remarks about my attire and the unique smell, continued with our discussion of campaign goals and culminated in our delivery of a second batch of signatures.



Image 209: Meeting at 10 Downing Street.

Canada and the Cornfields

A few years after the events of September 11 and the tragedy of the Twin Towers, Sara and I travelled to Canada. We had been invited to the University of Toronto to attend a conference on anthropology and urban

communities. We had plans to head south in Canada afterward. Following the event, we met Sara's family, who joined us for the rest of our travels.

Canada is vast, and considering its population, its expansive geography and natural landscape are remarkable. The lush forests, the unique lifestyle of its people, and so much more seemed filled with tranquillity. Thanks to my friend and their family, I also had the chance to meet other Canadian families, which provided me with further insight into Canadian life.

What struck me most were the sprawling farms. These enormous, well-organised fields were entirely mechanised. I found myself comparing their irrigation systems, advanced machinery and robust infrastructure with what we have in Iran and realised how far our agriculture must go to reach that level. Fertile land left underutilised, traditional farming methods, poor management of groundwater resources, reckless dam construction and ineffective administration have all contributed to the drought and water-scarcity crisis gripping Iranian agriculture today.

Another stark difference between Canadian and Iranian farms was the land's size and continuity. In Canada, farms hadn't been repeatedly divided into smaller plots. In Iran, when a landowner passes away, farms are often split between their children, leading to progressively smaller, less-productive plots over generations. In Canada, though, as I learned from speaking with farmers, they have preserved their farms in their original forms for centuries, without fragmenting them, often managing them under company or organisational structures. Everything is mechanised, so each person can claim their share with ease.

With Canadian Dollars in Child-Killing America

After Canada, I intended to travel to the United States. My critical stance toward the US Government, particularly the Republican Party, has been evident in my comments. I believe the country's policies, especially concerning the Middle East and developing, impoverished nations, are discriminatory. I cannot overlook the destructive role of European countries in this context. However, from arms sales to the continuation of wars and conflicts in these regions, and to the exploitation of their natural resources, I see the United States as playing a more prominent role. Nonetheless, these views did not prevent me from experiencing travel in America. I was close to the US and did not want to miss the opportunity.

Sara, as a relatively radical leftist activist, was unwilling to come to America, stating, 'I won't spend my Canadian dollars on expenses in America. America is a child-killing system!' She criticised US policies regarding Palestine, Africa and Kurdistan, viewing these situations far more radically than I did. It took some time to convince her that, as anthropology students, we should maintain an open yet critical mindset. Our opposition to the US Government did not mean we should avoid visiting the country or deprive ourselves of experiencing its communities and culture.

We rented a car and headed to America.

I should mention that this same Sara, who was unwilling to set foot in America with me, met a man in Iraqi Kurdistan several years later while teaching at the University of English in Erbil. He happened to be one of the advisors to the Republican Party representative in the US Senate. This twist of fate became a source of laughter for her friends, and we teased her about this remarkable and enormous change for a long time. I always marvel at such transformations and the rapidity of conflict and change in people, noting how perspectives can vary so widely over time. While such shifts have occurred for everyone, including myself, I still find it essential to learn the deeper reasons behind them and acknowledge that humans are very complex beings.

We entered the US through the land border. When the border agents searched my bag, they found a speech I had prepared for my presentation at the student association meeting. Sara, a few friends and I had drafted it at SOAS, and it was written in Kurdish. Because they did not understand the difference between Kurdish and Arabic, they thought it was an Arabic text. This was particularly concerning given the recent attacks on the US and the events surrounding the collapse of the Twin Towers, which were still fresh in people's minds. Strict anti-terrorism laws had just been enacted, leading to an unusual phobia toward Muslims and their countries. Consequently, as soon as they discovered the text, they called the head of the security team.

A few people approached us, asking who we were and why we were traveling to America. 'What is this document?' they inquired.

I replied, 'We are students, and this is the text of a speech for the student association meeting.'

They asked, 'What is this association, and what does it do?'

In my nervousness, I blurted out that some of us had gone to the Middle East and Iraq to interact with universities. The conversation about al-Qaeda was heated, and as soon as I mentioned Iraq, the situation escalated.

Sara and a few others who were with us protested angrily that they had no right to stop us. Ultimately, I threatened to lodge a complaint with the British Embassy. After about three to four hours of waiting, they finally allowed us to enter. This incident intensified our opposition to the US, and throughout the trip I couldn't shake the feeling of guilt because Sara kept saying it was my fault we had come; she had said not to come, but I had insisted . . .

Once we entered America, everything changed – from the houses to the highways, to the cars, and even to the people. It felt as if everything were larger than life. Suddenly, we found ourselves on highways that were bigger and wider than standard ones. The meal portions served in restaurants were two to three times that of a meal in Britain. There was an extraordinary excess in everything. We saw robust men and women, many of whom were overweight. For instance, the size of soft drink cups in fast-food restaurants like McDonald's was around a litre, and it seemed like people were in competition to eat more. Everything was exaggeratedly large. Cars and oversized vehicles were manufactured with little regard for environmental standards, and it appeared that, the bigger the car someone owned, the more confident they felt. Guns were readily available, and violence and street confrontations were common in some areas.

During our trip to America, we also visited the site of the Twin Towers in New York, where we were confronted with a flood of humane and compassionate messages. However, we also encountered bold messages filled with hatred and threats against people from the Middle East, Muslims and Arabs. These messages were full of revulsion and were heartbreaking, making one reflect on how superficially some people view these events. What lies at the core of incidents like the Twin Towers tragedy are the results of policies and decisions about which we ordinary people know little or, to put it better, have no role in shaping. As someone from a troubled region of the Middle East, I was filled with anxiety by the volume of hatred and threats present there.



Image 210: Government building of Ontario. Canada, 2004.

We might not have chosen the most opportune historical moment for our travel; nonetheless, the Republican politicians were stoking this hatred. New York, with all its opulence and skyscrapers and typical American lifestyles, also had parts like New Jersey that were entirely different, making you wonder where you were. In the suburbs of New York or Washington, we encountered levels of poverty and misery that were almost unbelievable, especially so close to the major cities of America. Many people from Latin America, Africa and Mexico lived at the very bottom of the economic ladder.

In the suburbs of Washington, we were guests of my relative Kak Morad Ahmadi, who I hadn't seen since our last visit in Van, Turkey, when our families met. He had left the Democratic Party camp in Iraqi Kurdistan in the late 1990s and had applied for political asylum in Turkey before eventually receiving asylum in the US. We stayed at his home for two days. It was the first time I met his wife. She welcomed us with her warm hospitality and delicious food. Kak Morad had not changed much: he was still tall, cheerful and, as the Kurds say, *khizm-dost* ('friendly').

Even in America, the former senior commander of the Party couldn't live a life significantly different from his Kurdish version. His home was filled with the essence of Kurdistan, and his sons had grown and were

attending school. They had learned the language, and both he and his wife worked.

During our stay at Kak Morad's house, guided by him, we visited several other places in America, including the White House and historic sites in Washington, D.C.

After bidding him farewell, I suggested to my travel companions that we should explore as much of America as possible. It's a vast country, and seeing everything was impossible, so we decided to choose a route that would allow us to return to Canada through a different border. We planned to see Niagara Falls and then head back to Canada from there. On this route, we passed through small towns in America, where we clearly saw the stark contrast in living conditions between large cities and impoverished areas. We couldn't believe that in one of the richest countries in the world, which claims to champion equal rights and the spread of democracy globally, there were people living in such extreme poverty.

While shopping at a grocery store on the way, something strange happened that I will never forget. I had a cart with a few bunches of grapes and other items in it, and I was busy shopping. That small store had several types of grapes, and being a grape lover, I picked a bunch from each variety, totalling around a kilogram or perhaps a little more. There were good farms in the area, and I craved grapes and watermelons, my favourite fruits. While I was standing in line at the checkout, someone behind me with a thick local American accent said, 'Wow! Do you know how much this will cost? You'd have to give an arm and a leg for it.' (This is a common English expression used to describe something that is very expensive.) When he said this, I looked at my fruit basket and realised that what I had chosen did not cost much for me, perhaps around ten dollars, but the man's comment highlighted the depths of poverty and high unemployment in that region. When I looked at his shopping cart, it further clarified the situation.

Whenever we entered a restaurant or had the opportunity, I would talk to people, and I noticed that many of them had little understanding or awareness of Europe, Asia or the world in general. At one point during the trip, we parked our car and took a taxi to New Jersey. The driver who took us was a young Black man who didn't even know where London was in the world. Later, I discovered that a significant portion of the American population has never had a passport in their lifetime and has never left the

US. This lack of travel could have shaped their views and perceptions of the world and limited their understandings of people, lifestyles and the overall worldview, making such levels of poverty and restriction seem tolerable to them.

Halabja: A Wound neither Talabani nor the IRGC Acknowledge

I undertook several trips to the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Turkey, visiting Halabja three times. In Halabja, I carried a pain that stemmed from the suffering of its people. It was a city rendered entirely toxic due to a chemical attack, its victimhood garnering worldwide notoriety. Toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1987, Iranian forces, aided and guided by the Peshmerga of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led by Jalal Talabani, captured the areas surrounding Halabja. From the perspective of Iraq and Saddam Hussein, halting the advance of Iranian forces and the Peshmerga during Operation Zafar 7 was a key objective. The seizure of parts of Iraqi Kurdistan by Iranian forces following Operation Valfajr 10 compelled Saddam Hussein to instruct his cousin and deputy, Ali Hassan al-Majid – infamously known as 'Chemical Ali' – to launch a chemical bombardment of these areas.

Subsequent reports indicated that, prior to the chemical attacks, the city had endured conventional bombing and napalm strikes for a period. Al-Majid apparently aimed to shatter the glass of the city's buildings through continuous bombardment, thereby minimising the possibility of resistance against the toxic gases.

This assault occurred forty-eight hours after Iranian forces had taken Halabja, utilising MiG and Mirage aircraft as well as helicopters. According to officials from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and eyewitnesses, during this multi-hour operation, residential areas of the city were bombed multiple times in various phases.

It later became evident that Saddam had ostensibly punished the people of Halabja for the collaboration of Kurdish forces with the IRGC. He warned the residents to evacuate the city, threatening an attack, yet, as attested to by locals, some Peshmerga from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and IRGC forces prevented many from leaving, resulting in a massive slaughter from the chemical bombardment.

It was during these trips that some people found the courage to speak with me about their suffering in this matter.

Although the IRGC later portrayed itself as the saviour of the people of Kurdistan and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan never acknowledged its grave error, some locals insisted that, in reality, they had become human shields. Some had lost family members; many became ill, disabled or incapacitated. They said, 'We knew this reality, but we were afraid to talk about it.'

I compiled this into a report and submitted it to Roj TV in Brussels. Due to their animosity toward the Kurdistan Regional Government at that time, they broadcast the report. It was even translated and aired in Turkish, and two foreign news agencies reprinted it. Consequently, after my trip to Halabja and return to London, the demeanour of some members of the Kurdish Government based in London changed, revealing a clear distancing from me.



Image 211: The gallows from which Ali Hassan al-Majid, known as 'Chemical Ali', was executed.

The chemical attack on Halabja by Iraq left approximately 5,000 civilians dead. According to investigations by the United Nations, mustard gas and several unknown nerve agents were used in the attack, which Iraq generally acquired from Western countries. This assault was officially recognised as genocide against the Kurdish people by the Iraqi High Criminal Court. The commander of this operation, Ali Hassan al-Majid, was found guilty by the Iraqi Supreme Court and was executed in 2010. The chemical attack on Halabja remains the largest direct chemical assault on an urban area in history.

A Journey to Koy Sanjaq, Kabul and Kandahar

During those years, I also travelled to the headquarters of the Kurdish parties in Iran, including the Kurdish Democratic Party in Koy Sanjaq, within the Kurdistan Region.

The Kurdistan Government had committed, in an agreement with Kurdish Iranian parties, to provide security for military bases and freedom of movement, as well as some resources needed by their Peshmerga, in exchange for a halt to attacks and military operations within Iranian territory. At this time, the KDPI had indeed laid down its arms. The secretary-general of the main faction was Abdullah Hassan Zadeh, who was affectionately referred to as 'Malahoula' (Mulla Abdullah) due to his religious education. My purpose for this trip was to interview him regarding regional developments.

I was surprised that the KDPI had not learned from the lessons of what had transpired over the past few years! By that time, two of its secretaries-general, Dr Ghassemlou and Dr Sharafkandi, had been assassinated in Europe as a result of the Iranian regime's planning, and many of its Peshmerga had been killed in the Kurdistan Region at the hands of the Quds Force and its affiliates, yet they still exhibited their previous behaviours. When I arrived, although they did not know me, I was easily accepted simply because I was an Iranian Kurd who had returned from abroad. They did not even search my bag but took me directly to the secretary-general's office. This fact caught my attention, and I brought it up with Mr Hassan Zadeh.

He acknowledged my observation, but jokingly remarked, 'Now, if you had said you were a relative of Morad Ahmadi or martyr Fattah Abdoli, they would have put you on their shoulders and brought you here!'



Image 212: From the Peshmerga of the Kurdish Democratic Party. 2003.

There, I also spoke with Mr Hassan Sharafi, the Party's political deputy, who hailed from Mahabad. Sharafi was well-informed about current global issues and understood that the KDPI needed to advocate more vigorously. When I shared my observations and experiences of the parties in Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey and their progressive political movements, and gently challenged him on these points, he replied, 'What you are describing are the gaps and problems of our internal political system. I agree that our politics and, consequently, our situation have remained somewhat traditional, but we believe we are still one of the most independent parties, and one of our plans is to attract young talent and infuse it into our leadership.'

One of my questions was about the average age of their leadership, which had exceeded 50 or 60 years, and the limited allowance for youthfulness and innovation, unlike other parties. In the Qandil Mountains, I had observed that many young individuals occupied important positions and responsibilities, but his justifications did not seem very convincing to me.

During those years, all attention was directed toward the Middle East, and wherever I went, discussions revolved around the events occurring in that part of the world.

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, having invaded Afghanistan two years earlier. In London, there were numerous discussions, comments and street protests about these topics. I had a friend from Afghanistan named Abdullah, who had previously been with the Taliban. He proudly declared, 'I am a Taliban', and constantly praised the group as good people, true Muslims and seekers of piety and salvation. What Abdullah said starkly contrasted with the images of the Taliban and its actions shown on television.

On television programmes, I saw the Taliban at the height of savagery and intellectual rigidity. Through a friend of Abdullah's, I travelled to Afghanistan via Pakistan and Waziristan, visiting Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Bamiyan. I found that the Taliban, which had recently regained power in Afghanistan and had garnered significant support, was a living, rooted and dynamic movement – neither what the media portrayed nor what Abdullah had described. The Taliban was a blend of both images I had been presented with. It also had justifications for opposing global hegemony and the history of Western deception and offered a different interpretation of Islam. Of course, both the Taliban and al-Qaeda were formed and equipped with the assistance and knowledge of the United States and were employed against the occupation and presence of the Russians. They were inclined to maintain value and Islamic traditions only insofar as it served their interests, and were, of course, filled with rage, hatred, frustration, violence and a thirst for power.

My first trip to Afghanistan was brief, concluding in Kabul and Kandahar. Since I was somewhat familiar with the environment, geography and food of Pakistan and Asia, had a grasp of Farsi and had learned Dari while working on translations, Afghanistan did not feel entirely foreign to me. The people were kind and extraordinarily hospitable, most of whom, due to forced migration to Iran, were familiar with Iranian Persian culture and language. Strangely, Iranian and Pakistani goods were found everywhere, and, apart from the natural beauty and harsh geography, I greatly enjoyed eating with my hands during my stay. Resuming the habit of using utensils upon my return to

London was somewhat difficult. I will share more about Afghanistan in the following sections.



Image 213: On the way to Panjshir. Afghanistan, 2004.

As I was writing the first draft of this autobiography in London on 15 August 2021, the Afghan Government fell overnight, and its leaders and Western supporters fled the country. For many in the West, it was hard to accept that, for all these years, only the capital and a few cities had been under the control of the Afghan Government and the West, while the majority of the country was managed by the Taliban. The Taliban had never fallen; it had remained among the people. This group was rooted in the populace and had received support from many. I believe that the Taliban today is not as inexperienced and brutal as before and, to maintain its power, garner financial assistance and avoid losing the government again, it is compelled to engage with the international community. I would love to visit Afghanistan and several neighbouring countries again at the earliest opportunity, and if security is established and conditions allow, to undertake one of my favourite projects there.

For me, all these travels were exciting and educational as a student of anthropology, and being objective about the world was certainly a challenging task. I had to maintain my scholarly neutrality in all my

analyses as an anthropology graduate, describing and analysing reality apart from my own value system – as it was, not as I would have liked it to be – and this was exceedingly difficult.

Establishing the KSSO Research and Studies Association and the Unsympathetic Reactions of Kurdish Parties

During the final year of my master's degree at the University of Kent, I was constantly commuting between Canterbury and London, often taking the train. I also stayed in the Canterbury dormitory for a while to keep up with my back-to-back classes. Gradually, I realised that working with the KCC was not particularly beneficial, as their activities were largely local and service-orientated, resembling those of others pursuing their own political interests. I thought it would be better to replace it with a fresh and more genuine force.

I spoke with several members of the student association's board and students I had met at the Centre to propose establishing a new organisation. I shared my idea, saying, 'We have our own histories and can operate independently instead of working in less democratic and political groups.' I recalled the incidents surrounding the photos and emphasised that their behaviour was beneath our dignity. Others agreed that working in a student centre instead of political groups seemed logical and scientific, and we decided to get started.

I had thought about the scope of our work and suggested we approach SOAS, which focused on African and Middle Eastern studies and was the hub of leftist activities and pro-Palestinian and anti-war movements.

I dedicated many nights and days to this effort, and along with a few others, including Sara, we drafted a charter and submitted a request to establish the Kurdish Students' Association, which was quickly approved. Earlier, other Kurdish parties had set up organisations at this university, but they had all been short-lived.

Initially, we were a group of six, five of whom were from different regions of Kurdistan: Ilhan Ganj, Fazil Horami, Nawzad Saleh, Mohammad Ali Waisi and I. Sara Kiliyar, who was writing her dissertation on Kurds in London and was interested in this area, was the sixth member and the only non-Kurd in the group.



Image 214: Newruz celebration at SOAS University, London.

After gaining the university's approval, we needed to secure the necessary funding. Therefore, we negotiated with the Kurdish community and businesses. We approached shopkeepers and companies, explaining our plans and intentions, and received some financial assistance. We also sourced part of the funding from groups and associations and contributed the rest ourselves. Ultimately, we established a research-and-studies association called KSSO, which stands for the Kurdish Students' Research Association. In just a few months, we garnered several hundred members, including students who were unwilling to join political organisations like the KCC or other Kurdish centres.

Students were reluctant to collaborate with organisations exhibiting radical political behaviours. Many young people had experienced distrust or had faced exclusion or restrictions from Kurdish parties and were apprehensive about their involvement in their lives. In our organisation, they felt assured that they would not encounter any of these obstacles.

Besides the lobbying we engaged in at the House of Commons and the House of Lords, we organised traditional student celebrations on various occasions. We brought in musicians and provided young, local artists with

opportunities to showcase their talents. We collaborated with other organisations, including Greek, Italian, Latin American, Arab, Iranian and even Turkish groups, hosting successful cultural, musical and dance events. We celebrated several occasions in the large SOAS hall and bar, including Newruz and other festivals, which quickly became popular, and we even began selling tickets for these events.

We collected a portion of the studies and dissertations conducted on Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey at prominent universities and, with the modest funding we received from the British Library, presented them in a cohesive archive online. We recorded oral and folkloric stories shared



Image 215: Lobbying meetings and seminars at the UK Parliament. Westminster, 2005/2006.

by older migrants and compiled articles related to Kurdish issues. More importantly, we connected students with the courses and programmes they needed and facilitated their relationships with universities, professors and other students.

At that time, systems were gradually becoming electronic, and we scanned and archived documents. These documents were stored as part of an ethnographic and audio-visual anthropology collection in a virtual library. This library is still accessible, but it is likely that not much has been added to it.

Another aspect of our work involved lobbying the UK Parliament. Representatives from areas such as North London, where many Kurds lived, recognised our influence within the community and that we could garner positive public sentiment for them and secure votes. This connection allowed us to persuade them to attend our events and speak out on issues occurring in Kurdistan and the Middle East. For instance, we addressed the killing of a journalist in the Kurdistan Region by a political party that had been drawing considerable attention at the time, and the Turkish army's attacks on regions in Kurdistan and Qandil.

Our focus in this organisation was primarily on Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, with less attention given to Iran. During the reform period under Khatami's Government, nothing significant happened in the Kurdish regions of Iran, and the political situation was relatively calm. We held meetings with parliament, and if our requests collected sufficient signatures, according to the rules, we could arrange formal sessions with parliamentary groups on those issues and discuss them with the ruling party.

All these successes and impacts indicated that we were gradually becoming a young, progressive and non-political academic organisation.

It was from this stage that Kurdish parties, such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, and of course the PKK, began to react unfavourably toward us. They also had youth and student committees but did not accomplish much, and their members were gravitating toward us. While they operated within political and party frameworks, we thought beyond these limitations, considering the territorial integrity of Kurdistan and issues related to university youth.

I remember that the Kurdistan Government held a conference at SOAS regarding education in Kurdistan and cooperation with British

universities, inviting the minister of science from the Kurdistan Region. They arranged the event in such a way that our association members could not attend, as we intended to question the minister about why his ministry, despite having substantial funding, performed so poorly, and why the Kurdistan Government's scholarship students had to endure poor conditions in hostels in England. They did not allow us to enter, but we stood outside the venue with protest placards, forcing the minister to respond in front of the media, and we spoke on behalf of the protesting and dispatched students.

In this student organisation, we also played an effective role in addressing honour killings, such as the case of Banaz Mahmod in London and the stoning of Du'a Khalil Aswad, a Kurdish Yazidi girl in Mosul. For a time, we acted as a hub for issues related to Kurdistan, particularly in the realms of universities and youth, which did not sit well with Kurdish parties.

Ultimately, we decided to hold joint meetings with them. In these meetings, we reached a common understanding, stating that, while we posed no threat to them, it was essential for us to maintain our independence. Once they realised that we had no specific intentions and were not political, or, rather, that we did not pose a threat to them, the gossip and whispering ceased. I remained in the role of responsible founder of our organisation until I left for Turkey.

Travel to Palestine and Israel

While I was nearing the completion of my master's degree, I applied for a doctoral programme. The university did not offer a doctoral programme in visual anthropology, so I had to choose a research-orientated field. I had no interest in this field and felt the need to change my major. Gradually, I began to believe that pursuing higher academic qualifications, which take years to obtain, was no longer particularly practical and did not provide significant added value. The academic world was also undergoing transformations, and many degrees and lengthy programmes, particularly in the humanities, were no longer cost effective. It became apparent that one could cover most parts of a long and arduous doctoral programme through several intensive courses, while learning the rest in practical work settings.

I had always wanted to travel to Palestine, and since I was not considering returning to Iran at that time, I thought about this trip without concern. I was aware that those who had the Israeli stamp on their passports, or those who were found to have travelled there, faced legal and judicial problems in Iran and were often accused of connections with Israeli intelligence agencies. The old Iranian passports explicitly stated that 'travel to Israel is prohibited'. I did not have an Iranian passport and would therefore travel with my British one.

My supervisor, Sara, who was also my advisor, was conducting research in the field of Palestine and Israel and planned to visit there again. It was decided that I would accompany her.

Glenn Bowman was a well-known figure in Palestinian studies, advocating for Palestinian rights and even purchasing a house in the West Bank, where he spent part of the year. I was interested in his area of study and even considered writing part of my thesis or one of my academic papers on this topic. After traveling to Israel and Palestine, I became an even stronger supporter of Palestine than before, writing a sharp and critical article entitled 'The Occupied Nations' about Israel and its military's actions. Of course, this trip later became one of the charges against me in prison and a part of my ten-year sentence from the Iranian Revolutionary Court.

I had always wanted to understand the underlying reasons for the conflicts in this region of the Middle East. The Kurds had drawn inspirations for their movements from the Palestinian struggles, which occasionally appeared in our writings, thoughts and poetry. At the same time, Israelis sometimes identified with the Kurds in their historical claims to the land. As a Kurdish student and a globally minded citizen, I felt it was time to witness this land amid the turmoil and conflicts.

I joined a group of students visiting the Ramallah University, which was a sister university to ours, for a project concerning the significance of food in the ethnography of nations. Upon arriving at Tel Aviv's airport, I felt a slight unease. I had heard stories about the inspection processes upon arrival and anticipated such problems, especially since I held British citizenship but was born in Kurdistan, Iran. Before receiving my entry card, I was somewhat taken aback when I was forced to fill out an exceedingly long form and provide comprehensive information about everything, from my father and grandfather to the names and birthdates

of all my siblings, as well as my email address. When my companions and I reached the administrative section for passport control, we were directed to a corner of the arrivals hall, where an unfriendly officer told us we would have to wait for a while. This officer did not budge from beside us throughout the tedious inspection process.



Image 216: Local Jews and Arabs in Tel Aviv, 2004.

They informed us that the reason for the lengthy wait was the routine checks and verification of our university invitation, and that they were waiting for someone to interview us. During the interview, I was asked questions about my personal life, Britain and my family background in Kurdistan. They also inquired about my reasons for traveling to Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Indonesia and almost all the countries I had visited! It was one of the most humiliating experiences I had endured, as it involved thorough physical searches and an interrogation. I felt extremely uncomfortable, and, in addition to all the questions, when we asked why all this was happening, they replied that these matters were 'security related'. This intense Q&A process was distressing and compelled me to threaten them with legal action. In the end, they agreed to let me enter Israel without any apologies, and an empty airport greeted us. Our bags and suitcases were still piled on the now silent, abandoned conveyor belt,

and the sight of the large sign reading 'Welcome to Israel' installed above the entrance felt ironic, as if mocking us.

My first impression was that I was entering a clean country and metropolis, but our arrival coincided with the Jewish Shabbat holiday, which seemingly hinted at the unavailability or scarcity of buses to access the deserted streets of central Tel Aviv. It struck me as odd that a religious holiday could cause such a shutdown of activities, like driving, prompting me to reflect on the depth of religiosity in this new country. After resting and shaking off the fatigue from the afternoon flight, we searched for a restaurant for lunch. We eventually found one that was open, but there, armed officers sometimes inspected people's bags and belongings at the entrance! It was at that moment I realised the presence of militarism in Israel.

Observing the similarities between the events of the Holocaust and the Anfal operation in Iraqi Kurdistan was striking to me, and I was eager to discover other aspects of this country. The next day, we visited the Diaspora Museum of the Jews. The dark and somewhat depressing entrance of the museum was filled with slogans reminding visitors of Jewish history.



Image 217: Entrance to the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv.



Image 218: Armed police officers praying facing the Western Wall.

Afterward, we prepared for a forty-minute trip to Jerusalem and searched for a shared taxi, known as a *sherut*, at a busy bus station. My initial impression was that the city, given its religious significance, would fall asleep early. I also noticed that in the old city market most of the vendors were either Palestinian Arabs or Orthodox Jews dressed in traditional black garments.

Our first experience in the city involved police accompanied by armed security officials, who often stopped us to discuss our work or to ask us about the conflict between Palestine and Israel. When we approached Israeli soldiers for a chat, I noticed the angry looks from the local Palestinians. I took photos of them and asked for their opinions on the overall situation in Israel and Palestine. Two young soldiers were only interested in talking to foreigners and showed no interest in political discussions. Their superior officer (who, he said, had parents who migrated from Bombay in India to Israel) pointed out the heavy military presence in the area for security reasons, reminding me of the events at the airport.

The next day, we went to the Jewish Quarter, located in the old part of the city – one of the three main areas. Since my companions had Christian backgrounds and I had grown up in an Islamic country, we had all agreed to act neutrally and choose the neighbourhoods without considering our personal interests.

The famous Wailing Wall had always intrigued me, and I eagerly anticipated seeing it. Jews stand before it with their Torahs, swaying their heads in prayer. Along the way, I purchased a *kippah*, or *yarmulke*, and struggled to fit it on my freshly shaved, thinning hair. I was astonished by the warm and respectful encounters with Jewish worshippers, who spoke to me in Hebrew, mistaking me for a Jew. After centuries, a few pieces of the original temple remained in the Wall, which is mostly barren except for some weeds, and devoid of any decoration. I began documenting my experience with photos and mingling among the young and elderly worshippers.



Image 219: Orthodox Jews commuting daily to Jerusalem for prayer.

A group of armed security personnel, led by a rabbi, were crying loudly and praying. Near the wall, I attempted to converse with a bearded Orthodox Jew. With broken English, he conveyed to me that his son was sick and lamented the cost of treatment in Israel. He told me he spent about an hour to an hour and a half daily commuting to Jerusalem to reach the Wall for prayer. After that, I met two young Jews wearing yarmulkes who

were writing their wishes on pieces of paper. They said that, after praying, they could place their papers in the Wall in hopes of their wishes being fulfilled by God. I couldn't help but recall Jamkaran Mosque, where people wrote letters to the Hidden Mahdi and threw them into the well. One of their friends told me that the chief rabbi collects all the papers once a month and burns them in the shade of the Wall. The smoke then rises to the sky and to God, and, after that, all prayers would eventually be fulfilled. When they learned that I was a Kurd born in Iran, they showed more interest and wanted to know whether Iran still referred to Israel as a tumour and cancer of the Middle East, intending to eliminate it from the map with a nuclear bomb. In this way, they cleverly avoided answering my questions about the tensions between Israel and Palestine.

Next, I approached a Turkish Jew who was praying and spoke with him in Turkish. I was somewhat surprised when I learned he was aware of the Kurdish issue. I asked him about the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and he said, 'I believe in dialogue and a solution based on the establishment of two States', and he held a similar view regarding the Kurdish and Turkish issue in Turkey. He provided me with useful details about how and when to pray as a Jew, along with the necessary items. The prayer area beside the wall was divided by a metal fence for women and men. However, the voices of women's prayers could still be heard, and guards instructed female worshippers on how to dress appropriately on entering.

After that, we visited four synagogues of the Sephardim in that area, the oldest of which was in Jerusalem.

That afternoon, under the scorching sun and through the narrow alleys, we made our way to the Christian Quarter and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It can confidently be said that this was the most touristy and compact area of the old city. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is said to be the tomb of Christ. An Arabic-speaking priest guarded the tomb, not allowing visitors to engage in prayers or light candles for more than a limited time, and preventing any disrespect by ensuring they were appropriately dressed, with covered arms and legs. The small, dim tomb was illuminated by candlelight and filled with fragrant incense. Its design was quite simple compared to the surrounding churches.



Image 220: A young Christian praying at Christ's tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

After that, we intended to visit the Church of St John the Baptist, the oldest church in Jerusalem, which had served as a place of worship for the knights during the Crusades. Unfortunately, it was closed and abandoned, with only the outer part of its domed structure and plasterwork visible.

To save my photos on a hard drive and catch up on the world news, I went to an internet café in the market run by a young Palestinian. When I entered, he was engaged in conversation with a Brazilian Jewish girl. We chatted, and I asked her opinion about the prospects for peace in Jerusalem. She believed that dialogue was possible as long as life remained conducive and the Israelis withdrew from East Jerusalem, but she was unsure if this would happen during her lifetime. She said, 'If you ask me, all religious people of any faith in this region are crazy and are the cause of all problems.'

On returning to our accommodation, I saw a couple of tourists on the hotel balcony and struck up a conversation with them. A Frenchman said, 'I don't understand this deep hatred on both sides. In the end, I decided to just learn and experience. Don't try to make sense of it all, or your brain will explode.'

Given the similarities between this issue and the Kurdish tensions, I replied, 'I can understand this blind hatred because I have experienced it and lived with it!'

'Father! I swear I was born a Muslim!'

The following morning, we set off toward the last sights of the city, namely the Muslim Quarter. Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are considered two of the holiest sites in Islam.



Image 221: Midday prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, where women pray alongside men.

These two buildings are situated directly above the southern wall and can be accessed via a long pedestrian bridge that passes over the Jewish prayer site. Individuals are subjected to very stringent body searches with metal detectors before entering. On entering the main courtyard, the stunning beauty of the golden dome is overwhelming. This place evokes memories of my childhood, when I watched on television as young Palestinians threw stones during demonstrations and were met with gunfire from Israeli soldiers. These protests intensified with Ariel Sharon's

opposition to entering Al-Aqsa Mosque and were a primary reason for the onset of the Intifada and the new uprising. I had seen all these scenes repeatedly in the news during my childhood and adolescence. I decided to enter the mosque, but the guard insisted that it was only open to worshippers and refused to believe I was a Muslim.

He asked for my identification and then referred me to his superior for further verification. They requested that I recite verses from the Quran to prove my faith. I recited a few short verses that I remembered, but I stumbled a bit and became slightly tongue-tied. Eventually, the officer was satisfied and granted me entry. However, he remained unconvinced and sent a guard to accompany me. They did not trust me and stated that, due to fears of bombings or attacks, the entry of Jews and Christians was prohibited. They pointed out a section of the mosque that had been targeted and said, 'Over there, the Israeli army attacked worshippers with tear gas!'

In the courtyard of the mosque, you felt as if the entire complex were under siege, as all entry points were filled with armed Israeli officers. As we exited the mosque, these officers were checking the identifications of a young couple to ensure they were indeed Muslims.



Image 222: The entrance and exit of the mosque are monitored by Israeli police forces.

That afternoon, we met with an Israeli poet and intellectual named Gabriel, whom I had previously gotten to know through a neighbour of mine in London. Gabriel was critical of the Israeli Government, asserting that many Israelis shared his views. He also stated that the entire conflict and the peace process had been hijacked by a small but influential group of conservative politicians and military leaders like Ariel Sharon. He pointed out that events such as the recent truce in Gaza would have been impossible without such oppressive policies, as the anxious and irritable Israeli society sought assurance in its conservatism. Gabriel believed that such actions by a more liberal government would undoubtedly plunge the country into a cold war.

The next day, we left our accommodation for Ramallah to document our first real experience of Palestinian life in the West Bank. Along the way, we were flanked by enormous concrete walls adorned with graffiti in Hebrew, English, Arabic, Spanish and other languages. Some expressed support for Hamas and the Palestinian movement, while a few were written by peace-seeking tourists. The area of the walls and the checkpoint was a scene of utter chaos: busy, dirty, polluted and filled with taxis and buses that constantly transported passengers from various points in the West Bank to Israel and back. One of my fellow travellers likened this space to a



Image 223: Qalandiya, one of the longest checkpoints.



Image 224: The wall of the West Bank, which the United Nations claims is illegal.

disordered planet in one of the *Star Wars* films, saying it felt utterly extraterrestrial!

This point, known as Qalandiya, is one of the longest checkpoints for the daily control of individuals heading to the West Bank and is only open to Israelis who have travel permits. As a result, it quickly becomes notorious in the vocabulary of travellers to Palestine (even those visiting temporarily). To pass through, you must navigate a long tunnel surrounded on both sides by metal fences resembling prison bars. The conditions for crossing toward Israel are more akin to those of a cattle pen, where the fortunate individuals with permits are subjected to lengthy and intense security checks after passing through metal gates. The entire process is repeated on the other side. The area is filled with taxis eagerly hunting for passengers. A significant difference between the two sides is the apparent absence of security forces in the West Bank.

Ramallah is the most populous city in Palestine and is bustling and vibrant. The presence of armed Palestinian Authority personnel with

Kalashnikovs in the streets is very noticeable. We stopped to converse with some of these officers, who generally showed a willingness to engage in conversation, though only one of them could speak broken English. When we asked him about the presence of Israeli forces in the West Bank, he explained that security in Ramallah is currently provided by Palestinian security forces. However, he qualified his statement, saying, 'Sometimes at night they come and arrest several people. We don't interfere . . . it's peace, after all.' He then shrugged and concluded his remarks.

As we walked down the street, we saw a man dressed in traditional Arab attire with an *agal* on his head, resembling Yasser Arafat. He was determined to show us his home, claiming that Israeli forces had destroyed and seized their house due to his and his father's political activities. He said his home was only 300 metres away, though it was much farther than that. This man intended to run for local elections and claimed that all his former students and colleagues supported him. As he pointed to the litter strewn in the street, he said, 'When a nation lives without hope and power to change its life, they stop caring about their surroundings, their lives and even sometimes their physical conditions!'



Image 225: Images of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden in one of the streets of Ramallah. Vendor awaiting customers.

He held rigid views about women, believing they were foolish beings who only thought about cosmetics. He also had no belief in the possibility of peace between Palestine and Israel, asserting that he trusted the Israelis not at all. He went on to say, 'I think Saddam Hussein was a good man, and in a divisive society like Iraq, that was the only way to govern.' I wanted to challenge him and mention Saddam's violence against the Kurds and Iraqi Shia citizens, as well as Halabja or the Anfal campaign, but he easily dismissed my words, saying, 'Bush the fool also killed many in Iraq. Not everyone is sweet like honey.' His wife was reluctant to meet or talk to us. After sharing a cup of Arabic black coffee with him, we bid farewell and wished him success in the upcoming elections.

The next morning, before leaving the hotel for our first visit to the university, that same man called us, inviting us to accompany him on a trip to Nablus. However, I declined his invitation, explaining that the university had arranged other plans for us.



Image 226: Yasser Arafat's tomb.

We also visited Yasser Arafat's tomb, a clean structure made of fresh, gleaming marble, contrasting sharply with its surroundings. Two members of the Palestinian Authority guarded the tomb and adopted a relatively formal stance toward our presence.

The tomb was in an area where Yasser Arafat had been besieged for over a year during his lifetime. Many believed that Arafat was the main obstacle to peace, yet, despite these claims, he managed to rally the Palestinians. I had a lengthy discussion about this with a high-ranking member of the Palestinian Authority who had also served in the Nigerian navy. He believed that, although the Palestinian Authority had a long way to go, despite its limited resources, a complete withdrawal of Israelis from the West Bank could bring both peace and the necessary and short-term management of Hezbollah and Hamas for the Palestinian Authority.



Image 227: Supporters of Palestinian President Abu Mazen at the Gaza Freedom Festival.

Coexistence with Violence and Hatred

Continuing our journey, we travelled to Hebron, known for the bloody clashes between Palestinian residents and Israelis. We visited the old city of Hebron, where the Prophet Abraham died. He is a significant figure in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and is respected by the 700 Jewish inhabitants of the area. The city was under Israeli control, and on entering we again underwent rigorous checks, handing our identification cards through a metal drawer to an officer we could not see.

As we entered the city, we were greeted by empty, silent streets, punctuated by armed officers at every corner. In this city, I encountered

the ultimate absurdity of the Israeli regime. I was astonished by a people who themselves had endured a bitter experience in the Holocaust yet had transformed the living conditions of others into something reminiscent of the ghettos of World War II.

Groups of armed soldiers stood ready along the street, and just a few metres away two boys played, oblivious to the surrounding signs of violence.

We made our way to Hebron's only tourist site, the Tomb of Abraham and Sarah, which had been divided into a mosque and a synagogue following the massacre of twenty-nine Muslim worshippers by a soldier in 1995. To enter, we had to undergo another body search with a metal detector. This time, questions about our religion were added to the previous checks. Reluctantly, we identified ourselves as adherents of the relatively neutral faith of Christianity.

To learn about the site's history, we gave a small amount of money to a middle-aged man who conducted the tour in the most political manner possible. He focused more on the bullet marks on the walls rather than the historical significance of the site.

I spoke with an Israeli soldier who expressed his feelings openly. He stated that protecting his country was his duty and that peace between Israel and Palestine was impossible, a reality he accepted without regret. He admitted to hating all Palestinians and trusting none, as six of his close friends had been killed in clashes with them. He declared, 'This has happened to everyone. If you ask a Palestinian child the same question, he would say the same thing. Perhaps he also had six friends who were killed. We all want revenge.' He also suggested that, if we wanted to wake up alive in the morning, we should not spend the night in Hebron, especially at the Arab hotel.

While passing through another heavily guarded checkpoint near the mosque's exit, we saw two young Muslims being detained by Israeli soldiers. They had their hands clasped in front of them, their heads bowed in shame, facing a wall, much like the punishment of schoolchildren in days gone by.

As we walked through the deserted streets, which had once been bustling markets, we encountered members of a peace-monitoring group composed of representatives from six European countries. They said such scenes were common and claimed this was a method to instil a sense of

severity in Israeli soldiers toward Palestinian citizens in the occupied region.

We All Want Revenge

On the way back, we met a Palestinian man who invited us to his home for coffee. In his view, the conditions we observed in the old city of Hebron were relatively good. He said, 'Just two years ago, during the Intifada and the attacks from both sides, the situation was so bad and difficult that sometimes my family and I wouldn't leave the house for several consecutive days!'

After passing through the checkpoints and gates, we left the Israeli-controlled part of Hebron late at night and, by chance, spent the night in an Arab-owned hotel and survived.



Image 228: The Old City of Hebron, separated from other parts of Hebron by the Israeli army.

Upon returning to Jerusalem, I met a Kurdish Jewish shopkeeper who claimed to be originally from Iraqi Kurdistan. Jalil did not speak Kurdish, but we managed to communicate in broken Arabic. He mentioned, 'There are many Kurdish Jews living in Israel, most of whom have come from Iran

or Iraqi Kurdistan.' He was cautious not to engage in political discussions and showed no interest in questions about the Kurds.

During the remainder of our stay, I heard many similar stories, some of which were even exaggerated, from various people. We spent one night in a peculiar cave-like hotel in Jericho and chatted with the hotel owner. He recounted how 300 Israeli soldiers killed his friend in 'that garden' (pointing with his hand toward the garden) after six hours of resistance and the hotel being besieged. When we asked why, he said, 'Israeli agents had reported that my friend and I were supporters of Al-Aqsa and were plotting against them in the hotel.' He then showed us the scars of four bullet wounds on his body and described how he had been imprisoned for years, tortured and mistreated for being labelled a terrorist.

The following day, we crossed the Kalandiya gates again to attend a demonstration organised by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (known as Abu Mazen after leaving Gaza) in Ramallah next to Yasser Arafat's tomb. Foreign diplomats and religious leaders were also present at this gathering, which had more of a celebratory atmosphere, though it was not well organised.



Image 229: President Abbas delivering a speech at a ceremony in Ramallah: the West Bank and Jerusalem are set to be liberated.

One of my objectives for the trip had been understanding the details of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, but by the time of my departure I was still unsure about the situation. However, recalling the humiliations we faced on entering and exiting (our luggage was held by security forces after the flight and sent three days later), I could understand part of the anger and humiliation that Palestinians experience daily. Simultaneously, I tried to grasp the feelings of ordinary Jews, especially their fear of being killed for being Israeli. I also considered their government sentiment, which, according to Gabriel (a Jewish poet), had been overtaken by a conditional voice of a small group of conservative soldiers supported by the army. One could certainly draw parallels to Hamas and Hezbollah in this context as well.

After my return, I shared this issue with one of my English-Jewish acquaintances, who said he had never felt comfortable visiting Israel and never would. I was shocked by the experiences I had on this trip and compared them to my travels in other parts of the Middle East. At his suggestion, I attempted to write about my experiences in the form of an article or travel notes to reflect the lives of the people living in that region and the actual conditions there, although few writings can truly capture the essence of this matter.

Chapter Fifteen: Back to Kurdistan, Back to Iran

Memories of the past do their job well; I gradually came to realise this. I'm not sure if it's the nostalgia that people talk about, but I know these memories always arrive tinged with sorrow. They know exactly when and where to catch you and show you that, without roots, something is always missing, and one leg of your world limps. The past reveals how a part of your being – indeed, your very essence – is lost if you've become forgetful, if you've severed your connections with the world or if you're struggling to ignore them.

I returned to Iran filled with trepidation and, of course, sorrow over the loss of a dear one whose death was utterly unimaginable. We grow up, and the grown-ups grow old, and we farewell them, one after another.

This is the tale of my mournful return to my homeland, a return marked by the departure of someone dear, yet it reminded me of my longing for the people of my childhood, my culture and my community.

Farewell to My Grandmother

After about twelve years apart, I finally saw my grandmother again. Over the phone, she always used to say, 'Kameel, I must see you; after that, I have no business in this world', to which I would jokingly reply, 'Then it's best you don't see me for a while.'

I had travelled to the Kurdistan Region for a conference, accompanied by my uncle, who walked with a cane. I had no specific plans in Erbil, or Hewlêr, as it's known, and my only aim was to visit my grandmother. On arrival, I joined the delegation that had come before me. We were told that, while we were in Kurdistan, especially in Iraq, we would need armed

escorts. The situation in Iraq was dire, and security was a pressing concern. Aside from me, there were a few others who had come from Britain, and the UK Foreign Office had advised that British citizens be especially careful.



Image 230: Uncle, Grandmother and me. Erbil Castle, 2004.

They provided us with two armed Peshmerga and a vehicle to help us with our tasks. My grandmother was staying at my cousin Shahnaz's house. This was the same cousin who had fled and married a man from Kirkuk after the Gulf War and the arrival of Iraqi Kurdish refugees.

I went to meet my grandmother and uncle in the town of Raniya. How frail and aged she had become! Her cane shook more than before, and the wrinkles on her hands had deepened considerably. As always, she was overjoyed to see me, hugging me tightly. The familiar scent of the cloves that hung around her neck revitalised my spirit. She wore a Kurdish wool shawl draped over her shoulders and a beautiful smile on her lips. Just like in the years I had spent beside her, she kept sniffing and kissing the back of my neck. During our time together, my grandmother said, 'Kameel, I wish there would come a day when we would have such conditions in Iran.'

She saw the Kurdish Peshmerga in the street and remarked, 'I wish we had Peshmerga instead of Ajam police.'

I found it fascinating that a woman of her age, without any political knowledge, had grasped the desire for self-governance. Perhaps when she saw the police and Peshmerga dressed in Kurdish attire, it excited her, and she said, 'How wonderful that everyone speaks Kurdish.' She noted that, when you speak to the police and guards in Iran, they don't understand what you're saying, because they're not Kurdish. She had spoken to the Kurdish border guards at the Haji Omran border and realised they hadn't understood her. This memory lingered in her mind.

I was about twenty-eight years old, but to my grandmother I remained the same child, Kameel. She embraced me just as she used to, kissing the back of my neck. She constantly lamented that these armed escorts wouldn't allow us to be alone and talk freely: 'They keep dragging you off to this meeting and that meeting.'

We talked late into the night, and one evening I asked her to tell me the story of Sultan Mahmoud again. I recorded her voice and filmed her. I knew it would be the last time I saw her, and, sadly, it turned out to be true. Two weeks after our meeting, she passed away. Later, I learned she had been ill for a few days, but they hadn't told me.

On the morning of 21 January 2003, I was in London, working at home when my sister, a doctor, called and said, 'Kameel, we no longer have Grandma . . .'



Image 231: Grandmother in bed and Aunt Maryam. Kurdistan, 2003.

This was my first encounter with the death of a loved one. My aunts always said, 'Her only wish was to see you, and, once she did, she left this world.' This statement didn't bring me any comfort; it felt as if, had I not seen her, she might have stayed alive.

Many people called to express their condolences; some acquaintances and family in London came to visit me and offer their sympathies. When my sister delivered the news, I remained on the couch until nightfall and then went alone to the pub at the corner of the street. I constantly spoke to my grandmother in my heart, revisiting my memories with her. It was a long and difficult night, and I didn't go to work the following day. Many days passed before I gradually accepted this grief – the grief that signified I had lost the firm pillar of my life. She had played a significant role in shaping my imagination and childhood memories, providing unparalleled support for my teenage dreams and ambitions. She was always my unwavering supporter. In her poems, she saw me driving a car, working as an engineer and living in London. My goals and efforts were intertwined with my grandmother's stories. She nurtured my aspirations. She had a substantial impact on my present and many of my past moments, an undeniable influence . . . She understood me even more than my parents did.

Coming to terms with her absence was hard and unbearable. I kept telling myself she would never leave, and it felt as if she hadn't yet. She lives on in my heart, bringing the scent of cloves, wrapping her wool shawl around herself and smiling at me with that familiar warmth.

The Sweet Aroma of My Parents in London

It had been about a month since my grandmother passed away when my parents announced they wanted to come to London for a while to lift my spirits. I had been so deeply saddened by her death that I immersed myself even more in my work and worries, placing daily matters low on my priority list. However, my parents' arrival was a tremendous help in getting me back to a normal life.

Mustafa and I decided to send invitations to our families. Our fathers were cousins: I invited my parents, and he invited Uncle Mohammad Amin and Auntie. They accepted the invitation quickly and obtained visas from the British Embassy in Tehran.

Shortly after a trip to Palestine and Israel, my parents arrived in London. When I saw my father at the airport, I felt I didn't recognise him. He had aged – most of the hair on his head and face had turned white. My mother, who always had a radiant face, with fair skin, blue eyes and henna-red hair, also showed signs of aging. It was strange that I felt their aging at that very moment, but soon everything felt normal again.

When they got into my car, my father was thrilled. He exclaimed, 'What great upholstery you have!' I found it odd that this was the only thing that intrigued him. I understood the reason when I returned to Iran for the first time and saw the Paykan cars.

I have forgotten to mention the story of buying my car. Now that it's come up, I'll tell you. As soon as I learned my parents were coming, I replaced my car with a larger one. My first car in England was a Citroën, which belonged to the French brand Peugeot. While working at Pizza Hut, I delivered a pizza to two Iranians at an engineering firm who were discussing car sales in Farsi. I said, 'Excuse me; I overheard your conversation. I'm looking to buy a car.'

They told me, 'This car is £415, but, since you're Iranian, you can have it for £350.' It was a good car with only a slight oil leak, which was not a

bad option for a student like me. When my parents arrived, I sold it and bought a German Polo.

But let me tell you about my mother. When she stepped into my house, she brightened up and cleaned everything. She complained a lot about how much hair from women and the cat was scattered everywhere. She noticed the women's hair far more than I did. I laughed and said, 'Apart from the fact that I'm a single man, I always rent a room, and here, unlike in Iran, gender segregation doesn't really apply. Sometimes a woman stays in my home, and sometimes a man. You'll see that among my friends there are both women and men.' It was not easy for my mother to digest this, and she never came to terms with it. She always said that cat hair is dirty, and she had a poor relationship with my cat, Hawal (meaning 'friend'). When she thought I wasn't looking, she would push it out of the kitchen.

In Islam, dogs are considered unclean, and, traditionally, families do not keep dogs as pets inside their homes. The situation is different with cats; they are generally popular in the Middle East. However, there is also a belief that cats are cunning and possess spirits within them. As a result, many of us aren't particularly fond of pets. My cat was frightened by her presence, and I noticed how it kept its distance from my mother.

During the days my mother was around, the house smelled of Kurdish and local food, was tidy and clean and sparkled like a mirror, emanating the aroma of life. It felt as if the rings of my identity and existence had connected.

What a wonderful feeling it was that, after a long period of separation and longing, when I returned home from daily work, my mother was waiting for me. Her presence heightened my motivation to return home. For me, who had emigrated right after adolescence, there was a deep sense of longing, and it felt as if I had not been sated by my time with my parents. I thirsted for their love and affection.



Image 232: Kurdish dance with the warm gaze of mother and my father as the lead dancer. London, 2003.

Those few weeks were precious and unforgettable. The bond with family had always mattered to me. During my time as a delivery driver, whenever I saw a family gathering, I would feel a pang of envy. Even though I had made a conscious decision to emigrate, there were times when I missed my family and questioned myself: if I could have studied in a peaceful environment in Iran, would I have chosen to emigrate? When my parents arrived, that longing vanished, and my connection with other relatives in London was reestablished.

I spent most of my time with my parents. I had never had the opportunity to be with my mother full-time; my grandmother had always been a sort of barrier. But now, my relationship with her grew closer, and I felt her maternal affection more deeply. I found it easier to more directly express my love for her – feelings that had had little opportunity to emerge during my childhood and adolescence, from either side. My grandmother's love and support had been so intense and ceaseless that it had prevented my mother from expressing her maternal love as she wished, perhaps depriving her of the experience of loving Kameel as her firstborn son, and vice versa. For the first time, my relationship with my mother was direct and pure. More than ever, I felt that I loved her and needed her presence,

and she finally found the opportunity to show the love she had always nurtured in her heart and mind.

I also felt a closer bond with my father and was very satisfied and happy that they were my guests. It had always been my wish to present a capable and successful image of myself to my father, and that wish had been fulfilled.

The relationships of some men with their parents often develop when they are separated from their families and are busy with their own lives. Suddenly, they realise how much they miss them. This happened to me. It seemed that in adulthood I felt a greater need for their presence. I had left them early, but that trip provided an opportunity to experience being with them again and being nourished by their love.

My Mother's First Complaint About My Father

I took them out, and they were happy to experience new things. Every moment was filled with beautiful feelings. I seized every opportunity to make them happy.

During this trip, for the first time, my mother complained to my father. Until that day, I had only seen them argue once back in the 60s. I think my grandmother had provoked my father by saying that my mother sewed clothes for her family every day and went back and forth to their houses or something along those lines. After this incident, my mother and father had a falling out and she went to her father's house, but she returned. We children always teased them about their one quarrel in life, as we hadn't witnessed any other disputes between them.

That day, when she expressed her grievances to my father, I took them to the beautiful, large Regent's Park in central London. She said, 'Most of these years, you've been preoccupied with yourself, Karim. You've taken care of yourself, sometimes going on trips while I was often alone at night. You've made me feel neglected and invisible.'

My mother's words were surprising. I didn't know she had such feelings toward my father. I realised that, over all these years, she had had many thoughts that she rarely expressed. Like many Eastern women, known for their patience and endurance, I understood then that her patience extended to me as her eldest son. Faced with my grandmother's

boundless love, which had somewhat restricted our relationship, my mother had practised a lifetime of patience.



Image 233: In the embrace of Mother. Hammersmith, London, 2004.

For the first time, I felt so close to my mother that I was disappointed in myself for not giving her more. Then I remembered that, long ago, I had suspected my father, too. I was a teenager, and she had asked me to spy on him at the shop, to report back on his activities, but I had refused. Later, I realised that many mothers, when they see a change in their husbands' behaviours, ask their sons to keep an eye on them, which can lead to

confusion in the son's mind regarding matters he doesn't yet understand. Mothers, often unaware of the implications and consequences, typically make this request of their sons. I began to feel like I was betraying my mother, and then I thought again: why did she even ask me to do that?

There was an unusual closeness between us in London that prompted me to reflect on everything from the past. We had late-night conversations about others. During that time, something unfortunate had happened in our extended family, and the older family members had fallen out with each other.

When my parents left, I felt very downcast and upset. I cried at the airport during our farewell. For the first time, I felt so alone, and thoughts of marriage and even having children crossed my mind. I wondered what I was doing there. Yes, everything was good, but what would be the result? I kept remembering my parents' words: 'Kameel, what do you plan to do after university and your studies? Don't you want to get married? Start a family and have children?' A quiet need began to form in my heart, perhaps driven primarily by the loneliness I felt after my parents returned home.

The End of My Mother

Not long after my grandmother's death, I lost my mother. It had been about two months since their trip to London, and her presence – along with the aroma of Kurdish dishes in my home, our walks in the park and countless other memories – was still vivid in my mind when she suddenly left. Her death was much harder for me than my grandmother's passing, perhaps because it left a profound sense of longing in my heart. Just as our emotional connection had started to deepen, her absence intensified my sorrow and helplessness.

I had received a call from home, but they didn't mention that my mother was ill. It was my brother Rasul who, crying, shared the news that, after dinner, while cleaning the table, my mother had suffered a stroke. Due to the lack of facilities in the hospital in Piranshahr, she was transferred to Urmia, but the doctors said she was brain dead – her brain had stopped functioning while her body remained alive on life support.

Distraught and tearful, I spoke to her doctor on the phone. He was very cold and perhaps even cruel when he said, 'It's all over! She won't survive

once we disconnect her from the machine. In fact, she's already gone, but you don't want to accept it.'

The world around me turned dark, and my tongue felt dry. I couldn't speak easily. That day, I was at a friend's house, and I can't remember how I made it home. I sat motionless on the couch for a long time, staring into the small kindergarten play area in our yard. My entire childhood flashed before my eyes: my mother, her concerns, all her sacrifices and selflessness. The hardships of war, displacement and every other misfortune had never changed her patient face and ever-present smile.

Just when I was beginning to perceive everything about my mother! I felt an overwhelming regret settling in my heart like never before, and I couldn't believe she was gone. Until that moment, I had never considered that one day my mother would leave, and now this heavy burden was weighing down my shoulders.

My father, my aunt Khadijeh, my brother Rasul and everyone else were crying over the phone. The discussion was about what to do: should they take her off life support or not? Should I return to Iran for the funeral and mourning ceremony? With all my heart, I wanted to go back. It had been only two months since I had seen my mother again after many years, and she had left countless reminders in my home. Sometimes, in moments of madness, I wished she had never come.

It was the first time I had wanted to return after leaving the country, and thousands of thoughts and scenarios raced through my mind. I was scared and knew that my return might have consequences for me. Years had passed since I left, and I had been active in Britain, which, although not against the Iranian Government, could create trouble for me. However, I could not accept my mother's death in this way. I hadn't been there for my grandmother's burial, and I couldn't miss this one, too. Despite all the advice and consultations against it, I decided to return. My friends said I was taking a huge risk, but they didn't understand that this was Kameel, the Kameel who always plunges into the deep end!

Going to Iran was difficult for me; I felt terrible, and when I went to the Iranian consulate in central London to get my passport, I felt like a traitor. I had always opposed the regime, and all the reasons for my opposition, both intellectual and ideological, were playing in my mind. All of that was one thing; my greater worry was that my return might create trouble for my family or see me labelled a traitor.

At that time, returning to Iran was not very common. One Kurdish person living in London travelled to Iran, and when he returned people said he was one of them; had he not returned, he would have been arrested, and so on! It was the same old story of migrant versus migrant and the closed environment of gossip. This had happened to me as well, while Khatami was president and many people were returning to the country. Among Iranian Kurds, however, it was widely believed that if you went to Iran and were allowed to return, you were definitely in league with the Government. Many, especially older Party members, were still stuck in the early Revolution and the year 1979.



Image 234: (From right) Aunt Khadijeh, Aunt Maryam and Aunt Zeynab bedridden after Mother's passing. Mahabad, 2004.

When the consulate staff saw my state, they helped me and issued a travel permit within a day. My family had been anxiously keeping my mother on life support until I could arrive. I kept wondering whether I would be able to face my mother's body or not. On the one hand, I thought to myself, what kind of son are you that you don't want to see your mother? On the other hand, I was terrified of facing her corpse. The torment lay in the fact that I had just seen her, and accepting her death was incredibly

difficult for me. At the same time, I hoped against hope that by some miracle she would awaken from her unconsciousness and come back to life.

I finally got my passport and went to Istanbul. I spent that difficult night with the help of a Kurdish friend from Diyarbakır, who is now a journalist, and made my decision. Tearful and wailing, I called my father and said I was coming the next day, but they should bury my mother without me.

My father agreed, saying, 'Kameel, my dear! Your mother is suffering. What difference does it make if you're there when she's buried or not?'

I wept in the phone booth and told them to go ahead with it. It was one of the hardest decisions and nights of my life. The next day, my mother was buried without my presence, marking another sorrowful date in my life: 21st of Dey, 1383 (10 January 2005).

The Bearded Guard and My Father's Tears

I accepted that I could no longer see her, but I was still filled with fear. I felt like a frightened kitten. In my mind, I envisioned being arrested, imprisoned and tortured again by the Intelligence forces as soon as I returned. The memories of the tortures I had experienced in my teenage years were intertwined with those fears. They all paraded before my eyes. This fear and anxiety were so overwhelming that they overshadowed even the death of my mother. I travelled the entire way from Istanbul to Mehrabad Airport with this dread. An elderly Iranian man sat next to me, trying to calm me, but, when the plane landed, he quickly left me with a cold farewell!

My heart was in my mouth, and the anxiety was driving me mad. I stood in line; the passports of the passengers in front of me were stamped quickly, but when it came to mine, they held me back. My fear and anxiety multiplied. First, they whispered among themselves, then they made a few phone calls, and then began the interrogation.

A bearded man in a plain black outfit with a closed collar led me into a dimly lit room, and the questions began: Where have you been? How did you go? Why did you return? I filled out several forms. I had typed for years, but now I was writing on a blank sheet of paper with the same familiar BIC pen. I had to write in Farsi. It seemed that, despite all the years,

not much had changed, and the same old administrative system was still in place.

They took my passport and said, 'It's Tasu'a and Ashura, and it's a holiday here. Hold a memorial for your mother and come back to this address in a week.'

Following my father's instructions and, despite my reluctance, I spent the night at a relative's house who had faced serious issues with the family and was now reluctantly living in Karaj. The next day, I flew to Urmia and from there went home. A large convoy of family and acquaintances came to the Urmia airport to welcome me, and I remember much about the embraces, the kisses, the tears and the way we regarded each other as we arrived at the crossroads of Urmia to Naqadeh.

On the newly opened lane of the Urmia-Naqadeh Highway, the bridge construction and surrounding developments caught my attention. Iran had changed so quickly, but why hadn't the forms of interrogation, the BIC pen and even the look of the administrative paper changed? Perhaps all this reflected a cultural lag and highlighted the unchanged administrative bureaucracy, among many other things.



Image 235: Among sisters and family on arriving home. Piranshahr, 2004.

On the way, just before Piranshahr, another car joined the caravan. My sisters and aunts were in it, and for the entire journey, until we reached the house, I was embraced by one sister or another, with poetry and lamentation from Aunt Maryam and Aunt Zeynab, and my little sister Kani's small hands and my brother Kamyar's hands in mine.

On arriving home, a traditionally gathered crowd had come to greet me, striking their faces and heads. Everyone wanted to embrace me and express their sympathy. It seemed important for them to do this before anybody else did. My return was very strange, as I was treated like a hero. There were people who had come not only out of a sense of duty to attend the memorial, but also to see me. According to the common customs of those days, anyone who shook my hand would kiss me three times. I had been kissed so much that my face burned for days afterward.

The crowd pushed me inside the house. I was the eldest son and had to welcome everyone with a face full of strength and resolve. How strange it was! Suddenly, all the cultural and traditional parameters returned to their places and became the driving force. Traditions are so powerful.

In this memorial and two others that occurred in the following years, I behaved in this manner, and this approach was very impactful. As was customary, the women's gathering was at home, and the men's gathering was at the Quds Mosque near the house. Most of the female relatives embraced me. The kisses and endless tears flowed between us, as if I were a mahram to all of them, and there were no rules of halal and haram, or perhaps no one paid attention at all.

I felt dizzy; I hadn't been able to sleep properly for several nights, and I was exhausted and distressed. I don't know how long I was there or when the male relatives took me away. When I went to the mosque, I felt that my presence gave my father more of a good and proud feeling than anyone else. Everyone stood up for me, and the clan members came to welcome me. I was returning from an unknown world, and I think my family and the people in general saw my return as a commendable and worthy act, as if they were openly yet covertly saying, 'Look, this is what we call a son. He returned from Europe for his mother's memorial. Look at the son of so-and-so, who hasn't even called his parents for years!'

After my mother's death, many things changed. I felt pity for all of us, but especially for my father. A man with such strength and power was weeping like a spring cloud, and his tears seemed endless. It was very

strange. The men among the relatives and friends told him to stop: 'Karim, how long are you going to cry?!' But the women understood him more and comforted him.

Apart from the issues surrounding my mother's death, which were all strange and even enlightening in their own way, I noticed that some relatives and acquaintances had changed significantly. Some had become wealthy, and their behaviours had changed; some acquaintances had false senses of confidence, as if they constantly wanted to tell me that I hadn't done anything special to have gone away, and God forbid I might think that living in Europe was a big deal! They looked at my simple clothes, scrutinising me, and behaved similarly. On the second day of the memorial, at my request, they brought me Kurdish clothes, which I wore; then the curious stares diminished. Their behaviour felt unusual to me; I had returned heartbroken and desolate in ordinary clothes, yet they regarded me differently. While they did not realise that life in Europe is different and people generally dress simply and more freely, everything seemed to have turned into a competition. It was as if the modernity I had witnessed in Europe had manifested in a different way in Iran, creating a heavier and more tumultuous competition. I saw that modernisation in Iran had a different meaning compared to the West. Where I lived, I reflected on the authenticity of civil behaviours, but here it was manifested in the appearance and demeanour of the people.

I felt that my father was struggling. While others, or more specifically, the younger generation had become wealthy and engaged in cross-border trading, he remained just a shopkeeper. Although he had been quite successful in his own time, he had stayed stagnant, continuing the same work he had done decades, without any innovation. Those who previously had little wealth compared to my father were now flaunting their newfound riches.

I also reached out to many of my old friends. I had seen several of them at my mother's memorial service, but many continued to invite me over, and I found myself often at the homes of relatives and friends. This was good not just for me and my father, but even more so for Kamyar and Kani. Kamyar was going through high school, and Kani was in middle school. Losing their mother so suddenly at this age was extremely difficult for them.

My nephew Pouya had also joined the family; I think he was around four or five years old. He attended kindergarten and had a lazy eye, which required one of his eyes to be patched. I would jokingly call him a pirate and tell him stories featuring pirates to help normalise the idea of wearing an eye patch.

Kamyar and Kani were older now, but these three were new to me, as I hadn't had the opportunity to spend time with them before. After my mother's death, Kani cried constantly; being the youngest in the family made it very hard for her to cope with the situation. Pouya was too young to grasp what was happening, while Kamyar pretended not to care. I could tell he was not reacting outwardly, yet he was withdrawn and shattered inside.

We all tried to keep my father composed. His tears were endless, and he constantly wanted me by his side. My sisters would say, 'Kameel, every time you step outside, he becomes more agitated.'

I felt closest to my sister Tabibeh after my mother's death. She seemed profoundly affected by the loss. She had not yet divorced her husband, and their disagreements were peaking. Although my father expected Mahbubeh, as his eldest daughter, to manage the household, Tabibeh was not inclined toward helping with such tasks and found the extra responsibility burdensom. I could see how flustered she became, yet she did what she could to please our father.

Thus, life continued with its ups and downs. I remained in Iran for three months, feeling trapped as the passport office would not return my passport. During those months, I observed this new life in Iran: everything had changed significantly. These changes were not limited to our family; they were evident everywhere. The standard of living had improved, and urban infrastructure had somewhat transformed. I hadn't seen Iran since the era of reconstruction, and now, during Khatami's presidency, I noticed that Iran had made advancements in civil and political domains, and even social freedoms had increased compared to before.

At the university, I witnessed scenes where boys and girls were having close relationships or walking hand in hand in parks, openly flirting with one another. According to existing documentaries and research, Khatami's era was one of the calmest periods in life after the Revolution, and for someone like me, who had experienced the era of the Komiteh and social, cultural and political repression, this change in the value system was

pronounced. I felt and observed the extent of these broad changes upon my return.

Within families, respect and adherence to traditional moral values had diminished. They had, in a sense, modernised. In every household, satellite dishes were installed without fear of consequences, and in children's bedrooms, posters reflected aspects of Western lifestyles. One of the first things that caught my attention in most homes was a poster of the film *Titanic*, which had been popular at the time. Many household items and symbols of life had modernised; even Kurdish clothing had been altered. Almost all the pieces and components had become shorter, more pronounced and tighter. Lives had become more urbanised, and social etiquette had evolved, becoming even more beautiful. Furthermore, the mannerisms and behaviours had become more polite, and all these changes made me wonder just how deep they were or if they were merely superficial.

My aunts were almost always at our home to support my father comprehensively. According to traditional rules, it was not surprising that the whispers about my father's remarriage began. My aunts would say, 'Kareem, we know it's hard, but you need to get married.' As soon as someone said this, my father would reply, 'How dare you say such a thing! How could I ever look at another woman!' And everyone, especially the women, would give him a bitter smile and say that many people say such things, but ultimately they get married.

Two days before my departure from Iran, my father had fallen into a phase of depression over why I was leaving. It seemed he was frightened that I would go and he wouldn't see me for many years. People were obtaining national ID cards, and my father was thrilled that I had also gotten one, repeatedly saying, 'Now you're officially Iranian, and you can come and go.' I found it amusing; I travelled on a passport, not an ID card, but this seemed to bring him joy. Then he would say, 'So-and-so hasn't returned yet. He bought a house here – purchased land.' During the last days of my stay in Iran, he said, 'Savings in England aren't much, but here you can buy a house with that same money and do many things. Why don't you invest?' He thought that, this way, he could tie me down and make an investment beneficial for the whole family.

Little did I know that, two days before my return to London, he had found a dilapidated house near his shop and wanted to sit me down for a

deal. It was a two-storey house that had once been part of the old city bath and had three shops underneath it. I didn't have a good economic sense for buying and selling real estate and didn't understand why I should do this. I kept wondering what use this house would serve, but I went along with it for my father's happiness, taking on debt. I borrowed from the bank and my credit in London and then worked many times harder for a long time to pay off the loans and the remaining money for the house. Apparently, at that time, those who emigrated abroad would send money back to their parents to buy property and land in Iran, because in Iran land and property have always been valuable and represent an important investment for a young person.

Interrogation Again

A week after my mother's memorial, I returned to Tehran with the letter they had given me. That same day at the airport, an officer from the Information Protection Unit of the police stamped my passport, and I was left to pursue its retrieval. My father would send someone with me each time so I wouldn't be alone. He was worried I would be sent to prison. I knew that, at the passport office, I wasn't supposed to answer to a security agency, but the atmosphere instilled a sense of dread in me. The officers, their uniforms and ranks, along with the pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei on the walls, still frightened me, evoking memories of detention and imprisonment.

I was sent to the second floor of the passport office, where I saw other people who had returned and were facing the same problems as I was. Some had been dealing with this issue for six months to two years and had not reached a resolution. According to them, the situation was dire. You had to submit a request, and your file would go to the Information Protection Unit and then to the relevant authorities. The inquiries would return, and then they would question you about why you left Iran and didn't return. They would want to know when you went to prohibited areas and where you had been all those years. They would check if you had a criminal record or any embezzlement history and whether you were on the Interpol wanted list, etcetera.

After all this, the presidency office, which was downstairs, would confirm your exit from the country. Then, the file would return upstairs,

and, after the head of the passport office approved it, you had to get your exit stamp from the last border you had crossed.

Going through these procedures was a huge hassle for me. Terrified, I could only think about returning. It was a tough time, as it coincided with my university exams, but I had to go through these steps – there seemed to be no other way. Every morning, I would go and plead, trying to find a connection and explore every possible route, but nothing progressed. They would tell me to come back in a week. Again, I would get on the bus and return a week later. Remember, each time, one of my relatives would accompany me, disrupting their work and life and incurring considerable hotel and food expenses.

Eventually, I reached a point where I was interrogated. I answered everything honestly; I didn't even censor a word. For the passport officer, who seemed like a nice guy from the north, it was unusual, and on the last day he said, 'Ahmady, why are you being so candid? Here, people say two words and just sign beneath them. Our problem with those returning from abroad is just this! How transparent and honest you are. You don't need to say everything; this is Iran, and they'll make a file on you!'

I replied, 'Now that I know you're a good person, what should I do? I'm stuck here. This memorial notice and the inheritance issue – I had to come back. I'm a student, and it's the middle of my exams. I need to return.'

He said, 'You don't have many options. These steps must be followed, and everything here is manual. It's not like abroad! All the papers must be signed, and those who need to sign will be available one day and then another the next. Just try to write as little as possible. You'll have to go to a couple of other places; answer briefly to whatever they ask.'

He made it very clear to me that censoring and denying would facilitate my case, while honesty would create obstacles and issues for me. He was right. In an inefficient social system where denial is seen at every layer, both surface and deep, mixed with censorship, being honest is like swimming upstream, and you'll find that you're getting nowhere. This was the opposite of what I had experienced in European and British society. There, honesty was a significant social capital, and ignoring it would have consequences. I couldn't believe that in my own country, being truthful could have repercussions!

In the next phase, they told me to go to the presidency office and get a letter from there. It was late in Khatami's term, and my knowledge of

events during those years was limited to the Koy University incident, the serial murders and the changes I had seen in Iran's social landscape. What I saw at the presidency office was almost unbelievable. There was a man, similar to the government officials, with a beard and an appearance resembling theirs, but slightly better dressed. It was also the first time I had seen Khatami's picture alongside Khomeini's and Khamenei's. As soon as the man saw me, he asked if I had returned from abroad. I smiled and explained my problem, asking for his help.

He said, 'This is not our policy; the Government wants you to travel freely. This is good for the people and the country's budget, but the presidency office at the passport office is powerless, and they even trouble us.' He indirectly indicated that the Government's power was limited and that there was a rift in Iran between the Government and the higher security agencies, which constituted the ruling system. He said, 'There are entities that do not want individuals to live their lives.'

It was the first time I had heard such grievances within the system, and it struck me as strange. I had always thought that the Government and the ruling body were the same, but that day I realised it was not so. What I later learned about the reformist process became apparent to me in that small interaction.

I met with that man several more times, and whenever I got stuck I would turn to him for help. He would try to assist me and provide letters. He would say, 'Go see so-and-so', even though they wouldn't listen to him.

For example, when I went to the Information Protection Unit of the police, they would say, 'What's this presidency office nonsense? This is the end of the line for them; they'll leave. Just because you brought a letter from there doesn't mean your issue will be resolved!'

This level of internal dissent and open criticism within the regime was astonishing to me. Many political analysts believe that the eight years of reform and the sixth parliament had slipped from the regime's control.

All calculations indicated that Nategh-Nuri was the winner of the election, and Khatami's victory came as a major surprise to the regime's hardline faction, which held the majority of power. Analysts believe that, afterward, the regime did not allow such a trend to repeat itself, even at the cost of the electoral coup in 2009 and the suppression of public protests following the elections. After Khatami, reformists were unable to regain the presidency or the majority in parliament, as the hardliners consolidated

power under the Guardian Council's oversight, effectively eliminating reformist candidates.

Hassan Rouhani's eight years in office, which began with the support of the reformists, revealed that this political group did not have a proper understanding of him. Rouhani was closer to the conservative faction and military institutions than to the people.



Image 236: Azadi Square, Tehran.

A week before my departure, I received a confirmation letter stating that I was in the final stage. I was told I needed to go to the Bazargan border. I had heard that it would take at least a month because the letter had to go to the province and then to the district for the issuance of my identification documents. My greatest fear was that my past from my teenage years and military service would resurface. I did everything I could to avoid this stage. I said I was willing to do anything, but not to be sent to the province.

He replied that there was no other way. In frustration, he said, 'Leave me alone! Go tell the head of the department. He's the only one who can help you.

I took my file. I knew the person who had given me the letter wouldn't help me. The situation for passport office visitors was clear, especially if you were a resident of a foreign country: they seemed to be trying to make your life more miserable. The common belief is that, since the military in Iran is not allowed to travel abroad, the staff take out their frustrations on others. I was shocked by the level of hatred and thought to myself, 'What harm have I done to these people? No matter how well you behave and cooperate, it's futile – in their eyes, you are someone who went abroad to enjoy yourself while they are left behind in misery.'

They kept asking me if I lived in England. 'What made you remember to come to Iran after all these years? Why didn't you stay with the cunning old fox of colonialism?' The atmosphere made you constantly feel that your

life was in jeopardy, surrounded by numerous mad individuals telling you that you still had a long way to go!

Desperate, I approached the head of the national passport office. I had to request a meeting, which they told me was only possible on Tuesdays for so-called public meetings. There was a soldier there, and I explained my situation.

He said, 'Say you're a student, that you have a ticket, and you need to go.'

I replied that I didn't have a ticket, and he said to book one – just get something in my hands and go see him. I had an old Turkish Airlines ticket that had expired.

The soldier mockingly said, 'This is fine! They don't speak English anyway!' He tried to help me and said, 'The chief is going to pray now. While I bring him his food, use the opportunity to go inside. If he yells at you, just say you went in because no one was there and that you're trying to solve your problem.'

As soon as the soldier left, I entered the room and saw a military officer, who was about to wash his hands for prayer in his sandals. When he saw me, he asked who had allowed me to enter. I said no one was there, that I was in a hurry and had come from the county. He said, 'Oh, so Mr So-and-So sent you?'

Without thinking, I replied, 'Yes.' I was so desperate that I immediately said yes! It seemed he was expecting someone else and had mistaken me for that person. I was terrified that this other person might arrive and cause chaos.

He looked at my file in surprise and muttered to himself that the file Mr So-and-So had recommended was about something else.

I interrupted his train of thought and said, 'I'm a student in London, and my problem is that they say I have to go to the Bazargan border, but I have a flight.'

He replied, 'I don't think I can help you. You'll have to go yourself.'

I said I had a ticket, and he quickly asked, 'Where is it?' I showed it to him, and I couldn't understand why someone at his level didn't pay attention to the date on the ticket. Maybe the soldier was right. He then asked, 'What are you studying in London? Why did you go?'

I replied that I had gone to study.

'Were you on a scholarship?' he asked.

I said yes. That was my second lie. The system was forcing me to lie, breaking my resistance.

He exclaimed, 'Oh, you're a scholarship student! My niece also received a scholarship from the Ministry of Science and is currently studying marine engineering in Spain.'

As he was describing his niece's brilliance, the phone rang. My heart sank. I thought, 'The person he's waiting for has arrived!' While speaking on the phone, he was also writing something down. You would never see such a system outside of Iran; I always think it's impossible for someone to talk on the phone while working or to do a second task correctly while on a call. I've only seen this situation in Iran, and it always puzzles me how bank employees manage to process cheques while speaking on the phone and calculating numbers. While he was on the phone, it was clear he was chatting with friends and smiling. He wrote something at the bottom of the letter and, to my utter astonishment, muttered, 'Good luck.' I thought, at last, this chaotic system has worked in my favour! I looked at the letter in disbelief and could hardly contain my excitement.

It felt as if the entire city of Tehran had been packaged and handed to me. I couldn't believe it. In a flash, I handed the letter to the officer who had been making my life difficult. He started complaining about why this letter had been given to me, saying they would have his head tomorrow. He reported the matter to his superior, but he too said, 'You can't question the chief's word. Do you want to get yourself into trouble?' The officer begrudgingly began processing my paperwork, but he did it so slowly that I was left waiting until the end of office hours. I sat there like an orphaned child, watching his fingers write one line or one word at a time, while other visitors came and dropped their files next to mine, then left for tea and returned half an hour later. I was anxious that their boss might find out the real story and come looking for me. When he noticed I was watching him, he would say, 'Your work is still not done; go outside and sit! I'll call you.' Again, he came back and said, 'If I get to it, it will be done; if not, it will be left for Saturday.'

At the end of the working day, as he was putting on his coat, he took my file and placed it in front of me. Then, after a long pause, he muttered, 'Go. We will stay here, and you will leave! You are just like all those who come and go every day.'

I grabbed the file and rushed out, thinking to myself, 'Am I really the cause of his being stuck here?'

Such encounters highlighted how shallow and simplistic some people's analyses and understandings of social and organisational issues remain. As a result, they view problems in a more personal and individual light, struggling to comprehend the deeper social layers and broader contexts.

After that, everything happened quickly. I bought a new ticket and returned home. I packed my things and was anxious not to let anyone feel regret. Again, there were tears and family gatherings, and farewells. The tearful eyes of my sisters, especially Kani, along with Kamyar and my father ignited my emotions. I still remember the stress of passing through that cursed gate at the airport and the overwhelming relief when my passport was finally stamped. In the end, everything worked out, and I returned, but from then on, my travel to Iran was formally established.

Kameel, You're Acting Suspiciously

When I returned to London, the behaviour of some individuals had changed. One of my friends from Sulaymaniyah pulled me aside and said, 'While you were away, one of the representatives of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and another individual have been gossiping about you, claiming you're suspicious!' They suggested that I must surely be an agent of Iranian Intelligence, as I was able to go and return. They remarked, 'We've been here for thirty years and haven't gone back. Now Kameel has gone and returned, wanting to work as before!'

I anticipated such analyses and comments. In politically charged gatherings, these things often come up, along with baseless judgements accompanied by unreasonable and dishonourable labelling.

For me, someone who had had no controversies up to that point, it was quite upsetting. I called the person – who happened to be from my hometown – and asked why they had said such a thing. They denied it, but I didn't back down. Following a friend's advice, I contacted the Party's office in Paris and submitted a complaint. After a while, they pressured him to apologise. I asked on what basis and evidence he had made such an accusation. I explained that I had gone for my mother's memorial and had struggled to obtain permission to leave. Although everything was clear, I elaborated for him, stating that I wasn't like the other Peshmerga and had

no political activities. I was a student activist, and my work hadn't involved Iran at all.

This incident deeply upset me. It was the first blow I faced to my activities during that period. I wrote a lengthy article in English for *KurdishMedia*, a prominent website, explaining how damaging such behaviour could be. Many readers and writers from other parts of Kurdistan welcomed my article, and, as I read their comments, I realised how similar our experiences were, with the role of parties and the narrow-mindedness of their affiliates being almost identical, rooted in a long history.

Among the Kurds of Iran, I was one of the few who returned during that period. The fact that Persians and Turks who were migrants and refugees had much more freedom of movement than the Kurds was painful enough; such behaviour made things considerably more difficult. The

A Time for the Kurds to Embrace Change

17.8.2006
By Kameel Ahmady

As we are on the verge of a new system in Kurdistan, together with many changes and challenges to the status quo, it is high time for the Kurdish people and all those who want to work alongside them to find new ways of working which will respond to the changing world in which we live.

This means not only recognising that Kurdish issues are linked to social issues in the region and globally, but also addressing some of the challenges inherent within Kurdish society. We need to look closely, honestly, and critically at some of the practices which are taken for granted in our society, and discard those which prevent us from moving forward in the achievement of our goals; goals which are as varied as the activists whose daily struggle and commitment has contributed so much to the transformation of Kurdish issues in recent years. One of the central problems I am referring to is the ways of working and interacting which have limited the participation of this vast array of interests, and kept these contributions and innovations on the sidelines.

For example, many people today, particularly



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Image 237: Headline of my critical article in *KurdishMedia*.

Kurds had largely left Iran for political and economic reasons, some having emerged from parties or military bases, or having escaped from prison, making their return impossible.

We students held several meetings and realised just how many people were affected by such gossip. In these discussions, it became evident that Kurds from Iraq, Turkey and Syria faced similar problems, and we all talked about the issue. This topic had not been discussed before, and it helped to bring some balance to the matter. As one friend put it, while the roots of such behaviour remain, they have taken on different forms. Many politically minded individuals abroad, who have lost their connections with Iran over the years, remain oblivious. It seems their minds have been frozen in the early Revolutionary Iranian society.

In one of the parliamentary meetings discussing the situation of Kurds in Turkey, I spoke about the changes in Iran during the reform era. The social structure had shifted, and the outlook of the younger generation had changed. Iran was no longer the rigid and harsh place it once was – not, at least, in the way it was when I had grown up. When I spoke and wrote about Iran and its changes, a few individuals affiliated with a political party attacked me again, implying that I was Government-affiliated. I was astonished by how narrow-minded and envious politicians could be. After this, I encountered many more instances where either I or others faced judgement and narrow-mindedness in the political arena. It seemed that no one had the right to express new ideas that contradicted the politicians' wishes and upset their equations. This highlights the intellectual stagnation of politicians in our regions and serves as a useful measure for understanding why we find ourselves in such times!

Returning to Iran: A Strange Feeling with a Stepmother

I hadn't yet processed the events of my previous trip to Iran when I found myself compelled to return once more. One day, my aunt Khadijeh called and said, 'A woman has been chosen for your father to marry.' She was worried about my father's health. She felt it was her duty to sort things out for Karim, and, in her mind, marriage was the only solution. She said, 'Khatoon is a very good woman, and your father is counting on you. You are the eldest son, and you need to come back to arrange the wedding.'

At first, I tried to dissuade my aunt, but both my efforts and those of Mahbubeh were in vain. They were determined, and under the pretext of keeping the family intact and ensuring a warm meal on the table for Karim, Kani and Kamyar, they orchestrated my father's second marriage.

Given the family circumstances at the time, my aunt's words made sense, and it didn't occur to me what Kani, Kamyar and Pouya would think about it. Would this event harm the children or not? I thought it would be good for them. Although this woman wouldn't replace their mother, at least there would be someone to care for them.

I couldn't say no to my father, who kept insisting, 'Now that you have your passport and national ID, why don't you return?' He pressured me, and I found myself back in Iran again. Unfortunately, my unexpected return only fuelled further gossip, creating another question mark: if yesterday the reason for my return was my mother's death, why was I back now, and where was I connected?

This time, I arrived in Piranshahr without any issues. After a simple engagement meeting that had already been arranged, the ceremony



Image 238: Father, during the marriage contract ceremony, hand in hand with the bride's brother, in the presence of the local mullah and his cousins. Piranshahr, 2004

quickly took shape. The woman, who had separated from her husband years ago, was married to my father. Mahbubeh, who was the most sensitive of us all, cried and was very upset. No formal ceremony took place, and when we brought the bride home, it seemed as if my father were embarrassed.

I had my father's car; I drove the bride while Mahbubeh sat beside her in the car as the eldest daughter. I remembered sitting in the bride's car twice before, for Habibeh and Mahbubeh's weddings, but this time felt so different. I was taking the bride home for my father.

It was a strange situation. In that brief moment, the scent of her perfume, the new clothes and the jewellery she wore struck me. I realised how heavy this situation was for everyone, especially for Mahbubeh, and later for Tabibeh and Kani. Mahbubeh sat in the car, trying to hide her feelings, so the woman wouldn't be upset. I was careful not to look at her in the car mirror. It felt as if my mother's spirit was chastising me for what I was doing. When we arrived home, Khatoon went into the kitchen to make tea. I felt a pang in my heart, envisioning her in my mother's kitchen, washing cups in the sink. I sensed that my mother was gone, and another woman had taken over her kitchen! Witnessing such a scene broke my heart, and, once again, a profound longing consumed me.

I couldn't act normally. It was beyond my control. The taste of the food she served was different from what my mother had cooked for me in London some time ago. Khatoon was a new person, someone we had no familiarity with, and we couldn't easily connect with her. I tried to be kind, and she was well aware of my position, but something felt off – it simply couldn't be right.

I didn't pay much attention to the significance of being the eldest son, but I had sensed its weight after my mother's death.

When I returned to Iran, I was welcomed at the mosque. I had to make decisions for the household. I had come back for my father's wedding. My stepmother was aware of these matters and made efforts to accommodate me. When I came home, despite her resistance, she would rise from her seat out of respect for me. I thought about how, just three days prior in London, none of these customs existed, but here, in my own city, everything had a different meaning. Sometimes, even failing to observe certain customary practices could spark discussions. The differences became more pronounced than ever before.

Two Films in Two Journeys

My trips to Iran transformed me into a different person. I was no longer Kameel, filled with anger and dissatisfaction before my migration, nor was I Kameel, a student engrossed in a European life. Iran had changed significantly during my absence, but articulating these changes was met with resistance from some long-time emigrants. For them, it was hard, if not impossible, to believe that many things had changed and that Khatami had created an open atmosphere during his presidency, which there were some grounds to assert. They had been away from Iran for years, and some lacked the opportunity or courage to return.

During my two trips to Iran, I discovered a new version of myself, one who viewed the world differently and constantly identified issues and damages that could serve as the bases for research projects. In 2005, I made a short but fruitful trip to Iran, where I found numerous subjects that became more serious in my subsequent journeys.

On my first trip to Iran, I made a film and returned to London with a wealth of material. In the documentary *Poverty and Bread*, I presented an ethnographic perspective on the lives and work of the border porters (*Kolbars*). Hardly anyone, both in the world and in Iran, was familiar with the Kolbars and the hardships of their lives in Kurdistan. I had heard about smugglers, or, rather, cross-border traders, since childhood, but at that time it was not as common a profession as it is today.

The situation in the Kurdistan Region was vastly different from when I migrated. Many military bases had been dismantled. The Region had calmed down, and the relative peace after the war had led to population growth and the expansion of cities. Up to this point, everything seemed positive, but in line with this growth, urban facilities and employment opportunities had not developed sufficiently, creating a mismatch between the population and available resources. The number of impoverished individuals and, consequently, Kolbars had increased. Kolbars faced numerous dangers and challenges. Sometimes, while descending from the mountains, they clashed with border forces and lost their goods. Many Kolbars have been killed or injured in the course of their work, and no individual or institution is held accountable for the tragic events that occur to them.

Social conditions had become more complex than before my migration. People were no longer the same. Frugality had given way to consumerism. In the cities along the borders with Iraq and Turkey, large markets and shopping centres had been established, attracting many from across Iran to these cities in search of cheaper foreign goods. Meanwhile, Iranian production was in a state of disarray, stagnation and weakness.



Image 239: Porters (Kolbars) crossing the border. Kalegin, Piranshahr, 2005.

In Iran, I had several research subjects. Although I was troubled by the existence of the issues and the damages caused by them, I realised that good research could be conducted in Iran and the surrounding countries, exploring topics that had been overlooked for various reasons.

As I mentioned earlier, I had encountered the issue of female cutting in Africa. The subject was familiar to me, and I remembered it was also practised in our region. My inquiries revealed that many of the women around me were victims of this harmful tradition. My grandmother, mother and sisters had experienced this harm, and the issue was widespread in the Maku region. I wanted to gather more information, but those around me were not very cooperative. It seemed strange to them that

a man would ask about women's bodies and a topic that they themselves did not discuss. In Iran and the Region, addressing the body – especially women's bodies – was accompanied by sensitivity and negative reactions. Consequently, research on such topics is so challenging that most researchers give up and prefer not to engage with the authorities. I had decided to work on this subject – one that even my family could hardly accept my inquiries about, let alone my surrounding society and the Government!

I knew that researching this topic would require demanding fieldwork and would be time-consuming; I was also aware of the potential dangers. However, such traditions provide a fertile ground for social research and should not be overlooked due to fear. I reflected on my memories and recalled that in Naqadeh, Piranshahr and Gerdashavan, the Qarechi people, or Gypsies, practised cutting. These groups were quite mobile in the Region, and I had seen them in Gerdashavan. Locals claimed that the Gypsies were descended from Romani people or were from modern-day Romania, having scattered across various countries and learned the languages of their places of residence. The Qarechi people of Iranian Kurdistan had their own language but had also learned Kurdish. The Qarechi people from the Siahchard region of Iraq mainly came from Kirkuk and Germiyan, and, due to their proximity to Arab-inhabited areas of Iraq, they also spoke Arabic.

The Qarechi people of the Kurdistan Region typically arrived after spring and stayed until autumn. Their work included basket-weaving and crafting small wooden items. Alongside this, they also performed tasks such as writing charms, fortune-telling and circumcising girls and boys, receiving payment in food, flour, rice and the like for their services. Those wishing to circumcise their children would wait for the Qarechi to arrive, and, as soon as they spotted them, the children would scream in terror, 'The Qarechi have come!' This phrase was used to frighten children, and they were genuinely scared, having often encountered the Qarechi tents and experienced the pain in the most literal sense.

Interestingly, male circumcision was public and discussed openly, while female cutting occurred silently and away from the eyes of others in places like haylofts, storerooms and other secluded spots. My two elder sisters had been cut in the summer in Gerdashavan. The rest of the women

in the family also fell victim to this erroneous tradition, which has been in decline since the mid-1970s.



Image 240: Documentary film *Poverty and Bread*. Iraq-Kurdistan border. Produced in 2004.

Understanding the extensive dimensions of female cutting in my community and family led to the creation of the initial version of a documentary film on this subject, which I gradually refined and titled *In the Name of Tradition*.

I took the films *Poverty and Bread* and the initial version of *In the Name of Tradition* back to England. One of the members of the UK Parliament held a meeting about poverty in the Middle East, focusing on the human-rights situation of Kurds in Turkey. During this meeting, excerpts from *Poverty and Bread* were shown, and the phenomenon of the Kolbari was something strange and unexpected for the attendees.

Considering the events in Iraq and Afghanistan and the issue of terrorism, the media paid little attention to my films, which they weren't particularly interesting to them. Even when I wanted to present the film *In the Name of Tradition* at a Kurdish film festival in London, some of its organisers said, 'We want to discuss the bravery of the Kurds, nationalism and the freedom of Kurdistan, and here you are bringing a film about the

circumcision of women that could disgrace us and Kurdistan!' For some, the topic was intriguing, while others dismissed it, implicitly suggesting that it was fabricated. The topic of *Poverty and Bread* was also new for the audience, but it captured its attention. Although the film didn't receive significant acclaim, I realised I was on the right path and needed to continue.

Thesis in Mahabad

In my final year of my master's degree at the University of Kent, I needed to propose a topic for my thesis. I had several ideas, but one stood out to me more than the others. During my two trips to Iran, I was particularly fascinated by the behaviours of Kamyar and Kani, and, more generally, the mindset of adolescents and their differences from our generation. I decided to conduct an analytical study on the impact of media on Iranian teenagers. I chose the age group of thirteen to sixteen as my target population and the Mahabad Children and Adolescents Growth Centre as my location. The Centre had a professional structure, and its international connections could facilitate collaboration with a student from abroad.

To kick off my work, I established initial contacts at the provincial level and sought advice from the British Council in Tehran. With the support of my supervisors, Peter Parker and Glenn Bowman, along with input from my friend Sara and several other graduate students, I presented my proposal. My supervisor and the head of the Anthropology Department at the university approved my research idea. It was agreed that I would return to Iran to carry it out.

This was my third trip, and I intended to implement a visual project for a group of teenagers at the Mahabad Centre. The plan was to rent a camera for each teenager, provide necessary training, allow them to select a project and photograph it while writing about their experiences. The results would be displayed in an exhibition, and I would also conduct a content analysis of the photos and writings. This project was a blend of anthropology and visual and analytical ethnography, which I later published as a book. Moreover, unlike the usual approach, it was not solely a study about teenagers; it actively engaged them in the process. This made it quite innovative in the fields of child anthropology and sociology and had little precedent in Iran.



Image 241: Educational workshop at Children and Adolescents Centre. Mahabad, 2005.

My brother-in-law, Kak Hussein, introduced me to the Mahabad Centre through an acquaintance. I submitted my university introduction letter and a letter from the cultural section of UNICEF, along with their translations, to the Centre's main office, located in Seyyed Qotb Park, Mahabad. Initially, they welcomed me, but once they realised I was a student from abroad, everything changed. The Centre's head said, 'I need to consult with the provincial office', and took the letters from me. After a week, they informed me that the provincial head was supportive, but I also needed permission from the security office. The security office organised a demonstration meeting with the head of the provincial centre, who gave their approval.

As the start of my project approached, the usual sensitivities in Iran became problematic again. I wanted to reassure them that I had no political agenda, but it was necessary for both girls and boys to attend the classes together, which made them anxious. It was agreed that a supervisor would always be present in the classroom to ensure I did not teach anything inappropriate to the children! I had thought that most sensitivities, like when I was a teenager, were related to political issues, but they were more concerned about sexual matters. Once they accepted the presence of a

supervisor and said they would arrange the classes themselves, they felt somewhat reassured that everything was under control, and we proceeded. As we progressed, the supervision gradually decreased.

The children enjoyed this class and talked about it with other members of the Centre. Others came, and sometimes there was no room at the table for everyone. This situation upset some of the instructors, and they reported to the Centre's director, who was apparently affiliated with the Basij, that I had come from abroad to mislead the children. For a while, supervision became strict again, but when they saw that there were no issues, they eventually relaxed.

The photography classes and workshops continued for nearly three months. During this time, I rented a house in the employees' district of Mahabad and experienced life differently. I spent my days from morning to evening with the children at the Centre, devoting all my time and life to taking notes from my field observations, which is vital in anthropology. My friend and fellow student Sara and my project supervisor Peter Parker were incredibly helpful, and their advice greatly benefited my work.

Throughout my stay in Mahabad, I reestablished family connections and took every opportunity to explore different parts of Iran. There was a teahouse across from the Centre where young people would smoke hookah. It was the only form of entertainment available in that environment, and I eventually got used to smoking hookah myself, so much so that, when I returned to London, I bought an intricately carved wooden hookah from Sanandaj. I would sometimes prepare it, but it never had the same taste and aroma as the hookahs from the Mahabad teahouse.

Divorce and Remarriage of My Father

While I was working on my thesis in Mahabad, my father divorced Khatoon Khanum. It was barely a month after their marriage when problems began. My father was deeply attached to my mother and had not completed his internal mourning process. He was constantly crying and causing distress to both us and his new wife. From the very beginning, he had stated that he did not want this woman and found her unattractive. He would say, 'Every time I get close to her, I see the angry and tearful face of Amine.' His disdain went beyond this: he even claimed he disliked her eating and talking. He expressed that he couldn't bear it and sought help

from everyone to free him from the situation. Those around him with traditional perspectives said that time would solve the problems, but my father insisted they were insurmountable.

My aunts, especially Aunt Khadijeh, who had facilitated this marriage, said, 'Our honour is at stake', but my father had made his decision and wanted to separate by paying only a small part of the dowry. Khatoon Khanum had a high dowry set for her, and my father did not want to pay the full amount for just one month of marriage. Khatoon Khanum was unwilling to relent, stating, 'Now that you're divorcing me so quickly and ruining my honour, you must pay the full dowry!'

I did not agree with the foundation of the dowry, but I had no choice but to support my father's wishes. With the help of my father's cousins, uncle and aunts, we spoke with Khatoon Khanum's family, but it was to no avail, and she received a significant portion of her dowry. I felt sorry for her; she had lost her husband and wanted to build a new life, but Khatoon Khanum's hasty marriage to Kak Karim was not successful.

Some time later, my father married a younger woman. He had seen her in his shop, and this time, without anyone pressuring him, he married her of his own accord, as the Kurds say. This woman was from an area between Mahabad and Miandoab and had three sons from a previous marriage, all of whom were young and independent. Years earlier, she had started a life in a nearby village called Kalba Rezakhān but had later separated.

My father's new wife treated me with respect. She was kind and very sensitive to what others said or how they treated her. I did not see her behave poorly until shortly after my father's death, when she married one of our relatives and we witnessed behaviours that made it seem like we were just getting to know her.

During the fieldwork for my thesis in Mahabad, I returned to Piranshahr a few times. It seemed that life had relatively returned to normal. After completing my work and holding an exhibition of the children's photos and artworks in the Mahabad municipality hall, I returned to London. Since my project was focused on ethnography and visual anthropology, with the help and guidance of my supervisor and, of course, Sara's extensive assistance in analysing images and providing linguistic, written and editorial support, the main structure of my thesis took shape. I defended it under the title 'Adaptation and Resistance in Mahabad'. Recently, this thesis was published as a book by Mehr

Publishing in London and Scholar Planet in Persian, English, French and German, and the electronic and audio versions were released by Avaye Bouf Publishing in Denmark. The Kurdish version has also been published in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

PART FIVE: RETURN

Introduction

I chose to settle in Diyarbakır to experience another part of Kurdistan. Initially, I intended to write a travel guide for all four parts of Kurdistan – a plan that, as you may know, was not destined to materialise! A significant portion of our lives is shaped by unforeseen events. We choose our paths repeatedly, but invisible forces seem to take control and alter our journeys. I had struggled to leave Iran and start anew in a different corner of the world, but fate had other plans. Fate had foreseen other dreams, dreams that compelled me to stay in Iran and be by my father's side.

I remained in Iran, and my true career path as a researcher took shape. I worked hard, fell in love, got married, became a father and lost my father. I started anew in Iran, but this new beginning was different from my previous ones. I was no longer young and naive. I had direction and purpose. I perceived people and the environment differently, and I was reconnected to my roots. I stayed to walk new paths and learned that life is a continuous process of loss and gain.

It was during this period that my research became more serious. I delved into topics that some Iranian researchers avoided for fear of confronting government and political structures. With the knowledge that I had to take risks to conduct fieldwork in Iran, I took on the challenges and worked tirelessly to the best of my abilities.

Chapter Sixteen: Diyarbakir, the Largest Kurdish City in the World

After I completed my thesis, my mental struggles began. I constantly asked myself, 'What should I do next? Should I stay in the UK? Should I pursue further education and work in a university, municipality or judiciary?' I had peace and comfort in London, but my heart yearned for something more than an ordinary life.

Before and after my master's degree, I took courses in Research Methods, Middle East Politics and Sustainable Peace at the London School of Economics and the University of London. These courses taught me to view the world and its issues from different angles. Kurdistan, Iran, the bitterness of my childhood and teenage years, and even my travels took on new meanings. This analytical perspective, combined with my education and work experiences, constantly pushed me to explore new possibilities. I had a background in photography and journalism, I had studied anthropology and I had worked in the hospitality and tourism industry.

I had to choose one idea from among many and embark on a different journey. One idea prevailed, and I decided to write a comprehensive travel guide for Greater Kurdistan – a book about the four parts of Kurdistan. During my numerous travels to different parts of the world, I had noticed that even people who loved traveling were not familiar with Kurdistan and its culture. I needed to write the guidebook from an anthropological



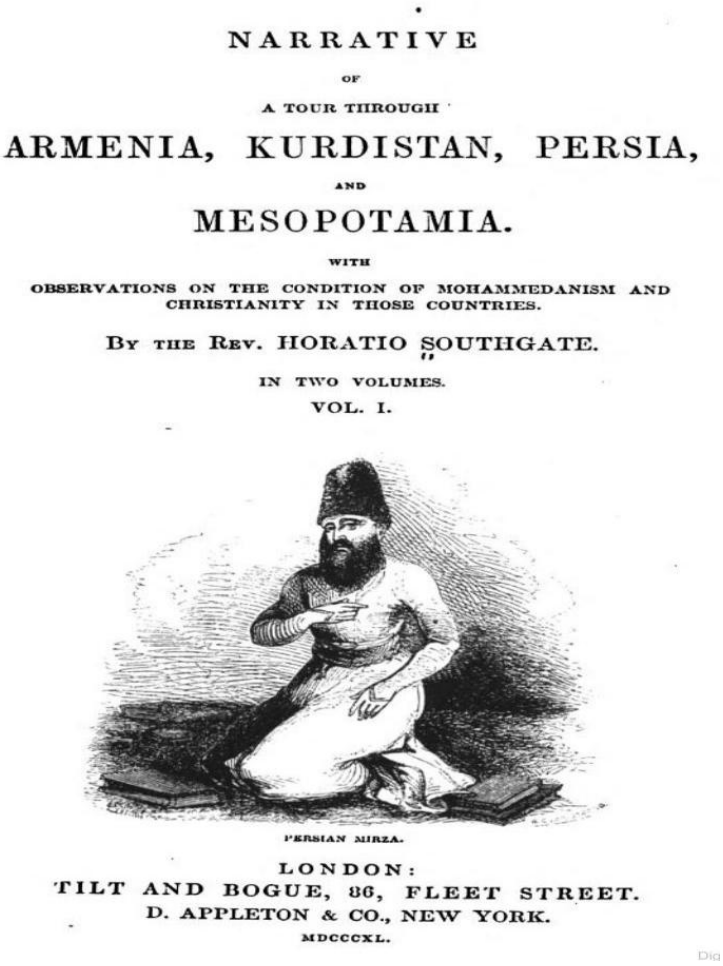
Image 242: At the British Library, London.

perspective, to introduce the culture, music, food, traditions and customs of Greater Kurdistan.

I spent five months studying at the British Library, delving into travelogues from various periods, particularly those of the Safavid and Ottoman eras. These accounts, written by Christian missionaries, traders, officers and soldiers, were of journeys to Kurdistan and the historical region of Mesopotamia.

Christian missionaries and military officers are often referred to as the first anthropologists. These individuals, driven by their missions, had to observe their surroundings with curiosity and precision, recording their observations in detail. Today, in anthropology, one of the most crucial principles that every student must master from the outset is this very meticulous and comprehensive observation of the subject.

These travelogues spanned from Turkey's Kurdistan to Iraq's Mesopotamia. This region held immense significance for Europeans for two primary reasons: firstly, Christians held a special cultural and religious interest in the region because many pivotal Christian events had taken place in this area, and numerous saints and important historical and religious sites were located there. Furthermore, many ancient philosophers and Christian theologians had lived in these regions, making it all the more significant for them. The second reason was politics, as most of these journeys were undertaken to gain a better understanding of the region, with colonial ambitions in mind.



NARRATIVE

OF

A TOUR THROUGH

ARMENIA, KURDISTAN, PERSIA,

AND

MESOPOTAMIA.

WITH

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CONDITION OF MOHAMMEDANISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN THOSE COUNTRIES.

BY THE REV. HORATIO SOUTHGATE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

PERSIAN MIRZA.

LONDON:
TILT AND BOGUE, 86, FLEET STREET.
D. APPLETON & CO., NEW YORK.
MDCCCXL.

Image 243: Title Page of Travelogue of Armenia, Kurdistan, Iran and Mesopotamia.

I had been reading about the ideological trajectory of the PKK and its inspiration from Mesopotamia in Abdullah Öcalan's writings and in some other political and personal literature. A new civilisation in the Middle East, or the Near East, had originated from this very region, and the invention of agricultural tools and ploughing is attributed to this area. One could not help but be fascinated by the advanced and deep civilisations of Mesopotamia. I spent many days at the British Library, pouring over travelogues written by individuals who had journeyed to that region in the

past and present. The more I read, the more captivated I became by this part of the Middle East.

The memoirs and logbooks of British army officers and Christian missionaries were filled with astonishing and intriguing details. Their writings touched on the Syriac and Assyrian churches, the demographic makeup of the region, the social and political roots of the Kurds and the Ottoman Empire's policies toward them, the displacement of Armenians, and the replacement of Kurds who are now at war with the Government.

The topic, however, did not appeal to publishers of travel guidebooks in Britain, nor did research institutions show interest. I had to find a sponsor by any means. There were high-ranking politicians who frequented London, with whom I had collaborated during my time at the Turkey's Kurdistan Cultural Centre, serving as their guide and translator. I mentally reviewed the individuals and identified the best candidate: Osman Baydemir. He and his wife, Reyhan, were lawyers, and for a period he was the head of the Diyarbakır Bar Association. This association was more of a political entity than a legal institution, closely tied to the PKK. Baydemir was later elected as a representative of the Democratic Society Party (the 'DTP') and, with a high vote count, became the mayor of Diyarbakır. Osman was a charismatic political figure with a distinct approach: modern, articulate and astute. Despite his alliance with the DTP, he occasionally had differences with them. The DTP was close to the PKK, and the Turkish Government insisted there was no difference between the two parties, viewing them with suspicion.

When I shared my plan with my friends, they said, 'Have you gone mad?! You're leaving your life and home in London behind to write a four-part travelogue about Kurdistan? Have you considered the time and cost involved?' They thought my idea was impractical. If I were being reasonable, I would have had to agree with them.

I rented out my house to my friend Manuela and another German friend, to pay off my mortgage. I also announced my departure from the KSSO research student association, paving the way for new elections and the introduction of a new president. I handed over my consultancy work, law work and court cases, and settled my accounts. I stored my personal belongings in the attic of my house and prepared to leave Britain.

My plan was to start writing my travelogue in Diyarbakır, Turkey and then move on to Syria, Iraq and finally Iran. The day I left England, I felt

both sad and relieved. I felt liberated from all the responsibilities I had taken on in my youth and wouldn't have to worry about bank loans, income and end-of-month salaries any more. For years, I had been managing my life and carrying heavy burdens. I bought a one-way ticket from London to Atatürk Airport.



Image 244: The city walls of Diyarbakır, 2007.

When I arrived in Istanbul, I couldn't get a flight ticket to Diyarbakır, nor even a bus ticket on time. My friends were waiting for me in the city, and I didn't want to stay in Istanbul. I boarded a bus heading toward Urfa. Urfa, or Şanlıurfa, is a few hours away from Diyarbakır and has a population consisting mainly of Kurds, but also a mix of Arabs and Turkmen. The city is the birthplace of the famous Turkish singer İbrahim Tatlıses and the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Öcalan. I arrived late and sat with six other people in the bus's buffet section. We were packed in tightly, practically sitting on top of the noisy bus engine. Most of the passengers were Kurds and Arabs from Urfa, returning home tired but happy from their work in the orchards of western Turkey. The driver played İbrahim Tatlıses's songs throughout the journey. I had heard these songs in Iran before, and hearing them again bonded me with the Kurdish workers on the bus. Apart from reviving old memories, it made

me realise I was heading toward a new and completely different life, in a city I didn't even know!

Finally, I arrived. I spent a few days with my friends Amin, Khadija, Metin and Arsalan, and then made arrangements to meet with Osman Baydemir. He was busy with his schedule, constantly traveling and attending meetings. It took some time to schedule a meeting. I went to see him with Khadija.



Image 245: Osman Baydemir, Mayor of Diyarbakır, at his office.

It was interesting that, during our meeting, I spoke in Kurmanji and he spoke in English. Osman Baydemir was trying to improve his English skills in any way possible. When I presented my idea, he said, 'You start and count on my help. You want to do something that aligns with our political and ideological views and also relates to the tourism activities of our mayors.'

Osman Baydemir explained to me that attracting tourists in Turkey's Kurdistan has many challenges. Domestic and foreign media have created a widespread misconception that there is constant war in the region.

He was a clever person and quickly grasped my idea, giving it a political spin. Of course, I had my own goals, and he had his own. I said, 'Mr Osman! We both know I need the resources of the mayor's offices under your authority, but it's a win-win deal.'

He instructed his secretary to take me to the municipality's guesthouse. This hotel was an old Armenian house located in the city centre.

I planned to present my project proposal the following week at a meeting with other regional mayors to secure funding and resources. The meeting took place, and, after discussions, I adapted the proposal to better suit the region's specific needs and priorities. We agreed to begin the project in one or two cities in Diyarbakır province, which would allow the other municipalities to make final decisions after reviewing the initial results.

Despite my limited experience, my enthusiasm and aptitude convinced them. In addition to accommodation, they provided a car, a driver and two



Image 246: Project office. Sur, Diyarbakır old city, 2006.

assistants. I commenced fieldwork and prepared a booklet of my observations as the initial draft of the travel guide for the next meeting.

On the day of the presentation, everyone was anxious about the chairman's arrival. Manaf, the director of GABB (Union of Southeast Anatolia Region Municipalities), was particularly stressed and repeatedly altered the booklet's design and layout. He constantly instructed me on what to say and how to behave. This level of fear, obedience and adherence to hierarchy seemed incongruent with the DTP's rhetoric and the aims of the current political movement. Later, I realised this was typical throughout Turkey, with many governmental and organisational decisions being commander driven.

My observations included everything from the people's general temperament to the irritating checkpoints and the presence of armed military vehicles.

Baydemir remarked, 'Writing so frankly about checkpoints and military vehicles will scare tourists away!' Their intention was clear: they wanted the final product to portray the region as peaceful and idyllic.

I explained that this would be one of the first independent travel guides for Turkey's Kurdistan, published in Turkish, Kurdish and English. Foreign tourists expect such warnings in a guidebook, and omitting them would create legal and ethical problems.

Ultimately, we agreed that I could keep detailed ethnographic and factual notes for my own records, but the version submitted to them would downplay security concerns. Thus, the travel guide project for fifteen provinces of Turkey's Kurdistan (Bakur, or Northern Kurdistan) was approved and our collaboration began. Securing the necessary funding took considerable time, but I trusted Baydemir and pressed ahead.

My hotel was centrally located, allowing me to carefully observe the local lifestyle and behaviour. I was struck by the simple attire of young men and women, who frequented cafés in jeans and t-shirts. Diyarbakır's hot evenings had a different energy from places like Iran and Iraq. Young people gathered in a street called Sanat ('Art'), drinking tea and coffee, looking little different from Europeans. However, I later learned this was only superficial: different parts of the city possess unique identities and structures. Gradually, I gained insight into other layers of society, uncovering important details, which I will discuss later.



Image 247: Children in Diyarbakır's old city, also known as the Stone City. 2007.

The prominent language of the market and streets of Diyarbakır is Turkish. I found it astonishing that the largest Kurdish city in the world, which is referred to as the capital of Greater Kurdistan, is so weak in preserving its mother tongue and cultural components. Many people attribute this weakness to the systematic discrimination by the Turkish Government, as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has not adequately addressed the role and significance of language, despite broadcasting most of its radio and television programmes in Kurdish. I later encountered a similar phenomenon in Kermanshah, the second-largest Kurdish city in Iran, where the street language was heavily influenced by broken Farsi.

Some parts of the Turkey's Kurdistan Region, which have since expanded, were under the control of the ruling AKP or AK party.[1] These individuals were opposed to the PKK, which they viewed as anti-Islamic and Marxist. The atmosphere in the city was always tense. Young people protested unemployment and discrimination. This prompted many to migrate to western cities or Istanbul.

I was offered an office space. They suggested I go to the municipality building, but I refused, saying, 'The work will become bureaucratic and slow.' I wanted to be among the people, directly and qualitatively, without any intermediaries, to investigate the matter.

Most tourist areas in Diyarbakır are in the ancient Sur district, which was a fortified city. The municipality had purchased and restored an old Syriac merchant's house. The house was situated in the famous Ziya Gökalp neighbourhood and a narrow alley. It was converted into a Dengbêj-house (a traditional Kurdish music house). They allocated part of the house to our office space. The upper floor had several empty rooms, and I asked the municipality if I could live there, which they accepted. It seemed that many people were not interested in working or living in this area. The electricity was often cut off, and clashes with the police were a normal occurrence. The sounds of traditional Dengbêj music continued from morning till evening in the courtyard of this stone-paved house.

1 Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi ('Justice and Development Party').



Image 248: Among the Dengbêj musicians. My workplace courtyard, Diyarbakır, 2006.

I soon hired several assistants, a secretary and later an editor and graphic designer. As the project leader and coordinator, I established the team in that house. We began our research and started writing the initial chapters of the book, followed by fieldwork in fifteen provinces. We started in the small province of Sirt, near Diyarbakır. We planned to conduct fieldwork for about a year, covering all fifteen provinces, and then take another year to complete the writing phase.

Tourism is a significant topic in Turkey; thus, many guidebooks are published. Some of these guidebooks briefly mention the famous province of Mardin and other tourist attractions. Municipalities in Kurdish provinces had prepared brochures to introduce tourist attractions, but the information was scattered and incoherent. There was no comprehensive work that covered all fifteen provinces in a modern tourist guide.

The total area of the provinces we were concerned with was approximately one-third of Iran, and we lacked sufficient data and information about the historical sites. The presence of Catholic Assyrians, Armenians, Jews, Kurds and Turks in these regions revealed a complex and interconnected history that we could not ignore. These regions were historically and culturally rich, and their location in Mesopotamia amplified their significance.

The conflicts between the army and the PKK, which had started decades ago, had left no opportunity for work and research on the subject of culture and tourism. The region was complex and faced significant historical, cultural, religious and political neglect. Within approximately 150 years, two significant events had overshadowed the lives of non-Muslims residing in these areas: one was the expulsion of Armenians, Christians and other non-Muslim sects, and the other was the notorious Armenian massacre, which led to their migration. In the last thirty years, the war between the Kurds and Turks had also changed the demographic fabric of these regions, leaving many villages abandoned and empty.

The Armenians Who Vanished

We had a small Italian Fiat with a Diyarbakır license plate. It would always cause trouble at checkpoints, but it had to be praised as the best and most reliable car in the world. It took us to places that no 4WD could reach. Our modus operandi was to explore cities and villages, registering tourist centres, caravanserais, baths, churches, mosques, monasteries and historical buildings, however ruined they were. We recorded their visual and historical features by note-taking, filming, photographing, measuring



Image 249: Washing the mini Fiat. Dersim (Tunceli), 2008.

areas and identifying routes to these places. The fieldwork involved visiting the sites, and the rest of the work was done in the Diyarbakır office, but, since we lacked primary and basic information, we sometimes spent weeks in the field.

During these journeys, I became aware of a deep-seated and discriminatory ethno-religious policy. Most religious, cultural and social centres belonging to Armenians and other religious minorities were left to decay. In Armenian-inhabited villages, there was at least one church that could be architecturally interesting, but the policy was to let them quietly disappear. It's worth mentioning that in some places, people themselves, due to religious biases or the belief that priests had buried valuable items in the altars before leaving, had destroyed parts of these buildings. The Government didn't care about these structures, and it was common to see a large, modern mosque being built next to or on top of the ruins of a beautiful church.



Image 250: The provocative slogan 'How fortunate is the one who says, "I am Turk."'

A comparable phenomenon can be observed in Iran, where many people still refer to major streets by their pre-Revolution names. One of the most striking examples is in Khuzestan, where cities often have dual names: the official names used by the Government in documents and maps, and the traditional names used by the native Arab population. By using these indigenous names, locals protest the longstanding ethnic suppression in the region and resist state-led attempts at Persianisation. Notable examples include the cities officially named Mahshahr and Khorramshahr, which are called Mashhur and Muhammarah by the local Arab community. One's choice of name in such cases signals one's cultural and political stance.

The Armenian massacres had led to the abandonment of many villages. Some Kurdish lords and others in the region, with the backing of the then government, occupied the deserted homes and fields. In the years that followed, the current Government pursued an unofficial policy of Turkification, giving villages new Turkish names. Yet many local people refused to adopt these imposed names, continuing to refer to their villages by their traditional Armenian or Kurdish names. This act became a quiet but powerful form of resistance against the dominant state ideology.

In fact, most villages in the region came to be known by at least two or three different names: the original Armenian name, the Kurdish name used locally and a new Turkish name imposed officially. In our guidebook, we made a deliberate choice to include all three but referred to villages in the body of the text by their historical Armenian and Kurdish names rather than the Turkish ones. This decision was rooted in a commitment to historical truth and cultural respect.

Recovering the correct names required extensive and meticulous research: consulting Armenian cultural archives, historical records and Kurdish encyclopaedias; interviewing village elders, *kodkhodas* and spiritual leaders; and cross-checking oral histories to avoid inaccuracies. We even ensured that Armenian names were written correctly in their original script. It was a difficult but necessary task – one that demanded both precision and a sense of responsibility to preserve the cultural memory of these places.



Image 251: Plainclothes police officer tailing us. Dersim (Tunceli), 2007.

The police or security forces in small towns consistently followed us, ostensibly for our safety, but this intimidated locals into refusing to answer our questions. Our objections were met with the same unconvincing explanation: 'We're escorting you for your own security.' The true reason, however, was clear: they wanted to prevent us, as foreigners, from speaking to the local people.

The first year was spent on fieldwork, and then the research phase began. We gathered and published nearly 650 sites in the book. We travelled to every possible location, covering about 200 cities and hundreds of villages. I tried to include the stories and narratives of the people, as well as the legends of each region, in the book. This was a challenging task, especially during a time when technology was not as advanced and information was not easily accessible. Moreover, the Turkish Government had no interest in collecting tourist information about Kurdistan and didn't take any action in this regard. I extracted most of the historical and folklore information from books, some of which I had obtained from the British Library.

The Turkish Government only allowed Kurds to produce content that promoted Turkish nationalism and avoided any mention of non-Turkish identities. The official literature tried to erase the historical and cultural

heritage of Armenians and downplay the historical significance of Kurds. For example, when you read the official tourist guide of Mardin province, you won't find much information about Kurdish and Armenian residents, and almost everything is presented as Turkish. Even the introductions to mosques and tourist centres are written in line with the Government's perspective.

Many historical buildings in Turkey, now mosques, were originally churches, a fact well-known to Turkish historians and tourism advocates. These churches were often significantly altered – bell towers removed, minarets added – effectively erasing their Christian past and presenting a narrative of their existence beginning only with modern Turkey. Little was written about their earlier history, further obscuring their true origins.

Baydemir, likely aware of the project's potential political sensitivities, waited two years before allowing its publication. Osman, however, saw its potential beyond a simple travel guide, recognising its significance in showcasing the breadth, depth and cultural autonomy of Kurdistan across fifteen provinces. This was a considerable risk, as the Turkish Government is acutely sensitive to Kurdish issues and any historical or scientific acknowledgement of Kurdish identity and territory. Consequently, our research team faced increasing surveillance and scrutiny as the project progressed.

I had an eight-member team, but our numbers fluctuated according to the workload. We continued to work at the Voice of the Homeland while waiting for the electricity generator, computer and other equipment to arrive. Our location in Diyarbakır was particularly challenging because of frequent protests and skirmishes. The government and street protests often took place in our area, and sometimes petty crimes like pickpocketing occurred in the city centre. Every morning, as we reported for duty, we knew that if the Turkish army clashed with the PKK, the consequences would be felt in our region.

The DTP would announce that people should take to the streets to protest, and they would. The riot police would fire tear gas, and some areas, including the Sur district and its entry points, would be closed off and a curfew declared. The effects of the tear gas would reach us non-



Image 252: Map of 15 Kurdish provinces, from *Another Look at East and Southeast of Turkey* (2008).

protesters as well, and we would sometimes continue working with burning eyes.

As in other places, children were often exploited in the conflicts and protests. Some adults who were extreme supporters of the PKK would break large blocks or stones with hammers in areas close to the clashes between protesters and security forces, and give them to children to throw at the armoured vehicles. The children of Sur had become desensitised – throwing stones had become a form of entertainment for them.

During my stay, I discovered important aspects of life in the old part of Diyarbakır. In these areas, the municipality and the PKK had significant control, and each neighbourhood had its own local council. At first glance, these offices seemed to carry out municipal tasks, but in reality they were centres for recruiting, the ideological indoctrination of young people and resolving local disputes. These local councils had personnel who patrolled the neighbourhoods, reporting cases of municipal-law violations. The authorities were responsible for reporting incidents such as littering, unauthorised construction, damage to municipal properties and, occasionally, immoral acts.

Most of the PKK's sympathisers were not devout Muslims, and the female activists generally held radical views, but there was less acceptance of sexual freedom, and such cases were often reported. Alcoholic beverages and sexual relationships were still implicitly prohibited for the PKK's armed forces. It was no surprise that they wanted to implement this system in the city as well and oversee its execution. Municipal employees



Image 253: Women's Day. Diyarbakır, 8 March 2007.

knew that displaying their relationships or frequenting certain bars and clubs would lead them to the disciplinary committee, so they were cautious.

At first, I lived in the municipality's hotel, until I discovered that an Armenian's house in the Khanchepek neighbourhood had been renovated and converted into a library (not to be confused with the music house mentioned earlier). It had a beautiful courtyard and a lovely fountain. The space had two empty rooms, and I requested one of them. My request was approved, and I was given one room, while the other was allocated to the librarian, a disabled man from one of the cities around Diyarbakır. I purchased some of the equipment myself, the municipality provided the rest, and I settled into the library. Both of us liked to socialise. Sometimes, our colleagues and friends would come over on weekends, and we would talk in the courtyard until midnight. The librarian would play music for us, and we would share spicy Diyarbakır dishes together. Twice, the local office politely inquired about the noise at night, and I explained that friends had come over for dinner.

We thought we had no problem and the issue was resolved, until one of the cultural department managers at the Sur Municipality contacted us, saying, 'Let's have a cup of tea together.' In our culture, having a cup of tea

is a subtle hint that a significant conversation is about to take place. I was teaching English language classes to children at the cultural department in Sur. I assumed they wanted to discuss the classes, but it was something else entirely. They told us that the locals in Sur and Diyarbakır are deeply traditional people. Many of them have been forcibly displaced from their villages and have taken refuge in the city. A lot of their children have been PKK guerrilla fighters, killed or injured in combat, and are considered martyr families in local literature. They were offended by our dress code and party style and couldn't tolerate our lifestyle. They then recommended that we take a house in the city centre, which they referred to as the 'office', claiming it had a more 'cultural' atmosphere. This was, in fact, an implicit ultimatum, and we understood that we had to leave the library.

Zalim Düniya ('Cruel World'), the Miracle of Mutual Understanding

We were city-hopping, following the trail. My field observations suggested that people had relocated to cities due to security and economic concerns. As a result, many ancient churches, bridges and historical sites had been abandoned and left to decay. There was little research on these old structures. We faced serious restrictions when trying to enter certain regions, so visiting all these areas was time-consuming and risky from a security perspective. For instance, the Turkish army and gendarmerie near the Iran-Iraq border wouldn't allow us to venture farther.

Sometimes, Turkish security forces would suspect us of working for the PKK, and things would get worse if I mentioned that I was working with the Diyarbakır Municipality. Diyarbakır is the heart of Kurdish politics, and being associated with the municipality would only fuel their suspicions. I was forced to travel to certain mountainous and militarised regions where the presence of armed PKK groups was possible. Turkey has been at war with the PKK for forty years, and some border regions are under Government control; thus, there are restrictions on movement. As soon as the security forces discovered that I was from Diyarbakır and working with Osman Baydemir, I was instantly suspected of being affiliated with the PKK.

To facilitate my work, I adopted a different approach. I possessed a British press card from the National Union of Journalists, which had

earned me accreditation from the Ministry of Communications in Ankara. This allowed me to present myself as a foreign journalist, but I was obligated to publish a few articles every month to maintain my journalist visa. I would prepare news reports for Radio Global and other media outlets, and, in return, I could show my journalist visa to the authorities. Despite having this card and government-approved accreditation, I still faced harassment. They would search my bag, read my notes and scrutinise my work – all contrary to international standards for treating journalists. In short, I had to tread carefully, but I had no choice but to continue my work cautiously.

I have a memorable experience from these frequent, intentional harassments. In the Şırnak province, where there is ongoing war and conflict, the atmosphere is militarised and heavily guarded. This province boasts several unique historical churches, hot springs and ancient baths that few people had seen in years due to security concerns. We reached a roaring river, twenty kilometres from Şırnak, nestled in a deep valley flanked by towering mountains. At the bottom of the valley was a road leading to the small border town of Beytüşşebap. We had made the necessary arrangements to visit Beytüşşebap, but we knew that entering and exiting this town, situated at the intersection of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, would be extremely challenging.

We arrived at the gendarmerie checkpoint, which resembled a fortress with high walls bearing the marks of bullets and artillery shells. Several soldiers held up large mirrors to inspect the underside of our vehicle, then meticulously examined our identification cards. They announced that they would search our vehicle and take our belongings to the centre for further examination.

I retrieved my press card and showed it to them, saying, 'I have a press card, and you don't have the authority to take our belongings.'

During this standoff, a sergeant followed by an officer and eventually their commander entered the scene. After a radio call to the centre, the commander declared, 'I don't care what you've got in your bag. I won't let you pass!'



Image 254: Bitlis Road, 2007.

When they refused to grant us permission, they would say, 'It's for your own security.' I had grown sensitive to this phrase, and when I realised they were using it as an excuse to hinder our work, I said, 'You don't have a legal reason to prevent me from passing; I have a permit, and I want to go to Bitlis.'

When they saw I wouldn't back down, they told us to wait in the guardroom. In this situation, I refrained from speaking Turkish to avoid complicating matters further. Shirin, a municipal employee from GABB, was accompanying me and playing the role of a mediator. That day, I would explain my concerns, and Shirin would translate for the officer and vice versa. It was a comical situation. The officer had his hand on his chest, and his body language screamed, 'I'll never let you pass!' He then said, 'I'm suspicious of you. This is a military zone. What's the tourist importance of you coming from Britain and writing about it?'

I contacted the British Embassy and complained that I had been detained without reason. A few hours later, the governor of Şırnak province, due to the embassy's interventions, pressured the military personnel to release us, but they stubbornly refused, saying, 'If anything happens to this foreigner, we'll be held responsible!'

The military curfew would start at 6 pm, and we had no way of moving. It was around 5 pm. As the sun descended, the atmosphere in the room grew heavier. A young, lean soldier would regularly bring us tea. Each time, he would firmly plant his feet together and salute before leaving. Shirin, as always, was terrified and whispered, 'Kameel, we'll have to stay here tonight, and then the PKK will definitely come and read our epitaph!' Shirin's brother was a member of the PKK. Although he lived in Europe, she always worried that someone would discover the affiliation and cause trouble.

Shirin had a fascinating and sorrowful story in her family. Her grandfather, along with his brothers and other tribe members, had attacked an Armenian village on the shores of Lake Van during the Armenian Genocide, killing most of the men and forcibly taking the women and children out of the village. However, a few young girls were spared and eventually married the men from Shirin's tribe. Shirin's grandfather and uncle were forced to convert these girls to Islam and marry them. Later, when I visited Shirin's village, I met her grandfather and grandmother, who were still alive, and spoke with them. Her grandmother, Kemit, spoke in a Kurmanji dialect and recounted the tale with sorrow, saying, 'To save our lives, my sister and I were forced to marry the murderers of our father and brothers, and we had to live with them every night.'

The most heart-wrenching part was when she told this to her husband, Hajji Osman, he lowered his head and softly replied in Kurmanji, 'Lê tiştên wê demê wisa bûn, bêborîn/efû bike', which means, 'Forgive us; it was that way back then.'

The air was thick with tension as the commander of the garrison uttered his final words: 'You can't leave!'

With frustration and anger, I knocked my teacup on the saucer and exclaimed, 'Zalim dünya!' ('Oppressor of the world!')

To my surprise, he asked, 'Do you speak Turkish?'

As I began conversing with him in Turkish, his demeanour completely changed! I was amazed at how a shared culture and language could have such a profound impact on establishing a connection. I was no longer that stubborn Kameel Ahmady determined to have my way, and he was no longer the annoyed officer trying to stop me. We chatted amicably for a few minutes, and with respect he bid us farewell, even providing us with

an armoured escort to ensure our safe passage to Bait al-Shabab, some 15 kilometres away.

It was as if 'Zalim dünya' had brought us together. İbrahim Tatlıses, a famous singer, has a song called 'Zalim Dünya', and this phrase has become a colloquialism in Turkish, often heard in traditional Istanbul taverns. Broken-hearted lovers frequent these bars, drinking rakı and pounding their fists on the table, lamenting, 'Zalim dünya . . .'

Some parts of Turkey, despite modernisation and European influences, have retained their traditional aspects. I never thought that speaking Turkish and being able to converse with a military officer would be so crucial. This incident taught me a valuable lesson that I applied in other situations. That officer, in his sentry box, had looked me straight in the eye and said sincerely, 'I'm in a position of power here, with a military garrison, a checkpoint, a gun on my belt and fifty armed soldiers under my command, so I'm in charge here. No matter who you call, if I want to, I can harass you and you have no power to resist.'

As he had spoken, I had gazed out of the sentry box window, watching the sun set behind the towering mountains. Across from me sat the army commander, with Atatürk's image in a large frame behind him, seemingly endorsing his words. Although his words were somewhat melancholic, they were logical, and I accepted them, telling myself, 'Kameel, accept reality. He's in a position of power, and you can't change the situation from your current stance. You need to learn that sometimes there are other ways. Your pride might take a hit, but you need to learn how to open up paths.' My instinctive reaction to my inner thoughts led me to knock my tea cup on the saucer, breaking the tense atmosphere between us.



Image 255: Hajji Osman and his Armenian wife, Kemit, in the village of Pingenos, Bitlis, 2007.

Meeting with an NGO

Our initial estimate for the Kurdistan tourism book project in Turkey was two years, but it took almost three years to complete. The volume of work was much more than we had anticipated, and as we progressed, we discovered more fascinating aspects that were crucial to introducing this forgotten geography.

I spent almost three years in Diyarbakır, but from the second year on, I made several trips to Iran, gathering information about female genital mutilation/cutting. Meanwhile, I met an active NGO in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, who emailed me after watching my film *In the Name of Tradition* at the London Kurdish Film Festival, wanting to discuss it.

I met the NGO president in Istanbul. They wanted to use my film for promotional purposes to attract funders and show that female genital mutilation/cutting ('FGM') wasn't just prevalent in Iraqi Kurdistan, but also in Iranian Kurdistan. I agreed, on the condition that they preserve the credits and logo. I told them I'd be returning to Iran the following year to start a research project on FGM/C, and they promised to help me find a sponsor.



Image 256: Sheep-shearing festival, on the border of Turkey's Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan, 2007.

I don't deny that my field experiences with the tourism guidebook project were instrumental in my subsequent work. The strategies I employed and learned during that research greatly benefited me.

During my time in Diyarbakır, I travelled to most parts of Turkey, as well as Egypt and the Sudan. As I wanted to expand the tourism guide project to other Kurdish regions in neighbouring countries, I made several trips to Iraq and Syria. On one of my visits to the Kurdistan Region, I met with the minister of tourism and

showed him the sample work from Turkey's Kurdistan. He was impressed and expressed the need for a similar project in their region.

At the time, Kurdistan was doing well economically, receiving around 17% of the national oil revenue from Baghdad. The economy was flourishing, and the Government's coffers were full. Regional tensions had decreased. The president of the Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, along with his nephew and son-in-law Nechirvan, envisioned turning Erbil into another Dubai. Therefore, they were keen on developing their tourism and medical-tourism sectors. I scheduled a meeting with the minister of tourism, and we had preliminary discussions.

I also made two trips to Syria. The first was during the Eid al-Fitr break, when I headed to Syrian Kurdistan. One of the municipal employees from Diyarbakır, who was from the city of Jilanpenar on the Turkey-Syria border, invited me to spend the holiday with them. I accepted but told them I'd stay for a few days and then head to Syrian Kurdistan and the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. Syrian Kurdistan, also known as Rojava, is a lush region, mostly flat and filled with olive groves. The Kurdish population is concentrated in three provinces. Holding a British passport didn't pose a problem, and visas were issued at the border. Syria, however,



Image 257: The famous Aleppo Citadel. Syria, 2007.

was vastly different from Iraq, Iran and Turkey, and was plagued by systematic government corruption.

At the border, some Turkish truck drivers argued over who would take me across the border for free, as they wanted to smuggle cheap tea and oil from Syrian Kurdistan. They even offered me money to let them take me across the border out of turn, claiming they needed to escort a foreign tourist. I found myself surrounded by about twenty angry men, all vying to take me to their vehicles. The officials, meanwhile, demanded bribes ranging from $10 to $30 just to let me enter Syria and stamp my passport, citing frivolous reasons such as a broken computer or a power outage.

Finally, I stepped on Syrian soil. I was used to seeing large portraits of Khamenei and Khomeini in Iran and Atatürk in Turkey, but the number of portraits in Syria was far greater. Huge pictures of Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad, as well as government propaganda, were everywhere. Arabic slogans, flags and portraits of Hafez al-Assad, who had recently passed away, were ubiquitous.

Due to the sensitivity of the security police toward foreign presences, I quickly attracted the attention of a few Intelligence agents. I later realised that taxi drivers were usually informants for the Intelligence Service. Hatem, the friendly Kurdish taxi driver who took me to my destination, had already informed them of my presence over the phone at the beginning of our journey, using the excuse of refuelling.

With Hatem, I headed to Qamishli, but since the environment was sensitive, I eventually took the train to Aleppo, a large city. In the old-fashioned style of Arab countries, a person would stand in front of cinemas and urge people to come in and watch a film. The Baron Hotel in Aleppo was famous. It was where Atatürk had stayed when he was about to sign the famous peace treaty between Turkey and Syria. The hotel owner was proud of this fact and said that if I paid twenty dollars more, I could stay in the same room where Atatürk had stayed. I said I only wanted to take a few photos, and he replied that I had to pay $5 even for that! I thought that if I paid $20 and stayed in the same room, it would be cheaper for me. Of course, the hotel's fame wasn't only due to Atatürk's stay. Famous guests

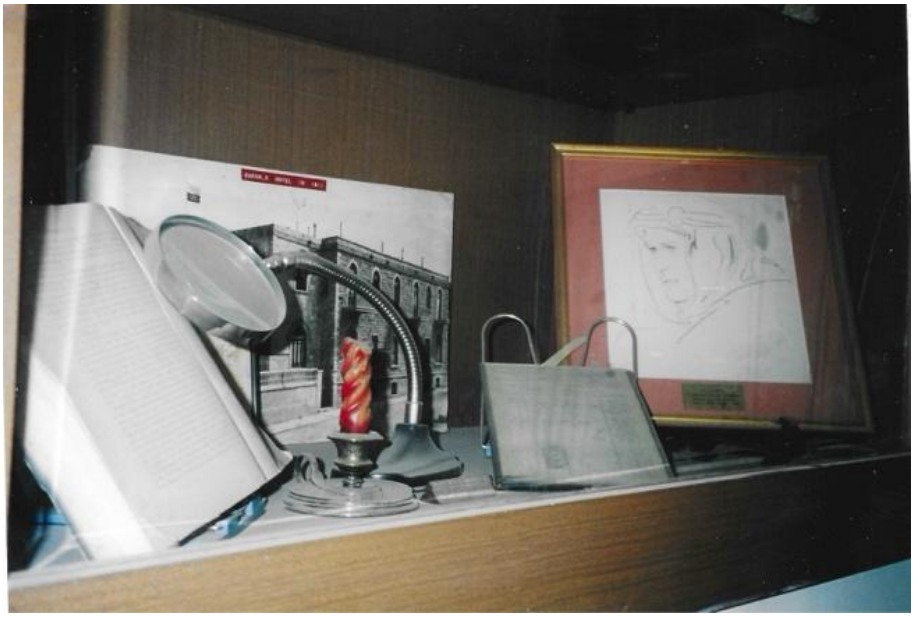


Image 258: Atatürk's room and Lawrence's. Aleppo, Syria, 2007.

like the Shah of Iran; Agatha Christie, the renowned English crime novelist; and TE Lawrence, the famous British officer and spy had also stayed there.

When I was working on my project in Turkey, people would tell me bitter stories about Atatürk capturing and executing Kurdish rebels and ordering massacres during internal wars. I slept in Atatürk's room and had more nightmares that night. There was a handwritten note by him in the room – he had written about the cultural differences between Aleppo and Istanbul.

After Aleppo, I went to Damascus, which had a charming atmosphere. A minority of Armenians and Christians lived peacefully alongside Arab Muslims. The Armenians and Christians would attract foreign tourists by selling jewellery and handicrafts in the city's central churches, and their neighbourhoods and markets were cleaner and wealthier than those in other parts of the capital.

One day, I also visited the shrine of Zainab, the daughter of Imam Ali, the first Shia imam. A group of Iranian tourists, mostly Farsi-speaking and from Yazd, Semnan and Isfahan, had come on a pilgrimage tour. They had crossed the border from Bazargan and gone to the Turkish city of Şanlıurfa, then entered the Turkish province of Hatay, and finally entered Syria, reaching the shrine of Zainab near Damascus.

Their pilgrimage, mourning and lamentation rituals were similar to those performed by Iranians in Mashhad, Qom and Karbala. It was astonishing how similar all these places and pilgrim behaviours were. From the design and architecture of the shrines to the style and method of pilgrimage, it was clear that the political-religious institutions, organisations and artists of the Iranian Shia community had left their mark on these sanctuaries.

I spent that night beside the shrine of Zainab, and the wailing and lamentations of the Iranian pilgrims continued until the early hours of the morning. The fascinating aspect of all this was that each bus had its own group of mourners and clerics, and each would recount the story of Zainab and her quest for justice in their own distinct way. Their words were filled with claims and endless rivalry: who could evoke the most tears from the people? It was striking to note that their eulogies were permeated with discriminatory undertones, perpetuating a dichotomy between Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

As a Sunni by birth, I was torn between staying and leaving, but I decided to stay and wander among them until the end of the night. Questions constantly swirled in my mind: 'Is it wise to respect all beliefs and faiths? Do I have a religion, or has it been imposed upon me? Isn't the foundation of religion based on inquiry, not imitation? If the principles of religion are based on inquiry, and someone has researched and not arrived at a particular conclusion, why are they considered an apostate? Why is the Quran one book, yet Islam has branched out into seventy-three sects? Which faith will lead us to heaven? Why do followers of different religions have absolute faith that their own is the best and only they will attain salvation? Why does Hussein only appear in the dreams of Shiites, Omar in the dreams of Sunnis, and Mary in the dreams of Catholics?' In the atmosphere surrounding the shrine, I was more perplexed than when I was studying religions at the Vatican.

The journey to Syria was so fascinating and challenging that I returned to the country at the first opportunity.

An Eerie Encounter with Another Ancient Civilisation

In Egypt I saw many things that made me wonder – although they were nothing like the breathtaking beauty of its historical landmarks and tourist



Image 259: Cairo, Egypt, 2008.

attractions, especially the three pyramids in Cairo and the majestic flow of the Nile River. The level of violence against women and even children in public spaces was beyond comprehension. We were a group of men and women who wandered together, and the women told us, 'Wherever we go, we're harassed!' We took notice and saw that, in the marketplace and public areas, men would touch women's chests or buttocks. Shopkeepers would use the excuse of selling local clothing and taking measurements to freely grope women. They would commit these acts more brazenly against foreign, unveiled female tourists. It seemed that the lack of hijab and being a non-Muslim made it easier for them to commit these acts.

Years later, when the Arab Spring (which the Iranian Government calls the Islamic Awakening) took place, an Al Jazeera news-network journalist was harassed in Tahrir Square, Cairo, and other journalists reported similar incidents. It reminded me of the things I had seen during my travels to these regions, especially in Egypt.

Three years later, I was invited by my friend Dr Mohab to a conference on female genital mutilation/cutting at Cairo University, and I saw that the

situation had not changed much. Foreign women accompanying us, albeit to a lesser extent, still experienced the same harassments.

The Bizarre and Bloody Events of Diyarbakır

During my time in Diyarbakır, several significant events unfolded, which I reported on in the form of news articles and cultural pieces. These events became a solid justification for me to continue my work in the region.

One such incident occurred in 2007 in a village between the provinces of Diyarbakır and Mardin. A man fell in love with his cousin, but she married another cousin. On the wedding day, the men from the first cousin's family massacred the guests and the newlyweds, killing twenty-three people in a matter of minutes. This news became a global sensation. Global, CNN, CBC and other media outlets contacted me to discuss the tragedy. I provided my analysis in the form of news reports and articles, highlighting the impact of violence and war in the region, the role of the government, poverty, illiteracy and the tribal and patriarchal systems.

The sensitive aspect of the incident wasn't the domestic violence or family feud, but its political undertones. The Turkish Government's arming of this clan was a topic that garnered everyone's attention.

In some regions, the Government had created a massive semi-official militia by bribing and arming mostly unemployed villagers, known as



Image 260: Report on CBC. Mardin, 2007.

görücü in Turkish, which translates to 'lookout'. To the Kurdish community, these görücü were traitors, serving the Government and betraying their people. These village guards, stationed in their own villages and military centres, were familiar with the local terrain and played a key role in the army's battles against the PKK.

I had witnessed this system in Syria and Iran, and it was also prevalent in Iraqi Kurdistan before Saddam Hussein's fall.

It seemed that many governments had created similar systems to counter Kurdish opposition forces. The army and the Government were under pressure to explain their roles in the massacre and take responsibility. They faced intense media scrutiny.

During that period, I reported on other incidents – such as Turkey's attacks on the Qandil Mountains or the bombing of military buses in Diyarbakır, which left many casualties – and my reporting didn't escape the police's notice.

The Troubles of Publishing a Book

Part of the research budget for the Kurdistan tourism guide was funded by the European Union, but, ultimately, we worked under the supervision of the Diyarbakır municipality. Every six months, I would travel to Ankara



Image 261: Protests against government policies. Hakkari, 2006.

or Istanbul to renew my visa.

One time, I was in the process of finalising the research section of the guidebook. They bluntly told me, 'The work you're doing will cause you trouble. The book you're preparing belongs to the GABB's mayors, and the map you're publishing only covers the Kurdish provinces. This is a form of segregation and a declaration of autonomy.' They then said they needed to review the book before publication and distribution.

I replied that these issues were beyond my control and that they needed to speak with the mayor, Osman Baydemir, but it was futile. They claimed the mayor wouldn't talk to them and they had no communication with him.

Internal and external conflicts have always existed in parallel to my work. When, after two and a half years of intensive work, the book was ready for publication, new challenges emerged. Groups within the municipality, particularly the cultural and tourism unit, realised the project was nearing completion, seemingly with success. They wanted to somehow sabotage our efforts.

It didn't take long for me to understand that people in the municipality were categorised into groups. They called our group *Osmanchi*, meaning supporters of Osman. The groups close to the DTP kept an eye on the Osmanchi. In reality, the DTP cadres were all-powerful, and the municipality represented them, with a duality in the mechanisms of cultural advisors and other advisors.

The cultural and tourism unit of Diyarbakır was headed by a lady whose father was a former member of parliament and had been imprisoned with Leyla Zana, a former MP. This meant they had influence everywhere and a sort of 'green passport'. Although Zana had been out of favour with the PKK for some time, this lady had become sensitive about our project. She knew that, when the guidebook was published, it would benefit the GABB (Union of Municipalities of the South-Eastern Anatolia Region) and bring them cultural prestige. More importantly, the metropolitan municipality of Diyarbakır, with its budget and mechanisms, had not been able to accomplish such a task, and this would raise questions about her and her institution. The rivalry between the GABB administrators and the municipality had created unhealthy competition,



Image 262: Celebration of the DTP's victory. Diyarbakır, 2009.

and I found myself entangled in obstacles and challenges that had nothing to do with me.

As they say, the fish had reached its tail, and the project was near completion, but internal and partisan disputes had just begun. One day, Kak Osman summoned me to his office. He looked worried and asked how much work was left. I said one month. He told me to increase my cooperation with the municipality's tourism department.

I had already made up my mind and immediately said, 'What should I do? You know we worked independently, and you yourself approved that the GABB would handle the project. Now that it's almost finished, I cannot hand it over to them. We haven't discussed this before, and it's necessary to be clear and transparent about the problem.'

Osman was under pressure, and my colleagues told me to finish the project quickly, but I couldn't sacrifice the result of my hard work due to the conflicts of others and hand it over to people in the municipality.

As these conflicts continued, the editor and graphic designer changed their approaches. Both were professionals, but because they were from Istanbul, they were excluded from the process, and then a controversy arose about where the book should be published. It required expertise to print such a book, and it was supposed to be published by one of the most

prominent tourism printers in Istanbul. The same group that had meddled before insisted that it should be published in Diyarbakır. Their excuse was that the profit from the book would benefit their own company. If it was published in Istanbul, the money would go to the Turks. I knew the obstacles came from the cultural unit and was very upset. I saw the local printing house, and they were talented and good people, but printing this book was not their job. They could publish the municipality's internal magazines and party publications, but not a professional tourism project of this magnitude with numerous photos and graphics.

I lodged a complaint with Osman Baydemir. I said the Diyarbakır print house was incapable of printing the book and would ruin it. He fell silent, a very long silence – one of the longest I remember. This stage of the project was crucial for me, and I was waiting for his final verdict. Osman seemed to be wrestling with himself. He knew we had to give the book to a professional print house, but if he did, the pressures would increase, and he would be criticised for allocating the Diyarbakır budget to the 'Turkish pockets', despite the existing discriminations.

Finally, he said, 'You know how things are. Unfortunately, I cannot agree with you!'

The discussion was over. Since I couldn't trust the local graphic designer and printer, I asked two members of my team to oversee the process. We reviewed every section of the book until the end. Finally, we also hired an inspector from Istanbul to control the process. We went through a long and tiresome process to print the book. After many troubles and stress, we found a print house in Istanbul with some Diyarbakır natives who printed the book for us. The book was printed in Istanbul and published.

A Troublesome Newruz!

The book, *Another Look at East and Southeast of Turkey*, was written in English and Turkish and later translated into Kurdish, as well. It was one of the most up-to-date travel guides to this region, covering topics beyond tourism, such as social and anthropological issues. Richard Lim, one of the prominent writers from *Lonely Planet*, who became a close friend, was the consultant and editor.

The book's publication coincided with the 2009 Newruz celebrations. There was supposed to be a big festival on the outskirts of Diyarbakır, and

we were going to launch the book there. The Diyarbakır Newruz Festival is a grand event with around one million attendees. Usually, the afternoons turn into massive protests against the Turkish Government, eventually ending with police intervention.

I was busy with the book's printing in Istanbul, but I wanted to attend the Newruz programme. On the last day, the book's printing faced a problem, and I reached the airport late, missing my flight. All flights were full, as many were heading to the famous Newruz celebrations. With great difficulty, I found a last-minute ticket.

Every year, politicians and diplomats from Europe and other countries attend the Newruz celebrations. I was anxious to arrive and showcase the book's outcome. I had told Osman to distribute some books as gifts to the guests. The plan was to take the foreign guests on a tour of the Kurdish Region for a week or two, creating an opportunity for them to use the book as a travel guide, especially since it was published in English. The cultural arms of the PKK were very successful in attracting and influencing



Image 263: The million-strong Newruz celebrations in Diyarbakır, 2009.



Image 264: English and Turkish versions of the book. Istanbul, 2009.

European representatives and left-wing politicians, a method and success that many other Kurdish parties lacked in the Kurdish regions.

I knew that Mayor Baydemir's office was busy, but I handed the book sample to him, his deputies and the cultural department. The outcome was a magnificent, full-colour book with glossy paper.

A contradictory and eerie atmosphere had been created. Manaf, Mayor Baydemir and the entire production team were overjoyed, but those who didn't want the project to succeed were sulking, flipping through the book with scowls, pretending it didn't matter. It was tense, and previous incidents had left me anxious. I kept telling myself, 'Now they'll find a problem.' Fearful of those individuals, we had reviewed the book's words countless times, but I still had my doubts.

The book was distributed at the Newruz Festival and received a positive response. Foreign guests welcomed the book, and I could see Mayor Baydemir and the GABB mayors were delighted. However, our joy was short-lived. A few days later, a warning letter from the prosecutor's office

was sent to the municipality and Mayor Baydemir, stating that they had carried out an illegal project outside the municipal-service framework.

The Turkish Ministry of Culture had also complained about me as the research supervisor. The first accusation was that I had written the word 'Newruz' in Kurdish Latin, with a 'w', which doesn't exist in the Turkish alphabet. Apparently, this had a political message, and even a campaign was formed around the 'w'. Another issue was that, until then, the Turkish Government had not given cultural legitimacy and importance to Newruz, but we had crossed that red line.

Newruz has a cultural significance in Iran, but in Turkey, it's more of a political gathering. The Newruz ceremonies in other regions were limited to ancient games and fire-lighting, but in recent years, they have been elevated to include Kurdish dances and festivities in large groups, which seemed to be inspired by Newruz in other parts of Kurdistan. In Kurdish Turkey, Newruz has become heavily politicised, and people gather in urban spaces or large squares, holding political rallies. Famous singers perform, and people dance in Kurdish attire.

Another accusation against me was the definition I had provided of ancient Newruz in the book, which was deemed to be against national security. Another was the use of Kurdish and Armenian names for cities and villages. They claimed the idea behind this project was security-orientated and political. The party and municipality used the book for propaganda purposes, and the opposing individuals would say, 'Look, trouble has started!'

The Newruz Festival in Diyarbakır continued for about a week, with different groups from inside and outside the city performing in various locations. The third or fourth programme that year was the official book launch of *A Look at Eastern and Southeastern Turkey*. The book ceremony was held at one of the municipality's cultural centres. The night before the ceremony, I had a meeting to discuss the book launch with Kak Ahmed Türk, the then-secretary-general of the DTP; Mr Selahattin Demirtaş, the current party leader, who is now in prison; Kak Osman Baydemir; and a few prominent members of the GABB.

Some people were saying that we should tone down the ceremony, since the media was present, and we should keep everything calm. Others believed that we should take advantage of the opportunity to maximise political, promotional and tourist benefits. Osman Baydemir, Ahmed Türk



Image 265: The book launch and receiving a plaque of appreciation from Mayor Osman Baydemir. Diyarbakır, 2009.

and I were scheduled to speak. I was to present the objectives and methodology of the research in a PowerPoint format, followed by Baydemir, as the mayor of Diyarbakır, and Türk, as the head of the GABB, criticising the discrimination, lack of development and government investment in the tourism industry in Kurdish regions. Türk was also going to discuss two issues: why Kurdistan doesn't receive an equal share of the national budget and wealth, and how Kurds should utilise their internal capacities more effectively.

Finally, the day of the event arrived. A large crowd had gathered, including many experts and high-ranking officials. Almost all the mayors of the GABB region and their representatives were present, as they felt they had a stake in the project. Representatives from the Ministry of Tourism and the Governor's Office also attended. In front of the cameras, those who had longstanding feuds and animosity toward each other were trying to pretend to have peaceful and friendly relationships. Many media outlets were also present, from CNN Türk to Al Jazeera Network. I had established media connections and had invited a number of foreign journalists in Turkey to attend.

I usually speak from the heart when I'm behind the microphone. That day, I deviated from the programme and touched on topics that weren't planned, which seemed to surprise some group members. I didn't deliver a radical speech; instead, I shared my experiences from the region and Kurdistan in Turkey, highlighting the vast discrimination that exists and how the enormous tourism potential of these regions has been sacrificed to

ethnic- and identity-based politics. I said we tend to forget that it's these civilisations that have built cities and social spaces along their paths. We have no right to erase them or alter their histories to suit our own ideologies and create new, unrealistic concepts.

We've turned churches into mosques and mosques into ideological centres, and under the pretext of combating ethnicity, nation and race, we've sought to assimilate and erase identities, languages, foods and cultures.

I also targeted the nationalist slogan of the Republic of Turkey, 'One language, one flag, one homeland', stating that if such a slogan were to be uttered in any European country, individuals would be accused of promoting fascism, even Nazism. Yet, in Turkey, a country that is a NATO member and aspires to join the European Union, this slogan is proudly displayed at the entrance of every city and town. According to international laws, which Turkey has also signed, all people should have equal rights, but they don't.

The media's response to my words was ambivalent. Some Turkish media outlets attacked me, questioning how I dared to speak my mind as a guest in their country. 'You're a guest in Turkey; you shouldn't take such a stance,' they said.

Another group, mostly local, retorted, 'We should be able to express ourselves, too, but we don't have a British passport, and we can't!'

This is a characteristic of dictatorial societies, where diversity in ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and culture is often viewed as a threat to the central government. Not only do they not recognise this diversity, but also they combat it with all their might, striving to assimilate all citizens into a monolithic whole.

This attempt at homogenisation was the same bitter and suffocating feeling I had experienced in Iran, and now, after all these years, I was facing it again in another corner of Kurdistan. It was as if they wanted to turn us into Fars in Iran, and now they wanted to turn us into Turks.

Ahmed Türk's words, as always, were political, directly criticising the president, his party and the system's inefficiencies. When Osman Baydemir's turn came, he spoke sharply, using the map we had prepared to show the scope of our work. The map highlighted the fifteen Kurdish provinces, which stood out more prominently than the rest of Turkey's provinces. With a little attention, it was clear that the designers had subtly



Baydemir'den Kürtçe ve Türkçe iller haritası

Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi Belediyeler Birliği Başkanlığı'nca (GABB) hazırlanan "Doğu ve Güneydoğu'ya Farklı Bir Bakış" rehberi tanıtıldı. GABB ve Diyarbakır Büyükşehir Belediye Başkanı Osman Baydemir, Sümerpark Resepsiyon Salonu'nda düzenlenen tanıtım toplantısında, "bir zamanlar üzerinde yaşayan topluluklara, kavimlere bereket, bolluk, bilgi ve ilham kaynağı veren bu eşsiz coğrafyanın kara talihinin dönmesi, yeniden üzerindeki topluluklara mutluluk ve bereket vermesi için hak ettiği noktaya gelmesi" gerektiğini söyledi. Baydemir, hazırlanan rehberin 13 il kapsadığını da ifade etti. Baydemir'in gösterdiği haritadaki illerin Türkçe ve Kürtçe isimlerinin birlikte yer alması da dikkati çekti. Baydemir'in daha sonra bazı ilçelerin altlarına Kürtçe isimlerini yazdığı görüldü. ■ DİYARBAKIR

Image 266: Osman Baydemir writing in Kurdish on the map. 2009.

emphasised Kurdistan on the Turkish map. Everyone knew that this was a red line for the Turkish Government. We had included the map in the book, but without any intention of stirring controversy. However, it was now out of our hands, and the media and municipal officials had decided to print it in large dimensions and plaster it on the walls.

Baydemir, infuriated by the Government's complaint and the prosecutor's summons regarding the book, spoke about the municipality's limited power and how the Governor's Office controlled the budget, always viewing Kurds through a political and discriminatory lens. He took a marker and circled the names of some cities and villages written in Kurdish, Armenian and Turkish on the map. He even translated a few places from Kurdish Kurmanji to Zaza, playfully pointing out our mistakes. Radical Turkish media outlets published this part of Baydemir's

speech and the photo of him writing on the fictional map of an independent Kurdistan as their main headline.

Aside from all the provocations and political speeches of that time, usually, on Newruz, Abdullah Öcalan's message from prison would be released, or his recorded voice would be broadcast on the morning of the new year. However, that year, the book's launch created additional controversy that continued for several days. I spent two or three days packing up the office, preparing to transfer everything to the GABB and officially shut down the project.

Chapter Seventeen:
Returning to Iran Without a Choice

I knew that someday I would return to Iran. My trip to Kurdistan, Turkey and my proximity to Iran had made this thought more solid in my mind. I had a vague plan for my return, but I didn't think that one of life's bitter twists would bring me back home so suddenly. Then, out of the blue, Kamyar died in a car accident, and when I received the news, I was overwhelmed with grief. I wanted to rush back to my family as soon as possible.

A voice within me whispered, 'You must stay in Iran now.' I knew my father couldn't bear the loneliness again. He had already lost my mother and young Kamyar, and I understood the terrible emotional state he was in. I told myself, 'You must return and be a support for your father and family. You have no choice; fate has made its decision; and the only path ahead of you is to accept your destiny.' I knew, like any human being, I had the right to choose and could refuse to return to Iran, but I didn't grant myself that right. Kamyar's bitter and painful death had made the decision for me.

This return, although bitter, was good for my family, and it took my professional life in a different direction. I gained many experiences and saw Iran from a different perspective. Of course, sometimes I wonder what would have happened if my father had known what hardships lay ahead for me after this return. Perhaps he would have forced me to stay in London, but who knows about tomorrow? No one.

Farewell to Kamyar, Forever



Image 267: Kamyar's wedding. Piranshahr, 2009.

21 June 2009. It was about 2:30 in the morning when my phone rang. I didn't answer, but it kept ringing again and again. I thought it might be from the municipality. Maybe the police had raided our storage and confiscated the books or something similar had happened. I was so tired that I preferred not to know the details. The phone's continuous ringing finally made me surrender, and I answered it. It was Kak Ibrahim, my cousin's son. He first asked about my wellbeing and then calmly said, 'Kamyar has had an accident. He's doing well, but he wants you to be by his side.'

It was clear that there was more to the story. Anxious and worried, I said, 'I'm not a child, Kak Ibrahim! Tell me what happened! Is he alive or dead?'

My uncle's son-in-law snatched the phone from Kak Ibrahim and said, 'He died on the spot!' Although he expressed his condolences, I was deeply disturbed by the phrase he used: 'His life was cut short.' Even now, I irrationally harbour resentment toward him. I don't know if it's because of the bad news he delivered or the way he delivered it.

Kamyar was only twenty-one years old. He had just finished his military service and had turned our father's boutique into a successful business. I wasn't in Iran at the time, but I knew how enthusiastically he was working. Six months before his death, he had married with great fanfare and had a great zest for life. He had gone to Tabriz to buy goods for his shop when he became the victim of a car accident a few kilometres from Mahabad.

Without hesitation, I decided to rush back to Iran. Everything was racing through my mind. When I left Iran, Kamyar was just a child. I hadn't witnessed his growth, but in recent years he had taken charge of things and become our father's support. Everyone loved him. He was kind, carefree and beautiful, and had a strong presence in family life.

I told myself, 'Your responsibility has doubled.' It wasn't hard to imagine that my father would think he had lost his old-age companion. I knew this calamity would destroy him.

I immediately contacted Manaf and told him I had to go to Iran, and he informed Osman Baydemir about the situation. They said, 'Whatever help you need, just let us know. The municipality's car is not available, but we can rent a private car to take you to the Iranian border.'

A few months of my house contract in Diyarbakır were left, but I decided to leave earlier than planned. Manaf, my assistant, and a few friends who had heard the news helped me gather my belongings and take them to a friend's house. Everything was packed and ready in an hour. At 6 am, they arranged for a taxi to take me to the Sero border. For the first time, I was going to this border; I usually used the Bazargan border, which was farther but more official. The driver and my assistant decided on the route we would take. I was extremely anxious, and all the events that had happened after my mother's death came flooding back. I kept calling my family to let them know where I was. Again, the same calls, the same waiting and the same questions about when I would arrive . . .

As we drove down the seemingly endless road, the driver sped along at over 130 kilometres per hour. At one point, on a stretch of road winding above the Sharankoh province, he lost control due to excessive speed and drowsiness, veering off the road and heading toward the valley. He managed to stop the car by crashing into a roadside railing. In that instant, I felt death with all my being. My insides turned cold, and my stomach numbed. I froze. Was this what death felt like? Kamyar had experienced it the night before, and so had my mother and grandmother. For a fleeting

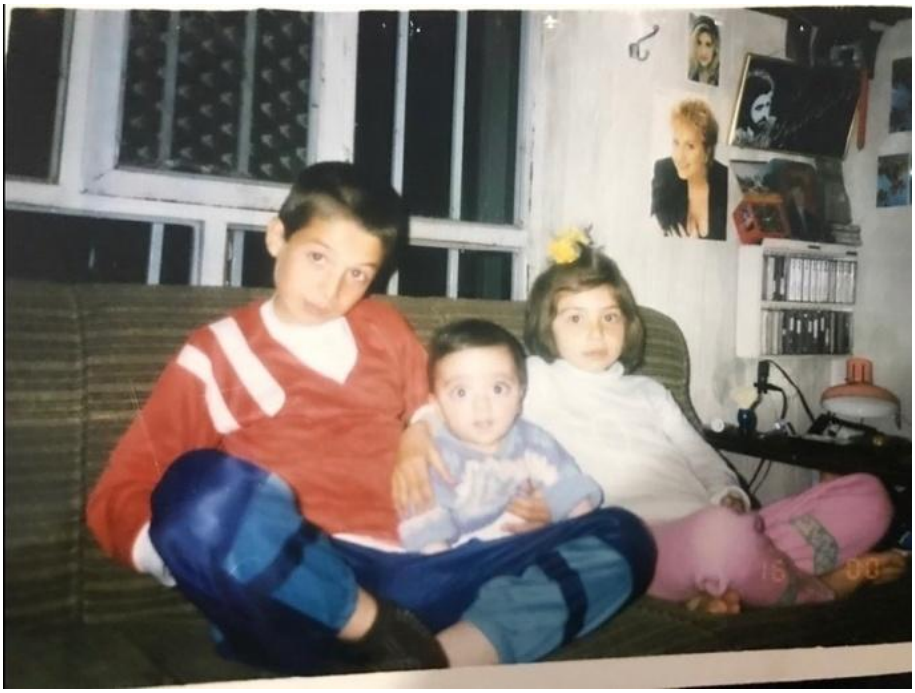


Image 268: My brother Kamyar, my nephew Pouya and my sister Kani. 1999.

moment, I thought of my father, wondering how he would cope if I died and he lost two sons in one day.

I hadn't been to Iran in a while, and I was overwhelmed with work pressure, especially with the project deadline approaching. About ten kilometres from the Iranian border, I realised my passport had expired. Around 2 pm, I bid farewell to the driver and my assistant at the border and stood in line with an expired passport . . .

A police officer noticed my distressed state. He pulled me out of the line and asked what was wrong. He was from Urmia and spoke Turkish, so I explained the situation to him. He was a kind man who tried to help me. He sympathised with me and said, 'These things happen to everyone. I'll let you through, and I won't take your passport. Just write a letter promising to go to the Urmia passport office later, explain everything and renew your passport.'

I pleaded with him not to send me to the passport office because they had given me a hard time the previous time.

He said, 'The situation has changed. The country is in an election frenzy, and things are not like they were before!' He stamped my passport and led

me out of the small border-control building. He hailed a passenger car and told the driver, 'Kak Ghaffour, this gentleman's brother has passed away. Please take him to Urmia quickly.'

The driver, who was waiting for passengers, agreed, but I wish he hadn't! He was an odd or, rather, a greedy man. I had rented the car, but he kept stopping on the way, buying yoghurt, doogh, and other things in different villages. He didn't care that I was in a hurry, my brother had just passed away and I was crying, begging him not to stop. Fed up with his behaviour, I said, 'You're being unfair. I rented the car to get there quickly, but you're thinking about buying things for your home!'

It was pointless. He would say, 'Just one minute', and continue with his shopping.

I finally arrived in Urmia and, from there, I got another car that would take me to Piranshahr. This one was different, with a yellow plate. The driver had a GPS device, which was only a week old, and drove as if he were in Switzerland. He claimed he never exceeded 85 kilometres per hour, fearing a fine. He even had a large thermos of tea beside him, from which



Image 269: On my arrival at the women's mourning gathering. My paternal home, Piranshahr, 2009.

he constantly refilled his cup and offered me some. For the entire two-and-a-half-hour journey, he sipped tea and kept a close eye on the speedometer.

Throughout the journey, my cousin Omid stayed in touch with me. When we arrived, I saw him waiting for me at the terminal, his eyes fixed on me. He hadn't told anyone what time I would arrive and had come alone. I was in a hurry to get to the mosque, but he wanted to calm me down and take me on a tour of the city. I told him I hadn't made it to the funeral and needed to go home first, then to the mosque. I wasn't in the right state of mind. Kamyar's death and the way the family handled the tragedy were different from my mother's passing. Kamyar had died young, having just gotten married, started a new business and begun his life. In traditional societies, they mourn the death of the young with wailing and self-flagellation. Kamyar's passing must have triggered similar reactions.

When the family saw me, the wailing and lamentations resumed. One by one, they hugged me and cried. I could see how much my sisters were struggling, and Kani was devastated, having lost not only her brother, but also her childhood friend. I saw Kamyar's wife for the first time, weeping like a spring cloud and distraught. My aunts were also overcome with grief, and the atmosphere was heavy.

Once again, some of the men in the family tried to take me away from the women, but I refused to let them. I sat among my sisters and aunts, trying to calm them down. I realised how much my role had changed, and I was now speaking and behaving like the eldest son of the family.

I could see the immediate impact of my actions on the spirits of my sisters and those around me. When they saw me taking on a supportive role, they calmed down even more. They didn't know what turmoil was going on inside me – or perhaps they did . . . We were all in this together.

Shattering of My Father

I saw my father at the mosque, staring blankly into space. When I called out to him, he wouldn't even turn his head. In our first moment together, he collapsed into my arms. We both just cried, his head raised slightly to look at my face. He was shattered and weakened, hiding in my arms like a child. His eyes were red from crying, his chest heaved with sobs and his heart raced.

For parents, there is no greater tragedy than losing a young child. My father was consumed by this grief and was more broken than he could manage. He sat beside me on the bench, stunned and lost in his own world.

As people came to pay their respects, we stood up, according to tradition, and recited the Fatiha together. I pretended to pray and follow the rituals, but my heart was in turmoil, thinking about everything: my father's state, my sisters' emotional wellbeing, the food and accommodations for the guests . . . I could hear the whispers around me, asking what I was doing – whether I would stay or not. Kani and Father were the only ones left, and I heard them saying that I had returned after all these years and should stay. I wasn't bothered by what others were saying. I knew I had to be there for my father and family.

It hadn't been hours since my arrival when the news spread like wildfire, and, just like at my mother's funeral, the condolences and kisses began. I couldn't bear it. Under the pretext of going to the toilet, I escaped. My father followed me with his eyes, as if he would lose his patience in my absence. I hid myself in the mosque's toilet, listening to the sound of my own heartbeat, anxious and uneasy – a state I knew all too well. I was about to make a crucial decision.

I returned, sat beside my father calmly and, embracing him, said, 'Father, look into my eyes!' I held his hands firmly and continued, 'Father, I will never leave you!' Right there, I made a vow to never abandon him, and I kept that promise until the end of his life.

At first, he didn't believe me; he only looked at me. Then, with a heavy heart, he said, 'No, Kameel! You're saying this for my sake!'

I protested, 'Believe me! Now, I want us to sit together firmly and upright on this bench. We are the hosts, and these people are here for us. Let's fulfil our duties.'

It seemed he believed my words, as he emerged from his dejected state and became a different person. I was overjoyed to have given him hope, and right then I realised I must never break my promise.

On the second day of the mourning ceremony, before the mosque rituals began, an incident occurred that made my blood boil. One of the family members of Kamyar's wife contacted us, saying they would come to take her away. I asked, 'Where will they take her? What is this behaviour? What does it mean? How can they take the daughter-in-law of a household on the second day of mourning?'

Some relatives said, according to tradition and custom, since her husband had passed away, she was no longer the woman of this household. Moreover, from an Islamic perspective, she was a woman without a husband and had rights she could claim.

I said, 'Fine! I don't know the Islamic details, and I need to ask, but here, this is her home, and today is the second day of her husband's mourning. My brother's body isn't even cold yet; how can they take her? Where does this level of ownership and guardianship come from?'

Kamyar's marriage had been a love story marred by old traditions. I was in Diyarbakır when Kamyar got married. To be honest, I should say he eloped with his love, and after much dispute and mediation by the elderly, peace was established between the two families. However, despite the mediation, our two families had never established a rapport. According to Sunni tradition, they had obtained the father's permission to perform the contract in his absence, with the uncle of the bride acting as proxy. I had been classmates with the bride's uncle in the past. Both of us tried to calm the situation and convince the bride's father and grandfather to talk. Although we seemed to succeed on the surface, it hadn't even been three days since Kamyar's death when they started making moves to take the bride away.

I sent a message to her family via her uncle: 'This is an insult to us and everyone. This woman has been crying all day, with her face bruised and swollen. How can you take her away from her home and life? Do you want to settle accounts with someone whose hand is already severed from this world? What have we, or my father, done wrong? Don't you know how heavy a psychological blow this would deal us? She is the only memory left of Kamyar. Be patient, and after the mourning ceremony we'll find the right path together and act accordingly.'

I didn't let my father know about this. I knew it would torment him. A few hours later, another message arrived, insisting they would take her. I sent another peaceful message, and this time the response was: 'Tell that foreign boy this isn't Europe. We'll take our daughter out and bring her home!'

Her aunt had come with a message and was sitting in the women's gathering, waiting to take our bride away. I was at the mosque when they came to fetch me, telling me that my brother's in-laws had arrived and things were getting out of hand. I rushed home and told the family, who

had been playing a destructive role in this saga from the start, 'This is her home and life. Didn't we make peace? See how your daughter is crying and pleading to stay. Give her some time.'

They replied, 'No way! We want to take her with us.' Eventually, they forcibly took her away. Later, I heard something that made me even angrier. Apparently, one of their excuses was that, if their unmarried daughter stayed at our house, she might develop feelings for me, and I might marry her off.



Image 270: The grave of Kamyar.

When my father returned from the mosque and saw that they had taken her away, he cried even more. I was relieved that this incident had occurred in his absence, and he didn't have to witness the heartbreaking moment when his daughter-in-law was dragged away, crying, with my sisters clinging to the door, begging her not to leave: 'Don't go! You remind us of Kamyar!'

For me, this level of interference in a person's private life was unacceptable and appalling. In traditional cultures, the people surrounding a woman wield immense power over her life. I saw how that poor girl had become a tool for settling scores, and I was also angry with her for lacking independence. Later, with a broader and deeper perspective, I realised that the process of socialisation or acculturation of that girl as a woman in a traditional system couldn't have enabled her to develop an independent and powerful personality that could defend her rights, autonomy and choices. In such societies, there is no supportive legal framework, and women are often viewed as possessions or commodities. However, we often forget that it's not just some men who wield power over women. Often, women themselves exercise power over others, and in this case it was her aunt who had perpetrated more cruelty against her than any man. My expectations from her were unrealistic and unfair, although she was crying out loud not to be taken away. She was, after all, a product of a traditional society, and her cries fell on deaf ears.

A short while later, they married her off to the same aunt's son – the very boy who had been seeking her hand from the start. It was a sorrowful

settling of scores. What's more striking is that the same aunt played a significant role in determining how much of the bride price she would receive. She knew that our bride would become her own daughter-in-law and pursued the matter with calculated interest.

The behaviour of the bride herself was also astonishing to me. A girl who had been Kamyar's wife for six months, had stood up against her family for my brother, loved him passionately, and wept at his death, was now, just two weeks later, sitting in the family home, calculating the bride price and Kamyar's bank account with such ease that it was hard to believe she was the same lovesick girl mourning her dead beloved. I said to her, with sadness, 'How you've changed so quickly', and thought to myself that, when personal and material interests come into play, people can transform so rapidly.

Three days had passed since Kamyar's death, and we still had guests arriving for the condolence ceremony. In our region, it was customary for the bereaved family to stay at home for a week to ten days after the passing, receiving visitors from near and far who come to pay their respects and offer condolences. The mourning rituals varied, but one of them was to abstain from shaving, listening to music and watching TV in the deceased's



Image 271: Kamyar. Mahabad, 2008.

home. In recent years, these customs had been relaxed, and people were no longer forced to watch TV at someone else's house, as we had to back in the day.

The televised election debates had just begun, and the excitement in the air reminded me of the police officer's words at the border of Urmia. Since we didn't turn on the TV at home, I caught some of the debates at my aunt Maryam's house – she had moved from Piranshahr to the city.

Something unprecedented was happening in the Islamic Republic. I was astonished. Was this really Iran? Were these events unfolding in Iran, where two candidates were speaking so candidly and unabashedly? Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sat facing Mir-Hussein Mousavi, who had a rich revolutionary background, holding up a photo of his wife in front of the camera and shouting away. The opponent would counter with statistics of Ahmadinejad's corruption and misconduct during his tenure as Tehran's mayor, and they would engage in open, unbridled conversation! It was bizarre to me, who had been away from Iranian society for so long. I think it was bizarre to everyone, and everywhere people were talking about the debates. They were amazed and, of course, delighted. As they would say: 'Let the dogs bark, and you just watch from a distance!'

Kamyar had been in an accident at a place called Pasgah-e Bardeh Rshan, twenty kilometres from Mahabad. They had kept all his belongings at the hospital, saying that the next of kin should come to take care of the funeral expenses and collect the medical examiner's report for the insurance company. It was a week after his death that I went to the hospital. They handed me his mobile phone, notebook, key and a few other items that had been in his pocket. There was also a gold necklace he had bought for his wife from Tabriz, inscribed with 'Dedicated to my love'. All these belongings were stained with blood. Although I didn't know Kamyar well, he was my brother, and I couldn't help but sniff all his belongings during the entire journey, while my eyes turned black. Those dried bloodstains devastated me. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. Whenever people talked about him, I would leave the room.

Kamyar was the beloved of my aunts and family members, and they cherished him dearly. Kamyar was a lovable, laid-back, carefree person. When I had returned for my mother's funeral, he was a teenager. I had bought a leather jacket from Italy that I really loved and was wearing it. I also had my camera with me. I wanted to go to Tehran to follow up on my

passport, but I realised my jacket and camera were missing. No one said anything until Kani finally spoke up: 'Kamyar wore your jacket and went to the mountain with his friends.' The clothes didn't fit him, and they were totally unsuitable for the mountain. He had even taken my father's mobile phone.

I called him and asked, 'Kamyar, where are my clothes? Where's my camera?'

He hung up the phone in fear!

I called again, almost shouting, 'Bring me my jacket. I'm running late!'

But he switched off his phone.

Finally, I wore my father's clothes and headed to Tehran. Kani would say that, when Kamyar found out, he fled in a state of panic, throwing on his shoes and escaping with his friends in a Jeep.

When I returned a few days later, Kamyar returned my jacket, worn, scuffed and no longer the same. I said nothing. For a while, I walked around quietly, feeling an odd heaviness inside me, as if the sunlight itself had dulled. It wasn't just about the jacket; it was the sadness of seeing how careless he was and how distant we'd all become since my mother's death.

Kamyar was a carefree person. For exams, he wouldn't bring a pen. He would wear his shoes haphazardly and forget to wear a jacket, even in winter. His love was sleeping. Both Kani and Kamyar were bear-like, deeply in love with sleep, and we four older siblings were vastly different from them. It was as if they belonged to another world.

Running the Shop During the Tense Election Period of 2009

A week had passed since Kamyar's death, and my father's shop remained closed. On the eighth day, some nearby shopkeepers came to our house and said, 'Kak Karim, you must accept reality and not pause your business. This grief is heavy, but you've been a shopkeeper all your life, and you must get back to work. We've come to take you and reopen the shop for you.'

This is a tradition that I believe is also common in other regions. According to this old custom, the shopkeepers collected my father and I, took the bunch of keys and opened the shop for us. We gathered around, read the Fatiha; then they handed over the shop to us. These rituals not only help the bereaved pass through the crisis and mourning phase more

easily, but also, from a sociological perspective, increase social solidarity among people who form an identity group.

The night before, our elderly relatives had come and asked my father to shave his beard. Of course, it wasn't just a request. They would sit and wait for him to do it. No matter how many times my father said 'tomorrow' or 'some other time', they would say, 'You must shave your beard right now.'

For women, there's a similar tradition of bringing colourful scarves and headscarves, saying they're 'taking condolences', and exchanging the gifts with the black headscarves worn by the women.

That night, my father shaved his beard, but I was so shy that, when they told me to shave my beard, I didn't know what to do. In short, the presence of the shopkeepers complemented the previous night's rituals, and we reopened the shop. For me, who had frequented that shop since childhood, it was a familiar feeling, and something inside me said, 'You're supposed to be a shopkeeper for a while.' To show my father that I was committed to the promise I made at the mosque, I stayed and ran the shop.

Everyone was laughing – one saying, 'Kameel, after all this time abroad and studying, you've become a shopkeeper again', and another saying, 'Can you really sell manteaus here?'

I was left wondering what to do, as I didn't know the prices and had never sold manteaus before. I had to take the manteaus down from the racks, fold them and present them to the customers, speaking in a language they could understand and showing them different models. The customer would constantly ask if something was big or small, so they could buy one. Besides manteaus, we had trousers and scarves for a mix of urban and rural customers. The rural manteaus were different, and Kamyar's modern and trendy options didn't appeal to rural tastes. I found it fascinating that wearing manteaus had become a substitute for traditional clothing among Kurdish women and girls, even in rural areas.

In the months that followed, my father and I would often disagree when we went shopping in Urmia and sometimes Tehran for the store. My father would say, 'Don't buy these. Women don't like them, and they don't wear these sorts of manteaus here.' He was right, and he knew the local tastes. I would try to modernise and follow the path of Kamyar, but, ultimately, my trendy manteaus would stay in the store or behind the display window for months until I could sell them at half the price or return them to Tehran. The manteaus from Tehran wouldn't sell in our region, but the ones made

in



Image 272: My father's store after Kamyar's death. Piranshahr, 2009.

Tabriz and Urmia would sell easily. The regional affinity and understanding of local culture were even reflected in the way people dressed, and the more open and relaxed style of Tehranis wasn't in demand in our town. Of course, the reasons were no secret – the town was small, traditional and full of gossip.

Just like my family's struggles to find our feet, the country was finding its future path. The debates ended, and election day arrived at our local mosque, which was just a hundred metres from our house. I had decided to vote for Moussavi, but I didn't go to our local mosque. A few days earlier, we had held my brother's funeral ceremony there, and I couldn't bring myself to face the sorrowful atmosphere where we had held the ceremonies for my mother and brother.

I knew that most Kurdish parties were calling on the people of Kurdistan to boycott the elections, but in that period the story took a slight turn. There were whispers from some Kurdish opposition parties about indirectly supporting the elections and backing reformist candidates. As the Kurdish Democratic Party wrote in an analysis of Mehdi Karroubi's

presidential campaign statement, regarding ethnic and religious minorities:

> For the first time, a presidential candidate in the Islamic Republic of Iran has included the issue of national and religious minorities in their election programme, albeit under the title 'ethnic and religious minorities'. This move by Mr Karroubi, whatever its intention, is a positive step. It helps to explicitly raise an issue that practically exists but is not officially acknowledged.

Ultimately, many people, especially the younger generation, participated in the elections.

Traditionally, elections are formally boycotted by Kurdish parties, but some people and young people didn't pay much attention, and many others voted out of fear of the consequences or the lack of an election stamp on their identity cards.

In this election, the sensitivities were less intense, and many people voted. I voted for Moussavi, and I encouraged some of those around me to participate in the elections. It was an odd feeling. I thought that, after a long time, I had returned to Iran and our votes would bring about change and more reforms. I was hopeful . . .

On that evening, and in the days that followed, I clearly knew that the tourism project wouldn't be feasible in other parts of Kurdistan. I told myself, 'I can't conduct formal research in Iran.' Similarly, I knew I couldn't replicate a project like Diyarbakır in Iraqi Kurdistan and had to keep my promise to my father and family. On the other hand, I was counting on the fact that the elections would bring about changes in Iran and that I could make a meaningful contribution to the field of anthropology. (When I was working on my thesis in Iran, I realised how undeveloped and neglected the humanities and social sciences were.)

The situation took a turn, however, and my hopes for improvement were dashed with the outbreak of political differences following the elections. The news from Tehran was unsettling, making me want to witness everything firsthand.

I respectfully asked my father for permission, telling him I needed to go to Tehran for a couple of days. I mentioned that I had some work at the

embassy, which was partially true. I wanted to inform them of my presence in Iran. The situation was still not extremely dire, but it was increasingly precarious, and I feared getting caught in the middle. They told me the situation was not good and advised their citizens to leave Iran. The Iranian Government had arrested several British Embassy employees, accusing them of espionage and inciting protests. They claimed that the embassy and a few other countries were orchestrating the demonstrations. The embassy told me to return to England as soon as possible. I explained that I couldn't leave due to my family situation. They gave me an emergency contact number, and I left.



Image 273: Mourning ceremony for Kamyar. Malli Dengbêj, Diyarbakır, 2009.

In Tehran, the atmosphere was eerie. Smoke, slogans and placards filled the city, reminiscent of my memories of Naqadeh after the Revolution and the Kurdistan events. I had never seen anti-government protests in Iran before; people had no power to resist, and they were suppressed. When I witnessed the massive street protests and clashes in 2009, it was clear that the Government had lost control. Like many others, I felt that its time was up.

One night, a bloody confrontation broke out on Republic Street and Revolution Street, and many people fled. The scenes I saw were unbelievable – this was Iran and Tehran!

The streets were filled with Basijis, Sepahis and plainclothes agents who were beating and arresting people without mercy. I emailed *Global* and a few other news agencies I worked with, informing them that I was no

longer in Turkey and had settled in Iran. They quickly contacted me, as the Iranian Government had restricted foreign journalists, and I, not being an official news-agency reporter, could provide them with information and articles. I sent a couple of reports under a pseudonym, but it was a risky endeavour, so I didn't continue.

After a few brief phone interviews with CNN, the Canadian Television Network and others, I stopped answering their calls and returned home.

I decided to return to Diyarbakır and collect my belongings. My father was opposed to the idea, worried that I would leave and never come back. I reassured him that I would return, but he was anxious and asked friends and acquaintances to talk to me and dissuade me from going. I told him it would only take a few days, and I would bring my belongings back and settle down in Iran. Eventually, he relented.

When I arrived, my colleagues had organised a mourning ceremony for Kamyar at Malli Dengbêj in Diyarbakir, and Osman Baydemir and other directors attended.

I handed over the final project closure to my colleagues Shirin, Metin and Manaf, and we settled our accounts. They treated me very kindly. I bid them farewell and prepared to return to Iran.

A Chance to Mourn Kamyar

The night before returning to Iran, I was at my friend's guesthouse in Diyarbakır. I had packed my belongings to take with me, and my heart was heavy. Around midnight, I unconsciously contacted Kani.

'Why did you call so late?' she asked. 'Has something happened, Kak-Kameel?'

Suddenly, I burst into tears. Throughout this time, I had held myself together, because I had to be a strong supporter and companion as the older brother and son, especially since we didn't have a mother and our father was grieving the loss of his young son. I had played my role well, but my condition wasn't improving. That night, it seemed my patience had run out, and I found an opportunity to mourn.

I was crying on one end, and Kani was on the other. Amid our tears, I explained how much I missed Kamyar, and Kani said she constantly reminisced about him. We talked for a long time. I poured out all my grief and worries. I think this is how I deal with death. I had exhibited the same

behaviour when confronting my mother's death in Istanbul – when I told my father to take her off life support.

The next day, I felt lighter, and I asked myself, 'Kameel, why didn't you do this sooner? Why didn't you mourn, but blocked the natural stages of grief?'

Kamyar is still with me. I have kept his belongings that I received from the hospital, and the good memories of him.

The next day, I returned to Iran. I had brought a lot of books, personal project archives and some of my household items from Diyarbakır. I had a few bags and suitcases, and the border authorities gave me a hard time. After the election unrest, the atmosphere had become security-focused, and the Revolutionary Guard had almost taken control of the borders. The books caught their attention, so they started asking questions.

I had told Kani and Tabibeh to wait near the border with their car. I thought to myself, if there was a problem, at least they would be there and would be aware of the situation. Tabibeh had recently separated from her husband and was living in Urmia. She was a young, spirited woman. She started chatting and joking with the officers, which completely changed the atmosphere. Laughing, she said, 'Dad, why are you being so strict? He's come with just a few books. He doesn't even know what they are – he's just showing off!'

The officers burst out laughing, and these words made it easier for me to cross the border without hassle.

The moment I entered, I reminded myself that Iranian society is different from the Western world. I had to learn more about its traditional and cultural characteristics and adapt again. I was facing a situation opposite to what existed in Britain and London. In Iranian society, it's not rules that drive progress, but traditional relationships and cultural connections that play crucial roles in advancing work.

Withdrawal from Business and Focus on Research

I had to help my father, so I returned to the shop and got back to work. I did the usual tasks, like opening the store at 9 am, cleaning the windows, arranging the goods . . . all the way to dealing with customers and managing the inventory. I didn't have the passion for shopkeeping, nor did I have the opportunity to pursue it. All my friends and acquaintances were

surprised and couldn't understand why, after all those years of education and different careers, I had gone back to shopkeeping. One would say it was a show-off job and that I was only doing it out of obligation, while another would congratulate me and encourage me. The latter was more from my father's family and friends, who were happy that I hadn't left him alone. Now that I had somewhat settled, my not getting married also added to the pressure. My peers had grown-up kids, and I was still single.



Image 274: The shop apprentice with my nephew. Piranshahr 2009.

Most of the time, my laptop was on my knees and I was reading about female genital mutilation/cutting and taking notes. At the same time, I was selling coats. I was dealing with two completely different worlds, and that sometimes confused me. After a while, I saw that I couldn't continue and told my father we needed to talk about our situation.

With a sigh, he said, 'Oh, you want to leave!'

I said, 'No, but our circumstances have changed. I know that before Kamyar passed away you had your own life, with your new wife and sisters, traveling and almost retiring, but accept that all our circumstances have changed. I'm keeping my promise and staying, but I can't be a good shopkeeper. If I was successful for a short period in my youth, it was because I needed the money and wanted to migrate. Now, I want to pursue my own goals and projects. I have a proposal: let's find an apprentice for you, so they can handle some of the tasks. I'll happily do the purchases.'

He said, 'I won't hand over the shop to anyone.' He looked at things very traditionally but accepted that we could bring in someone from our own family.

We agreed that our cousin (aunt Kolthum's daughter) and her father Qader would come to the city from the village and take over the shop.

From the very first days, my father said, 'She's not fit for this place and doesn't have the language skills.'

My plan was to empower her by giving her the opportunity to work. I said, 'Let's not be gender-biased and judge her. I'll teach her the job, and I'll take responsibility.'

Our cousin really didn't have the necessary skills for shopkeeping and dealing with people. She had grown up in a traditional and limited village environment and was shy. She hadn't been given the necessary opportunities, but, once she got the chance, she gradually changed and learned. My father and I took her under our wings, and she moved into our house. Gradually, her appearance, dress, behaviour and other habits changed as she adapted to the urban environment and the shop. She started wearing makeup, and with Kani, her roommate, she slowly got accustomed to city life.

My cousin's presence was good for Kani's mental wellbeing, but after some time my cousin's mischief began and she started a relationship with one of the young shopkeepers in the neighbourhood. I think my father smelled a rat and said, 'I don't want any apprentices, and she should leave.'

My cousin didn't want to go, as her life had changed. Returning to the small, enclosed village would be difficult for her. She begged not to be sent away, but my father, aunt and uncle conspired to make her return home. Despite my and Kani's objections, they eventually sent her back in my absence.

My father also found an apprentice for his shop who had all the desired qualities. She was the daughter of one of his old friends. Although the father had passed away, the acquaintance gave him a good feeling. The girl was clever, responsible and trustworthy. She managed the shop well and gradually reduced my responsibilities.

Chapter Eighteen: The Official Start of My Research and Its Challenges

I finally reached the point where I had to be. My father had accepted that I couldn't be a good shopkeeper, and my destiny was clear. I had no plans to leave. I had to stay in Iran. It was time to begin my field research and put my research ideas into practice.

I had chosen the subject of my first research project some time ago, read a lot about it and even made a documentary film called *In the Name of Tradition*. I knew that conducting field research on the topic of female genital mutilation/cutting ('FGM/C') in Iran would be fraught with difficulties and obstacles, but I had made up my mind. It was an important topic, and I believed it was worth the struggle.

During the course of completing this research, I faced many difficulties, but I didn't give up. I stayed in Iran and persisted. I experienced countless bitter and sweet days. I lost my father, went through tough times, fell in love, got married, became a father and, in the midst of my research and its challenges, lived a whole new life.

From Iran to Africa

As I mentioned earlier, I travelled to Africa with the charity organisation Oxfam to do humanitarian work, where I first encountered female genital mutilation/cutting.

In some parts of Kenya, they held a festival during the spring season. Tribal leaders and villagers, dressed in local attire, gathered in the village square, and music and dance filled the air. They played local instruments and cooked a special local dish with goat meat.

It was astonishing to me that FGM/C, or the cutting of women's and girls' genitalia, was performed openly and publicly as part of the festival, with a specific ritual. The village women would take the teenage girls to a corner of the square, form a circle around them and, without any medical equipment or anaesthesia, use a razor blade to cut off part of their genitalia, including the clitoris, which is commonly referred to as *choochouleh* in Farsi colloquial language. I couldn't see the depth and extent of the cutting, and they weren't comfortable with me, as a man, asking too many questions about it.

As a child and teenager, I had noticed that girls, like boys, underwent circumcision, but I didn't know when or how. When boys were circumcised, I would empathise with them, but this practice was carried out for girls in a way that no one could discover. My observations of female cutting in Africa led me to compare it with Iran, and I saw similarities and differences. In both regions, the goals of controlling and reducing women's sexual desires, religious beliefs, symbolic rituals for reaching maturity, and health and medical reasons (from their perspective) were the justifications



Image 275: Me in Sudan, Africa, 2006.

for it, but their approaches differed. In Iran, it was done in secret and silence, whereas in Africa, it was done openly.

However, the approach to cutting varied across different regions of Africa. In places where organised religions like Islam and Judaism existed, the behaviours surrounding cutting were similar to Iran's. Many local tribes performed this act as a rite of passage for girls and boys from childhood to adolescence, and, according to region and culture, girls would often be cut after the age of ten during local festivals. The main reason for FGM/C was controlling sexual desire, but in some African tribes it was also seen as a symbol of transitioning from childhood, reaching maturity and preparing for marriage. Cutting carried almost equal legitimacy for boys and girls. They also believed it brought purification and removed 'impure blood' from the body.

During my research, I found that beliefs about FGM/C differed across regions in Iran. Sometimes, people were simply following tradition, and religious approaches and beliefs lent legitimacy to the practice. In parts of Iran, almost everyone agreed that cutting made girls pure, and eating cooked food and drinking water touched by an uncut girl was forbidden. In some regions of the Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces, it was



Image 276: Explanation and defence by some clergy of the 'necessity' of FGM/C, referencing tradition. Mahabad, 2013.

believed that FGM/C removed impure blood from a girl's body, and they used medical reasons to justify it. In southern Hormozgan province, a combination of all these factors existed, and there was a higher level of fanaticism. For instance, some grandmothers and mothers would say that the Prophet's daughters and even Aisha, the Prophet's wife, were cut, and following the Prophet's tradition was obligatory.

The most common reason for performing FGM/C was that it had always been done and should therefore continue. When asked why, many would answer, 'We don't know, but they say it's good.'

Most people, especially village clergy, 'knew' that cutting reduced girls' sexual desires, and older women would welcome this, saying, 'Thanks to this, our communities are purer and free from sin!' Sexuality has always been viewed with suspicion and denial in societies with religious, traditional and guilt-inducing views, and it is a taboo that needs to be monitored.

FGM/C in Iran and most parts of the world is a secret act that takes place behind closed doors. Men have no involvement. Hence, activists in this field have referred to it as 'violence against women by women'. Although one cannot ignore the historical and belief-based role of men in imposing this practice on women, they are generally unaware of the details, timing and manner of its execution, and the pressure usually comes from grandmothers, especially paternal grandmothers, and elder women in the family.

On the southern coasts of Hormozgan province and the islands of Qeshm, Hormoz and Lark, if a girl were not cut, she might not be accepted into the village's Quran classes. FGM/C or the lack thereof was sometimes used as a mechanism for social acceptance or rejection. If a family had migrated and returned, one of the questions asked was, 'Have you circumcised your daughter?' If a girl was not cut before marriage, the mother-in-law would sometimes insist that it must happen. In reality, some individuals used these tools to exert power because they lacked official and structural authority to control FGM/C.

Seeing these cultural and religious differences taught us that, contrary to popular belief, there is no overarching framework for this issue. Unfortunately, the lack of a clear framework allows traditions to deviate from their original paths, and their initial philosophies are forgotten over

time, to the point where few people remember the purposes of these traditions.

What I saw in Africa differed slightly from what I heard during my childhood in Kurdish regions. The secrecy surrounding the issue told me that FGM/C in Iran was a harm with unclear dimensions and consequences. The time had come to explore the practice in Iran through close-up, in-field interviews, examining its extent and harms.

I began my work. In the first step, it was better to start with locations that I had daily access to. Urmia, Sardasht, Piranshahr, Naqadeh and their surrounding villages were my initial choices. In each city, I would find a few acquaintances or relatives interested in the topic to accompany me to the surrounding villages. We would usually leave in the morning and return in the afternoon. Later, as my research area increased, I had to seek help from unfamiliar individuals for interviews. Most of my inquiries were centred around women and gender, so female interviewers were necessary to conduct them. However, families were the main obstacle to women travelling to distant locations, away from home. Most families would not even allow their daughters to take a day trip for work, saying they must return home for lunch and definitely be back before sunset. Therefore, it was not possible to take someone away, even for a few days, for fieldwork.

In Iranian society, the concept of fieldwork was not defined. Everyone had a specific workplace and schedule, and it always ended in the afternoon. People were unfamiliar with alternative arrangements. I had to have lengthy conversations with families to make them understand why I was traveling from one city to another and from one province to another. These challenges made my work difficult. Building trust is a crucial part of fieldwork and qualitative research, but in Iranian society I had to gain the trust of the families before I did anything else. This was particularly challenging, given that my work was unofficial and focused on a topic that some parents were ashamed to discuss or thought was beneath their family's dignity.

In 2009, Iran was experiencing its most sensitive security conditions since the Revolution, and I, as a dual national, was traveling to remote villages to work on FGM/C – it was pure madness!

The traditional view was that, as a man, I was working on a subject that is not masculine. My father suffered greatly from the ridicule of those around him during his lifetime. Some acquaintances and relatives would

scornfully tell my father, 'Other people's sons are making names for themselves in lucrative and respectable careers, while your son, after all those years of education, is gathering girls to work on women's issues in some place!'

I have often seen even religious and social leaders avert their gazes in embarrassment when discussing this topic. Many would directly or indirectly remark, 'What kind of man are you?' or even whisper behind my back, 'You must be a spy, selling GPS and geographic coordinates in border villages!' Some would even jokingly call me 'Circumciser Kameel', but none of these remarks affected my work nor deterred me from my path.

Another challenge was the lack of resources for my work. It seemed as if I had to start from scratch. Under such conditions, the task for a field worker was extremely difficult and daunting.

Around the same time, a lady named Homa Ahadi and her colleagues investigated FGM/C in rural areas near the city of Minab in Hormozgan province. They published their findings in a scholarly article. Ahadi, a nursing student, had studied and examined forty cases of FGM/C in her internship village. Online and printed sources led me to her work; in addition, there were a few news articles and interviews in Farsi-language news agencies abroad, but no comprehensive research had been conducted on the subject. I had a scattered collection of data and videos gathered between 2005 and 2008.

I defined a localised model for my work and began my research. Initially, I only conducted sampling. When I started working in a province, sampling all its villages was impossible. Gradually, based on a scientific and field-based model, I would select a few villages from the east, west, north and south of the province, such as in Oshnaviyeh county, and begin conducting face-to-face interviews and local surveys. Then, I determined the prevalence of FGM/C in each region, whether it was still common and, if so, what age group(s) the afflicted women belonged to.



Image 277: During fieldwork in Kurdistan Province, 2009.

In the first phase of my research, I found that a high percentage of women over forty and fifty years of age in some Kurdish rural areas had undergone FGM/C. Part of the story went back to the nomadic routes of the Koli people, also known as the Qarachis, who traversed the Kurdish Region. The Kolis mostly travelled in border areas, and the incidence of FGM/C was higher in those regions. In the depths of Kurdistan and places like Bukan and Mahabad, the prevalence of FGM/C was lower, and in villages near cities, the statistics showed a declining trend. My initial assumption was that perhaps FGM/C was only prevalent in our region, namely Mokrian in Kurdistan and the southern part of West Azerbaijan province. However, when I crossed into Kurdistan province and moved from Bukan to Saqqez, I realised that it was scattered throughout the region, and I needed to continue my research in other provinces.

I was scared. What I had in mind was to complete a project with a roughly defined geographic boundary, but I discovered that the issue was much broader than I had thought. I was so astonished that I got in touch with an organisation in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. I had come in contact with this organisation in Istanbul and from it I had obtained permission to screen my documentary film. I sent the organisation a sample and explained that FGM/C appeared to be widespread in Iran. The executive

manager of this organisation was a young, well-mannered Kurdish man who was familiar with the region, and the director was a German national. Those two individuals and the budget-makers of their institution were thrilled from the start. They had been following this sensitive topic in the Middle East and had now found traces of it in a country that fascinated the West. This issue could help them attract funding and expand their sphere of activity to countries beyond Iraq. Years later, the organisation launched a project titled Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in the Middle East, which was eventually discontinued due to budget constraints and a shift in the priorities of its funders.

We were invited to Sulaymaniyah to discuss and learn about the organisation's work. We set off with six people, but, upon arrival, one of our companions separated from us. I later discovered that her husband was a Peshmerga fighter from one of the Kurdish parties and was in prison. Two others from our group were supporters of the PJAK and the PKK. I was new to the scene and didn't know the individuals involved. Many were unwilling to collaborate, and those who were willing mostly had connections elsewhere that I wasn't aware of. I later realised that, in Iran, in most civil activities and women's movements, one generally affiliates with a party, ideology or political stance, and it's likely that one is connected to an organisation, or *saman*, abroad.

In Sulaymaniyah, we visited the saman centre. They were almost replicating the same method I had seen in Africa. I was thus familiar with this approach, but the others were excited. They had adapted the project to the local context in Iraqi Kurdistan by studying the projects there. With vehicles and teams of interviewers and facilitators, they would visit villages, converse with people and provide education. They almost covered the entire village, including religious and social leaders. Male and female staff had separate responsibilities; for example, female interviewers conducted interviews and discussed the harms of FGM/C to dissuade rural women from continuing the practice. Men, apart from conducting field interviews, were responsible for negotiating with the village elder or Mulla. Over two intense days, we witnessed their field programmes and visited several centres and samans operating in Sulaymaniyah, Raniya and Erbil (known as Hewlêr in Kurdish).

On the final day, we met with the minister of women in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil, discussing their activities and the current

situation of children and women in relation to FGM/C, and I praised their support and achievements.

When I returned to Iran, I cautiously maintained contact with that organisation. It claimed to have found a few individuals interested in collaborating with me. Later, I received a message saying that it could fund my idea and project. I told them that the geographical scope of FGM/C in Iran was much broader than in Iraqi Kurdistan, and, to identify the exact areas, I intended to scan all provinces in Iran, but I lacked the necessary budget and human resources. I also said that if I didn't receive help I would proceed alone. Apparently, my determination and the fact that Iran was a high-priority country for FGM/C research had caught the organisation's attention, convincing it to find funders for the research.

Before my trip to Sulaymaniyah, I met three individuals who greatly contributed to my work. The first person was Parvin, a lady from Marivan who was living in the city. I had come across her name in a radio report about FGM/C in Iran. Through a mutual friend, I managed to contact her, and we set up a meeting in Marivan. Parvin was an energetic and determined individual who combined archiving and reporting on social issues, including FGM/C. Despite her limited resources, she had made significant efforts in this field. Her work wasn't limited to FGM; she had



Image 278: With the minister of women at the time. Erbil, Kurdistan Region, 2009.

also worked on other issues such as honour killings and domestic violence. She would often travel to surrounding villages to gather information and produce reports. Parvin had a humble and open attitude, sharing her information with me without any hesitation. I invited her to join me in the fieldwork, but, due to her husband's and children's health problems, she couldn't accompany me.

At the beginning of the provincial-scanning phase, I met Fatimah Karimi, who we affectionately called Fati. She was an energetic and motivated student from the small town of Ravansar. Fati had studied women's studies and held radical, even iconoclastic views. At the time, she was one of the few individuals who had worked on the topic of FGM/C at the master's level. She had conducted interviews with around forty women in rural areas of Ravansar, Kermanshah and had incorporated translated references from global sources into her work. Her focus was on narratives that emerged from the field, which she analysed from a relatively feminist perspective. The university had initially promised that she could defend her thesis but ultimately declined, citing the topic as taboo.

Fati was forced to write about an unrelated topic that she had no interest in, just to obtain her degree. However, she eventually published her rejected thesis as a book titled *Tragedy of the Body* in 2009, which became the first published work on FGM/C in Iran. The book won the Seddigheh Dowlatabadi Award in 2010. I met Fati when I was forming a team for the first phase of the project outside the province. I offered her a job, and she accepted, partly because it would rescue her from a sedentary life in her small town. Fati and I quickly became close, and she effectively became one of my main team members and right-hand persons in the field.

Through a mutual acquaintance, I met a young woman named Bahareh, who described herself as a social activist, environmentalist and blogger. Blogging was a popular trend among young people at the time, and Bahareh was passionate about it, writing about most events around her. Initially, this concerned me, and I would constantly ask her not to write about our work. Bahareh was a free-spirited young woman who didn't impose many limits on herself. Her family had some reservations about her work, but they respected her choices and eventually allowed her to accompany us on some working trips. Bahareh worked with passion and dedication, and, along with Fati, she was committed and enthusiastic about our project for several months.

Examining 31 Provinces

We started working with this new group in the province of Kurdistan. Often, temporary guides or assistants would join us for a day or two before departing. We faced significant challenges in some provinces, and our local colleagues played crucial roles in gaining the trust of local women who had undergone FGM/C. Without their help, our work would have taken longer, and gaining the women's trust for interviews would have been difficult, if not impossible.

Initially, finding a suitable team member who could handle the workload and continue with the project was a significant difficulty. It wasn't uncommon for us to start work with someone in the morning and bid them farewell by evening. There was also the possibility that the village council, a cleric or someone else might report us to the authorities.

Before beginning, I would assess all aspects and, as the English say, 'go straight to the head of the snake' – the home of the village elder, the white-bearded man, our acquaintance or the wealthiest person in the village – to introduce myself and the team, hoping to gain their support. I had to employ different techniques to build trust, which I learned over time.

One of the major issues in fieldwork was finding accommodation for the night. Since we didn't have official permission to work, we couldn't get a letter of introduction to hostels, homes or hotels, so we tried to use local resources. The presence of two strangers with a car always raised questions, so we tried to find a local acquaintance or relative who could accommodate us for the night. If we went to hotels or similar places, the rules at the time required obtaining official letters of introduction or permission from local authorities. This, in turn, meant we had to reach out to local families or acquaintances to explain our purpose and secure their support in obtaining these documents. We had to be cautious, ensuring our names weren't registered anywhere, and we knew we had to move quietly,



Image 279: A wedding ceremony. Qeshm Island, 2013.

without drawing attention to ourselves. My main effort was to use our network of friends and family to find families willing to host us for the night. I didn't feel comfortable with this arrangement, and my colleagues were always unhappy about it.

I decided to scan the entire country first to identify the exact locations where FGM/C was prevalent. Then, we would create a map of those areas and delve deeper into the work. In our initial investigations, I came across some interesting findings. The practice of FGM/C in these regions of Kurdistan didn't have a fixed pattern. For instance, we would arrive in a village where FGM/C hadn't been performed for years, only to encounter a space in a nearby region where FGM/C was still prevalent. In the regions of Maku, Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan, Gypsies primarily performed FGM/C, whereas in the provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshah, local midwives and elderly women had learned the practice and took responsibility for it. Where locals were the ones performing FGM/C, the rate of FGM/C increased in some regions to 70–80%. Where local practitioners were absent, the rates of cutting were lower.

In villages where there were more students, particularly female students, and consequently more knowledge and awareness, the prevalence of FGM/C decreased, and vice versa. In general, the factors contributing to the decline of FGM/C in villages were access to cities, education, women's awareness and employment, the presence of seasonal workers, and access to the media and the press. The Kurdistan climate network, through continuous awareness-raising, discouraged people from performing this act, which is why there was no uniform perspective on FGM/C. Of course, there were other factors to consider in examining the issue, all of which I have discussed in detail in the publication titled *In the Name of Tradition*. Here, I will briefly touch on the issues related to the methodology of our fieldwork.

In the province of Kurdistan, following a comprehensive statistical survey of Baneh and Marivan, we reached the Oramanat region. This vast area is situated between the provinces of Kermanshah and Kurdistan. I had heard that in some parts of this region FGM/C was no longer practised, while in others the prevalence remained high. It was fascinating to see that in certain areas, due to religious beliefs, the influence of Naqshbandi sheikhs and the proximity to the border with Iraqi Kurdistan and Halabja, the practice of FGM/C was more prevalent.

During my travels to the provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshah, I realised that social freedoms and women's empowerment were relatively higher in this region compared to the Mokrian area. Until then, I had thought that, due to the political history and viewpoint of Mahabad, which has a strong connection to the historical-political roots of greater Kurdistan, the Mokrian regions would be more politicised and modern. However, during the course of our fieldwork, it became clear to me that the Kurds in this region, particularly in large cities like Sanandaj, Kermanshah and Oramanat, despite having semi-traditional communities, enjoyed greater civil liberties than the women of Mokrian. The region had undergone changes in the past one or two decades, or since the Revolution.

Most of the first-phase assistants and surveyors for the project were from the provinces of Kermanshah and Kurdistan. The cultural differences between these two regions and other Kurdish areas were also fascinating. These regions were more modern and urbanised, with stronger connections and exchange with other Iranian cities, particularly Tehran. In



Image 280: Fieldwork. Mansour Aqaee Village, Kermanshah, 2011.

the large cities, the rate of university admission for girls and boys and their presence in the capital and major Farsi-speaking cities was higher than the Mokrian regions and the southern parts of West Azerbaijan province. Therefore, urban development and public awareness, especially among girls, have been effective in reducing FGM/C statistics.

We continued our work in the western provinces and then moved toward the southern parts of the country. In Kurdistan, the signs of FGM/C were evident, but the data did not show a uniform trend; in some places, the percentages were high, while in others, they were low, and in still others, the practice had completely ceased. In some regions of Ilam province and among the Kurds, the effect of FGM/C was more evident among older women.

From Lorestan, we moved toward Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad and the central regions. We examined the province of Fars and the geography of the Qashqai people, and, per our usual method, sampled some villages in all four directions – north, south, east and west.

We identified areas with high rates of FGM/C and marked regions where the practice was unknown or data was lacking as 'white zones'. We then moved on to the next region. After Fars province, we headed toward Khuzestan, Bushehr and Hormozgan. When we entered the Lar region of

Hormozgan and the Sunni-dominated areas of Fars province, the statistics began to change. People acknowledged that FGM/C was indeed prevalent in those regions. Although this tradition was previously practised by a small group of Arabs and others in Bushehr, it was no longer observed there. However, in Hormozgan province, the numbers were alarmingly high. Prior to this, based on the article by Ahadi and her colleagues, I knew that FGM/C was common in Sunni areas of Minab and the Hormozgan Islands, but the numbers exceeded our expectations.

As we approached Hormozgan, the air grew hotter and more humid, and the number of FGM/C cases increased. We encountered fresh cases and living statistics in villages, where girls had been cut two or three years prior. When we reached Minab, Bandar-e Pol and Bandar-e Langeh, the numbers continued to rise. We set aside our doubts and asked directly, 'How old were you when you were circumcised, and who performed the procedure in your neighbourhood?' We even came across infants who had been cut mere months prior, which was unbelievable. As we moved toward Bandar Abbas and larger cities, where the majority of residents were Shiites, the numbers decreased, but when we reached Qeshm Island, the statistics peaked.

We were shocked. I emailed several people, sharing some voices and accounts with translations, saying, 'This place likely has the highest rate of FGM/C not only in Iran, but also in the entire Middle East!' Bandar Abbas and its islands were not unfamiliar to me. I had visited Qeshm years prior, before migrating to Europe, and had experienced a different Iran, but I had not interacted much with the local people and was unaware of the high level of poverty and rural religious biases on Qeshm Island. The islanders felt severe conflict and discrimination from the Central Government, similar to the sentiments of the people in Kurdistan.

After a few days, we headed toward Sistan and Baluchestan province. I thought that, due to the Sunni majority and general poverty, the statistics would be comparable to or even lower than those in Bandar Abbas. However, we didn't find a single case. Instead, another issue caught my attention. I was still grappling with the poverty and deprivation in Hormozgan province when I realised that almost all the cities in Sistan and Baluchestan were poorer than the most impoverished regions I had seen in Iran and around the world. I kept wondering how these innocent and helpless people survived. I couldn't believe that this was part of Iran. The



Image 281: Deprived villages in Baluchistan, 2011.

shock of the province's situation overwhelmed me. No matter how I thought about it, I kept coming back to the fact that, despite all our political and economic problems in Kurdistan, we lived a relatively better life than the people in Baluchestan. Our situation was average, even good, by comparison! As we Kurds say, 'Korê dêłê šayi' ('Father, you are so fortunate, like a king!')

Despite everything, FGM/C did not exist in Sistan and Baluchestan. Contrary to one or two unreliable reports, the province had almost every kind of problem *except* FGM/C. This outcome undermined the hypothesis of a direct link between poverty and FGM/C and indicated that it was related to other issues.

I left this province and headed north to the Kurdish minority areas, where during the Shah Abbas and Reza Shah eras they had been exiled and displaced to the Golestan and northern regions of Mazandaran province, but I did not find any evidence of FGM/C there, either. We also visited the Turkmen Sahra and border villages, where Sunni Muslims reside, and did not find a single case. In Khorasan, where Kurdish-speaking people of Kermanji origin live, there was no trace of FGM/C, either. We examined the central regions, including Yazd, Kerman, Tehran, Karaj and the

Turkish-speaking provinces, and over several months we meticulously surveyed and analysed almost every province in the country.

Ultimately, we reached a tangible conclusion that the phenomenon of FGM/C is scattered and more prevalent in Kurdish villages adjacent to the border with Iraqi Kurdistan.

In Kermanshah province and its centre, Paveh, villages such as Shamshir, Mansour Aqaee, Kamyaran and Ravansar and the Jaff clan's area, as well as villages in the Oramanat region, such as Uraman Takht, Kamaleh, Kuseh Hejij and Hani Garmaleh, and villages affiliated with the cities of Nodsheh and Nowsud were affected. It was also prevalent in villages in Ilam province, which shares borders with Kermanshah. In southern regions, women were cut at older ages, and in the coastal areas of Hormozgan province and its islands, there was a high prevalence, especially among Sunni Muslims.

After completing our nationwide study, with the help of a reporting team, we wrote a comprehensive report on the situation in all thirty-one provinces and drew a map of the distribution of FGM/C in Iran. According to our fieldwork estimates and precise sampling, a full study would take three to four years, with a possible one-year delay, making it a five-year project. I prepared my proposal and recommendations to continue the research.

Unsuccessful Efforts

The geographic scope of the project was extremely wide, both in terms of the time and resources needed, especially if we wanted to conduct education at the micro- or mid-level.

Before submitting my proposal, I thought to myself, 'Kameel, now that you're back in Iran and know how sensitive the situation is, with the country's political climate becoming increasingly complex and security concerns escalating, how dare you seek foreign funding to work on the issue of female genital mutilation/cutting? The religious differences, the dichotomy between Shia and Sunni groups, and many other factors could lead to various labels and risks from the Government. As someone who has returned from abroad and has a dual nationality, you would be at a much higher risk, especially given your past political record and detention!'

I frequently heard from acquaintances and colleagues that establishing connections with foreign organisations was dangerous in Iran. Despite all these risks, I couldn't ignore the efforts I had made so far. It was toward the end of that year that I started my work. I sometimes joke with friends, saying that I was one of the few people conducting fieldwork in Iran during that period. Many political and social activists either ended up in prison or were under house arrest or strict controls. Other serious researchers and activists in these areas preferred not to work, fearing being caught in the security net.

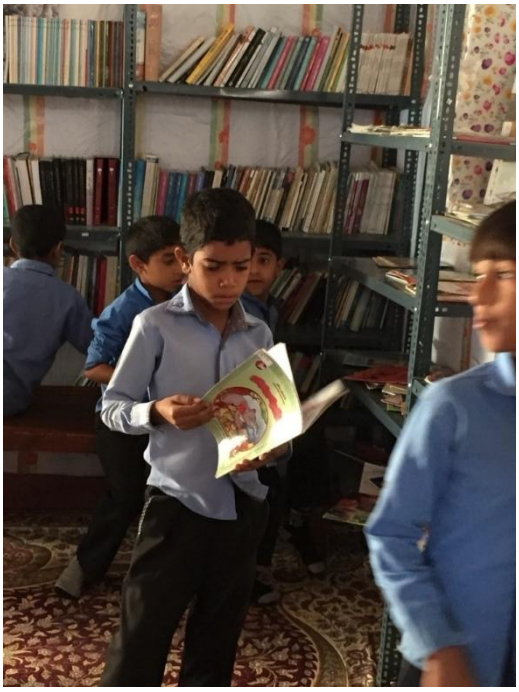


Image 282: Establishing a children's library in the village of Selakh, 2014.

Contrary to the advice of those around me, my analysis was that the security system didn't expect anyone to return from abroad and work on a sensitive topic like FGM/C. There was a possibility they would be too preoccupied with other issues, but I knew it was a sensitive subject, and it made me anxious. Sometimes, I even grew suspicious of my colleagues' movements and would scrutinise their contracts to ensure they didn't have permission to engage in political discussions or join groups.

I warned my colleagues that we needed to turn our ideas into an acceptable and limited proposal, targeting government institutions like the Welfare Organisation in provinces affected by FGM/C. They were taken aback, asking if I thought I was still in England.

'This is Iran!' they exclaimed. 'Don't you think they'll send you to prison or that the Intelligence forces will arrest you? Don't you think the authorities will report back to their superiors if you approach the Welfare Organisation?' They couldn't fathom why I would want to collaborate with

the Islamic Republic, especially during Ahmadinejad's presidency, when working with the Government was considered shameful and treasonous.

My colleagues and acquaintances were educated and committed to social activism, but at that time the relationship between the people and the Government had deteriorated to the point where many, especially the middle class, had lost trust in the system and were intensely angry and hurt. I didn't want to rely on foreign funding, having previously collaborated with NGOs and knowing they would ultimately steer the project to serve their own interests, compromising my independence.

Our research focused and highlighted on one of the most harmful traditions, which I didn't fully understand myself, and anthropological considerations limited my scope. I wanted to request collaboration or, at the very least, permission from the Government, which was responsible for its citizens, but others warned that it wouldn't cooperate and might even arrest us. These contradictions and differences in opinion existed, but I believed we had to try.

At my insistence, we prepared a proposal and headed to Sanandaj, seeking out activists and a few NGOs who had a good rapport with the social directors of the Welfare Organisation or the Governor's Office. We asked them to arrange a meeting with the relevant authorities so we could explain our project's objectives. One of the reputable activists in Sanandaj introduced us to the governor's social deputy, a local and enlightened individual. We presented our plan, and he was receptive, but cautioned that the topic was sensitive and the likelihood of approval was low. He promised to try, and we waited for about two months based on that promise. He finally agreed to schedule a meeting at the Governor's Office in Sanandaj, inviting the Welfare Organisation, the Provincial Clerics' Council, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Education and other bodies we had suggested. Only a few individuals attended, but, for me, it was a significant achievement.

One summer day in 2009, Fatimah and I went up the stairs of the Governor's Office to defend our project. Bahareh said, 'I don't buy into this system at all, and I'm not coming.' Fatimah was nervous, smiling sarcastically to the end, saying we were betraying our own beliefs and it was all over. I was hopeful and convinced that achieving minimal goals

would bring the best outcome for our target community. I knew that even a small part of the system would yield good results if we could get it to work. However, I couldn't fathom the level of disillusionment and mistrust among students and the educated elite, and I didn't agree with it.

Perhaps I lacked their lived experience, and my intellectual, experiential and professional foundation was geared toward ensuring success and greater efficiency by working with the systems. At least someone had come to listen to us, and that was good enough. They said we should push the project forward quietly. I agreed. I was willing to accept more conditions to get my project officially recognised, avoid the stress I had experienced over the past few months, and not have to deal with unnecessary complications.

To reassure them, I said I would implement the project on a trial (pilot) basis in a few specific villages near Sanandaj, with the help of the Health House, and provide a report on the project's progress. They tacitly accepted, and it was agreed that I would meet with the governor, but that was our first and last meeting. All further phone calls and emails went unanswered.



Image 283: Developing the project – Fatimah Karimi and Bahareh Alavi. Takyeh and Chaman, Sanandaj, 2009.

The same scenario repeated itself at the Hormozgan Governor's Office. After much effort through the University of Tehran and several intermediaries, we finally got a meeting with the deputy minister of health, Mrs Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi, and a few ladies in *chadors* who were her advisors. After this brief meeting, we heard through an intermediary that she had listened to us indifferently and neutrally, without giving any response, and didn't even grant us a meeting. The minister of health acknowledged the medical dangers of FGM/C, but said, 'This issue is not a priority for my ministry; give your proposal to the deputies of other sections to decide and report back to me.' The deputies led us on a wild goose chase.

I was told that maybe Seyyed Hassan Mousavi Chelak, then head of the Iranian Social Workers Association, who was also a good manager at the State Welfare Organisation, could help. Fatimah and I went to his office, where he received us warmly and listened to our words carefully.

I said, 'We've been looking for help everywhere. Just give us a letter so we can work in the villages.' I explained to him all the problems, limitations and sensitivities. At that moment, Mr Shojaee, who later became the deputy of welfare in Kurdistan province and is now retired, walked in with a file in his hand.

It was agreed that I would be in touch with Mr Shojaee to see how things would unfold for our project in Kurdistan province. He said that if we needed any help at the provincial level, we should contact him. Later, he offered his assistance, and a year later he even proposed that I implement a project on divorce, which we pursued to some extent. However, it was eventually halted due to the sensitivity of the project's conservative administrators.

That day, Mousavi Chelak gave me a letter to deliver to the social deputy of the Governorate of Hormozgan province. After a short while, we arrived in Bandar Abbas, and the city was filled with welcome banners. I made my way to the governorate to hand over the letter to the intended person. Unfamiliar with the bureaucratic and factional structures in Iran, it hadn't occurred to me that someone introduced by Mousavi Chelak would be a reformist. When I met the social deputy, after exchanging the usual greetings, I said, 'I hope your projects are progressing well, and I'm sure the President's visit to the province will bring you good results.' I

didn't know that the person opposite me, like many others, didn't have a positive view of Ahmadinejad.

Fati, who was with me, gave me a sidelong glance and whispered, 'What are you saying, you naive person? These people are part of the reformist camp; now is not the time to throw the letter out the window!'

The social deputy didn't throw the letter out the window, but the atmosphere became slightly tense. He gave us a letter for the University of Medical Sciences. A meeting was arranged for us with one of the welfare deputies, and I realised they were aware of the issue of FGM/C in the province, particularly on Qeshm Island. They had information about its harms and had even collected statistics at some point, but they weren't allowed to act on the matter. The Iranian Government has always had a closed-off approach to social problems, seeing denial as the best way to deal with them. As a result, the problems persist, and related organisations have lost their functionality and become ineffective.

The employees of the provincial Health Houses were almost all locals, well-informed about what was happening around them. When I presented



Image 284: Local prayer ceremony at a wedding. Salakh village, Qeshm Island, 2013.

my statistics, they found them interesting. They wanted to have the statistics to use in their reports to higher authorities, but they emphasised that they couldn't discuss the issue with the system. As I proceeded with my work, I understood that the Government knew it lacked legitimacy in these regions, and the locals, who were mostly Sunni Muslims, were dissatisfied. Therefore, they preferred not to touch on this sensitive topic but leave it alone. In their view, such projects and research were seeds of division and disrespect toward Sunni sanctities. Moreover, they considered it purely an internal issue, justifying their lack of responsibility toward citizens by citing cultural sensitivity and security risks, and ultimately concluding that it wasn't their concern and the issue would resolve itself over time.

At this stage and in this situation, I realised that the entire ruling system, especially ministries like Health, Justice and Education, the governorates, and the Welfare Organisation, would not show a favourable attitude toward my work. All my efforts would be in vain, and all doors would be shut in my face. Considering the geographical scope of FGM/C that we had recently discovered, it was no longer possible to work with personal funding. I had no choice but to cautiously send my plan to my contact in the Kurdistan Region. Shortly after, they agreed to fund the first phase with a very limited budget.

When the green light was given for the first phase, I equipped and prepared two teams of several people. I wanted to target the provinces with high rates of FGM/C and take our work more seriously.

Before starting this phase, some friends who were working with me left the project for further education or migration, and a few others joined us. Fati also bid us farewell at this stage, but we didn't forget her genuine intentions and follow-ups during that period.

The South is Mine!

As we were conducting the identification phase in Bandar Abbas and Qeshm, Bahareh wasn't with us. She got in touch and said, 'A demography student in Shiraz has emailed me, saying she's working on her thesis about FGM/C on Qeshm Island. She's very keen to meet us and discuss it.' Bahareh arranged a meeting with the lady, and we met for breakfast in Bandar Abbas.

Taking a statistical and demographic approach, she had delved into the topic of FGM/C on Qeshm and was seeking our help. I explained to her that we were still in the identification phase, but it might evolve into a broader project. I emphasised that, due to the country's situation, we wouldn't be making any announcements about the project until its completion. She was extremely interested in seeing how we worked and sharing her own work experience. I suggested she join us in our fieldwork on Qeshm.

I noticed she had a structured questionnaire, which she distributed to healthcare workers and nurses in some rural health centres on Qeshm Island. The rural healthcare workers would fill out the questionnaires, and she would collect them during her two-day trips to Qeshm. I explained to her how our data-collection method differed from hers: while she gathered information through intermediaries and questionnaires, our approach was field-based, involving face-to-face training and interviews. I also explained that we aimed to identify the phenomenon more extensively, analyse it and develop strategies to combat it in Iran.

On our way back, I invited her to Shiraz. Due to some family issues, she was living with her grandmother. We spent a night there, talking late into the night and enjoying the local wine she had brought. We discovered common interests in our work and quickly formed a friendly bond. After this trip, my connection with Ms RM continued. From then on, I felt that our relationship was no longer just a professional collaboration but was heading toward a more personal and in-depth acquaintance. Our daily phone calls, SMSs, Yahoo chats and emails increased, and, what's more, their content became more significant.

At this point, I had relocated from my family home to Sanandaj to be based in a strategic location between the three provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Kermanshah, where FGM/C was prevalent. With Fati's help, I rented an apartment in an area called Takyeh-va-Chaman. We did some office work for the project there, and I could easily access each of these three provinces and return home in the evening.

Ms RM expressed during our conversations her interest in visiting Sanandaj and said she would come for the Pir Shalyar ceremony. She came with her niece from Shiraz and stayed at my place for a few days. On the second day, we went to the village of Uraman Takht, but the police didn't permit the ceremony due to the crowd. We explored some parts of



Image 285: Pir Shalyar ceremony. Uraman Takht, April 2009.

Kurdistan Province and visited Kermanshah. The next day, Fati joined us, and we invited them for lunch.

Ms RM returned to Shiraz and, about two weeks later, we decided to head south together. She would collect her questionnaires from the rural health centres on Qeshm Island. We travelled from Laristan to Hormozgan and spent a night camping by the seaside. We rented a house on Qeshm for a few days and collected her questionnaires from three rural health centres. On Qeshm, we visited tourist spots on the island and took photos and videos as mementos of those places and our time there. We then returned to Shiraz.

I visited Saadi's tomb with my cousin and spent the night at RM's house. I also met her mother at my cousin's house. RM asked me to introduce her to a few organisations, foreign institutions and other researchers in the region who were working on the issue of FGM/C, so she could gather information, references and field data from them. I introduced her to two organisations and an expert I was in touch with via email. About a month after our collaboration began, we signed a contract like the others, and she was employed as a research assistant in the southern region. She worked with us for less than a month and then severed ties.

In the final days, my colleagues and I realised that she didn't have a comprehensive understanding of the project's scope. When she became aware of the project's vastness and international legitimacy, she felt that she had lost control of the research in the southern region. She had plans for another project, including making a film. However, our contract did not permit her to publicly disclose information outside the framework of our policies and strategies, which led to her swift departure from the group.

Later, differences arose between us, and my friends and colleagues shared some amusing and unprofessional stories about her behaviour in the field of research. She openly claimed that she was the first to work in the region – Qeshm – therefore, the south belonged to her and Kurdistan belonged to us. She had an irrational sense of ownership over southern Iran and was obsessed with fame, which was annoying.

Unfortunately, one of the problems prevalent in Iranian humanities is that students do not learn teamwork and professional ethics during their studies. Many people believe that a topic should only be researched by one person, and others cannot enter that sphere. Sadly, such individuals never consider that every researcher can have their own approach to a phenomenon and view it from a different angle, which is not a threat to their colleagues but can even be beneficial.

After leaving the project, she sought revenge, jeopardising our work's security with her irresponsible behaviour and deliberately trying to create anxiety and fear among my colleagues. For years, she caused trouble with her unfounded accusations, which I will detail in Part Seven of this collection.

A New Acquaintance and a Rural Girl's Surprise

While we were investigating the issue in Kermanshah, Bahareh introduced me to one of her friends. Shafagh, originally from Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, agreed to guide and familiarise us with the villages and districts of that city and Qasr-e Shirin. One morning, we set out early to sample villages and the city's outskirts. In the afternoon, we engaged in conversations with the locals, but – I don't know why – they mistakenly took us for Mojahedin-e Khalq activists and reported our presence to the security forces, who arrived swiftly and stopped us.

They scrutinised my colleagues' student IDs and searched the car, but we didn't have anything that could cause problems. The acquaintance of one of the security officers with Shafagh's family, who were old residents of Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, helped to resolve the situation peacefully. We returned to Kermanshah late and exhausted, spending the night at the house of our new group member.



Image 286: Me in Saravan, Baluchistan, 2011.

That night, I couldn't imagine that this collaboration would eventually lead to the formation of a deep and powerful emotional bond, culminating in our marriage. Interestingly, as our relationship became more public, I felt that one or two people in our group and our acquaintances started to behave strangely, reacting to our relationship.

My personality was such that I viewed daily behaviours in Iran, which were accompanied by traditional constraints, with an open and flexible mindset. My relationships with those around me were simple and friendly – a trait that was attractive to some but unpopular with others. I was part of a generation that had spent its childhood and adolescence in a restricted and closed environment, amid war and displacement, and had later experienced life in a more developed and flexible social world. As a result, I adapted my behaviours according to the community I was in.

In my human relationships, I made efforts to be transparent, even if it sometimes put me at a disadvantage. This period was highly educational for me: I was practically and experientially learning about Iranian sociology and anthropology. The social conditions had changed significantly during prior years from when I had experienced life in Iran, and cultural traditions had also undergone transformations, leading to changes in people's behaviours and relationships, which I had to learn to understand.

One of the confessions that many experts dare not utter is that, even when facing the most brutal and harmful topics, their sensitivity wears off over time. This is why many doctors and researchers are accused of being heartless and cruel. Constant exposure impacts researchers, specialists or doctors, diminishing the initial sensitivities they felt at the beginning of their careers. In my field of work, where social harms and harmful traditions were prevalent just a few years ago, the same applies. At first, I would get more upset, but – unfortunately – I would constantly encounter new cases just like the thousands I had seen before. That can lead researchers to become desensitised to harm, which others might perceive as callousness. However, this bitter reality has an advantage. Once the researcher becomes less emotional about the subject, they can examine it more logically and without passion.

I had heard numerous accounts from individuals about FGM/C and, naturally, had become less sensitive to the topic over time. However, one memory that I will never forget is when, during a project, I was working in a rural area near the city of Bukan with my colleagues, Fatimah and the late Bahareh. We conducted an interview with a girl, asking her if she had undergone FGM/C.

The girl confidently replied, 'No, I haven't been cut. What is FGM/C, anyway?' and reacted as if she were hearing of it for the first time. My colleagues explained the harms of FGM/C to the young girl and thanked God that she had not undergone the procedure . . .

In the midst of this, the mother of the girl arrived and joined the conversation. The researcher said, 'Our research topic is FGM/C, and we were discussing it with your daughter, but she didn't know anything about it, since she herself has not undergone it and is fortunate.'

The mother turned to her daughter and said, 'What are you saying? Why are you saying you weren't circumcised? When you were four, I took you to the Kolis to have you circumcised!'

From a distance, behind the camera, I saw the girl looking at her mother with a mixture of shock and bewilderment. I was taken aback. This scene was extremely disturbing. On one hand, there was a mother who not only had no problem with FGM/C, but also believed it was normal and good. On the other hand, there was a girl standing there, filled with shame and embarrassment.

We saw many such scenes. The clergy, men and elderly women of the villages, who were our interlocutors, told us many heart-wrenching stories, but I still remember this scene and ponder its various dimensions. For instance, what would those who consider FGM/C to be a ritual say in such a case? Isn't the ritual supposed to help girls transition into womanhood? How can they claim that a girl who doesn't even know she was cut or remember it has successfully undergone the ritual? This is usually the case with most traditions, where the performers of the rituals carry them out without thinking about the philosophy behind them, so that, after a while, the rituals become mere forms, and their original meaning is lost.

Yalda Night and Shahnameh Reading in Isfahan

We were in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad when my friends Parvin and Ahmad invited me to Isfahan. They had also recently returned to Iran and knew I was working in the neighbouring province. I said I was not far, but I would arrive late. They insisted that it was Yalda Night and I needed to rest, so I should come to their place. I discussed it with Fatimah and Bahareh, and we decided to go.

I had never attended a Yalda Night party in Iran. The ceremony was not common among the Kurds in our region. We were invited to the home of one of Ahmad's friends in the Ayyani neighbourhood of Isfahan, and the



Image 287: Part of the documentary film *In the Name of Tradition*, showing a girl who has undergone FGM/C. Mahabad, 2011.

host is now one of my dear friends. The guests were mostly older than us, had different interests and seemed cultured and special. The atmosphere was eerily quiet, which was unusual for a house that was about to host a big party. As we climbed the stairs, one of the hosts welcomed us, speaking very softly and implying that we should also keep our voices down.

We had not bathed for a few days and looked dishevelled. We entered the living room and saw women and men sitting in a circle, all between sixty and seventy years of age, each holding a thick book. One person was reading poetry in a heroic tone, and some nodded their heads. Some listened attentively, some looked down and a few looked dissatisfied. We had entered so quietly that no one noticed us. There was a table next to us, filled with homemade wine and various snacks. We took advantage of the poetry reading and momentarily forgot our worries.

The poem they recited was about a duel between two warriors, one of whom was striking the other's head with a mace. One of the gathered stood up and said, 'This is the wrong way to recite it. You should do it like this.' He emphasised that every single hamza and kasrah had to be pronounced correctly and heroically to avoid any controversy. For us, three Kurds, the text didn't make much sense. I, personally, had never experienced such a gathering or session before.



Image 288: Fieldwork. Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, 2010.

Later, we realised they were reciting the Shahnameh, and it was extremely important to them that it be read in a particular tone and with heroic flair. Interestingly, the Shahnameh held the same value for them as the Quran, and they were sensitive about every single word. Some believe the Shahnameh promotes Iranian nationalism, while others consider it a racist document, claiming that it reflects the extremist and racist views of that era. Later I discovered with fascination that, among the Lur, Bakhtiari and other groups in Iran, there was an endless dispute – each claiming to be the true owners of the Shahnameh, preserving their own oral traditions that sometimes didn't match Ferdowsi's version.

At the end of the Shahnameh recitation, we got to know some refined and sophisticated people. I asked about the reason behind their sensitivity in reciting it, and one of them replied, 'The Shahnameh is the book of Iranian culture and civilisation for centuries.'

I thought to myself, as a minority, we didn't have much cultural connection with greater Iran and the Farsi language. On the other hand, since I hadn't lived in Iran for years, this cultural bond had been somewhat severed. The interesting part of the story was that we Kurds had learned in a monolingual education system and knew some poets, but the Farsi poetry enthusiasts didn't know any Kurdish poets. To me, this indicated the Central Government's orientation to the Kurds – if they had considered Kurds as part of themselves, they would have recognised their literature as well and included it in school textbooks. This policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has led to people, even those interested in literature and poetry, having little knowledge of Kurdish literature. (Of course, in recent years, the situation has slightly improved due to the increase in translations of literary works from Kurdish to Farsi and the expansion of social networks.)

They, like many others, perceived Kurds to be connected to the issue of Iran's disintegration and implored us not to divide beloved Iran. They claimed that Kurds were the most Iranian of all. I don't know why they thought we three had taken up arms to separate the borders of Iran and Kurdistan. Unfortunately, due to the Government's propaganda in the media and public sphere, the Iranian people's understanding of Kurds has been reduced to political misunderstandings and ideological biases, such as the notion that Kurds are separatists. It rarely happens that we get to discuss Kurdish literature and art in such gatherings. Perhaps the

homemade wine had added more fuel to their anxieties. In any case, it was useful for me to observe private cultural circles up close and get familiar with their mental clichés.

Do You Want to Tarnish Iran's Reputation?

The project was progressing. We were still pushing forward with the Untold Truth project, but an event occurred that shouldn't have, and it disturbed us for a long time.

As I mentioned earlier, during the initial stages of our work, we travelled to Sulaymaniyah to meet with an NGO. A young woman from Mahabad joined us on this trip. Her family didn't allow her to accompany us on our fieldwork, and she had to persuade her father just to let her join us for this one journey. This woman worked at a local Kurdish newspaper and was passionate about Kurdistan and its political issues. Her close friends mostly had intellectual ties to the PKK and PJAK, and two of them were in prison. She was an emotional person, and, despite her simple heart, she sometimes behaved aggressively. Whenever one discussed political issues with her, it led to arguments and loud outbursts.

During the trip, one of my tasks was to control the heated debates she had with others, which sometimes ended in upset. She appeared in the initial version of the documentary film *In the Name of Tradition*, arranged some interviews for me, courageously shared her experience of being cut and played the role of an inquisitor in one of the interviews. She had gone to Tehran for further education and sometimes we would have phone conversations, but, due to her extreme views, I preferred not to collaborate with her.

At that time, students were protesting the arrest of several Kurdish student activists and held a sit-in at the University of Tehran. She and a few others were at the forefront, holding placards and chanting slogans. We saw the reflection of this event in foreign media and Kurdish networks, and, due to the intense security atmosphere at that time, we were worried she might cause trouble for us. Apparently, she was arrested by the Intelligence forces that same day.

I was unaware until a few days later, when Fati told me that so-and-so had been arrested. 'The one who came with you to Sulaymaniyah. Won't this cause trouble for you?'

I



Image 289: Lobbying sessions in the villages of Mokrian. West Azerbaijan, 2012.

said, 'No, I didn't work much with her, and she doesn't know much about our project, but I'm worried about her.' Later, I realised I should have been worried about the project, too! Apparently, during the interrogations, they had taken her email password and seen our correspondences about coordinating a trip to Kurdistan Region and preparing a film. Naturally, they discovered that I was a dual national, had returned to Iran and was researching FGM/C, and that I had taken her to a foreign institution in Iraqi Kurdistan for training.

From then on, the story became serious for the security forces. Everything had created huge question marks and suspicion for them. They reported from Tehran to the Intelligence Agency in West Azerbaijan and Mahabad, and they pursued it.

After my identification, they contacted my father by phone, summoning him at night and interrogating him. The old man was terrified. I was in Tehran when I received a call from another number late at night. With a trembling voice, he said, 'Kameel, what have you done? What calamity have you brought upon yourself? They say you're making a film and you're going to tarnish Iran's reputation!' Either she had confessed or they

had inferred that I was making a feature-length film about FGM/C, and that was why I had travelled to Sulaymaniyah.

This marked the beginning of an extremely difficult phase for me, my family and my colleagues. The Intelligence forces wouldn't leave my father alone. My only chance was that my father had mentioned I wasn't in Iran but had returned for a stint and was now in London. The Intelligence forces pressured my father to contact me in London. They repeatedly summoned him to the Intelligence agency, harassed him, took away all his identification documents, shut down his shop for a while and constantly put him under pressure. They even found my phone numbers in England and Turkey through my father's phone. They would call our London home, trying to trace me, but to no avail. The situation became so dire that I had to halt all my activities and contemplate whether to continue at all.

It was a period of immense anxiety. I was practically in hiding, moving from place to place every few days. All the young people who had worked with me were terrified of being next on the list, and two of them even terminated their collaboration due to fear. Finally, the lady was sent to the public prison after her interrogations. I think she was eventually released on bail. It took us a long time to resume our work. Later, when we were working with my colleagues, including Fati, in the villages of Kermanshah, the lady called me from inside the public prison. She asked where I was and what I was doing. I didn't want to reveal anything, as I was still being monitored by security forces and she was in prison. I informed her about what had happened to me and my father.

She became distressed and tearful, saying, 'Everyone has abandoned me, and no one answers my calls.'

Now that I've experienced the horrors of Evin Prison myself, I understand her better. Unfortunately, due to her arrest, my father, some others and I came under the microscope. You can't judge a prisoner, especially in Iran's prisons and interrogations systems, without considering the larger context. Many people break down earlier in the process. Some believe that in a place like Iran, you shouldn't get involved in a risky job or trend, and if you do, you should have the moral courage to tolerate harsh conditions and not speak out against others.

After her arrest, her friends took extreme and unfair positions, which were fuelled by the anxiety and fear of the situation. I was also extremely exhausted and frustrated. Throughout, I had tried to protect the project by

being cautious, but now I was embroiled in a situation over which I had no control.

It took months for me to muster the courage to return to my family home, and I even avoided going to the house I had rented in Sanandaj. My father suffered mental trauma. The constant interrogations and summonses tormented his tired spirit. All the bitter memories of his imprisonment and torture were revived, and he lived in constant fear.

This incident had some positive consequences, causing me to become more vigilant and approach my work with greater sensitivity. I didn't work with just anyone, and I didn't discuss my work freely with others. I even added a clause to my contracts stating that project team members should not attend political gatherings or meetings, and they should not keep project documents and related emails for themselves, nor discuss work details with anyone.

Later on, one or two individuals involved in social and political activities accused me of controlling and restricting personal freedoms, saying it was none of my business what they did outside of work hours and whether or not they were involved in socio-political activities. I acknowledged their right, but I had no choice. My lived experience had led me to believe that the most effective way to create change was through persistent, albeit slow, efforts to engage with the social fabric and wage a cultural and scientific struggle, which was far more important than radical, short-term battles. I didn't intend to judge or evaluate either approach, but this was the decision I had made for my life and my path, and I demanded this right for myself, just as my team members had the right to leave the project if they saw my stance as contradictory to individual freedom.

After my father's repeated arrests and interrogations, some aspects of the project changed. Given the security situation at the time, I became even more anxious and started analysing everything with paranoia. I constantly wondered if I had started something dangerous and would have to be accountable to the families of my colleagues if anything went wrong. My research locations were remote villages, mostly in Kurdish border regions or southern villages, which were politically volatile, particularly regarding Shia-Sunni religious policies, and my presence in these areas could raise suspicions that I was working in regions where religious minorities and opposition groups were active, whereas the main nature of my work was something else. As I mentioned earlier in the Diyarbakır section,

unfortunately, in countries with dictatorial governments, even the smallest issues can quickly become security concerns.



Image 290: My father.

I was worried that my work would be politicised and I would be branded with political labels, preventing me from continuing my work. I thought about whether to continue or not, especially after a close friend, Bahareh, was arrested due to her frequent media appearances. She was a journalist who worked on human-rights issues in Kurdistan and was one of the few who continued her work despite the oppression after 2008. Even some of her close friends accused her of being reckless after her arrest. Bahareh was very shaken and didn't return to work for a while. The sudden execution of Farzad Kamangar and several other political activists also terrified everyone.

I had gone to Diyarbakır to complete the tourism project archive and hand it over when Fatimah contacted me with trepidation and trembling, saying, 'Kameel, Bahareh and some friends and family members of [the imprisoned woman] have gone to the front of the Seven Sins Intelligence Agency, lit candles and taken photos. Their actions are now being widely publicised. The situation is precarious and dangerous.' Bahareh was archiving the interviews and had all the project's emails and information. They still hadn't released my father, and his documents were being withheld. The Education Ministry's security team was also harassing my sister and her husband, which had brought on another set of troubles. Given Bahareh's emotional and impulsive nature, there was a risk of her being arrested or interrogated. I was so worried that I scolded her over the phone without asking too many questions, saying, 'I've begged you, be cautious and don't put the project and others at risk. You hold a key



Image 291: The late Bahareh Alavi at the end of the documentary *In the Name of Tradition*. Saqqez, 2010.

position in the project and are aware of all the sensitivities – why did you do this without consulting me?'

The pressure, the stress and Fatimah's provocations led me to make a hasty decision, and I informed Bahareh of the termination of our collaboration. The sorrow of this incident and my mistake lingered in her heart, and I later apologised to her and her family multiple times to partially restore our relationship. She continued to work on the project as an office assistant in a limited capacity and eventually decided to pursue higher education. Unfortunately, we lost her in a family accident – she and her father were killed, and her mother suffered a spinal cord injury. Her death revived the grief of losing my young brother Kamyar, and for a long time I didn't know whose mourning to prioritise.

Bahareh may be gone, but her memory stays with me forever. In 2016, my research and documentary film *In the Name of Tradition* was completed, but I was too afraid to release it due to the existing sensitivities. I eventually dedicated it to Bahareh and had it broadcast on BBC Persian. The film ends with an image of Bahareh, a girl whose presence and gentle smile were reminiscent of spring.

Before Bahareh's passing, Fatimah had already left the group. The publication of her thesis as a book on FGM/C had put her in a better position. She had been seriously considering continuing her education abroad for a while, and, with the start of her language classes, she had been jokingly and seriously thinking of getting a nose job, which, as her friends said, contradicted her feminist views. She had stayed home for a long time and eventually stopped collaborating with the project. On her last working day, we were in Mashhad, preparing for the second round of regional scans, and were supposed to head south. Fatimah's departure from the project affected the quality and speed of our work for a while. Replacing her with someone of her calibre was not easy. After Fatimah, new individuals joined the project, some of whom were not Kurds. The project entered a new phase, and the research continued with speed and power.

Life in Tehran; Work in the South and West

The three-stage project to tackle FGM/C consisted of identification, education and assessment. Having completed the second stage in Kurdistan, I moved on to Hormozgan province. To establish a more formal presence in Tehran, I rented a house, intending to create a framework for legalising my activities. Strategically, I envisioned a central hub with a more formal workspace, focusing on social work, psychology and research into social harms.

However, I faced numerous obstacles. I didn't have an Iranian degree, and my education wasn't in psychology or social work. I needed someone with the relevant qualifications to obtain a permit in their name. As I delved deeper into the process, I realised that establishing a research foundation involved arduous administrative hurdles and security clearances. I didn't want to come under the scrutiny of security agencies, but working in Tehran was too enticing.

Through friends, I met someone who worked in a government agency as a social worker. They were looking for an investor to co-found a social-work centre. We agreed that they would take charge of the technical aspects, while I would handle the internal management. We rented a two-room office, but it took a long time to register our centre. Our application got stuck in various departments, including the police force and the Social



Image 292: Marketplace. Qeshm, 2010.

Welfare Organisation, delaying the issuance of our permit. It took months for our centre to be officially launched.

The general framework of our work involved counselling and conducting research, with part-time psychologists on board. The technical expert focused on this area, while I, with my research background, worked on establishing the necessary legitimacy for our activities within the centre. We drafted projects on issues like child marriage, FGM/C – for which I had up-to-date field information – life-skills training, divorce and addiction. We established connections with welfare organisations, healthcare centres and municipalities to gain their support, but I still couldn't succeed.

Unfortunately, various institutions' views on social harms remained unchanged. They claimed these issues weren't their top priorities. About a year and a half after I founded the centre, while I was simultaneously conducting fieldwork in the south and Kurdistan, I realised that my presence at the Tehran centre only added to my financial burden. The frequent trips from Tehran to Hormozgan and Kurdistan were exhausting me. In Qeshm, I found a social worker willing to collaborate, and I managed to utilise their centre for face-to-face training and in-depth interviews.

The only hospital on the large island of Qeshm was near my office – a dilapidated hospital where people often queued for limited services. In the absence of adequate medical facilities, many people would travel to Bandar Abbas or even Shiraz. The resident doctors were usually completing their mandatory service and were present on the island reluctantly. The islanders' health situation was subpar and included a high maternal-mortality rate that had persisted for years.

During that period, I had good connections with local and social leaders in the province and islands. As a Sunni Kurd, I had earned their trust. Influencing these individuals could help reduce FGM/C in the province, as people respected their opinions. I'm delighted to say that my good relationships with these individuals contributed to a relatively fast decline in FGM/C on the island and in the south. In the traditional environment of Qeshm and Hormozgan, my good rapport with religious leaders inspired people to follow their example and support me.

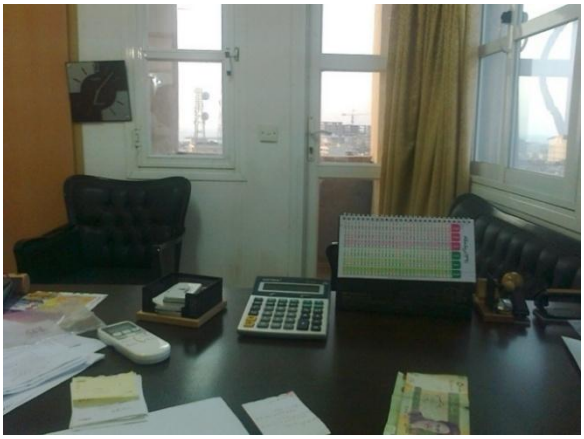


Image 293: Social-work office. Qeshm, 2011.

The Challenges of Independent Research and Divergent Views on FGM

My close encounters with people led me to understand the subject from a different perspective, and I realised that the types of cutting, approaches, mindsets and beliefs – even the manner and depth of the cuts on women's and men's genital organs – vary significantly from one country to another. My observations in Africa and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Iran proved to me that these differences cannot be dismissed or overlooked, even from cultural, scientific and religious viewpoints. The global indices and radical left-wing ideologues often failed to comprehend or ignored these sociological and anthropological nuances.

As a novice researcher with a financially dependent project, I was compelled to conform my data and analyses to the global indices. Of course, I resisted using certain terms and expressions to the end, particularly to maintain my commitment to cultural and anthropological values. I used both the phrases 'female genital mutilation/cutting' and 'female circumcision' to refer to the practice, despite the controversy

surrounding them. However, I confess that the results of this research were, to a great extent, devoid of depth and insightful quotes.

Years later, with the publication of *The Changing Paradigms of FGM A Comprehensive Research Study on (FGM/C) & (MGM/C) in Iran* and the completion of the documentary film *In the Name of Tradition*, I attempted to compensate for this shortcoming. This experience led to a personal commitment, and I learned to never sacrifice the integrity of my research for financial gain or to cater to global indices, nor should I fear criticism or validation from those groups whose existence relies on perpetuating statistics and securing funding.

The extent of clitoral cutting, known as *bēlōkē* in Kurdish, and the harm it inflicts on women's sexual desires was a crucial issue that activists in this field often whispered about in hushed tones. One of my foreign friends, a researcher in the field of FGM/C, adopted an academic and balanced approach to the issue while remaining mindful of the primary concern: the violation of human and sexual rights. My friends, including Professor Tobe Levin von Gleichen from Harvard University and Professor Nahid Tavassoli from Oxford University, as well as others, would occasionally engage in cautious discussions on the fringes of conferences at the United Nations and other venues.

The evidence suggests that FGM/C predates the emergence of Abrahamic religions and was later incorporated into organised religions. Proponents of the practice attribute it to their current religion; for instance, in Islam, some followers believe that the Prophet himself sanctioned or modified the practice. However, historical records confirm that FGM/C was prevalent before the emergence of Egypt and the Pharaonic era, and perhaps even dates back to an earlier period.

Beside the prevailing views on the reasons behind the practice, we considered two additional theories. Firstly, that girls were circumcised alongside boys with the same rationale – to reduce sexual desire in both genders. Secondly, that the roots of FGM/C lie in ancient Egyptian customs of body modification, which included practices like neck elongation, forehead flattening, lip enlargement and skull reshaping. This points to a longstanding human tradition of bodily modification for aesthetic or cultural reasons, into which FGM/C may also fit.

Additionally, there is a theory from ancient Egyptian medicine suggesting that removal of the clitoral hood increased women's sexual

desires. Pharaonic physicians believed that, because women generally take longer to reach orgasm than men, removing this hood sped up the process, facilitating quicker orgasms.

But can FGM/C increase women's sensitivity and arousal? In our conversations, we often reached the conclusion that, as activists or experts in this field, we could not openly discuss these issues. The dominant discourse views FGM/C as a far more complex issue, driven by patriarchal, anti-woman and anti-human-rights ideologies, rather than purely medical or health reasons.

That uniform, global perspective may have contributed to the biases and attempts to suppress discussions on sexuality. Most of our interlocutors were women, but the suspicion or, at the very least, the possibility that FGM/C had been designed to enhance arousal was so taboo that they would hesitate to express their opinions. Meanwhile, they were aware of the sensitivity surrounding this topic and the potential risks of being attacked by radical feminists or facing backlash. Consequently, we would only whisper about it among ourselves.

As I mentioned earlier, the dominance of extreme, often unscientific feminist discourse has cast a shadow over the liberal study of FGM/C, making it challenging for researchers, particularly male researchers, to explore the subject. In those years, the global community was more sensitive than ever to the issue of FGM/C, to the extent that the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union had incorporated funding for FGM-related projects in their national policy agendas. Hillary Clinton, in the years 1993 and 1994, was politically and publicly vocal about the issue, allocating substantial funds to reduce FGM/C prevalence in some African countries. In the same vein, a seminar was held in 2012, chaired by Hillary Clinton, then the US secretary of state, which I was

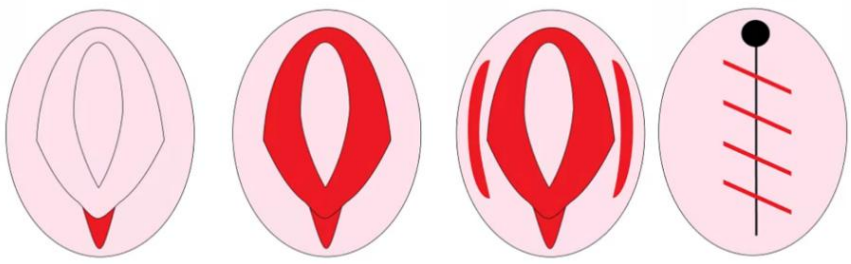


Image 294: Explanation of various types of FGM/C.

invited to attend. I did not participate because of the prevailing sensitivities between the Iranian Government and the United States.

Overall, FGM/C remains a significant concern for the Western world, although the enthusiasm and funding for the cause have waned in recent years. Nonetheless, the United Nations has planned to eradicate FGM/C globally by 2030, a goal that seems rather ambitious.

Changing My Father's Attitudes

I was constantly commuting between Qeshm and Tehran, and, naturally, I would visit Kurdistan to see my family and check on the progress of the FGM/C project.

My father and stepmother would sometimes have disagreements, and I had to intervene to reconcile them. Through my work, I had developed a more rational approach to dealing with problems and difficulties, which had earned me the trust of my family and relatives, who would confide in me about some of their issues. During this period, my visits to my family were often spent resolving these disputes and problems. My father was delighted and took pride in the fact that his eldest son had taken on this role among our relatives and acquaintances, and it was a balm to all the ridicule I had faced due to my work on FGM/C. I decided to have a serious conversation with my father about why I was working on that project despite all the difficulties.

He wanted to drive to Tehran, so I accompanied him. He sat behind the wheel, driving recklessly as always, which often frightened me. I started the conversation, speaking in simple and plain terms: 'Female circumcision harms their sexual health, and, when they get married, they can't satisfy their own and their husband's sexual needs naturally, leading to frigidity and creating extra mental pressures for both parties. It may eventually lead to the husband seeking another woman and the wife seeking another relationship, meaning that FGM/C can prevent a couple from having a healthy emotional and sexual relationship, leading to divorce. Circumcision endangers the family structure and the future of children in the marriage system, and it's an invasion of children's private spheres, whether boy or girl. They should be allowed to make their own decisions when they grow up.' I tried to explain the issue in simple language for him.

In the village, I discussed these matters with many people, but talking about these topics with my father was difficult when we were in our traditional setting. I felt his driving speed increasing, and we almost had an accident once. I begged him to pull over to the side. We switched seats, and I sat behind the wheel.



Image 295: Weekend with my father. Kurdistan, 2011.

My father analysed the issue logically and discussed it with me. He was very curious and asked, 'What is circumcision, exactly? What gets cut, and how true is it that circumcised women become frigid?' Then, he jokingly added, 'So, your mother was circumcised, and that's why she was so cold?' It was both surprising and empowering for me to be discussing this topic with my father.

After that day, when people would mock my work, he no longer changed the direction of the conversation. He bravely stood his ground and said, 'You don't understand what Kameel and his friends are doing! Their work is both religious and humane. They're trying to save families from conflicts that lead everyone to the abyss of divorce. You're being superficial and don't know what they're doing. Do we have the right to take our children's lives and make them miserable?'

When my father accepted my words, I realised that our people are very teachable and suffer from a lack of awareness. One must discuss every issue at the right time and place, according to people's levels of knowledge and awareness. I realised that if people become aware that their understanding of traditions is wrong or that the philosophy behind them has disappeared and is no longer necessary, they will automatically stop or change the way they practise those traditions. Observing those around me and in the field, I found that people constantly update and modify traditions, although, in some cases, like FGM/C, it requires more time, since it's a taboo subject. In many cases, I've found that raising people's awareness is more effective than legislation.

The Pillar of the Family Crumbled

On 7 February 2012, my phone rang early in the morning. My brother-in-law, Kaka Hussein, said suddenly, 'Kameel, your father's condition is not good. Come back.' Father had a history of lung disease. A few months prior, a doctor in Tehran had told him that his lungs were in bad shape and that the only solution was to quit smoking. It was to no avail, as my father continued to smoke. A few days earlier, on Eid al-Adha, I had spoken to him, and he had only a slight cold and no serious issues. I was still stunned when Shafagh arrived. She also lived in Tehran, and we would visit the national library every day for our project on child marriage. That morning, she arrived, and I sat behind the wheel, heading to Azadi Terminal. My heart was heavy, and I contacted my brother-in-law again, saying, 'I'm not a child. Tell me what happened!'

He wept. 'Kameel, your father has passed away.'

I crumbled. My father had died of a sudden heart attack after morning prayers.

I stopped the car by the highway. My body was shaking, my head was extremely hot and I was struggling to breathe. Shafagh moved behind the wheel and drove me to the airport. I couldn't get a seat on the Urumiyeh and Tabriz flights, so I rented a car to take me to Piranshahr. For hours, I answered phone calls from family and relatives, asking for permission to bury the body. I failed to arrive, and my father was laid to rest in my absence.

During the funeral ceremonies, everything seemed incomprehensible, as if I were in a foggy space. What should I do now? The shop, the house, my sister Kani, who was only twenty-one . . .

I had heard that when a brother dies your back breaks, and when a father dies the pillars of the house crumble. I experienced it. When Mother and Kamyar left, I could maintain my composure, but my father's death devastated me. I stood at the mosque door, only nodding in response to condolences. I delegated all tasks to my uncle and others. On the first night, all the women from our family were at our house, and, according to tradition, I should have gone out, but I stayed home and slept in Kani's



Image 296: Funeral ceremony at the mosque after my father's death. Piranshahr, 2012.

room. It was one of the hardest nights of my life, and I was on the verge of losing my mind.

I spent almost the entire night pacing back and forth in the small bathroom, the only private space in the house, lost in thought. My aunt woke up for the morning prayer and insisted I return to the bedroom. I was left wondering what to do after the ceremony. As the eldest son, it was my responsibility to handle the division of inheritance and many other matters. My mind was racing: What would happen to my job? Where would I live? My home was in Tehran, my office was in Qeshm and I had a completely different lifestyle.

The familiar lump in my throat returned – a lump that refused to dissolve and only added to my torment. On the second night, I sat among the men in the mourning gathering, and I realised something strange. After my father's passing, everyone's behaviour toward me had changed. They treated me as the head of the family. Even the elders would stand up in respect in front of me, and everyone, including my uncle (my father's brother) and my cousins, would call me 'Kak Kameel'. In recent years, my father had practically taken on the role of the patriarch, replacing Uncle Abdullah, or Mam Hawla. Although the atmosphere and dynamics of the family had changed significantly, the elders still played a crucial role in

some matters and events. It was as if, after the king's departure, the crown had been placed on my head, and I had become the head of the family.

That night, everyone was engrossed in discussing the country's economy and smoking cigarettes. I felt suffocated and couldn't bear to stay in the room any more. I don't know if it was the cigarette smoke or the empty space where my father used to sit, but I felt overwhelmed. I went out to the parking lot, rested my head on my father's car and wept uncontrollably. When I returned to the room, I felt lighter, but I felt guilty for not having spoken to my father more in his last days. The bond we had formed after my mother's passing and my return to Iran had grown stronger, but now my friend was gone.

After my father's death, everything changed rapidly. I packed up my life in Tehran and Qeshm and returned to Piranshahr. I appointed two colleagues as team leaders and delegated the project tasks to them. The mourning ceremony had ended, but two critical issues remained. Firstly, my unmarried sister, who was still living at home, and, secondly, my stepmother. A few relatives from my stepmother's family had a meeting with me and my uncle, stating that, according to religious and customary laws, she should stay in her husband's house until the fortieth day and observe the mourning period. In Islamic societies where many adhere to traditional customs and religion, when a husband passes away, the wife must wait for two menstrual cycles to ensure she is not pregnant and then leave the house and claim her inheritance. For me, who didn't know the details well, it was quite intriguing.

My stepmother was crying nonstop, saying she would stay with Kani and had no intention of leaving. She said, 'I won't abandon this family. I shouldn't let the house lights go out. This is my home, and I'm faithful to it.'

I wished for the same thing to happen, but those around me, especially my aunts and uncles, said, 'Son, you don't know much! Your stepmother is saying all this now, but she won't stay. She's not an independent woman who can make her own decisions.' They were right: one day, my stepmother, who was like a reminder of my father, was forced to leave due to family and societal pressures. She packed her bags and went to her brother's house. My aunts had come to bid her farewell, and everyone was



Image 297: My father and Kamyar at my aunt's house. Gerdashavan village, 2008.

crying. I recalled the memories of Kamyar's wife's forced departure, and my state became even worse. That same day, Kani came home from university, and I wish she had come a bit later and not seen her stepmother leave.

One day, amid the chaos of inheritance disputes, wills and hundreds of administrative papers, I had to take care of the shop and was left alone in our big, empty house. As I was driving from Mahabad's tax administration office to Piranshahr through the mountainous road, I stopped by the roadside and screamed as loud as I could into the heart of the mountain. I had immense psychological pressure. My stepmother had left, and Kani and I were like two orphaned children left alone in our father's big house. The presence and sympathy of others only added to our pain.

My father's death was a devastating blow – the deadliest blow I had experienced in my life up to that point. I screamed so much that my voice was hoarse for a long time, but I gradually calmed down.

My Encounters with Death

Death means the end – finality – and that's why it's terrifying for most people. My first encounters with death occurred during my childhood. The

most bitter encounter was the death of our old neighbour in the Naqadeh war – the old man who had gone out one morning to borrow bread from his family and was killed by a sniper. The sound of the gunshot, the smell of gunpowder and the blood-soaked body were very frightening for me as a child.

The second time I faced death was when I was a kid. Zolikhah, my paternal uncle's wife, had passed away. The news spread, and everyone started wailing and crying. The women of the family had scratched their faces and were covered in blood, chanting and screaming Zolikhah's name. The body was laid out in the courtyard, and a group of women washed it. As a child, I didn't seem to have a problem being present. It was night, and there were other children in the courtyard. I glanced at this person who had existed just a short while ago but was no more, hiding behind my mother's and grandmother's skirts for a few moments.

As a child, I didn't understand death, but even now that I've grown up, I still can't come to terms with the sudden losses of people. Zolikhah was originally from the Iraqi Kurdistan Kurds and always looked neat and tidy. She would constantly listen to Arab Osman's music, her favourite singer, but that night her eyes were closed, and her body was motionless in the courtyard. Because she was old, her body was wrinkled, and she had several layers of fat. I felt her face and body had turned blue or maybe purple. They wrapped her in a white shroud and carried her on men's shoulders to the mosque and then to the regional cemetery called Kohneh Khaneh. She was buried in the ground, and it was all over. During the condolence ceremony, we kids were happy, eating food and dates and playing. It was like a festival for us.

Later, whenever there were clashes in the city, I'd encountered corpses. If a Peshmerga fighter was killed, the next day his body would be thrown in the back of a military vehicle, and the loudspeakers would broadcast propaganda through the city streets. I think I was around eleven when they brought one of them to the city's main mosque. A Revolutionary Guard, whose rank I didn't know, had come alone into the crowd, circling the body and hurling insults: 'This is the coward who was broadcasting from the mosque's loudspeaker last night. This accursed one is the same who killed my friend in the clashes!' I still remember his face. The Peshmerga usually had long hair, and this young man's blood-soaked locks matched his grey Kurdish outfit, complete with a long shawl suitable for carrying

ammunition and grenades. He wore Adidas shoes, a common choice among Peshmerga fighters, which everyone knew. They took the body away from the furious Revolutionary Guard, who was yelling and screaming.

Several times I witnessed the bodies of Peshmerga fighters being brought to our local mosque, being laid out on a platform and having prayers recited over them. The bloodstained water would flow as they washed the bodies, and they wouldn't even take them to healthcare centres. We had to hold the funeral processions quietly, and the condolence meetings would be held in silence.



Image 298: Rafsanjani at the margin of Taleghani's speech, under stern looks from two Peshmerga. Sanandaj, 1980.

In my childhood and adolescence, I often saw death in these irregular, gruesome forms. The bombings of cities, particularly Piranshahr in 1980, were terrifying, and dozens were killed. During our escapes from the city, I'd see the bodies, and these nightmares would haunt me. At that time, I witnessed mass deaths in the most horrific way possible.

In late 1984, another image of death was etched in my mind. We had gone to my grandfather's village. They brought the body of a soldier who had been dispatched to the war zones in Sumar and the south. He was an army soldier who had been missing for a long time. When the body was found, they brought it to the village in a military vehicle, quietly. His body had become so dry and blackened that it didn't resemble a human being any more. His name was Mam-Rasul, a kind and handsome young man who had become like a piece of wood. He was the boyfriend of my aunt Kulthum's daughter, and I knew about their secret relationship. The body had been left in the scorching hot deserts of the south, so it was severely

decomposed and stinking. My uncle started washing the body, but he couldn't continue due to the terrible smell.

I said, 'Wait!' and brought a large, expensive perfume from the storage room. We were displaced due to the aerial bombings. My father had packed up his shop and stacked the goods in my grandfather's attic. I knew my father would scold me, but I brought the perfume and poured it on the body. This act gave me a sense of comfort. I had the courage to approach the body, even when everyone, especially my peers, was standing outside. I held my nose, poured the perfume and felt like I'd grown up and become brave. I talked about this act for a long time and, of course, struggled with nightmares at night. After Mam-Rasul's burial, I told my cousin, 'I poured perfume on him and washed him.' In the darkness of the attic, I was consumed by the stench of death, unable to verbalise the depths of my sorrow. I will never forget the grief in Zelikhah's eyes, akin to the charred body of her boyfriend.

These events had trained me to visualise the dead. Even now I dread encountering corpses. Perhaps it's due to those experiences and memories that I've developed an aversion. As a child and adolescent, I had a period of disturbing dreams. I don't recall the details of those nightmares, but in each one I saw dismembered corpses that were still alive, conversing with me.

Engagement with Shafagh and Dividing the Inheritance

Kani was studying at Urmia University. I had become sensitive to ensuring she didn't lack anything emotionally or financially. During weekends, when she came home, I made sure the aroma of food filled the house. I'd invite my sisters, aunts and other relatives over, and during university breaks I'd take Kani on trips near and far. I did everything possible to create a better environment for her. When I returned her to the university dorm after our father's passing, I handed over the required documents to the responsible lady and introduced myself as Kani's legal guardian, asking to be informed of any developments. I wanted everything to be reported to me, and, honestly, it was peculiar even to myself. I wasn't concerned about her relationships or friends, but I was perpetually anxious, worried that things might get tough for her. Kani had lost her parents and witnessed her brother's death.

In that period, family and acquaintances would hint with words and glances that I, being unmarried, should get married and settle down. 'What will become of Kani?' they'd ask, placing immense social pressure on me. My mind was constantly preoccupied with Kani. Everyone in the family liked her and was concerned about her fate, and I was the most worried of all.

When I entrusted Kani to the dorm's responsible lady, she said, 'Kani has been praising you a lot, saying you studied in England from a young age and grew up there. This behaviour doesn't fit with your English upbringing!' She wasn't aware of my internal struggles, and my sensitivity was misinterpreted as concern for her relationships, but her words were a good reminder, prompting me to behave more logically.

Amid this mental turmoil, my thoughts were occupied with Shafagh, my friend. Before my father's passing, she and my sisters had come to Tehran, and I had invited her to join us for an informal dinner party. I was certain I wanted Shafagh to be my partner. I hosted the informal gathering in a friendly atmosphere, but my family would smile, implying that I had introduced my chosen partner for marriage. Now, however, my life circumstances had changed, and I was constantly deliberating what to do



Image 299: The courtyard of our family home. Piranshahr, 2013.



Image 300: Shafagh and I. Mahabad, 2013.

and how to proceed with our relationship. What did I want to do with my life? I couldn't return to Tehran, nor could I stay in Piranshahr. Did I even want to get married? I had no clear plan and didn't know what to do, but I regularly spoke with Shafagh over the phone, feeling that our relationship would culminate in marriage.

Another issue I needed to address as soon as possible was the inheritance and legal matters related to it. My siblings had their own lives, and Kani and I were left alone in a large, now eerily empty house, after our stepmother's departure. On a gloomy Friday evening, after Kani left for Urmia, I sat for hours, lost in thought. I was frozen in silence, unable to move, my throat dry and my heart yearning to cry.

I tried to take a more realistic look at my life. I saw how everything had changed after Father's passing. I felt lost and bewildered, so I left the house behind. I got in the car and drove to Urmia. I spent the night at a hotel near Kani's dormitory, desperate to be close to the only person who still had a tangible presence in my life. The next day, I felt helpless. I didn't want to return to that big, empty house alone.

I wandered from city to city: Urmia, Tabriz, Sareyn . . . Like a restless bird, I kept moving. Kani, the only person who could bring light to the house, was at university, and our stepmother was gone.

I struggled to keep the shop's lantern lit after Father's passing. I reached an agreement with the others to keep the shop open, so it wouldn't suddenly close in that small, traditional town. I knew this arrangement couldn't last, but the lady who managed the shop remained dedicated, and I would buy stock from Urmia for her. I had learned which models of manteaus to purchase, and the shop would thrive before the schools reopened, selling school uniforms and bags. This was my only solace – being busy with work and slightly alleviating my anxiety. I thought to myself, 'I'll go to Tehran to buy goods.' Kani and Mahbubeh's and Tabibeh's children would come to help with the sales, and my situation would change.

After those few days of feeling miserable, I decided to start the administrative process of dividing the inheritance. Although some family members thought it was too soon, I had seen how prolonged disputes over inheritance often led to family conflicts.

I invited the local cleric and family elders to create a framework for dividing everything fairly. Since we couldn't reach an agreement, I followed the legal procedures, ensuring that the valuation of assets would make the process smoother.

According to Iranian law, a daughter's inheritance is half that of a son's. I couldn't accept this blatant discrimination and announced in the gathering that I wanted my share to be equal to my sisters'. The atmosphere became slightly tense. Many families who had gone through this process were displeased, and some men even protested, asking what this meant. However, the younger family members and women, in general, supported my stance. Mahbubeh, based on her beliefs, objected, saying she would only accept what Islam had allocated to her and wouldn't accept more. My brother Rasul also disagreed, refusing to abide by my decision. It was agreed that Tabibeh and Kani would receive shares equal to my inheritance.

A month and a half later, we divided everything: the shop went to me and my sisters and the house to my brother. Of course, a quarter of it would go to our stepmother.



Image 301: Father and Kani. Paternal home, Piranshahr, 2012.

Following the division of my inheritance, Shafagh and I held our engagement and wedding ceremonies. We chose not to make Piranshahr our marital home. My brother had inherited my father's house, and I no longer had a share in it. Given my living conditions, I didn't feel good about living in Tehran, being responsible for managing the shop and Kani's presence in Urmia. I decided to move to Mahabad, which was a suitable place to start my life anew. It was also Shafagh's preferred choice. I could define my own activities there while continuing my project on FGM/C in the Kurdistan Region and the south. Additionally, Kani had a close relationship with my cousin, Delnia, who lived in Mahabad.

Mahabad had a more culturally liberal atmosphere than traditional Piranshahr, and it was easier for me to access and commute to my father's shop. Although most of my paternal family members lived in Piranshahr after we left Naqadeh, we had some relatives in Mahabad and its surrounding cities, which was a good thing.

After my father's passing, I knew what position and responsibility I had been entrusted with, and I had to attend the funeral ceremonies of those who had attended our family's funeral ceremonies. Consequently, I would remember those I invited to my wedding so that I could attend their weddings in return.

I discussed the matter with Shafagh, knowing that she would understand the change in circumstances and agree to accompany me. We saw a few houses in Mahabad and came to a decision. During this period,

we still hadn't registered our marriage, and since it was the back-to-school season, my father's shop and Kani's temporary residence were in the same building that my father had purchased after my mother's passing. Kani and I lived a brotherly-sisterly life for almost two months during the summer, and then we moved to a beautiful, well-constructed house near Bagh-e Mikaiil, also known as Mellat Park, in Mahabad. Kani lived on the lower floor, while Shafagh and I lived on the upper floor.



Image 302: The shop during the back-to-school season. Piranshahr, 2013.

The Engagement and Wedding Ceremonies: Differences in Kurdish Culture

I finalised the Mahabad house rental, packed up my father's household items and settled into Kani's unit. I wanted to propose to Shafagh, but I preferred a more modern approach to the engagement ceremony and wanted to share the news with our friends. I invited the young members of Shafagh's family, and only Kani and I represented our side. We went to a restaurant in the Taq-e Bostan area in Kermanshah and had dinner together. I wore traditional Kurdish attire, got down on one knee, presented Shafagh with a ring and asked her to marry me.

Since my father's passing, I hadn't experienced any joy, and the world hadn't seemed pleasant to me. However, after getting engaged to Shafagh, my condition gradually improved. I felt a new sense of life and fresh beginnings ahead of me.

The joy of our engagement period lasted for about six months. I still had my share of sorrows, and sometimes I thought about how much my parents had wished to see these days, but it wasn't meant to be.

The next evening, it was time for the proposal. In our culture, it was customary for the elders and relatives of the first degree, as well as the women, to have the initial conversation and then everyone would join in for the proposal. In other words, they would finalise the terms, including the amount of the dowry and the gold to be bought. Shafagh and I, however, were against dowry and gold, and we insisted on our marriage-contract terms. With all the legal rights that a woman practically loses after marriage in Iran, I emphasised including them in the contract, to be later ratified by the notary. It was unbearable for me to think that, in Iran, the law takes away the most basic rights of women, including the right to an education, a passport and the choice of residence after marriage, which could only be returned to her if her husband agreed. I thought to myself, 'If I were a woman, how humiliating these conditions would be!' However, I had experiences and observations enough to know that Iranian laws in this regard were so patriarchal, even including these rights and terms in the contract would not be enough of a guarantee. I recently found out that they have even made it more difficult, requiring a payment of 200,000 tomans for each condition and limiting the number of terms. It seems to me that marriage is a social yet private matter.

During the proposal ceremony, both Shafagh and I were present, along with four or five members of her family, including her parents, older brother and an aunt. We all knew what was going to happen, but we sat in silence, looking at each other, until her older brother gestured for me to speak. I thought that, since the elder was present, it wouldn't be right for me to speak, but then I realised I had to. I was nervous about what to say, so I began by saying, 'I've come to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage and to join your family.' We had seen each other several times before and knew each other. Shafagh and I had been living together in Tehran and other places – what is colloquially known as 'white marriage'. We had attended each other's family gatherings, including my father's funeral, and I had danced at her sister's and brother's weddings. In short, I spoke for a few minutes, saying what I had learned.

Then, Shafagh's father started speaking. He is a strong, determined and forward-thinking man, and his views aligned with mine. I saw many similarities between him and me. As he spoke, I noticed the difference in our accents and thought to myself that he probably didn't understand many of my words, but he said, 'We are both Kurds, and our religion and

denomination are the same.' He was from an old family in the Sar-e Pol-e Zahab region, and Shafagh's mother was from the same area, from a village nearby. Both were from a Sunni Muslim background, and they were pleased to be marrying their daughter to a Sunni Kurd. Shafagh's father spoke for a few minutes, and we went through the proposal in its classical sense.

When I returned, I made the news public and told our relatives that the engagement and proposal had taken place. Although almost everyone knew, the gossip and chatter continued. People asked why I had taken a wife from Kermanshah and not from our own city or region. Others would say that Kameel was not a child, and he knew what he was doing. There were significant cultural differences between the two families, and I had to be mindful of them going forward.

In the Mokrian region, we had a tradition called *jalke bordan* in which the groom's family would bring gifts of clothes and jewellery for the bride. Typically, this ceremony would take place before the official wedding, but, because of the long distance, it was challenging to make two separate trips to Kermanshah. We decided to combine the jalke bordan with the official registration of our marriage, which was scheduled for a few months later. I didn't want everyone to travel by car, so I rented a bus. After the accident involving Kamyar, I had a bad feeling and was scared of Iran's roads.

We set off for Kermanshah by bus and a few cars. Since we had a large family, we had to select a limited number of people to attend. I also booked a hotel in the city centre. It was expensive, but there was no alternative. That night, at the bride's house, I gave a heartfelt speech, saying that we had gathered as family and relatives, and this union could be a turning point for us, coming from two different regions. My stepbrother and uncle-in-law laughed and teased me, saying my words sounded like parliamentary speeches. In the end, with laughter and warm wishes, the



Image 303: The night before the wedding ceremony with Shafagh. Kermanshah, 2013.

traditional engagement ceremony was completed, and we returned to the hotel to prepare for the official registration the next day.

In Western culture, there's a belief known as 'cold feet', where the bride and groom may feel doubts or hesitation before the wedding. I had seen this depicted in some Hollywood films and had laughed at it, but I experienced it myself. When we returned to the hotel, I asked my cousin, who was sharing a room with me, to leave me alone, and I contacted Shafagh. She sensed my anxiety and let me talk it out. I said, 'What have we done? Have we made the right decision? Did we rush into this?' Shafagh reassured me, and, with her help, I overcame my doubts.

We had disagreements about the wedding ceremony. The bride's mother wanted to hold the ceremony at home, while I insisted on registering our marriage at the registry office. Her reason was that, after the ceremony, we could stay at their house and attend to our guests immediately, but I didn't want the legitimacy of the ceremony to depend on the presence of a clergyman or a lawyer at home. I preferred a more legal and formal process. I had attended friends' weddings in the West and had seen how they could choose to get married in a church or at a municipal office. It was up to them to decide whether to have a religious



Image 304: The wedding ceremony and sugar scattering. Kermanshah, 2013.

or non-religious ceremony, but in Iran we only had one option. That's why I preferred a simple and brief ceremony at the registry office. Shafagh's mother eventually agreed, and we registered our marriage at an office where the registrar was a Sunni Kurd in traditional attire.

The ceremony had some amusing moments. There were many more family members on my side, and most of the elderly relatives sat on a platform facing us. The atmosphere was like something from a TV drama. We had a cloth covering our heads and sugar was scattered over us. This traditional Iranian ceremony didn't exist in Mokrian, and my relatives were shocked, wondering what kind of Kurds these were! Besides the dialect differences, which I found beautiful, most of the young people from the bride's family, especially the women and girls from her mother's side, didn't speak Kurdish, or barely understood it. Their Farsi, spoken with a local Kermanshahi accent, was unfamiliar and almost unacceptable to my family.

Mokrian and other Kurdish regions are different from Kermanshah in some ways. Kermanshah has always been a transit point for Shiite pilgrims from other cities, and several powerful and mostly governmental families of Farsi and Turkic Qajar descent have settled there, introducing urban conversations. On the other hand, due to the Shiite majority in Kermanshah and the gradual cultural genocide or ethnocide that has occurred in the city, people have come to value their culture less. However, my family

were among the few families that still spoke Kurdish with their children – although our Kurdish was heavily mixed with Farsi. This outlook and high level of education within our family had helped preserve our culture and identity; otherwise, in Kermanshah, at least in the past and in future generations, few people would speak Kurdish with their children. That is seen by Kurds from other regions as self-denial and submission to the dominant culture and ruling system.

Another interesting aspect is that I was hand in hand with my father-in-law, and the cleric would continuously read verses from the Quran in the form of a sermon. According to the Shafi'i school of thought, he would ask, 'Do you accept?' I would reply, 'I accept', but he would continue reading, and then my father-in-law would say, 'I accept.' Two of my aunts were very fond of this scene and didn't believe I would participate in such a ceremony. Before the ceremony, they would ask, 'Does the cleric really read the Quranic verses when he says, "Come, Kameel, read with me"?' I was in a situation similar to mourning gatherings, where I had to move my lips and pretend to read the Fatiha. The cleric would read, and then we would repeat after him like parrots.

After the ceremony, we returned to the bride's house for lunch. In such gatherings, it's common for the elderly from both families to sit together and get acquainted, but this didn't happen here due to Shafagh's family's culture and dialect differences, which was upsetting for me. They seated all my family members in a respectful part of the courtyard and served them food, but no one from the bride's family sat with them at the table, which was unusual and unpleasant for them.

When I realised this and asked where my father-in-law was, they told me he was in his room. Later, I discovered that eating together at the same table is not a common practice in Shafagh's family. Over time, I found out that each person eats at different times, which was strange for me, who values shared



Image 305: Marriage sermon, hand in hand, Kermanshah, 2013

meals and the traditional dining table. This lack of togetherness in mealtime has remained one of the reasons for disagreement between me and my wife to this day, and I try to avoid passing this on to my son.

Apart from the differences in food preferences and tastes within the family, I realised that my father-in-law had a completely different lifestyle, often preparing his own food and considering himself a health-conscious person who would sometimes spend hours doing yoga and strange exercises.

A few days before the wedding, my family and Shafagh's organised an official engagement ceremony for me. I, along with the other guests, headed to Kermanshah and returned to Piranshahr after the ceremony. Two days later, my cousin called and asked to meet up. I invited him to a theatre event in town, and that's where he revealed some surprising news: my stepmother wanted to get married. Although it was common in our culture for women to remarry quickly, I was still taken aback. The news stirred up mixed emotions within me. What's more, she intended to marry one of our relatives who used to be a cleric. He had gone on the Umrah pilgrimage with one of my aunts after my father's passing, and he and my stepmother had developed feelings for each other.

I was upset, not only because of this sudden turn of events, but also because, just two nights prior, during my own engagement ceremony, my stepmother had referred to me as her late-husband's legacy and had promised to never leave me. Now, I was hearing that she would be getting married in just forty-eight hours. I tried to approach the situation logically and acknowledged her right to make this decision, but her impulsive and emotional behaviour was still unsettling for me and my family, leaving our hearts heavy.

We put this episode behind us and moved on to focus on our wedding preparations. Shafagh had never worked after graduating from university. Prior to our marriage, I had encouraged and even urged her to find a job and continue her education in Tehran. She had studied agriculture but was passionate about politics and had participated in civil and political activities during her student days. We had met after the 2008 incidents, when oppression and silence had gripped everything. She had decided to pursue higher education, considering the political and social climate in Iran at the time.



Image 306: Opening a bookstore branch. Vafa Intersection, Mahabad, 2013.

Shafagh wanted to enrol in a master's programme in political science, but she constantly hesitated until she finally returned to university. I was her motivator, and I strongly believed she had the capacity to succeed. At the time, she was nearing the end of her master's degree at Karaj University. Shafagh had always dreamed of entering politics, and I had always wanted her to strive for progress and make a significant impact in her field. What I desired most, however, was for my spouse to be a kind and understanding person.

This outlook and approach to life's challenges had brought us closer together. Shafagh intended to engage in serious political and social activities, ultimately aiming to run for a seat in parliament. The political and social climate in the following years, as well as the filtering processes in Iran that hindered individuals like her, especially women, eventually derailed her plans. Therefore, her goals in this regard were never realised, and she changed her mind several times, searching for her true passion. Now, she says she is preparing to venture into the field of psychology.

Setting up our home was chaotic. We spent a considerable amount of time buying and arranging furniture, then focused on the finer details of

the ceremony. We held the wedding at the grandest hall in Mahabad, known as Bagh-e-Gulan. I was torn between who to invite and who not to. For years, everyone had been waiting for my wedding. There were many distant relatives and acquaintances of my father's with whom I was still in touch, and, according to local customs and traditions, it would be unacceptable *not* to invite them. I also had many non-Kurdish friends and a few friends from outside Iran. I had to rent a large venue to accommodate all the guests and worry about their accommodation, as well.

I booked the House of Teachers Hotel and entrusted the young men from Shafagh's family with its management. I also placed some guests at the Tara Hotel, which was close to the wedding hall, and a few others at another hotel. The night before the ceremony, all the out-of-town guests arrived. I organised a grand dinner party at a restaurant, followed by a lively celebration at the Bagh-e-Mikaiil, filled with laughter and joy.

Mahabad has a large market for second-hand clothing, known as Tanakura, which mainly features foreign goods. It also has a border market and there are numerous tourist attractions, making it an ideal place for guests to stay and explore after the wedding. This had led some guests to extend their stays and enjoy the local sights. I had planned everything meticulously, but I was worried about potential road accidents and conflicts that might arise during the wedding. Fights can easily break out



Image 307: The wedding hall. 2013.



Image 308: The bride and groom's entrance. Mahabad, 2013.

at weddings, especially when there's a history of tension, young men under the influence and emotional behaviours.

I had assigned a few people to keep an eye on potential troublemakers. The Kurdish dance, an integral part of weddings in Kurdish regions, was another concern. During this dance, the first person to grab the handkerchief and take the lead is called the *Ser-Chupi*. Sometimes, a competition arises and the handkerchief ends up in only one person's hand, which can spark a fight. This was another source of worry for me.

At my own wedding, I faced an unexpected issue. Traditionally, the bride's parents or family members welcome guests at the entrance of the house or hall. However, I didn't have a father or mother, so I stood alongside my uncle and other elderly relatives to greet the guests.

We had also arranged for a traditional Kurdish folk-dance group and a singer to perform according to the guests' requests.

I was so caught up in coordinating the event that I couldn't even take my bride to the hair salon. I asked my groomsman, Kak Hussein, to take Shafagh home so I could join her later. I think I was one of the first grooms not to accompany his bride. Of course, Shafagh understood my situation. During the short drive from home to the hall, the two of us were chatting in the car, discussing an unexpected incident that was unfolding. I never thought that the approximately 1,400 guests we had invited would actually attend, making our wedding a grand and chaotic affair.



Image 309: Me and Shafagh. Mahabad, 2013.

As I walked into the hair salon that morning, I saw Shafagh, already there and looking exhausted. I couldn't help but wonder what all the fuss was about. When I finally saw her, my question was answered. She was dressed in her stunning white wedding gown, but almost unrecognisable beneath all the heavy makeup. Her face was so caked with layers of foundation that it was difficult for me to acknowledge the person I knew.

I, too, had visited the salon that morning, getting a trim and a dusting of powder on my forehead to minimise the scar. That was the extent of my makeover, but poor Shafagh had undergone a complete transformation and was anxiously seeking reassurance about her appearance. Despite the excessive makeup, Shafagh was still beautiful, and I had to compliment her on her stunning wedding attire. I've always preferred simplicity, but I appreciated her beauty that day.

As we entered the wedding hall, hand in hand, the younger guests swarmed around us, waving handkerchiefs and cheering. My attention was drawn to my sisters, who were overjoyed but also tearful. My aunts hugged me tightly, laughing but whispering, 'Kameel, if only your parents were here to see this day.'

That night was bittersweet for me; many memories and people came to mind, including the four loved ones I had lost so suddenly and whose

absence still felt profound – my grandmother, my mother, my father and Kamyar.

My sister's absence also saddened me. She had distanced herself from our family, even skipping Newruz and 13th of Farvardin celebrations, due to her radical Islamic beliefs. Her absence from my wedding, too, was a painful reminder of her strict views. If she had been there, at least as the eldest child she would have taken some of the emotional burden off my shoulders, and things would have looked better overall. I saw my aunts, Tabibeh and other relatives trying to fill the void she left.

Amid the wedding chaos, I had another concern. Shafagh and I had rented a shop to set up a bookstore, and I had to oversee the renovation work on our wedding day itself. We wanted to establish a branch of City Book in Mahabad, where Shafagh would work. It would also be our hub for networking and implementing our ideas in the region. The bookstore, located in the basement of Vafaee intersection, eventually became our haven after the wedding.

Shafagh and I went through hectic and overwhelming days, managing the bookstore, which was always bustling in the evenings. Of course, the bookstore was primarily Shafagh's domain, and I, amid the chaos, continued to work on my own projects, including my child-marriage research. The death of my father had created some setbacks in my fieldwork, and I needed to make up for lost time and get back on track.

Life was moving forward. We were trying to balance our work and personal lives, occasionally taking trips to enjoy our new life together.

Publication of *In the Name of Tradition* in Europe and Iran

My father's death and the ensuing period of adjustment, including my marriage and the assumption of new responsibilities, caused a temporary suspension of my research on FGM/C. I maintained a low profile on the project, avoiding public discussion, until certain suspicious activities prompted me to resume my work.

On the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in February 2013, I realised that Ms RM had published an interview with some initial statistics from two provinces, which she had access to during our brief collaboration. We were supposed to co-author an academic paper, but our relationship ended abruptly. I didn't think she

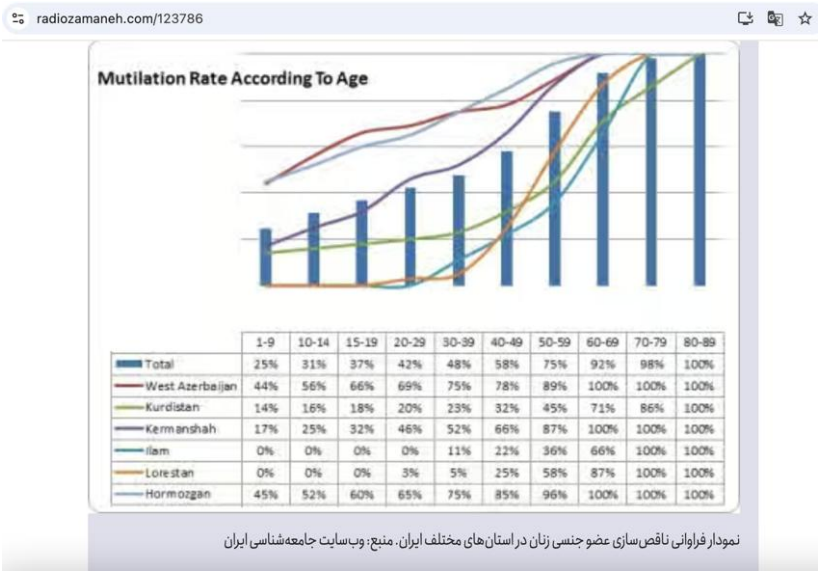


Image 310: Unpublished statistics that were later removed from the sociology website. February 2013. Radio Zamaneh.

would misuse this information, but one of my colleagues in the project informed me about it. Upon investigation, I found that one of Sweden's sociology websites had published an article by Ms RM featuring our statistics – validating her media statements with our data. What's worse, Radio Zamaneh also wrote a news report about it and interviewed Ms RM.

This was the most unprofessional act possible, as she had used officially unpublished research statistics to legitimise her media statements in her writing and analysis. She knew how cautiously and quietly we worked in those remote areas, yet she allowed herself to exploit our efforts. When I saw the report, I emailed Ms RM and the website owner, who seemed to be eager to explore this topic, and requested that they remove the statistics from the article.

Ms RM reacted aggressively and unprofessionally, questioning why I was objecting at all! These two, who apparently had a prior friendship, eventually agreed to remove the statistics from the article, after taking sides and defending each other. However, such behaviour was astonishing from someone who claimed to be a researcher. Of course, I later understood better their connection and the path they were taking. I will elaborate on this in Part Seven.

My research on FGM/C was almost complete, and the manuscript was being finalised. Given the prevailing circumstances, I couldn't publish it in Iran. I waited patiently for the situation to improve, and several books on social topics were published. Friends who were aware of my work advised me to finalise it quickly, either to publish it in Iran or abroad.

I had two concerns about my work: one was that our data and statistics might be leaked and published somewhere, like the previous incident, and the other was the time constraint, as the human-sciences data we had collected could be annulled due to changing conditions. Time was running out, and I might encounter more instances of exploitation like Ms RM's. I had to present my research in a formal format and framework sooner rather than later. Finally, I made up my mind and spent months working full time at the National Library, finalising, analysing and generating statistics and tables. Finally, *In the Name of Tradition* was ready for publication in Farsi, and I obtained official permission from the project's sponsor to submit it to a reputable publisher in Iran.

Later, the English version of the research was published in Germany and the UK, drawing attention globally. Activists in this field were astonished to learn that FGM/C exists in four provinces of Iran, in some cases even exceeding the prevalence in African countries. The book was unveiled on the International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression at the University of Oxford. Foreign media outlets covered the story, and I was interviewed by newspapers in the Netherlands and Germany. In the UK, *The Guardian*[1] and *Reuters*[2] extensively reported on the book and conducted interviews with me.

I didn't want to provoke the security forces, so I maintained a low profile in Iran and didn't allow the global attention to the book to have a significant impact domestically. I didn't anticipate that the topic of FGM/C would have such potential and attract the attention of the international media to such an extent. I had a more research-orientated approach and

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/04/female-genital-mutilation-iran-fgm

[2] https://www.reuters.com/article/world/anthropologist-reveals-fgm-practised-in-western-southern-iran-idUSKBN0P60OE/

was largely unaware of Western media's interest in topics like this, which they often use to fuel Iranophobia.

My intention was to approach this subject differently, engaging readers with human narratives, but looking back I must admit that I compromised on some aspects due to project's limitations, politics and budget constraints. The world has become more sensitive and aware of FGM/C, and there is a sad reality that anything related to Iran is of great interest to global and Western media, as well as certain groups. That further exacerbates the significant rift between Iran and the West – a gap that has widened over the past few decades. It cannot be denied that Islamophobia, Iranophobia and even Middle-East paranoia are phenomena that have been capitalised on and fuelled by some campaigners and organisations.



Image 311: News headlines on *In the Name of Tradition* and the launch event in National Library of Iran

Media outlets sometimes exploit this rift unfairly, further intensifying it. It's enough to publish a report on deprivation, poverty, gender, politics or any negative aspect of Iran – and there are many – due to the incompetence of officials, which only increases daily. Such reports will certainly be noticed, as they align with the old, institutionalised viewpoint of the Third World versus the First World, which aims to dismantle and humiliate societies in the face of developed European and Western communities.

Unfortunately, another world-wide problem is that today's media is overwhelmingly negative. If the news is related to Iran, the media will cover it even more extensively and broadcast it widely.

My mind still grapples with the question of why the Iranian Government doesn't take a step toward resolving the problem of FGM/C. Part of the ruling establishment's stance is aligned with conservative ideologies that have no view to empowering women and don't provide

them with equal social opportunities. This limited perspective doesn't allow the Government to have a broad vision and recognise that the consequences of FGM/C are harm not only to the women themselves, but also to the institution of family and, beyond marital relationships, the upbringing and education of children.

FGM/C is a traditional, cultural and religious practice, specifically among Shafi'i Sunnis, with whom the Government has traditionally had little direct or indirect involvement. I believe it will continue to be so. We should expect the system to sincerely and systematically pursue resolving this issue. Unfortunately, denial is a significant characteristic of the Islamic Republic Government, and in the years following the 1979 Revolution, this denial exacerbated problems in most layers of social life. The United Nations, relying on the research results published in *In the Name of Tradition*, asked the Iranian Government for explanations, but, as usual, they claimed the results were doubtful and questionable.

With the unveiling of my research on FGM/C and, simultaneously, the commencement of my work on child marriage, I soon realised that I had entered a broad and distinct arena of activity and research. Many enthusiasts and activists in these fields in Iran still did not have clear understandings of me and my work. As I entered this arena more openly, they gradually became familiar with the name Kameel Ahmady, and my entry into Iran's academic and civil society was marked by my work on FGM/C.

Even now, when discussing my professional background, many people remember me for this research, which was widely seen in Iran. Following its publication and the attention it received in non-Iranian circles, I experienced a scientific crisis full of doubt. It's excellent that one doubts everything, and nothing should be so sacred that even criticism and questioning it would be considered a sacrilege. In my opinion, if a researcher or a free individual loses the power and will to doubt, question and critique, they have lost their spirit. Internal and external criticism of any research is the main spirit of that work, and it will undoubtedly lead to its development and advancement.

I asked myself, 'Why is there so much attention to political, religious and cultural issues in countries like Iran, and to what extent is this attention planned and intentional? How much of this slogan of 'empowerment' is institutionalised and globally decided, aimed at injecting styles, ideologies



Image 312: *In the Name of Tradition* in English, Kurdish and Farsi.

or political interests, and how much of it is driven by competition between religions?' For me, having lived in both the Western and Eastern worlds and cultures, it was more apparent that approaches and perspectives would differ. However, when I looked at regional policies, the longstanding issue of capitalism, the promotion of so-called democracy and the advancement of globalisation, I suddenly saw the suspicious footprint of some of these phenomena and the powerful presence of radical leftism.

As the scope of my work expanded and my research continued in the following years, I gained a better understanding of the intentions of each party and the extent to which it reveals its true goals. This became more tangible when I decided not to receive funding for any other project. Without any financial or research limitations, I could publish whatever my work found and produce and offer independent work, free from ideological and value-driven biases (as much as possible). I could always commit to revealing the truth, no matter how relative it may be.

It was 2014 when *In the Name of Tradition* received a publishing license in Iran. My publisher and I were over the moon, knowing the significance of publishing this book in Iran. Of course, I should mention that during Rouhani's Government the atmosphere had become more relaxed and the security apparatus had slightly eased. The subject was unknown to the general public, but some children's- and women's-rights activists had become more sensitive to it.

We decided to hold the book-launch ceremony on the 17th of Bahman, coinciding with the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting. The publisher had previously held book launches at the National Library. Although access to that location was difficult for the general public, it was a more affordable option for low-income publishers, and I accepted it. I never thought that, after my arrest, they would accuse me of infiltrating the Government and cite the book launch at the National Library as evidence!

We didn't expect many attendees at the book launch, so we were astonished by the widespread participation of media personnel, students and women's- and children's-rights activists. I had invited some colleagues from my research group and a few speakers who lived outside of Tehran. I also invited representatives from provinces where FGM/C was prevalent. The head of the National Children's Reference Centre, whose office was in the Judiciary, attended the event. Dr Rasoul Khazri, the representative from Piranshahr and Sardasht, who was a physician and the head of the Health Commission in parliament, was also present. Mamoosta Malahsen Vajahi, a cleric and religious scholar who had recently joined the ranks of the political cadres of the Democratic Party, also attended, along with a few others from institutions such as the Welfare Organisation and the Ministry of Health, and a representative from the Legal Office of the President's Women's Affairs Bureau.

The book launch received good media coverage, and soon I started receiving requests for interviews about it. I had returned to Iran to stay and work, and these events made me extremely happy. I thought that the atmosphere was no longer so repressive, and I could continue my work. For a while, I engaged in interviews with the media; then I decided that it was enough and I should take the book to the people. Although book tours were not common in Iran, everything has to start somewhere. I made the initial plans and started. City by city, I took the book to the people, introducing it to them. This effort was both promotional for the book and educational for society.

I thought our own bookstore in Mahabad could be a good location for introducing the book. Although FGM/C was rarely discussed in Kurdish communities and was considered a taboo, the book launch was well received. On a beautiful spring evening, we decorated the bookstore, set up chairs everywhere and launched the book. It was my first encounter with the security forces in Mahabad. A day before the ceremony, someone from the Security Forces' Places Management Office contacted me and said, 'You should have obtained permission from us before announcing the programme publicly.' I didn't think that launching a book required permission from the security forces, and I was stressed. The invitations had already been sent out. Many people had been invited. I went to the Places Management Office to prevent the cancellation of the programme.

There were two officers from Miandoab responsible for issuing permits. After a brief conversation, I realised they had been instructed from above to stall us, and, as they claimed to be duty-bound and accountable, they came up with a laughable excuse, saying that my bookstore was a basement and if it were to catch fire with people inside, what then? I quickly understood that the main concern was the nature of the work, and this was just a pretext. I spoke to them in Turkish and told them that the



Image 313: Interview with Rudaw TV. Kurdistan Region, 2015.



Image 314: Launch of the book *In the Name of Tradition* in 2015.

book had received an official permit from the Ministry of Guidance and was not a sensitive issue that would concern them.

I had brought along the book's permit and news articles about it, as well as mentions of its launch at the National Library and the attendance of guests. I reassured them, and they issued the permit. They were locals and aware of the issue of FGM/C. They said that FGM/C was no longer a significant concern, but they had to ask questions as part of their duties! Of course, I had also learned to downplay the importance of the subject and told them that I had approached the topic from an anthropological perspective, and that the book was about cultural traditions and customs.

The book had gained significant attention in Mahabad and the Kurdish Region, as it tackled a challenging issue in those areas. The success in Mahabad gave me the confidence to want to launch the book at the Sanandaj Art Café as well. However, in that city, our encounter with the security system was much more serious and at the level of the Intelligence

Administration. Things went so far that, until just a few hours before the launch, we did not know if we would finally be granted permission.

The café owners were a couple with whom I had a friendly relationship. Both were social activists, and one of them had a history of arrest.

Perhaps it was a mistake on my part to choose the Art Café, given the security agencies' sensitivity toward them. We had chosen a day that would further exacerbate tensions. We had planned to hold the event on 7 March, and 8 March was International Women's Day. Until just a few hours before the ceremony, they constantly summoned the café owners and tried to intimidate them. I had become hesitant and suggested we cancel the event, but the café owners were insistent on holding it, and finally we did. Again, the ceremony had an unexpected reception, although the consequences for my friends were not insignificant.

My next destination was Kermanshah, but I was a bit worried. The security agencies in these provinces had become increasingly sensitive, and they were curious about who Kameel Ahmady was. If they had my file and background, they would likely create more trouble. I was reassured that the book had a permit and I was not breaking the law, although I soon realised that this permit was not of much use. In each corner of Iran, everyone plays by their own rules. A friend of mine introduced me to a liberal-minded bookseller in Kermanshah, who welcomed my proposal to launch the book.

When I arrived in Kermanshah, everything had already been done. We were having lunch at my paternal uncle's house when they called to say that the bookstore owner had been taken away by the Intelligence Agency that morning and had just been released. However, the store had been sealed and the book launch cancelled. We quietly made our way to the bookstore. The shutters were down, two police cars were parked outside and plain-clothed officers were informing people that the ceremony was cancelled. I was worried about the bookstore owner. A notice had been posted on the store's door stating that it was closed until further notice. Two Intelligence Agency cars were also parked on the corner of the street, monitoring the situation.



Image 315: Launch of the book *In the Name of Tradition* at the Sanandaj Art Café, 2015.

This event did not take place, and some news websites and Telegram channels wrote about the security measures taken against it. Some foreign Farsi-language media outlets like BBC and Deutsche Welle also contacted me for interviews, but it was better for me to remain silent. The issue was not complex; it seemed that the security agencies had become sensitive to the matter from Tehran and had taken action all the way to Mahabad and Sanandaj. In Kermanshah, too, they had seen that the work was continuing in Kurdish regions, where there were naturally some sensitivities toward it, and it needed to be addressed. In such conditions, I had two options: either wait for the atmosphere to calm down and then proceed or ignore what had happened and continue with my work, which was naturally the more sensible choice. I returned to Mahabad and focused on my research on child marriage.

Some time passed, and the situation in the Region calmed down. I decided to launch my book in a more distant location. I chose Hormozgan province for this purpose and held the ceremony on Qeshm Island. My friends at the clinic and another friend who was a native of the island helped me secure the municipal hall. Apart from the ceremony itself, past experience had shown that choosing official venues greatly contributed to the book's visibility. There were fewer than twelve people present in the

hall, which was not surprising. I was aware of the islanders' ethnic and religious sensitivities and knew they were not keen on discussing this topic, let alone attending an event where FGM/C would be explored.

The number of attendees was laughable, but in the given circumstances, it was an achievement. Qeshm had the highest rate of FGM/C in Iran, and a large part of our fieldwork findings were related to southern Iran and Qeshm. Therefore, launching the book on the island held special symbolic significance. Of course, I didn't stop at the launch; I also reached out to religious leaders, social figures and some rural Health Houses, distributing some books among them. Nothing extraordinary happened on Qeshm. Everything went smoothly, and a local newspaper even wrote a few lines about the ceremony.

From Qeshm, I went to Kerman and held the launch at a friend's bookstore. It received a warm welcome from the city's intellectuals. Then I headed to Isfahan, where, with the help of my friends, I organised the event in the courtyard of a child-friendly centre. This centre was well-known and respected in the field of childcare. To some extent, I was relieved of my security concerns and knew that the subject would be viewed as a childcare-related issue, which would generate less sensitivity. Looking at any issue from a human-rights or women's-rights perspective has always been problematic in Iran and still is, but framing the work as related to childcare generates less sensitivity in security agencies.

I met a young and enthusiastic girl during this unveiling. She introduced herself and requested an opportunity to collaborate on upcoming projects. My friends, who were mostly older than me, told me that she participated in environmental seminars and was an extraordinary girl who didn't quite fit in with her generation. I will provide more details later about allegations against me in relation to her.

I also met other individuals, which would eventually lead to collaboration opportunities.

After the Isfahan unveiling, I halted the series of unveilings for the book. I realised that the research itself could speak and establish connections with those who mattered. I decided to let the work unfold on its own and moved on to my next projects.

The Cutting of Girls and Child Marriage: Two Intertwined Phenomena

When I embark on a project or research, I simultaneously plan for future work. Experience has shown me that social problems often share a common foundation or borrow from each other, so most harm is interconnected and part of a larger chain. According to global findings in areas where FGM/C is prevalent, one likely related harm is child marriage. From the outset, I knew that my FGM/C project would lead to researching child marriage. That's why, from the midpoint of the second fieldwork phase in the provinces, I included some questions related to child marriage in the questionnaires.

I reached the conclusion that my hypothesis regarding the significant connection between FGM/C and child marriage was provable. When I took the work seriously, I delved into published statistics and was fortunate to find that authorities had not spared any expense and had released separate statistics on marriage, divorce and custody rates by age, city and village. In the following years this trend changed, and they no longer announced the statistics on girls under eighteen getting married, supposedly to prevent negative publicity, but it seems they have started announcing them again recently.

We prepared two proposals and presented the overall research idea. I reviewed global experiences and other work that had been done. We restarted the fieldwork and primary-investigation phases in the Kurdish regions. I was living in Mahabad and knew that child marriages sometimes occurred in the villages of the Mokrian region. We proceeded region by region.

To my surprise, I found that this problem, unlike FGM/C, was widespread and existed in almost all thirty-one provinces. While more prevalent in some provinces and less in others, it was common across the country, regardless of religion, tradition and geographical differences, and was also prevalent in regional areas.

The statistics in Iraq were not very reliable. My familiarity with the country suggested that child marriage was a serious problem there too. Turkey and the countries around the Persian Gulf were also entangled in this issue. Previously, statistical work had been done on this topic in Iran's neighbouring countries and to some extent in Iran, which helped me gain



Image 316: Launch of child-marriage workshop. South Tehran, 2014.

a deeper understanding and provided an opportunity to study others' findings.

Before I embarked on the project to eradicate FGM/C, I had spent some time seeking financial and moral support for the issue of child marriage. However, this topic seemed to hold little appeal for funders or activist organisations. Part of the reason for this lack of interest was that many people across the world had already worked on this issue, and research was relatively widespread. FGM/C, on the other hand, was a hidden, feminist and taboo topic that gained significant momentum after the publication of my research, *In the Name of Tradition*, which exposed its existence in Iran. This made me wonder, why wasn't child marriage, which is even more prevalent and widespread, a priority for anyone? Why wasn't this serious issue, which has devastating consequences not only for girls, but also for boys and children born out of such marriages, taken more seriously?

This comes back to the point I made earlier: some intellectual and media circles decide which topics to focus on and which issues to allocate more resources to. I had concluded that what leads to the prominence of a phenomenon or issue in the world is not its prevalence or frequency in societies, but rather ideological approaches and the interests of powerful forces that aim to realise their ideological and material goals.

My analysis suggested that, fortunately, the extent of FGM/C in many parts of Iran was limited to removal of the clitoral hood (a lesser form of the practice) and was not as deep-rooted or severe as in some African countries. In some cases, it even involved only symbolic circumcision, in which the knife was merely placed under the child's dress and then withdrawn. Thus, the physical harm was less severe. Of course, this should not downplay the importance of the issue or its violation of fundamental human rights. Child marriage, however, affects an individual's entire life, exposing them to numerous harms, including education dropout, poverty, depression, early pregnancy, domestic violence, divorce and the lack of

necessary experience and understanding to raise a child. The consequences of child marriage are therefore far more substantial than those of FGM/C.



Image 317: Fieldwork in East Azerbaijan, 2015.

As I continued my research, I realised it was better for me to work independently. I had come to understand that being independent in Iran was less likely to attract the attention of security officials. After publishing my FGM/C research in academic and scientific circles, I had a more official presence and was in contact with individuals active in social and academic fields. I saw that organisations with long-term and medium-term goals tended to follow the policies of their funders.

For me, academic and scientific independence was a red line, and I didn't want my work to be limited to producing content for a particular ideology, intellectual circle or organisation. Without support, my work would be more challenging, but it was worth it. I had to strive to maintain my independence in my research. I could initiate a new project using my own financial resources. Part of my London apartment's rent went toward paying off a bank loan, but I could convert the rest to rials, bring it back and use it to fund my research. My inheritance from my father was also a great help, and although the situation was difficult, it was better than when I had to rely on funding from elsewhere and risk losing my research independence.

In relation to child marriage, similar to FGM/C, little fieldwork had been done. Several articles, theses and books had been published, but most of them promoted child marriage. Before the Islamic Revolution, the Pahlavi Government had set the minimum marriage age at eighteen for girls and twenty-one for boys. Although people did not obey this law and many marriages took place at younger ages, at least the law provided minimal protection for those who did not want to be forced into marriage.

Early in the Revolution, this law underwent fundamental changes. Laws that were often inspired by French and Belgian models were replaced

by laws that emphasised Islamic principles and Shia jurisprudence. The marriage age was reduced to thirteen for girls and fifteen for boys, based on religious traditional norms. However, with the approval of a court, the marriage age for girls was sometimes reduced to nine.

A few years later, the law was changed again, and the minimum marriage age for girls was set at nine years once more. Despite pressure from civil society and activists in the 60s and 70s, no significant progress was made.

I intended to investigate the issue across Iran and then select a few provinces randomly and purposefully to study. However, I changed my mind and decided to use existing official statistics, which were relatively reliable. Using government statistics would lend more legitimacy to my research and would likely face less opposition from the Government. The Government did not recognise FGM/C statistics as independent, but they could not deny their own statistics. Moreover, I wanted to work with limited personal expense, so this was a more prudent approach.

I selected the provinces based on the highest percentages of child marriages. The highest incidences were in Razavi Khorasan and Sistan and Baluchestan provinces. In a brainstorming session in Tehran, we selected the top eight provinces in the country and began the fieldwork there. I attempted to apply a scientific and qualitative approach, similar to Grounded Theory, which I had not used before and in which I lacked sufficient experience. Ultimately, we reverted to the classic qualitative and quantitative analysis methods.

I had limited personal financial resources and could not afford to have a large team in the field like in my previous work. Therefore, I had to work more independently, quickly and efficiently, while maintaining scientific rigour. In most provinces, the provided statistics were accurate and precise, but in some cases, they were dubious and questionable. In rural areas, such as Sistan and Baluchestan, Hormozgan, and some regions in Isfahan province, where traditional marriages were more common, the existing statistics seemed manipulated, inaccurate and suspicious.

For instance, in Sistan and Baluchestan province, the marriage of young girls to older men was more prevalent than in other provinces. Families, due to poverty and deprivation, would force their daughters to marry and receive in return money, living arrangements and other benefits from the groom's family. In some cases, a married person would not officially

register their second marriage to a young girl, and everything would be limited to a local cleric's blessing. Unregistered marriages would take place on the marginal borders, particularly among the Baloch people in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Sometimes, due to the young age of the bride and fear of legal prosecution, some marriages would not be registered. Years would pass after the marriage and multiple children would be born without registration.

With the implementation of the targeted subsidy law and the monthly transfer of funds to people's accounts, the rate of registered marriages began to rise. Families who had not registered their marriages despite having multiple children took advantage of this opportunity to do so. That revealed the prevalence of unregistered marriages, also known as 'grey marriages'. Similarly, in a society like Iran, where denial and secrecy are deeply ingrained in its layers and levels, this could also be true for white marriages, or cohabitation.

Published statistics were very helpful, and our field studies yielded results more quickly. However, as in previous research, we had to conduct in-depth, face-to-face interviews with men and boys as well. In our previous research, men were also part of the statistical sample, and I was aware of the importance of collecting their opinions. In this study, as before, I attempted to enlist the help of local guides and translators and collaborated with individuals from various provinces in a limited capacity. A friend from the University of Social Welfare in Sistan and Baluchestan, and several former colleagues from the research on FGM/C, as well as two colleagues and friends from central provinces, greatly contributed to the advancement of the research.

One of the individuals who consistently participated in this research and the two subsequent studies, despite being new to the field, greatly helped me in conducting high-quality, in-depth interviews. Apart from his interest in the work and subject, he was a perfectionist who had written down 102 research ideas in his notebook, which he intended to execute. Two years later, he finally realised his only wish, which was to secure a scholarship and leave Iran, seemingly unfazed by the destination. According to him, he had escaped Iran's suffocating and problem-ridden environment.



Image 318: Fieldwork. Oramanat, 2015.

We conducted the fieldwork in seven provinces. Despite all the religious and cultural differences, they shared one commonality: the prevalence of early marriages. Generally, a combination of traditional, religious and economic pressures perpetuated these marriages. Additionally, regional customs and social pressure on families had significant impacts. We encountered many individuals who were unhappy with their early marriages. Interestingly, some families were also unhappy, but they would say that, if their daughters had grown older, people would have said they had become 'overripe'. If they insisted on their daughters obtaining diplomas, they would lose their marriage prospects, and no one would want them any more. Through our conversations, we concluded that attitudes, social pressures and cultural labelling play crucial roles in child marriages.

As a researcher, when you sit down with parents who are entrenched in their local customs and cultural pressures, you cannot ignore their

circumstances in your research. On the other hand, the Government has also provided many facilitating laws for the continuation and increase of these marriages, without enacting laws to prohibit them. I thought that the cultural and legal structures had collaborated to promote this narrative.

The approach of these parents can be logical within the cultural and social context. As a researcher, I would sometimes find myself caught in a paradox. I would ask myself, 'What do you want to extract from the core of your analysis? Do you want to contextualise the problems and harms inflicted on children against a particular backdrop, and then offer solutions? Can one, as an anthropologist, ignore the parents' perspectives and disregard existing cultural and social realities? And ultimately, does the researcher absolutely and logically identify religion, government and the legal system as the culprits, directing all blame toward them?' This is exactly where the researcher walks the tightrope.

I also asked myself, 'Now that it's become so clear, how cautiously should I express the fact that the system is responsible and guilty? If I don't tell the truth, to what extent am I compromising my scientific mission and my commitment to ethics?'

There are many sensitive topics in the realm of research in Iran that I dare say many colleagues either lack the courage to tackle them or approach them with bias. If they want to represent all people's views and express field truths based on their findings and correct understandings of culture, society and religion, they will be targeted by radical groups, from child-protection advocates and feminists to value advocates and the Government. Thus, there is a lack of audacity to write the truth and venture into these areas.

Appearing on *In Other Words* in Kurdish Attire

In December 2016, I was invited to speak at a conference at Oxford University in the UK. One of the organisers, Professor Toby Lyon from Oxford University, publisher of the book *In the Name of Tradition*, asked me to talk about female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage. An acquaintance who collaborated with the BBC suggested that I be invited to the programme *In Other Words*.

I was on the train from London to Oxford when Mr Fani called and invited me. I said, 'Your programme is mostly political, and I conduct research in social areas.'

Fani replied, 'We intend to expand the programme to various fields and scrutinise important social issues from different angles.'

I wanted to accept Fani's invitation on the spot, but I had to consider the implications of living in Iran. I said, 'I travel back and forth to Iran. If I'm to be challenged on your programme and give an answer that will lead to repercussions in Iran, what then?'

With a chuckle, he said we would tone down the challenging segment of the programme. They explained that it was part of a programme called '100 Women' held annually by the BBC, which would also cover the topic of FGM/C.

We met and discussed the programme, and I asked for a few days to think about all aspects of the subject. I consulted with friends and decided to participate in it, on the condition that I could also speak about child marriage and not be asked direct questions about financial support for FGM/C. As a BBC TV viewer in Iran, I knew that, up until that point, few people had appeared on the BBC wearing traditional attire, so I wore my Kurdish clothing to the studio.

According to what I'd heard, the BBC Persian TV tended to emphasise Fars



Image 319: Guest on the BBC Hard Talk programme. London, 2016.

ethnicity or imply the dominance of the Farsi language and ethnicity. It was important for me to appear on their popular show wearing Kurdish clothing. So, I borrowed a traditional Kurdish outfit, complete with a rank and *chokhe*, from an old friend. When I stepped into the BBC Persian elevator, one of the programme producers, who had coincidentally studied anthropology, was taken aback and asked in surprise, 'Does Anait want to come onto the studio and record the programme wearing Kurdish clothing?'

I joked, 'Don't let our work get caught up in protests and complaints. According to BBC's internal policies and regulations, you're prohibiting me from wearing my local attire, and that's cultural discrimination and humiliation!'

Fani, a professional and kind man, smiled and said it was okay. In our pre-recording meeting, he told me he was from Bastak, a Sunni region in southern Laristan. I sensed that he, too, understood the discrimination faced by minorities and was aware of the practice of FGM/C in his region. When I appeared on the show wearing Kurdish clothing, I intended to challenge the dominant perspective of greater Iran and its supposedly superior culture. As a Kurdish researcher, I sat in front of the camera and spoke about the problems plaguing the three predominantly Kurdish provinces in Iran – West Azerbaijan (also known as Urmia province), Kermanshah and Kurdistan. I aimed to discuss a harmful tradition in that culture while respecting its customs, authenticity and cultural heritage.

On the same day, Fani told me, 'The way you dressed is commendable. I don't know why you did it. I've interviewed some Kurdish party secretaries, and they wear ties and suits instead of Kurdish attire, but you showed up in Kurdish clothing.' Perhaps he meant that I wore local Kurdish dress to assert Kurdish authenticity, whereas many Kurdish party officials had adopted modern attire and didn't consider the underlying implications of their behaviour and dress.

After the programme was recorded, I asked to be informed before it aired, as I was concerned about potential security issues. I think I was the first person from inside Iran to participate in such a prominent programme. The matter was so serious that I would email the contact almost every few days, asking if there was any news. He would reply, 'Not this week. Maybe next week.'

Two days before the programme aired, I turned off my phone and went north with Shafagh. For about a week or ten days, I had no communication with anyone. Later, I saw the impact of the programme, which was re-broadcast throughout the week. The community's attention and sensitivity toward the issues of FGM/C and child marriage had increased, and discussions and debates were sparked.



Image 320: Wearing the traditional headscarf from the Mokrian region, known as *Pitch*. Mahabad, 2015.

Some viewers of the programme, as well as self-proclaimed patriots in Iran and radical individuals in Kurdistan, accused me of defamation and claimed that my work would tarnish Iran's image. They even accused me of receiving money from the UK to collude with the BBC to tarnish Iran's reputation! I heard many such remarks, but alongside them I also received encouraging messages. In my opinion, this programme and the re-broadcast of the documentary *In the Name of Tradition* on Aparat helped to raise awareness about FGM/C and child marriage on a larger scale than ever before. The media mechanism, particularly the BBC, played a significant role in accelerating the dissemination of this awareness, leading to something I had long been concerned about.

Raising Public Awareness on BBC Aparat

I had edited *In the Name of Tradition* twice, resulting in both long and short versions of the film. Earlier, in 2015, I had submitted the film to Aparat, a BBC programme, and, after some revisions, it was broadcast. The producers and presenters of Aparat appreciated the film, but they had reservations about the technical quality, deeming it unsuitable for television broadcast. As a visual anthropology graduate, I lacked the

expertise and equipment to produce a professional, television-standard film.

Two years later, due to the importance of the subject, they decided to re-broadcast the film. They re-edited parts of it and re-dubbed some sections. The first broadcast of *In the Name of Tradition* took place, but its impact was somewhat diluted when shown alongside an unrelated film. Although it didn't achieve the desired outcome, it still contributed to a greater understanding of FGM/C in Iran.

In February 2017, I was invited to appear on Aparat as a guest to coincide with the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (6 February). They arranged my travel itinerary, but I began the journey with a stroke of bad luck. It turned out that Iran Air had a bi-annual maintenance check, and I had booked my ticket on that very day. The plane took off with a four-hour delay, disrupting our schedule. I was supposed to be at the BBC studio at 2 pm London time, but, with the change in flight timings, I wouldn't make it. Nothing could be done, but they had already invited another guest and cancelling the programme was not an option. They had rented a cinema-like studio for a few hours. Every passing hour increased the production costs.



Image 321: Aparat Studio. London, 2017.

Finally, after a few hours of delays and threats to cancel the programme, I arrived at the studio. Before I could catch my breath, I was seated in front of the cameras and told to discuss FGM/C in Iran. The three-and-a-half-hour delay had left me stressed, and the producer, noticing my distress, immediately began the interview with me. Perhaps wanting to punish me for the delay and stress, he launched straight in. Later, when I watched the film, I noticed my chest heaving up and down, and my heavy breathing was evident.

My appearance on the BBC programme *In Other Words* and the subsequent broadcast of my film on BBC Persian's Aparat caught people's attentions. At the time, I had conducted several other interviews with the media, and I was confident that no issues would arise, so the next day I boarded a plane and returned to Tehran. I was aware that some people might question how I, a dual-nationality individual working on sensitive topics like FGM/C in Iran, could move freely between countries. 'How come Kameel Ahmady, who conducts research on sensitive topics, is able to go back and forth between Tehran and the BBC studio without any



Image 322: At the United Nations. Geneva, Switzerland, 2017.

problems?' Given the situation in Iran and the Government's behaviour, such judgements were natural. If I hadn't had a degree of freedom and flexibility during that period, I would have ended up in Evin Prison much sooner!

That same year, I embarked on two work trips that were connected. The first was related to a conference organised by several groups fighting against FGM/C with the support and funding of the United Nations. The conference was held on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting at the UN's European headquarters in Geneva, and I was invited to attend as someone who had worked on the topic in Iran. The African Committee on ICA, of which I later became a member, includes twenty-nine African countries that practise FGM/C. During the conference, a book on FGM/C was launched, written by my close friend Hilary Burrage from London.

My presence as a non-African individual from a country where FGM/C is prevalent was of interest to UN officials, UNESCO and UNICEF. It's undeniable that Iran, in and of itself, holds significant political power, and the sympathetic gaze toward gender issues in Iran was not entirely ineffective here. Furthermore, they had heard about many issues related to Iran, but FGM/C was unfamiliar to them, and I could understand the importance of the topic due to its peripheral connections and novelty.

At the UN, conferences on various topics were held simultaneously, and we were allowed to attend some of these sessions. In the main hall, which had a beautifully painted ceiling featuring a galaxy, moon and stars, the topic of human-rights violations against journalists was being discussed in an exclusive session. I quietly took a seat and listened. I glanced at the placards in front of each country's representatives to see which countries were participating, and my attention was drawn to the Iranian delegation. There were two male representatives, one of whom wore a clerical collar, and two women with hijabs and chadors sitting behind them.

Sixteen or seventeen cases of human-rights violations related to the media in Iran were read out, with references to arrests, bans and closures of newspapers. It was then the Iranian representatives' turn to provide explanations. One of the two Iranian delegates spoke with a thick accent, denying all the mentioned cases. As an Iranian, I was an eyewitness to the countless cases of human-rights violations in Iran, including the issues of FGM/C and child marriage, and the Government's reluctance to

investigate these topics. However, the Iranian representative seriously and confidently denied all the allegations, which had been publicly announced, and did so with the same old rhetoric that the Government was accustomed to using.

This individual, likely sent by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, criticised the behaviour of the American police toward journalists in the United States. He mentioned that the mounted police had trampled an American journalist, and, in London, the police had pushed a female journalist to the ground, breaking her camera. These incidents, of course, were violations of journalists' rights, but the Iranian Government should first respond to the numerous human-rights violations committed by itself before criticising others.

Later, when I saw several journalists in the fourth block of Evin Prison, the lies of that official resonated in my mind, and they still resonate today. Unfortunately, the situation of the press and media in Iran remains gloomy and regrettable.



Image 323: Conference in Belgium with fellow colleagues. 2017.

My second trip was for participation in another conference. Later, I attended a conference organised by the European Union in Brussels, at which I presented my research on FGM/C and child marriage. The conference lasted for two days, and I shared my findings and recommendations with the audience. After returning to Iran, some Iranian feminists who had followed my work began spreading rumours that I was present wherever there was money, be it the United Nations or the European Union!

I paid for my own flight ticket to attend the European conference, and only the accommodation cost was covered by the organisers. In such conferences, expenses are often not covered for individuals with British or European citizenship. As far as I remember, I was even charged an entrance fee of around 40 or 50 euros.

When I heard of these rumours through a friend, I felt sorry that working in Iranian society was becoming increasingly difficult. The difficulties of working with the system, legal and security pressures, and unfair judgements and competitions create an environment that is hostile to researchers, who have to deal with both the ruling structure's ideological pressures and irrational and biased judgements from others. This sphere has become a market where everyone perceives everyone else as a threat, and all are engaged in seizing opportunities, gaining fame and securing available funds.

The Birth of Kake Alan in Diyarbakır

My family life in Mahabad was taking shape. We had made many new friends, and our family visits were regular. I was busy with my research, focusing on child marriage, with the accompaniment of Shafagh. On days when I was conducting fieldwork outside Mahabad, my wife would stay at the bookstore, waiting for me to return so we could switch places. In short, everything was going smoothly, and we had a peaceful life, with a great happiness on the horizon.

One day, I returned home from the bookstore. Shafagh's face was beaming, but with an unusual excitement. Without hesitation, she said, 'I'm *duwigian*!' – a term used in some regions to refer to a pregnant woman, which I find to be the most beautiful word to describe this condition! Shafagh was carrying another life within her, and the precious life she

nurtured was dear to me. We had occasionally talked about having children, but Shafagh thought we should wait for another year or two, as the second year of marriage was still considered early for having children.

To some extent, I was right, but Shafagh and I had also lived together in Tehran in our own way. A significant amount of time had passed since we met, and it had been a year and a half since our marriage. We had a nine-year age gap, which meant I was around forty-five years old, and it was already late for me to become a father. When I heard the news, I was overjoyed and kept telling myself, 'Kameel, you're going to be a father!' It was thrilling and sweet, but I was also stressed and didn't know how to cope with this new situation and responsibility.

The period of Shafagh's pregnancy flew by quickly for me, although she might have a different opinion if asked! I was over the moon, eagerly awaiting the arrival of my child and busy working on the topic of child marriage. I wanted to finish my fieldwork as soon as possible and give us a chance to prepare for the baby's arrival. Then, I would move on to my next research project, which I had discovered during my field interviews: the concept of *mahramiyet* for children.



Image 324: Shafagh, me and Kani. Mahabad, 2015.

This practice is more prevalent in Shia-dominated Iranian society and, in my view, is one of the stages and platforms that facilitate child marriage and grant it more legitimacy. Sunnis do not believe in mahramiyet, but some Sunni communities have culturally defined other forms of mahramiyet. Examples include naming girls and boys or performing circumcision in childhood, which amounts to two families promising to marry their children to each other.

In other words, it is referred to as an 'arranged marriage', a traditional form of marriage where the agency of the marrying parties is not important and individualism has no place. Instead, tradition and the families decide for the two individuals, who are meant to marry each other from birth, thereby showcasing the power of collectivism and tradition in traditional societies. Although this custom exists among most Iranians, in some Shia communities mahramiyat takes on a religious and legal framework. I knew that, to explore mahramiyat in children, I had to examine temporary marriage or mahramiyat between adults, which allows for sexual relations, and tackle these two aspects in a joint research project.

Meanwhile, Shafagh and I were thinking about where our child would be born. In Iranian hospitals, men are not allowed to be present during childbirth, but I wanted to be beside Shafagh and see our baby at birth. In many parts of Iran, it is common for women to return to their parental homes, give birth and then return home after forty days. I accepted, and still believe, that a pregnant woman should receive special care and love



Image 325: At the hospital, Diyarbakır. 16 June 2016.

from her own family, but I couldn't accept this arrangement. I felt it would undermine my independence and life. I discussed this with my wife and told her that if she went to her mother's house for delivery and our child were born there, the city where our child would take their first steps wouldn't belong to them, and I didn't feel good about it.

The most important thing was that I had to be separated from my child at birth and couldn't be present at the delivery. It was also difficult for me to stay at my father's house for an extended period. I told them that the birthplace and my presence during the delivery were crucial for me, and I requested that her family come to our place and take care of her. I knew her mother was an avid solo traveller but didn't like to be away from her siblings and family ties for too long.

From the beginning, I had researched the type of delivery and had concluded that a natural birth would be the best option. I was delighted to hear that Shafagh had reached the same conclusion, as Caesarean sections, which are very common in Iran, have many complications. However, the misconception that natural childbirth would ruin a woman's figure had led many women to opt for the former and exaggerate its importance.

We still had to decide where to have the baby. We considered our options: Mahabad was not feasible because Shafagh was not satisfied with the medical facilities of the only hospital in the city. It was strange, considering hundreds of babies were born in Mahabad every day, and our family's blood wasn't any less important than others'! The next option was Tehran, but I was against it. The issue held cultural significance for me, and I preferred our child to be born in a Kurdish city, in Kurdistan, just like us. We thought a lot about it, and I suggested, 'Instead of having the baby in Europe or Tehran, why not go to Diyarbakır?' I had great memories of the place, and it was the largest and most attractive city in Greater Kurdistan, with a good healthcare system and a private hospital called Memorial. This could be a unique and well-planned option for the birth of our child. We both agreed on this choice.

We didn't want to know the baby's gender until the moment of birth, and modern justifications like preparing the nursery and buying baby supplies came second. Becoming parents was a significant wonder, and we wanted to be surprised again by not knowing the gender of our child. In Iran and Turkey, we insisted that the doctors not reveal the baby's gender to us.

sA few weeks before Alan's birth, we hastily packed up the bookstore – something we had thought about earlier but only acted upon impulsively. Previously, we had thought of hiring a few people to manage it, but when we saw the owner had another buyer for the property, we quickly wrapped everything up and donated the children's books to schools in the city and nearby villages, keeping some for ourselves. With just a short time left until the birth, we drove to Diyarbakır.

When we arrived, our friends wanted to invite us to their homes, but I said we preferred to stay in a hotel or rented house. We went to a hotel in the old city, Sur. Almost every day, from morning till night, we would watch a long, ongoing TV series and wait for the baby to arrive. I remember we were following a series called *24*, in which the FBI agent would solve all of America's and even the world's problems.

Apparently, our child was in no hurry to arrive. We had medical check-ups once a week, and the doctor would say, 'Go home, but the labour pains might start tonight', emphasising that we should rush to the hospital as soon as the contractions began. In short, we were waiting anxiously for the labour pains every night, but there was no news, and we were worried that we might have to opt for a Caesarean section.

Family and acquaintances were constantly calling, asking what's new, and we were anxious, wondering when our child would finally arrive. At that time, Diyarbakır was experiencing its own turmoil. The hotel where we were staying was filled with displaced people who lived in the surrounding neighbourhoods of the old city, which they called Sur. The story was that a group of PKK guerrillas, known as the *Gerîla*, had secretly entered the old, historic city, which was also their popular base. They were engaged in street-to-street combat with the Turkish army and special forces. Most of the people present in this part of the city were themselves displaced individuals who had been forcibly relocated from their villages by the Government years ago.

Many of the residents had deep sympathy with the Gerîla, and this region had always been considered an impenetrable stronghold of the PKK forces. As a result of this support and solidarity from the people, a bloody war had been raging for several weeks. The city was under siege, with casualties on both sides. According to many, after the Diyarbakır war, which spilled over to other Kurdish cities in Turkey, the Turkish Government's military arrangement and political reality toward the PKK



Image 326: Diyarbakır under military siege, 2016

changed forever, and the PKK faced severe criticism from the people who had supported it until yesterday.

There were criticisms toward both sides. The Turkish Government had always displayed discriminatory behaviour toward the Kurds, politically, economically and culturally, and had responded violently to their legitimate demands. On the other hand, the PKK was facing self-criticism and external criticism for the first time, and everyone was asking why they had brought the war into the city and hadn't continued their usual mountain clashes.

Watching the large iron plates that blocked the streets had a bad psychological impact on me. I loved the Sur region. When I was working on the Diyarbakır travel guidebook, I wished to have my office and even my home in that historic area. The city I loved had turned into a war zone, with armoured vehicles, tanks and soldiers stationed at the ends of every street, while the PKK forces were also moving house-to-house, from one neighbourhood to another, engaged in combat, and had set up booby traps at many entrances and neighbourhoods. These events reminded me of the bad memories of the Naqadeh days and the street-to-street war that had happened in the city – memories from my childhood and adolescence, which were marked by hardship and displacement. And now, just as my

child was entering this world, it was happening again. I had to push the memories away and not let them taint the most joyful moments of my life.

20:19 on 16.06.2016

The last time we visited the doctor, he said, half-seriously, 'It seems this child doesn't intend to come out on its own, and it's not advisable to wait any longer. So, we'll have to induce labour with an injection.'

The doctor was a kind-hearted and handsome man who always wore a smile on his face. What's more, he was a fan of the Kurdistan Workers' Party and didn't deny it. The next day, 15 June 2016, we went to the hospital. I noticed that the hospital was busier than usual, and all the rooms in the maternity ward were full. Afterward, we realised that many people had chosen this date for delivery because of its auspiciousness. They wanted to give birth to a child who wasn't even due yet, forcing a premature and potentially harmful delivery. I later discovered that this practice is common in Iran – families planning their children's births on specific dates, especially some religious families. Although I personally don't condone or understand this behaviour, and believe it can be harmful



Image 327: The entire historic Sur region was razed. Diyarbakır, 2016.

at times, it's undeniable that numbers and their meaningful connections to human life and destiny have been a human preoccupation since ancient times. That preoccupation has entered our modern world in various forms.

We had been waiting for weeks for our child's birth, and it was no longer medically advisable for the baby to stay in the womb any longer. So, we were forced to induce labour with an injection. From the perspective of others, we were just another couple who had fallen prey to this trend. In this hospital, it was clear that the modern medical system was ready to help, which alleviated my concerns about Shafagh's labour pains. I was thinking to myself that, if my family or my wife's family were present, they could provide emotional support to make the experience easier for Shafagh.

One or two tough hours passed, and the doctor announced that it was time for delivery. They took us to the delivery room. I was taking pictures and filming, and I was also by Shafagh's side, even though they said natural childbirth didn't require my presence. I wanted to be there for her, and that's why I had chosen this option. I was holding her hands, and she was pushing and suffering. Occasionally, she would curse, saying things like, 'How did my mother give birth to four children?'

It was Ramadan, and two nurses, amid the chaos, broke their fast upon hearing the call to prayer. Our child entered the world at 2019. Everything happened quickly. The doctor suddenly decided to take the baby out, but Shafagh wasn't aware of what was happening, while I was frantic and anxious. I was standing over my wife, and all I could understand from the doctors' and nurses' rapid Kurdish and Turkish conversations was that something was unfolding. Suddenly, they pulled out a blue, frail creature. The doctor held up the baby's tiny feet and dangled it in the air, all bloody and messy. They said it was normal for a newborn. The doctor, with a smiling and somewhat joking expression, pointed to the baby's genital area and winked, indicating it was a boy. I looked at Shafagh, who seemed to have lost all her strength and was in a state of exhaustion or a trance.

They quickly cut the umbilical cord. They wanted a piece of it, saying it was necessary for some diseases, and gave us instructions. The nurse placed the baby in a bassinet. We quickly moved to another room to measure his weight and length and perform other tasks. During this process, they handed him over to me for the first time, and I held my son in my arms, feeling an immense sense of belonging. It's a unique feeling,

knowing that this child belongs to you and is a part of your existence. Throughout life, we experience various feelings of ownership, but this one is different and very special.

As I held him, I felt the emotions of becoming a father: happiness, worry and other feelings all at once. He was crying, and his face would turn blue and white. I wanted to search for my own features in him. Does he resemble me? Not really. He looked more like his mother, with his wheat-coloured, dark complexion. His face shape and mouth resembled my sister, Kani, and his eyebrows resembled Shafagh's.

After we returned to our room, I held him in my arms again. Shafagh happily took our son in her arms, and, with the nurse's help, she started breastfeeding him. They told us we had to do this quickly to prevent her milk from drying up. We focused a lot on breastfeeding, but, unfortunately, Shafagh's milk dried up after a short while, and our son's feeding continued with formula.

Before his birth, we didn't know if our child was a boy or a girl. I wanted to name her Malala if she was a girl, after the Pakistani girl who taught children and was brutally attacked by the Taliban. Fortunately, she survived and became a children's peace ambassador. Although Malala means 'sorrow' or 'grief', I loved the name. Shafagh didn't like it at all, and we had chosen some Kurdish female names as alternatives. As for our son's name, we both agreed on Ala'an. In our view, the name Ala'an was different from well-known Kurdish names that start with the letter 'A' and have a hamza mark in Kurdish writing. It also sounds familiar and is easy to write in Latin script (Alan), since I was thinking about his future education in England, too. Ala'an is a Kurdish name with two meanings and translations. It refers to a fertile plain between Sardasht and Mahabad, where unique black grapes grow. The name of this plain is frequently repeated in Kurdish poetry and literature, and those familiar with the region must have heard of it. Ala'an was a popular or modern name in Kurdistan, Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s, and some of the Kurds I met in London had this name. So, it was both a Kurdish name and a geographic area in Mahabad and Sardasht. The second meaning is also profound, referring to a standard-bearer or flag-bearer. In Kurdish Sorani and Kurmanji, the word for 'flag' is *ala*, and *ala'an* is someone who holds the flag. These two meanings were significant to me, having local, geographical and cultural implications. Moreover, the meaning of flag-

bearing and flag-keeping was deep, encompassing the meanings of guidance, leadership and pioneering.



Image 328: 13th of Farvardin.

After Alan was born, we spent a few days in the hospital. A local television crew came to report on his birth in Diyarbakır. I had friends in the Diyarbakır media and municipality who had informed the TV station that we had come from Mahabad to have our child in Diyarbakır. We were even wearing traditional Kurdish clothing from our region, making it an attractive package for them to film. I was constantly mindful of not letting Alan's face be filmed, to preserve his privacy. However, after my arrest, one of the news agencies published a photo of us taken in the hospital room, which was later picked up by BBC and Reuters, spreading it globally.

At the insistence of a friend, we left the hospital and went to their home. Omar, a father himself for a year, was expecting another child. His father was a cleric and a respected figure in the Region. He visited us that day and, according to local custom common to many parts of Iran, recited the Adhan and Iqamah in Alan's ear. Shafagh and I, unprepared for this ceremony, exchanged awkward glances.

When I saw that Shafagh and Alan were ready for a day trip and car ride, we headed toward Iran. On the way back, we stopped by the Iranian consulate in Qayseri and obtained the necessary documents for Alan's birth. We crossed the border at Bazargan, where the officials were more formal and familiar with the procedures for registering children born abroad. We had completed all the necessary tasks but still had some anxiety. Everything went smoothly, though, and we entered Iran after a brief stop.

We arrived in Mahabad in the evening, where we were greeted with great fanfare by our families. I knew they had plans, but I hadn't expected such elaborate preparations. My family was present, and Shafagh's family had come with a group of aunts, uncles and other relatives. When we

arrived, Shafagh's family almost snatched the baby from our hands. They were so excited that they didn't even notice my family wanting to see the baby. Whenever the baby came over to one side, the others would take him back, and everyone was overjoyed. It was a hilarious scene.

I was no longer just a husband; I had taken on the role of a father, although I had no idea how to care for a child. Alan would cry at night and needed to be fed every two hours. During the day, he would sleep a lot and be awake for short periods. Initially, Shafagh's sleep was very disturbed. I didn't know what to do or how to help. No matter how hard I tried, I seemed to be more of a hindrance than a help.

Later, Shafagh and Alan went to Kermanshah, according to local tradition, and Alan was separated from me for a long time. The power of custom and culture can sometimes be overwhelming – such as taking your child and wife to another city, leaving you behind. How can you travel to your parents' house in another province to visit your child and stay there for an extended period? Throughout this time, I tried to find my own path. I had brought my child into the world in another country, wanting him to enter this world in my own way. But when I returned, I had to follow the cultural and traditional plans laid out for us.

As Alan grew, he began to flourish and become even more beautiful. His enigmatic face, once that of a newborn, transformed into that of a child, radiant with smiles and joy. This gradual growth and development of the child was incredibly sweet for his parents, and I would often tell myself, 'Look, this lovely child belongs to you.' Sometimes I would stare at him, mesmerised, and still do so today. I wondered if my own parents had felt the same way about me. They must have. Although there were more children back then and parenting styles differed, having this love is inherent to all parents.

For a long time, I put my work and other responsibilities aside and became a father. With Alan's arrival, many things in my life changed. I don't just mean changes in the daily routine, but something much more profound happened. Like a researcher entering a new world, I truly experienced the world of childhood. Until then, my research focused on issues like FGM/C, child marriage and the cycle of modesty concerning children, and I prided myself on my knowledge about the world of children. However, with Alan's arrival, I realised that, unless you have a

child of your own, you cannot fully comprehend the world and its problems.



Image 329: Me and my son at a wedding. Mahabad, 2017.

I remembered the conversations around me, when people would say, 'How can you advise others when you're not married yourself?', or my father's repeated comments: 'Kameel, you don't know what you're talking about; until you have a child, you can't understand my weaknesses as a parent!' I've always said, and still believe, that a person can be mature before they have a child, but having a child transforms them. Until you become a parent, you may not have seen many dangers and issues, and your foresight is limited; however, with the birth of your child, you learn to be patient, sometimes become like a child yourself, and temper your sensitivities, while turning a blind eye to certain matters.

Alan gave me a new and profound perspective on children's issues. With his presence in my life, I better understood children's work and, coincidentally, it was Alan who led me to topics like child labour – specifically waste-picking, but also other forms of child labour – as well as the sociology of childhood. My love for children and the desire to provide for their needs and protect their innocence prompted me to research male circumcision. I began investigating child sexual abuse and incest, and it was Alan who gave me the courage to write about my own experiences of sexual abuse during childhood in this book. Alan and children like him gave me the courage to acknowledge my mistakes, speak about them and research, hoping to help children of his and future generations.

Chapter Nineteen: Migration to the Capital

Living in Tehran had its own set of advantages and disadvantages. Although I had experienced strange days in my hometown, the dynamics of life in this city were vastly different from those in my home region of Iran. I adapted to this new style and its differences and continued working. As I delved deeper into each research topic, new ideas emerged. I became so captivated that I forged ahead, although with increased caution.

Of course, the publication of my books had given me more courage, and I thought to myself that the space in Iran was not as closed off as I had imagined. Despite all the sensitivities, I believed that research could still be conducted there. I thought to myself that, although there were obstacles, they were not insurmountable, and I could proceed slowly and steadily.

With this mindset, I gradually began to explore topics that I knew would stir up sensitivities in some people. There might be risks involved, but, as a researcher, I couldn't ignore the significant issues that affected the community I lived in. This was a community where the Government didn't permit the expression of its problems, and every problem had complex underlying dimensions that made it like 'pouring water into a beehive', as Nima Yooshij would say!

A Fresh Start

My research continued unabated. I travelled frequently, and, inevitably, my path would cross the capital. Gradually, I thought about living in Tehran, but my younger sister was living with us in one house, and I didn't know if she wanted to sever ties with her family and relatives. Amid this indecision, Kani fell in love and married a young, successful man. After

their wedding, which we tried to make a grand affair, we found a suitable house in the Saadabad neighbourhood and set off for Tehran in August 2018.

Shafagh was overjoyed, as her uncle and aunt lived in Tehran and Karaj, and her father had a house in the city to which he frequently commuted. I was sorrowful, as Mahabad was one of my favourite cities and I dearly loved Kurdistan, although I knew that living in Tehran was more suitable for me at that time.

Unfortunately, one of Iran's problems, especially for researchers and students, particularly in the humanities, is that it is centralised, meaning that the best universities, museums, libraries, bookstores and even theatres are concentrated in Tehran. Seminars and conferences are usually held in Tehran, and at some point you are forced to live there. In other words, social capital and opportunities are not distributed fairly. Of course, this doesn't mean other provinces and cities lack these opportunities, but anyone working in the humanities in Iran realises how difficult it is to be distant from the centre or capital, leading to the isolation of researchers.

I could easily connect with academic and university circles and NGOs to accelerate my research work. Although it was a difficult farewell, I had known from the beginning that my stay in Mahabad was temporary. I didn't have such a mindset about Tehran, thinking I would live there for a long time, but it turned out that living in Tehran was also temporary – not just in Tehran, but everywhere in Iran!

On our last day in Mahabad, my family came to bid us farewell. Everyone was crying, especially Aunt Zeynab. She had grown attached to our house in Mahabad. She sang a lament, saying, 'You've packed up your house and are leaving. In this city, I only had one hope, and that was in my nephew's house.' She recited a Kurdish poem: 'Yek barî kird kas neygeyrawa' ('Once someone departs, no one returns them').

My sisters were also sorrowful, saying, 'Your house has become our father's house, and we won't have it any more.'

Before migrating to Tehran, my research titled *An Echo of Silence was published and* gained attention. I had planned to launch it in Tehran, which became a turning point in my professional endeavours. Unlike *In the Name of Tradition*, this research tackled a widespread issue in Iran, and in many



Image 330: The book *An Echo of Silence in English, Farsi* and Kurdish.

aspects, it was even more sensitive. I noticed that several parliament members and the vice president's advisor on women and family affairs were pursuing a plan to increase the minimum age of marriage. I invited Parvaneh Salashesuri, Tayebeh Siavoshi and other interested individuals to discuss this topic via email, but none of them responded. That is, until a few days before the ceremony, when Mrs Siavoshi announced her attendance and expressed her intention to propose a bill to increase the minimum age of child marriage in the near future.

I didn't expect the topic of child marriage to have such significant potential for entering the realm of official policymaking. Throughout my work, I kept telling myself that child marriage would eventually become a top social and civil issue, but I didn't think it would happen so quickly.

The book launch took place on 21 August 2017. I thought that, since previous research on children's issues had already been conducted and my work wasn't particularly novel, it wouldn't garner much attention. Contrary to my expectations, the launch was even more crowded than my previous event, and prominent figures such as Mazar Alibabaee, the former secretary of the National Convention on Children, Zahra Jafari, a legal expert from the Presidential Office, and Somayeh Tahaseebi, a university lecturer and jurist, delivered speeches about the book. When we presented the research statistics, it sparked widespread media coverage, and the event was discussed in the press for several days. Everything went incredibly well, and I was overjoyed.



Image 331: The book-launch ceremony for *An Echo of Silence* in Tehran. 2017.

Shortly before the launch, the women's faction of parliament invited me to discuss the issue further. They were determined to introduce the topic as a bill to parliament as soon as possible. Additionally, the office of Sina Kalhor, the director of cultural studies at the Parliament's Research Centre, contacted me and requested a copy of *An Echo of Silence* to develop a proposal.

I was delighted that parliament had accepted my research as a scientific appendix to the topic of child marriage and wanted to use it as a basis for drafting a significant and effective bill. Later, I discovered that the same Kalhor was one of the main opponents of increasing the minimum age of marriage and our research. With his connections to security organisations, he was, in fact, a security-minded researcher.

A while later, parliament's women's commission invited me to attend a meeting as an expert and provide consultation on the topic, along with a few others. On the day of the meeting, I entered the main parliament building. There was no hustle or bustle. Occasionally, when the doors opened, I saw the representatives busily chatting in the open hall, but when they were in the corridors, individuals would try to approach them

discreetly and raise certain issues. The male representatives were mostly well-dressed and wore suits and ties.

From the appearance of the visitors, it seemed that they were financially well-off and involved in business. One could guess that their trade and economic connections had brought them to parliament. Sometimes, people in traditional clothing would follow their local representatives in the corridors, seeking to resolve an issue. I knew some representatives beforehand, and it was fascinating to see how power had transformed them into different individuals. Of course, not all representatives were like that; I also met individuals who had high levels of understanding and were committed to addressing social problems. Most of these representatives were women, and their areas of interest were not limited to rent-seeking and corruption.

When the session began, I was taken aback. I had imagined a setting similar to academic seminars, in which questions would be asked and advice sought. But the existing dichotomy in Iran prevailed here as well. The reformist representatives and I sat on one side of the table, while a distinct group sat on the other side. Around our table were the parliamentary advisor to the President, the head of the women's faction, a deputy and members of the committee. Also present were a representative from Shahin Milani's office, responsible for the Centre for Women's Affairs at the President's Office, and Layia Joneidi, the President's legal advisor, who was younger than the others. The other group comprised a few men and women.

The men looked like security agents, and the women were heavily veiled. One or two of them had come from the Parliamentary Research Centre, led by Sina Kalhor and Eniseh Khazali. They seemed sensitive to my words, taking notes and recording the session.

After I presented the results of the *An Echoe of Silence* research in a PowerPoint presentation, their challenging questions began, By the end of the session, I realised that this group was the core opposition to the bill to increase the marriage age. Despite this, I felt good after the session. I thought our research was influencing the country's policymaking, which is the best outcome for a social researcher. I no longer had the fears and caution of before. I conducted more interviews and occasionally attended university gatherings and conferences related to social and children's issues.



Image 332: Factional divisions in the women's faction meeting. Tehran, 2016.

Gradually, the issue of child marriage became a national dossier and was submitted to parliament as a bill. The book *An Echoe of Silence* was also attached as a scientific appendix to the bill. The bill received a positive vote and became a milestone in addressing child marriage in Iran. The proposal was to increase the marriage age for boys from fifteen to seventeen years and for girls from thirteen to fifteen years. Due to the opponents' attacks, the bill was written cautiously, only considering a two-year increase. The opponents argued that approving this bill would lead to a decrease in births and an aging population.

The expert opinions of the bill's supporters and our research findings indicated that the ideal marriage age for girls was above eighteen years, as they lack psychological, social, economic and independent-living readiness before that. They should instead enter the education cycle, pursue their studies and choose suitable careers.

Although this bill would ultimately empower boys, girls and women, it differed from the system's broader perspective and interpretation of empowerment. Later, the opponents seized on one of the statistics from the *An Echoe of Silence* research and claimed that, according to the results, the percentage of sexual satisfaction among children who married before the age of eighteen was high.

This was one of the many difficulties that made life hard for researchers like me in Iran. I could never respond to these individuals by explaining that the issue of fate-making, such as marriage, especially child marriage, cannot be reduced to sexual satisfaction, and that there are ways to address sexual desire other than marriage. Moreover, these children often have no concept of sexual relationships, so they cannot understand what 'sexual satisfaction' means. If I did that, I would be accused of promoting corruption. As it turned out, that's exactly what happened in the end.

I had discovered other instances that supported their views, and they would say, 'Kameel Ahmady himself has found through his research that the rate of sexual satisfaction is higher in marriages below the age of eighteen.' No matter how much I explained, analysing that specific section under the statistics and tables, it was in vain. I would explain that some respondents were forced to answer in the presence of their mothers-in-law or other family members, and some didn't dare to tell the truth, while others didn't provide correct answers due to shame and lack of trust. However, they were determined to interpret the research results in line with their own opinions and twist each section to conform to their views.

A Cowardly Trap

Our debates continued for a long time, which led to an invitation to a TV programme. I was first invited to the *Libido* programme, and later to another programme called *First Sex*. The presenter was Ehsan Rastgar, who I didn't know before, but it seemed he was being utilised by security forces and was pushing their projects forward. This happened during a time when the Cyber Army was launching harsh attacks against me and others advocating for raising the marriage age.

These attacks initially started with Twitter hashtags. I wasn't very active on Twitter and didn't know what was happening. A few friends told me about it, and soon the hashtags started: 'Kameel Ahmady, spy, traitor, and . . .' As a result, I decided not to participate in the TV programme's debate on child marriage.

Some time later, they contacted me again, and I declined, saying I wouldn't participate in the debate. Then they said I would have a scientific conversation with an expert, so I agreed. The expert was Sina Kalhor, who strongly opposed me and my plan, constantly criticising my activities. He



Image 333: Kalhor, Rastgar and me. Tehran, 2018.

was considered an authority on social issues for conservative and government-affiliated groups. Although he was once criticised by some clerics for his views on hijab, he was a government-affiliated researcher, enjoyed the support of a specific faction at the time and worked at the Parliament's Research Centre.

The programme's producer was a young man named Mohammad Reza Boruni, who later made abundant accusations against me on Twitter. I accepted the invitation on the condition that the meeting wouldn't turn into a debate and that we would have a free and expert discussion on child marriage.

On the scheduled day, they sent a car for me, and I went to the programme's studio. All the crew members and attendees were young, revolutionary and Basiji-like. From the very first moment, you could sense that you had entered an intelligence-gathering hub. It was clear what their style and approach were and where their budget came from. The individuals involved in this establishment were all valuable and affiliated with the extensive media institution of Ouj.

Later, when I was arrested, I examined the events leading up to my arrest and realised the significant role these individuals played in creating a scenario for my file and arrest. In this TV interview, despite their promises, they directed the conversation toward a debate, and it was



Image 334: Screenshot of messages from Borouni introducing me.

Tweet 1 (Top)
Mohammadreza Borouni @rezamehr... · 4d The lady sitting on the left side in this photograph is #Tayyebeh_Siavashi (Member of Parliament), and yesterday, #Parvaneh_Salahshouri (Member of Parliament) was also present at his book launch event.
Tweet 2 (Bottom)
Mohammadreza Borouni @rezamehr... · 4d He deems the laws of Islam to belong to 1400 years ago, is a proponent of unregulated sexual relations, obtained his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the United Kingdom, and has no occupation other than conducting research aligned with the objectives of the United Nations; more importantly, despite all these characterisations, he serves as one of the principal advisers to the Women's Faction of the Islamic Consultative Assembly [Parliament]. #Kameel_Ahmady

obvious that everything was scripted. I was more worried about them cutting and editing my words. Some friends told me, 'This will happen, and they'll connect the interview, questions and answers in a way that you won't believe you said those things.'

I endeavoured to approach the subject with dignity and honesty, transforming it into a genuine sociological and anthropological discussion. However, it didn't work. Everything was orchestrated to entrap me and provide pretexts for my destruction and arrest. I tried to expedite the interview and avoid saying too much, but Kalhor persistently emphasised that 'you' (referring to all the ladies in the President's office, the Women's Commission of the Parliament, and possibly individuals close to them) were seeking to increase the age of child marriage.

I repeatedly stressed that, as an independent researcher, I only utilised the scientific findings of my book, *An Echo of Silence*, which was incorporated into Article 1401. I argued that they were misusing the term 'you' for political gain, thereby undermining my independence as a researcher. Kalhor's sole objective was to focus on the term 'you' according to his own definition. He claimed that, even if we set aside this term, my research had stated that the appropriate age for marriage was eighteen, which contradicts the Islamic Republic's laws and foreign child-rights conventions.

Their final argument was that adolescence is a tumultuous period characterised by a desire for sexual relationships. If boys and girls didn't marry at young ages, it meant we should let them engage in sexual relationships and have boyfriends and girlfriends. What was my response?

They wanted to put me in a situation where I would utter those words, and then they would manipulate my sentences to create a headline. If I said, 'No, that's not the answer', they would revert to the same question.

I attempted to take the discussion in a different direction, suggesting that there are ways to control and guide adolescents' sexual desires. When young people have access to more recreational, educational and sporting facilities, they might not prioritise sexual relationships. We shouldn't view everything through the lens of sexual relationships and focus solely on that aspect. If we design sexual-education programmes for parents and children from the outset, the outcome will be vastly different. Moreover, we shouldn't intrude into people's private lives.



در ایران "۱۳ هزار کودک بیوه" وجود دارد

میزان ازدواج کودکان "چندان مستند نیست"، زیرا برخی از این ازدواج‌ها در چارچوب خانواده صورت گرفته و "جایی ثبت نمی‌شود".

روند رو به افزایش ازدواج کودکان

به گزارش خبرگزاری ایسنا، کامیل احمدی بر اساس پژوهش‌های خود از روند رو به افزایش ازدواج کودکان در ایران خبر داد و گفت: «در سال ۹۰، ۳۹ هزار و ۶۰۹ نفر (۴.۵ درصد) از کودکانی که ازدواج کرده‌اند ۱۰ تا ۱۴ سال سن داشته‌اند.»

احمدی سپس با اشاره به اینکه "این ارقام با روندی رو به رشد در سال ۹۱ به بیش از ۴۰ هزار نفر (۴.۹ درصد) رسیده است"، افزود: «ازدواج کودکان ۱۰ تا ۱۴ ساله در سال ۹۲ نیز با افزایش روبرو بوده است. این میزان با رسیدن به ۵.۳ درصد در سال ۹۲ و ۵.۵ درصد در سال ۹۵، نشان می‌دهد که ممکن است از میزان روند ازدواج کودکان کاسته نشود.»

کامیل احمدی همچنین گفت: «در سال ۹۴ بیش از پنج درصد ازدواج‌ها در سنین کمتر از ۱۵ سالگی ثبت شده است که از این میان بیش از ۲۸ هزار نفر دختران ۱۰ تا ۱۴ سال و بیش از ۱۴ هزار نفر پسران ۱۰ تا ۱۴ سال بودند.»

معصومه آقاپور علیشاهی، عضو فراکسیون زنان مجلس شورای اسلامی، ششم خردادماه گذشته آمار کودک‌بیوه‌های زیر ۱۸ سال در ایران را ۲۴ هزار نفر عنوان کرده بود.

آمار بالای طلاق و مادر شدن "کودک‌عروسان"

به گفته کامیل احمدی، ۱۷ درصد ازدواج‌ها در ایران مربوط به دختران زیر ۱۸ سال است

عکس: didarnews

Image 335: Reflection of research data in foreign media. 2016.

In Iran, There Are "13,000 Child Widows"

[...] The rate of child marriage "is not highly documented", as some of these marriages take place within familial frameworks and "are not registered anywhere".

The Rising Trend of Child Marriage

According to a report by ISNA News Agency, Kameel Ahmady reported a rising trend in child marriage in Iran based on his research, stating: "In the year 1390 [2011/2012], 39,609 individuals (4.5 per cent) of those who married were children aged between 10 and 14 years."

Ahmady then pointed out that "these figures showed an upward trend, reaching over 40,000 individuals (4.9 per cent) in the year 1391 [2012/2013]," adding: "Child marriage among 10 to 14-year-olds also experienced an increase in the year 1392 [2013/2014]. This rate, reaching 5.3 per cent in 1392 [2013/2014] and 5.5 per cent in the year 1395 [2016/2017], demonstrates that the rate of child marriage might not be declining."

Kameel Ahmady further stated: "In the year 1394 [2015/2016], over five per cent of marriages were registered at ages under 15 years, among which more than 28,000 were girls aged 10 to 14, and over 13,000 were boys aged 10 to 14."



صفحه اصلی /اخبار اجتماعی /آسیب‌ها

۰ نفر ★★★★★ ۸ اسفند ۱۳۹۶ - ۱۹:۵۷

یک میلیون کودک‌همسر در ایران و پدیده صیغه کودکان

سمینار بررسی عوامل تسهیل‌کننده ازدواج زودهنگام کودکان با محوریت صیغه محرمیت همراه با رونمایی از اثر تحقیقی «خانه‌ای روی آب»، امروز در دفتر مرکزی انجمن حمایت از حقوق کودکان برگزار شد.

فاطیما فردوس: در سمینار عوامل تسهیل‌کننده ازدواج کودکان، اثر تحقیقی جدید کامیل احمدی درباره صیغه محرمیت کودکان رونمایی شد.

به گزارش خبرآنلاین، کامیل احمدی، مردم‌شناس و نویسنده درباره اثر تحقیقی جدیدش شنیدن

Image 336: Internal media's entry into the topic of child marriage. 2017.

One Million Child Spouses in Iran and the Phenomenon of Temporary Marriage (Sigheh) of Children

A seminar examining the facilitating factors of early child marriage, focusing on the temporary marriage of convenience (sigheh-ye mahramiyat), accompanied by the launch of the research study titled "A House on Water", was convened today at the central office of the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights.

Fatemeh Ferdous: At the seminar examining the facilitating factors of child marriage, Kameel Ahmady's new research work regarding the temporary marriage of convenience for children was unveiled.

According to a report by KhabarOnline, Kameel Ahmady, an anthropologist, researcher, and author, stated regarding his new research work titled "A House on Water": "The word sigheh [temporary marriage] initially brings to mind adult temporary marriage upon hearing it; however, sigheh has various types and forms, whereas the temporary marriage of convenience (sigheh-ye mahramiyat) that we..."

I felt that my presence on the programme was a mistake, but, deep down, I was satisfied with the experience, as I had expressed my thoughts.

Sometime later, they released teasers from the programme on social media, where Sina Kalhor was speaking and I was shown lowering my head, listening silently, as if I had surrendered and had nothing to say. As expected and as my friends had predicted, they carried out their next unethical act and broadcast a manipulated version of the programme, deleting or editing some of my words, explanations and justifications, while leaving Kalhor's words intact.

Internal Publications Still Fascinated by Child Marriage

Internal publications were still captivated by the topic of child marriage, and the reactions from government and security circles continued. The bill to reform Article 1041 had gathered consensus in parliament and was scheduled for discussion and voting in the judicial commission. Meanwhile, several press campaigns had taken off, and I sensed that the issue was being securitised. I decided to distance myself from these controversies and focus on my own work. The topic of child marriage, with all its associated reasons, field evidence and statistics, which we had presented in our research, had become too heavy for them to handle. Even after I was imprisoned and forced to flee Iran, last year, in a segment of the *Jahan Ara* programme under the title 'A Look at Four Decades of Women's Policy-Making', one of the programme's experts interviewed me at minute 45, introducing me as a theorist of child marriage in Iran, claiming that my intention was to present a performance to the United Nations and questioning the validity of our field evidence and research analysis. They also mentioned my arrest and forced exit from Iran under the title 'Escape', which nicely illustrated the dominant intellectual discourse of the time – one that considered an independent researcher who refused to surrender to their ideologies a criminal.

During our research on child marriage, we discovered that temporary marriage, or *sigheh*, provided a suitable context for facilitating early-childhood marriage and legitimising the relationship. Sigheh, or temporary marriage, is a religiously sanctioned institution in Shia communities, primarily serving a sexual purpose for adults. *Mut'eh*, as it is also known, is when a temporary contract is formed between a man and a

woman, with a specified dowry, which automatically expires at the end of the agreed-upon period. There is disagreement among Muslims regarding the permissibility of this type of marriage. Sunni Muslims, Ibadi and Zaidis consider it impermissible, while Shia Imamis regard it as legitimate and lawful. Mut'eh is recognised in Iranian laws, following Imamia jurisprudence, but does not exist in other Islamic or Western countries.

One of the justifications and common applications of mut'eh dates back to periods when men would embark on long journeys with caravans and be away from their families for extended periods. They would thus temporarily marry women during their travels. Sigheh has had its critics in Iran since long ago, and women's-rights activists and civil activists have been among its staunch opponents. Some critics have even likened sigheh to Islamic prostitution, but Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, during his presidency, gave it semi-religious legitimacy in a famous Friday Prayer sermon. After the war and in the closed society of that era, when the controls and restrictions of the Islamic Revolution's Komitehs were prominent, Mr Rafsanjani proposed sigheh as a means to facilitate relationships between men and women with the aim of preventing moral corruption.

The proposed plan was to take sigheh out of its traditional framework and give it more legitimacy. Women could then refer to marriage and divorce offices and obtain official sigheh documents, using them for legal purposes such as cohabitation, travel and hotel stays. The approach of the system's officials, however, was more geared toward serving political interests and system goals, whereas sigheh is a social phenomenon that could have far-reaching and sometimes negative consequences for a society like Iran, with its cultural, economic, social and legal conditions.

My studies on sigheh began with child sigheh, but I later developed a broader understanding of the concept and its functions in all cases. In some cultures and regions of Iran, children were referred to as *naf-br* or *esm-bar*, which marked the beginning of their sigheh. This was accompanied by or later followed by the sigheh ceremony, wherein the family elder or patriarch would read the temporary marriage contract, uniting the two children – a boy and a girl – in sigheh. Since the children were not yet of legal age, their parents took on their guardianship until they felt the children had reached a suitable age for permanent marriage. In other

words, they would spend their childhoods in sigheh and then transition into a formal marriage.

Sigheh was not limited to being a platonic arrangement, as it sometimes led to unintended pregnancies. As out-of-wedlock pregnancies were considered a social taboo, families would quickly act and hold formal wedding ceremonies.

According to Article 1041 of Iran's Civil Code, the marriage of a girl before the age of thirteen and a boy before the age of fifteen is contingent upon the guardian's permission and the court's discretion, as long as the girl's interests are considered. This law creates an environment conducive



Image 337: Fieldwork in Mashhad. 2018.

to child marriage, which is one of the main factors contributing to the high rate of child marriage in Iran. However, sigheh is a contractual agreement between the elders and families, and it is not officially registered. In reality, it paves the way for and facilitates the permanent marriage process, taking advantage of the legal potential of Article 1041.

Sigheh accelerates early marriage for children and is incentivised through religious rhetoric. Therefore, the function of sigheh or temporary marriage for children is distinct from its function for adults. In the latter case, usually widowed or divorced women enter into relationships with unmarried men, or men whose wives are ill or who are financially capable of taking on a second or third wife. In other words, sigheh serves as a semi-official and religiously sanctioned license for extramarital relationships in Iran, which has become a norm, offering men a double standard and women temporary benefits.

In our research, we found that, aside from legal problems, sigheh has serious detrimental effects on women. When a woman enters into a sigheh, she becomes involved in an unequal transaction, experiencing a sexual relationship in exchange for limited financial benefits and only temporary advantages. In sigheh, the woman does not inherit from the man, nor does she have financial security or backing. A younger woman, in particular, spends her critical life years in a relationship that has been legitimised through sigheh but lacks commitment. If she is mistreated by the man and the relationship ends after a while – a common occurrence in sigheh arrangements – she will have lost her youth. Even the children born out of this sigheh do not inherit from the man, and their futures remain uncertain. The consequences of the relationship and the responsibilities following it fall on the woman.

Luxury Sighehs

For this field research, I selected three major cities: Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan. Initially, we planned to study Qom instead of Tehran, given the common perception that Qom and, to some extent, Kashan have high rates of sigheh (temporary marriage). However, we discovered that the situation had changed. Mashhad has become the hub of sigheh in Iran, followed by Tehran and the surrounding areas of Karaj. It was also notable that the nature and form of sigheh varied across cities like Tehran, Isfahan and

Mashhad. I began my studies with a small, dedicated and capable team. With a slight overlap, we also continued our research on white marriage in these three major cities. These two topics had semantic and content-related connections.



Image 338: Sigheh-seeking Telegram channels.

Left Screenshot - Two profiles:
Profile 1:
Code: 121 | City: Zanjan | Age: 30 | Weight: 77 | Height: 173 | Residence: Yes
Mehrieh (Dowry): 700k (Daily), 1.5M (Weekly), 3M (Monthly)
Coordination & Introduction Fee: 150,000 Tomans
Consultant ID: @moshaver349
Profile 2:
Code: 122 | City: Yazd | Age: 27 | Weight: 70 | Height: 170 | Residence: Yes
Mehrieh (Dowry): 700k (Daily), 1.8M (Weekly), 3M (Monthly)
Coordination & Introduction Fee: 150,000 Tomans
Consultant ID: @moshaver349

Right Screenshot:
Header: Official *Sigheh* Matchmaking Institute "Nikan" (Pinned Message)
Profile: #Code30 | #Isfahan
Name: Parisa | Age: 19 | Divorced
Height/Weight: 162/57
Location: Negotiable place
Residence: Yes
Requirements: Honest, clean, good-natured gentleman, age over 22
Other: Has travel conditions | Negotiable hours (can accept hourly) | No children | Holds a health record.
Fees: Monthly *Mehrieh*: 4 Million Tomans | Overnight *Mehrieh*: 800,000 Tomans
Introduction Fee: 150,000 Tomans
Contact: Message the ID below for coordination: @moshaver778

Through in-depth interviews, we explored the reasons behind the persistence of sigheh and the stylistic changes that had occurred and arrived at fascinating results. In Tehran and other cities, a modern form of sigheh has become prevalent. Apart from young men seeking to fulfil their sexual needs, some young and middle-aged women are voluntarily opting for sigheh through matchmaking websites, Telegram channels and Instagram pages. The administrators of these channels facilitate relationships and receive a 20–25% commission for each deal.

These individuals create profiles of women, mainly on Telegram channels, and for each successful sigheh they receive around one million tomans. The woman receives close to three hundred thousand tomans. This phenomenon has gained more ease and popularity with the aid of technology and new communication styles, namely the internet and social networks.

In this predominantly digital approach, the personal information published about a woman includes her age, her weight, her height, her interests, whether or not she has a health insurance card, if she has accommodation and what days and hours of the week she is available to receive men. Some sigheh options in Tehran and Karaj also offer hospitality

services, suitable for male travellers from other cities, such as heavy vehicle drivers or those who come to Tehran for shopping or administrative tasks. They can receive sexual services, food, bathing facilities and accommodation.

This approach has many followers, and its popularity grows daily in metropolitan cities like Tehran. In Isfahan, we observed the same digital approach as in Tehran, but traditional sigheh was more common: sigheh with longer durations and a more traditional view of the sigheh-maker and the sigheh-taker, leading to mid-term or long-term relationships and sometimes even permanent marriages. In the traditional approach, a man with sufficient financial means usually provides for the woman's needs and enters a relatively long-term relationship.

However, the situation was different in Mashhad, where sigheh had entered the tourism industry and become an attractive part of tourist services and hospitality. Some luxury hotels, through their agents, would show albums of women willing to enter sigheh to foreign tourists and pilgrims, known as 'dollar sigheh'. Shia pilgrims from countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and other Arab nations had a higher exchange rate than the Iranian rial, and they always had more opportunities for sigheh. In ordinary guesthouses and hotels in Mashhad, some brokers would sometimes offer sigheh to foreign and Iranian men. These brokers had rivals who were taxi drivers, shopkeepers and street vendors and who lurked around hotels and guesthouses, whispering offers of sigheh.

Pilgrims arriving from mainly Arab countries would, with prior arrangements, be able to utilise services offered by tour operators, interpreters or brokers from Imam Khomeini Airport to Mehrabad Airport and finally to Mashhad. Luxury cars or intercity taxis would transport these pilgrims from Imam Khomeini Airport to Mehrabad Airport in Tehran. Some would use private cars or luxurious tourist vans, exclusively designed for tour groups, to reach Mashhad. In some cases, these tours would take the pilgrims to northern Iran and cities like Ramsar, where they would be introduced to women available for temporary marriage. This circuit would continue until the pilgrims returned to Tehran and eventually departed for their home countries. There were also groups that would arrive from Iraq and the Kurdistan Region with their own luxury vehicles. Their usual hangout spot was northern Iran, where brokers

would provide them with facilities like temporary marriage and accommodation.

The statistical community in this research consisted of over 280 interviewees, including men and women. During our field interviews, we discovered that some people in Mashhad had taken a stance against this business and had even held protests twice in front of the Saudi Arabian and Iraqi Embassies. Despite the existing tensions, the temporary-marriage tourism had evolved into a deeply rooted trade that gained legitimacy from Islamic laws and, on the surface, posed no problems, while benefiting the country's security and police systems, as it had created a form of social order in the sex market.

Many signs of these relationships and trade were not visible in public spaces and were instead confined to private domains. Although it was implied that religious oversight governed this phenomenon, there was no genuine Islamic or religious intention behind it, and the conditions and stipulations that Shia Islam sets for temporary marriage were disregarded in these arrangements. This type of tourism was based on sexual relationships in exchange for money, with the label of 'temporary marriage' merely serving as a pretext to give it legitimacy.

However, if both parties wished to register their union and obtain a temporary-marriage certificate, they would go to a registry office and receive the certificate without having their names recorded on their identification documents.

Among the field samples of temporary marriages that we interviewed, there were many who lived together outside the conceptual and religious framework of temporary marriage. There were even cases where couples had entered into a relationship through temporary marriage and continued it. Other examples were young couples who lived together based on mutual agreement or conditions.

These samples drew my attention to white marriage, and I became interested in researching it. In previous studies, the statistical community was limited, and the reasons behind the emergence and manifestation of this phenomenon were not adequately explored or representative of today's Iranian society. As I began my research, I encountered different samples that contradicted what had previously been reported.

As a researcher, I couldn't ignore this topic. I asked my team to introduce me to cases of white marriage they encountered during their

study of temporary marriage. I archived them in a separate list, and, gradually, we realised that the frequency and number of cohabiting couples, or white marriages, were far greater than we had imagined. After conducting several interviews and further research in this area, as well as discussing it with colleagues, we concluded that investigating white marriage would be our next research topic.

White Marriage: A Phenomenon Concealed in Iranian Society

White marriage is defined as 'cohabitation' (living together outside of marriage) in Western societies. In a white marriage, a couple lives together and has sexual relations without being married. This lifestyle has become prevalent in most Western societies. Although I had heard and read about white marriage in Iran, I lacked documented information, since no serious research had been conducted on the topic. The Iranian Government claims that such a phenomenon barely exists and denies its occurrence, despite its significant presence in real-life society.

Individuals choose this type of marriage for various reasons, including economic and social motivations, obtaining visas or escaping judicial prosecution. It is also possible that one of the partners is homosexual or has sexual dysfunctions, making sexual relations in a white marriage impossible.



Image 339: Advertisement for sigheh in a public space.

The term 'white marriage' is a French metaphor derived from white sheets. In this type of marriage, sexual relations are not established, and the bloodstained sheet traditionally associated with the consummation of marriage is not seen; instead, the sheet remains white. Since, in Iran, this shared life is accompanied by sexual relations, the term 'white marriage' has a different application but is not legally registered, unlike *mariage blanc*.

During our research on temporary marriage, we reached a midpoint where we couldn't have individuals from the same group present in Isfahan, Mashhad and Tehran simultaneously. Therefore, we conducted two field research projects with a short time gap between them. By the end of our field interviews on temporary marriage, we found that 20–30% of our statistical population consisted of white marriages, which was a notable figure. We then conducted studies and field interviews with an emphasis on white marriage, which were not limited to specific areas of these three cities.

In Tehran, white marriage was more likely to occur in student groups and in central, administrative and newly built housing areas such as Mehr and Parand, where housing was more affordable. This pattern was also observed in Mashhad and Isfahan. Cohabitation, or white marriage, had several significant components: the cohabitants were not originally from the city where they resided and they were mostly students or employees who had moved from other cities to Mashhad, Tehran and Isfahan and lived together, away from their families' watchful eyes.

White marriage in Iran is a secretive relationship. Neighbours, building custodians and residential-complex guards assume that the couple is husband and wife, and, in most cases, even the families of the two parties are unaware of the white marriage.

According to field narratives, there is always a packed suitcase ready, and when one of the families visits, the other partner quickly leaves the house. The lack of awareness about this phenomenon in Iran is due to denial by authorities and ordinary citizens. This type of lifestyle lacks legitimacy among people in a religious society with traditional values and norms. The Government naturally tries to deny it and does not supervise or control this way of living.

Some of these couples believed that white marriage lacks security, particularly emotional security, since one of them might be forced to live somewhere else for a while until things settle down. Those who had

experienced this lifestyle felt that they had a home but were simultaneously homeless. In other words, the Iranian version of white marriage could be stressful, restrictive and perilous.

Based on the findings of this research, white marriage has become a secretive phenomenon with a short lifespan due to the lack of necessary social context and infrastructure. According to the statistical data, these couples typically last between two and three years. The majority of these relationships begin with the intention of cohabiting and getting to know one another better, but they usually come to an end soon.

In this type of marriage, women suffer the most damage. Men can easily and with less cost exit the relationship, but women and girls, in addition to any emotional problems caused by the relationship, also risk losing their virginities and possibly becoming pregnant, which can jeopardise their future marriage prospects. Furthermore, they face social repercussions, and any friends and acquaintances who are aware of the relationship will stigmatise them.

Due to the lack of necessary cultural, social, legal and religious infrastructures, white marriage is considered a courageous and adventurous lifestyle in Iran, and more negative consequences and harms are inflicted on women than men. This type of marriage facilitates a sexual relationship and common-law living arrangement, particularly for the twenty-five to thirty-five age group, as they cannot afford the high costs of a wedding, dowry and other expenses.

It was possible that in wealthy families the parents were aware of their children's white marriages, but this knowledge was limited to the immediate family circle and rarely extended to other relatives, friends and acquaintances. Moreover, due to social taboos, it was less common for the girl's family to be aware of the situation.

The phenomenon of white marriage was not limited to the three cities mentioned earlier but existed in other large cities in Iran. I even encountered a few instances of cohabitation among my friends and acquaintances during my university years, often outside of university dormitories.

Perhaps in recent years, such relationships have been viewed with suspicion, but I believe that in the not-too-distant future in Iran, and in the medium term, these marriages will become more widespread and accepted, even in smaller towns. We conducted approximately 305 in-

depth and semi-in-depth field interviews, and our findings indicate a shift in the younger generation's attitude toward marriage and relationships. I believe that the global model of cohabitation has reached Iran and is spreading.



Image 340: Screenshots of news headlines.

1. ISNA - 14 Aug 2018 Headline: The 'Age' of 'White Marriage' and Statistics Regarding It "An anthropologist and researcher, citing a study on 'white marriage' conducted on 213 couples in the form of field research, stated: 'The age of white marriage in Iran...'"

2. Rouydad24 - 15 Dec 2018 Headline: 'White Marriage' or 'Black Cohabitation'? A Social Problem or a Conscious Choice? "Rouydad24: White marriage is a phenomenon that has become common in the country in recent years, referring to a type of marriage where a girl and a boy begin a life together without..."

3. DW [Deutsche Welle] - 2 Nov 2017 Headline: 'Quasi-Legal White Marriage': An Alternative to Traditional Marriage? "Based on unofficial statistics, white marriage is expanding in Iran's major cities. However, experts believe that public acceptance of this phenomenon is low..."

The Grounded Theory model of our research showed that environmental factors (economic conditions, official and legal frameworks, and social structures), intervening factors (family conditions, diminished supervision, and migrant living), and background factors (relationship experience and individual worldviews) are the main drivers of white marriage. The core phenomenon in this research was the change in values and norms in the lifestyle of the young generation. The strategic action in this research was identified as the multiplicity and instability of relationships, and the consequences of these relationships included the erosion of gender stereotypes, freedom of choice, reluctance toward formal marriage, social ostracism, lack of legal protection, and fear of unwanted pregnancy.

As usual, I uploaded a condensed version of this research to my website and presented the results at a seminar organised by the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights. Not long after, I received a call from an individual who had seen the research. They invited me to a meeting at the Ministry of Sport and Youth to discuss potential collaboration. I was both surprised and delighted that someone in the Government was finally paying attention to these issues. It was even more astonishing that the officials at the meeting were extremely friendly and approachable. After the usual small talk, we agreed to submit a proposal, and the project was set to begin promptly. This was an unusual and unexpected turn of events for a government ministry.

I was still reeling from this pleasant surprise when a colleague sent me a news link. It turned out that, during the fifth meeting of the Tehran Provincial Youth Affairs Coordination Council, held on 22 February, with the attendance of Anoushiravan Mohseni-Bandpei, the governor of Tehran, they had addressed the provision of marriage-facilitation services. However, their primary focus was on the phenomenon of white marriage. In one part of the session, the research expert from the Ministry of Sport and Youth had presented our group's research, namely the book *A Room with an Open Door*, and elaborated on the findings regarding white marriage. The expert claimed that the research was commissioned by the Ministry itself. We were stunned that a government research unit had pulled off such a stunt, proudly presenting our research findings as their own.



Image 341: Ministry of Youth Affairs news headlines about 'White Marriage'. 2017.

Headline: Thought-Provoking Statistics from a Study on 'White Marriage'

"Tehran - IRNA: The fifth meeting of the Tehran Province Youth Affairs Organizing Headquarters was **the** venue for a presentation of a scientific report titled 'A Room with an Open Door' regarding 'white marriage' [cohabitation] in several of the country's megacities. It was stated that those most inclined toward this phenomenon are among the educated population."

"According to IRNA's reporter, in this study, the respondents also expressed their religious beliefs, with the majority describing themselves as having little to no religious conviction. Additionally, three percent stated that those with religious beliefs..."



ایرناپلاس بررسي مي‌كند

صاحب اصلي اين پژوهش كيست؟

تهران- ايرناپلاس- «كاميل احمدي» مردم‌شناس، پژوهشگر و نويسنده مي‌گويد پژوهشي كه در پنجمين نشست ستاد ساماندهي امور جوانان استان تهران ارائه شده است، حاصل پژوهش‌هاي چند ساله خود اوست كه به نام شخص و وزارتخانه ديگري منتشر شده است.

پنجمين نشست ستاد ساماندهي امور جوانان استان تهران روز چهارشنبه سوم بهمن‌ماه، با حضور انوشيروان

Image 342: *IRNA State News Agency* headline.

IRNA Plus investigates
Who is the true owner of this research?
Tehran – IRNA Plus – Kameel Ahmady — anthropologist, researcher, and author — says that the research presented at the fifth meeting of the Youth Affairs Coordination Headquarters of Tehran Province is the result of several years of his own work, which has been published under the name of another individual and another ministry.
The fifth meeting of the Youth Affairs Coordination Headquarters of Tehran Province was held on Wednesday, January 22 (3rd of Bahman), with the presence of Anoushiravan...

What was even more distressing was that the governor stated in the meeting, citing our research findings, that this type of lifestyle was 'not real' and was an immoral and un-Islamic phenomenon that threatened the institution of family. He further suggested to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that they consider changing the term 'white marriage' to

better reflect its inappropriateness. They also concluded that one of the ways to control and reduce the number of individuals with disabilities was to implement genetic screening before marriage, emphasising that the lack of genetic screening and the birth of children with disabilities was among the most significant consequences of white marriage.

I contacted the official who had coordinated my meeting with the Ministry, but they denied everything, promising to follow up and get back to me, but I never heard back. I was furious and outraged. I contacted the editor of the social affairs section of *IRNA News Agency*, which had published the news, and shared the story. They invited me to their office and conducted an interview about the incident. The news agency repeatedly sought confirmation and a response from the Ministry regarding my claim, but to no avail. They published my story under the title 'Who is the Real Owner of this Research?'

Some other short reports about this incident were published, but the Ministry of Sports and Youth didn't even offer condolences, let alone assume responsibility for the researcher's 'mistake'. I reported this scientific theft and the Ministry's cover-up to one of Tehran's representatives, who wrote a protest letter to the minister, seeking an explanation for their actions. My friends advised me not to pursue the matter further, given my situation, as it would be futile and might even harm me.

Most outrageously, the project I was supposed to execute in 1400 was ultimately assigned to a researcher who was a member of the board of directors of the Sociology Association and was known among many sociologists as a government-affiliated researcher. According to the Ministry's decision and the contract terms, the research results have not been published and are not accessible to the scientific community.

Efforts to Publish *A House on Water*

As the analysis and coding stages of the white marriage research were nearing completion, I submitted to the publisher the first draft of the temporary marriage and *mahramiyeh* (religiously sanctioned kinship) contract under the title *A House on Water*. Nashr-e Shirazeh, which had obtained permits from the Ministry of Guidance for my two previous books on female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage, faced issues

with this new book. The Ministry had quietly given permits for the previous two books with minimal margins, but this time it raised numerous questions and concerns. It seemed as if the first two books would be more sensitive topics for the Government, but the story took a different turn.

Typically, writers and researchers in Iran self-censor their work before submitting it to the Ministry of Guidance, which is akin to self-mutilation! You have many things to say and have grasped significant and fascinating topics and signifiers, but you must either hint at them or remove them to obtain a publication permit. I, too, diluted the sensitive topics to conform to the system's gaze and taste. At the time, the Ministry of Guidance was preoccupied with numerous dismissals and appointments of new officials. I tried to resist censorship as much as possible to preserve the foundational principles of the research, but they insisted that the research results should not question temporary marriage as an Islamic institution. This was despite the fact that the importance and role of religion were the central core of the book. In this research, we analysed the gender discrimination stemming from temporary-marriage contracts and referenced religious sources and statements, most of which were from both Shia and Sunni perspectives. However, this apparently did not sit well with the censors.

After numerous backs and forths, the book finally received a permit, which left me astonished. Although it was not my ideal version, it was still a good outcome.

The publication of this book was considered a success in this field, but it was not extensively analysed in Iran. In some cases, one or two foreign-based feminists – who could, free and uncensored, express their fiery criticisms – raised objections. They argued that the research did not adequately critique the institution of temporary marriage and instead accepted it as a social reality. Of course, they ultimately acknowledged that the author's and publisher's hands were tied. I read an article by a Swedish-based feminist activist who had written a scathing critique of the research's shortcomings and lack of courage in addressing certain topics, which reminded me of the old proverb 'the goat is worried about its life, while the butcher is worried about its pelt'.

I regretted that there was no common understanding of producing content with numerous limitations. Now that I'm outside of Iran, one of my projects is to rewrite the censored research papers, including all the



Image 343: The book *A House with Open Door* that did not receive a permit and was eventually published in London, Germany and the Kurdistan Region.

findings, analyses and field interviews. With the help of colleagues, I plan to replace the banned quotes and rewrite the field narratives in the form of ethnography and anthropology.

My *House on Water* was even more well-received than *An Echo of Silence* and *In the Name of Tradition*. This work, like my other books, was first published in English. Although it didn't receive much media attention, it didn't go unnoticed by foreign researchers who study Islamic societies and activities. It has become one of the most up-to-date references on temporary marriage and child solemnisation. I presented this research at several conferences, including one at the Sigmund Freud University in Austria.

At that conference, the topics of child marriage and temporary marriage were discussed together. I was the only researcher residing in Iran who attended the conference, and I accepted the invitation on the condition that my presence wouldn't be publicised. The conference was attended by Ms Mehrangiz Kar, a few social activists and others who, according to themselves, were considered enemies of the regime. The BBC reported on the conference and its themes, even mentioning my name and research. It was difficult getting my name removed from the report. Some photos were taken by the conference organisers and sent to me via email. Before my arrest, the Revolutionary Guards hacked into my email and saw these photos. During the interrogations, I had a hard time explaining my presence at the conference.

We held a book launch at the Vartan House, a beautiful artistic centre. A university friend introduced me to Abbas Abdi, who was the head of the Tehran Journalists' Association. Abdi agreed to attend the event and give a speech. Also present were Ms Sajjadi, the assistant to the President's chief of staff for citizens' rights, and several other speakers who discussed various aspects of child solemnisation and temporary marriage between adults.

Some opinions on temporary marriage were raised, and Mr Abdi's view that it was a personal decision sparked a reaction from some women's-rights activists. This issue caused displeasure in Mr Abdi and a few others at the session. The topic of temporary marriage and child solemnisation soon alarmed government groups, and I received warnings. They believed that I had touched on sensitive and very important social issues and was producing content quickly. From their perspective, I had threatened Islamic sexual norms.

When I realised the Government's perspective, I saw that the book had been reflected in the press, in public spaces and on virtual platforms, and, because of these reactions, my name was being Tweeted and hash-tagged even more. For example, when I went to Mashhad to research the topic of homosexuality, I was invited to a television interview by the municipality. I accepted the invitation and only discussed my research findings on the same topic, but I again faced a harsh reaction from conservative government officials and groups affiliated with the imam of the time in Mashhad. One of the main reasons for their opposition to me was that I had touched on sensitive subjects that were a matter of pride for them.

As I mentioned, our findings indicated that Mashhad was the hub of temporary marriage in the Islamic world. This fact did not sit well with the dignitaries of Mashhad, and during my interrogations in Evin Prison, I realised that most of my interrogators were from Mashhad and had been captivated by a Mashhadi gang. During those interrogations, they repeatedly questioned me about the narrative, dynamics and methodological flaws of our research, constantly referencing our study, *A House on Water*. It was fascinating to see a security officer display such certitude and, of course, make mistakes about a scientific topic.


سلام بر دوستان و مخاطبین خرد جنسی
یاسر عرب

1: ما در این مجموعه سعی کردیم توصیفی روشن از زیست جنسی ایرانیان و منظومه چالشها و مسائل آن داشته باشیم.

2: این مجموعه بدون هیچ حمایت دولتی یا حکومتی و تنها با یاری شما مخاطبین و همکاری سایت آپارات تولید شد.

3: تا کنون سی و نه روایت را در سی و نه قسمت تقدیم شما کرده ایم. اما قسمت سی هشتم این مجموعه (ختنه ی دختران در ایران/ ارائه جناب کامیل احمدی) پس از گذشت چهل و هشت ساعت به درخواست نهادی امنیتی حذف شد. ایشان در مجموع سه ارائه داشته اند که در حال حاضر به تصمیم نهادی امنیتی، و تمکین شورای سردبیری خرد جنسی بارگذاری آنها میسر نیست.

Image 344: Telegram screenshot of Yasser Arab and the deletion of my interviews and articles by the order of Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence Agency.

Greetings to friends and the audience of Sexual Wisdom, Yaser Arab

1. In this series, we have endeavoured to provide a clear description of the Iranian sexual landscape and a systematic framework of its challenges and related issues.

This series was produced without any state or governmental support, and solely with the assistance of our audience and the cooperation of the Aparat website.

2. To date, we have presented thirty-nine episodes to you. However, the thirty-eighth episode (on Female Genital Mutilation in Iran, presented by Mr. Kameel Ahmday) was removed after forty-eight hours at the request of a security institution. In total, he has provided three presentations; currently, due to the decision of the security institution and the compliance of the Sexual Wisdom editorial board, it is not possible to upload them.
3. Now, we have reached the end of the second chapter of the description and are ready to record the third chapter. This chapter will include a collective discussion among the professors who presented the previous two chapters, as well as the presence of...

I knew that people like Sina Kalhor and others had a shared think tank. Later, I saw a three-member group had written an article criticising our book and heavily manipulating the content. At least two of them had impressive resumes and jobs: Salheh Khodadadi, a professor of women's studies at the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom, and Mohsen Badri, a lecturer in women's studies and a member of the academic board of the Women's Studies Department at al-Zahra University, along with a student who had worked on the article. Their daily routines clearly showed who they were connected to. For example, they had published articles like 'Analysing and Criticising the Theoretical Framework of Fazlur Rahman's Interpretive Methodology as a Foundational Methodology for Some Feminist Readings of the Quran' or 'A Look at Iran's Population Policies from 1951 to 2006 and a Comparison with Other Countries'.

After *A House on Water*, no other book of mine was published in Iran. They refused to give me permission to continue my work, and, during my imprisonment, the Intelligence agents of the Revolutionary Guards removed some of my interviews and almost all of my articles from scientific websites and university archives.

I had submitted the research manuscript titled *A House with Open Door* to the Ministry of Culture and Guidance through Shiraze Publishing House to obtain a permit. The Ministry's system indicated that the work was under review, but there was no news. This was despite the fact that other books by the same publisher had received permits within one or two months. My concerns grew, the atmosphere became more suffocating, and the circle tightened. Voices from near and far, even from within, whispered to me, saying, 'Kameel, you will not be allowed to work any more. This will be your last project in Iran.'

The media campaigns about child marriage continued, and I was still trying to maintain a balanced relationship between my research achievements and my connection with the media without getting caught up in Iran's factional games. Apparently, I had been too cautious too late. I realised I was under the microscope, and several people with real names and identities were criticising me on Twitter, on Instagram, in the *Keyhan* newspaper and on the Revolutionary Guards' Intelligence Agency website, *Mashreq News*.

Regarding Third-Class Citizens!

It was a brave decision, or so I thought. Many believed that studying the LGBTQ+ community, especially in my circumstances, was foolish. However, I wanted to study the diverse sexual orientations in Iranian culture and society today and examine the issue of childhood sexual abuse and the gendered gaze toward children. I did not know if the system would tolerate this research and its findings, and I constantly asked myself, 'Can I publish the results of this study in Iran? If it is published abroad, what consequences will I face, and can I continue my academic and research career in Iran?'

After much contemplation, I finally made up my mind. Despite the numerous uncertainties and risks, I decided to take this step for two reasons. Firstly, I felt that it wouldn't be long before I was restricted from working in Iran, anyway, and possibly even arrested or forced to leave the country. Therefore, it was better to seize this opportunity. Secondly, I could collect field data and information, putting off publication until a later time.

I had another, more scientific reason as well. After studying white marriages, we began researching LGBTQ+ individuals. During our study on white marriages, we became aware of a group of LGBTQ+ individuals living together, including working-class girls and boys who were financially independent and cohabiting. On the surface, this seemed normal and natural in Iranian culture, but some of these cohabiting relationships were romantic relationships. I started working on this topic, cautiously and quietly, with a strategy based on my previous experience with temporary and white marriages. I focused on three major cities – Isfahan, Mashhad and Tehran – where LGBTQ+ communities were more concentrated and visible. Undoubtedly, similar groups could be found in

other Iranian cities, but in these three cities they operated more cohesively and were easier to access.



Image 345: LGBTQI+ in Iranian media channels.

> Social media public chatroom. People commenting on how beautiful the image is and how to connect with each other.

This research was accompanied by some surprises: we found that Iran's LGBTQ+ community was more organised than we had imagined. It was fascinating to see that most groups and individuals were connected in some way, had their own hangouts and social circles, and often interacted with each other on social media.

In Mashhad, there are two parks that are known among the locals as gathering spots for LGBTQ+ individuals. In Tehran, parks like Laleh and Daneshju, as well as a few other locations, served as hangouts for these groups. Interestingly, these parks had been meeting points for LGBTQ+ individuals in the capital even during the Shah's era and were familiar to

the locals. Notably, the presence of these groups in parks and their social interactions were somewhat tolerated by the security forces.

In our field studies, we discovered significant connections between these groups and the security forces, which the LGBTQ+ individuals confirmed. If their gatherings exceeded six or seven people, they would prompt a reaction from the authorities. The police would subtly convey the message that their gathering had exceeded the tolerated limit and needed to disperse. Any researcher would be curious about these unspoken rules and the lives of these individuals, who are often subject to social, cultural and legal discriminations. This crucial part, known as 'participant observation', would usually be carried out weeks in advance by myself and my first assistant, followed by introducing surveyors and conducting interviews.

In addition to making field observations, reviewing theoretical literature and related studies on the topic was another essential part of the research process. Before proceeding to the theoretical aspect of the subject, we would assess the potential and feasibility of the research, basing our decision on evidence. There were a few studies conducted within Iran that showed signs of pressure on LGBTQ+ groups.

The ridicule and contempt that their families and society showed toward them, the lack of equal job and education opportunities, being a 'third gender', and the discrimination – especially toward trans individuals – were entirely visible. Unlike others who had hidden sexual orientations, trans people were more apparent in their appearance, which, in their own words, made their lives even more difficult. The mockery, ridicule, contempt and even physical and sexual violence were not simply verbal assaults, and this was not something that could be hidden from anyone's sight.

Through the binary thinking and categorisations that society imposed on them, the mechanism of their exclusion was reinforced. Consequently, they were deprived of many services, facilities and social connections, and even jobs, with contempt. They couldn't integrate with the general public.

From studying LGBTQ+ groups, who were considered the underlayers of society, we discovered remarkable points about them. For instance, despite being marginalised, they struggled to assert their existence, saying, 'We are here.' They occasionally took over a limited geographical space in the public sphere and bravely protected it.



Image 346: Rome, Italy, 2017.

Studying these groups was not easy. They trusted us marginally, and the purpose and nature of our research were unclear to them. We had to preserve their identities and not cross ethical boundaries.

In this sensitive and stressful period, I was invited to a conference in Italy, which I felt was an opportunity to step away from the environment for a few days and rejuvenate.

The difficult part was that I couldn't discuss these pressures with my colleagues but had to maintain a natural and normal demeanour while

playing a supervisory and managerial role. Any mistake could have compromised the research, and I had to proceed with speed and precision. As a result, we entered the field with a large number of interviewers and in the most discreet manner. It was natural that the budget for this research was higher than for other pieces, and financial concerns added to the stress. During this research, for the security of our colleagues, we usually met individuals at cafés and hangouts rather than their homes. The cost of some of these fancy and chic locations was staggering, but I had no choice – the field studies had to be conducted in the shortest possible time and with precision and richness.

The Hegemony of Radical Left Feminism

During the time I was working on the proposal and initial studies for this project, I tried to contact some social activists for LGBTQ+ individuals outside the country. Contrary to my expectations, only a few were willing to talk and cooperate. Most of those who expressed willingness didn't keep their promises! Over the years, I've learned that, even when working on social, human and human-rights issues, there are boundaries, territories and a sense of ownership. It can be said that addressing these human issues has become an industry in itself. Of course, in the capitalist world, everything has become commercialised, but I felt that the realm of sensitivity and academic and professional pretensions surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals was more pronounced than in other fields. I think part of the issue was that I was working on this subject within the country, and there was a possibility that my research findings would contradict the official statements and organisational claims of some prominent LGBTQ+-rights defenders abroad, thus creating obstacles to their work. Additionally, it seemed that the root of the matter was competition and the fear of losing one's position. Perhaps my assumption is incorrect, but, apart from a few individuals, I did not receive much cooperation or assistance from activists for this group.

During my journey, I encountered some astonishing topics. The fundamental differences and ongoing disputes between these groups and civil activists are a crucial issue. Moreover, outside of Iran, from dissenters to feminists, there are significant disagreements. Some LGBTQ+ groups have strongly opposed powerful and well-funded feminist groups. Some

homosexuals even believe that LGBTQ+ individuals have come under the sway of radical leftist feminists and that they utilise the global attention and appeal that the Western world shows toward LGBTQ+ individuals for their own purposes and ideals. They also raise the criticism that this ideological and financial subservience is not beneficial to LGBTQ+ groups and that they should maintain their distance from feminists.

This, of course, is true for all vulnerable groups in society, not just LGBTQ+ individuals. These groups are often supported by certain institutions, but they do not realise that those same institutions are driven by their own interests and exploit the names of vulnerable groups to further their own agendas. Eventually, vulnerable groups become aware of this and develop feelings of resentment and anger toward those institutions.

For the first time in Iran, this research was conducted through in-depth interviews with approximately three hundred LGBTQ+ individuals, of whom 60% were biologically male and 40% female, although some individuals were non-binary or gender non-conforming and did not identify solely as male or female. We focused on three major cities, Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan. We examined the challenges arising from contemporary changes in gender relations and how these interactions play out in Iran. This research provided a theoretical framework and methodology for readers, LGBTQ+ individuals, universities, research centres, public and social activists, and students.



Image 347: *The Forbidden Tale* in three languages.

The primary objectives of this research were to understand emotions and beliefs about LGBTQ+ individuals through critical analysis and from their own perspectives. Another goal was to investigate the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in living in a religious, class-based, traditional and patriarchal society that rejects LGBTQ+ identities. This research, like a few previous studies, employed a combination of phenomenological, hermeneutic, postmodern and psychological approaches to create a comprehensive and theoretical framework suitable for researching LGBTQ+ experiences, also taking into account the experiences and emotions of researchers and respondents.

Finally, after lengthy brainstorming sessions, coding, model extraction and field-quote analysis, I submitted the initial text for review to several consultants and experts in sociology, psychology, law and theology. It was then translated into Farsi. We titled the research *The Forbidden Tale* and submitted the bilingual text to Mehri Publications in London for publication. However, we agreed that the book would not be published until the conditions were favourable. I gave my consent, but the publisher failed to adhere to this agreement and published the book in the first week of my arrest and interrogation in 2018.

When my interrogator angrily brought up this topic, I was taken aback. Apparently, some time after the book was published, several self-proclaimed leaders and activists from the LGBTQ+ community criticised it. It seemed as if they were either outraged or terrified. I suppose the issue revolved around the fact that, in our analyses and solutions, we had mentioned that certain organisations and NGOs outside of Iran, which claim to support LGBTQ+ individuals, receive substantial funding. We pointed out that it is natural for these groups to exaggerate the plight of LGBTQ+ individuals in Iranian society, reporting extensively on executions, stonings and lengthy imprisonments, as well as showcasing the struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals in the name of providing an up-to-date field report on Iran. Of course, some of these reports are based on biased narratives from LGBTQ+ migrants seeking asylum, who sometimes provide unrealistic and exaggerated accounts. The existence of these false reports does not mean that we should deny the discrimination and violence faced by LGBTQ+ individuals from Iranian society and the Government, but, in my experience, I have witnessed the stubborn presence of some self-

proclaimed LGBTQ+ leaders in public spheres, and I have seen how the system and society have no choice but to tolerate their presence.

The conflict between our scientific and professional duties and the activities of these external activists led them to unleash criticism and attacks against us. The initial version of the research was published in English, and our findings could have had consequences for some of them and their funders. Our release of the research findings, which was not driven by personal agendas or financial interests, could have been dangerous. I both understood and anticipated such a reaction, as I was familiar with the organisational structures and mindsets of these groups.

I had made an effort to include individuals from opposing groups, even those with differing religious beliefs, in our survey respondents. I had also collaborated with a few LGBTQ+ individuals to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of LGBTQ+ communities in Iran. One of the three LGBTQ+ individuals who participated in our survey was a bisexual activist who worked with us. He was a young Jewish man from a minority group in Iran, and he had intriguing perspectives. He was knowledgeable and helpful, enabling us to better understand the intricacies of LGBTQ+ communities in Iran.

The studies on LGBTQ+ individuals were nearing completion, and we were extracting the theoretical framework based on our research findings to perform a final analysis. I hadn't expected the work to progress quickly, as two of the individuals who assisted in the fieldwork had withdrawn due to concerns about the consequences of the research, and the others were gradually losing interest. I respected their decisions and didn't want the project to reach a point where I would have to apologise to them. Therefore, we first completed the fieldwork and then, after a while, when the anxiety subsided, we began the content analysis to better explore and understand the complexities of LGBTQ+ communities in Iran.

After finalising the research and publishing the final version, I stored the interview recordings and documents on a flash drive and hid it in a closet at home. I also cleared my email account and made sure to eliminate any trace of the research from my laptop and emails, although that proved to be futile. When I was arrested, they recovered all my information.

Chapter Twenty: Transcending the Sexuality-Centric Research Realm

Exploring Identity and Ethnicity through a Peace-Orientated Approach

Concerning the identities of ethnicities and nationalities in Iran, numerous studies had been conducted. However, working in this domain held significance for me from various aspects. I belong to a nation and people who have not only upheld the banner of identity in Iran as a whole, but also at the regional level. The Kurds, dispersed across four countries – Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran – have long been known to many for their desire for independence or autonomy and the formation of a nation-state called Kurdistan. I had worked in the northern part of Kurdistan (Turkey's Kurdistan) for two years. I had experience working and living in Southern Kurdistan or the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and was familiar with the Rojava region of Syrian Kurdistan to some extent. During my university days, I studied these very topics, and my thesis was related to identity. With these motivations and experiences, I was driven to conduct anthropological and ethnographic research on identity, ethnicity and its social forms in Iran.

Similarly to my approach in my other projects, I initially reviewed relevant studies on the subject and noticed that most of them adopted a political and theoretical approach to the issue of ethnicity and nationality, particularly regarding the Kurds, which was not unexpected. In other cases, I had observed that human-sciences researchers often forgot the target community. The outcome of this approach was more pronounced in the political sphere, and, in addition to the dominant and classic harms, the sensitivity of the ruling power and the resulting censorship damaged the

research. The existing texts did not emerge from the field, and the results had little relevance to the target community.

Therefore, I decided to view the subject from beyond Kurdish nationality and, as with my other projects, conduct national-level research. Examining all ethnicities with scientific rigor and standards would take years of fieldwork. Based on the population, I defined a shortlist of research priorities and selected five ethnicities, or nationalities: Farsi, Turkish, Kurdish, Baloch and Arab. In consultation with several experts, we drafted an initial plan titled 'Examining and Understanding Identity and Ethnicity with a Focus on Peace in Iran', aiming to explore the subject through interviews with elites, intellectuals and ordinary people from these five ethnic groups.



Image 348: Me with a pair of Hooraman shoes, a Kurdish Sulaimani jacket and a Sorani Kurdish turban.

The first ethnicity, or nationality, I studied was the Persians. I was cautious not to imply that Persians are a single ethnicity or nationality. Next, I turned my attention to the Turks, who were the second-most populous ethnic group in Iran, followed by the Kurds, Baluchis and Arabs.

In Iranian society, particularly among the educated, non-Farsi elite, there is an ongoing debate about the distortion of the 2,500-year-old empire and monarchy's legacy, attributing it to Iranian nationalism. The concept of a modern nation-state in Iran did not exist until recently. Throughout history, different forms of governance have emerged, each with its own distinct territory and sphere of influence. Even in times when powerful governments held sway over the country, dozens of local governments and semi-autonomous *khanates* maintained their power by paying homage, such as the Ardalan Emirate, which ruled over vast areas of Kurdistan for

seven hundred years, from the seventh to the thirteenth century Hijri, with a reign that rivalled that of several Iranian dynasties.

From the start, many questions arose for those involved. For instance, why weren't the Lurs included in this research? If I started with the Lur, the next question would be why not the Bakhtiaris? Or where do the Qashqai people fit into this equation? What about the Turkmen minority? And what about the Gilaks, Mazandaranis and other ethnic groups in northern Iran, some of whom have even claimed independence? There are many people who take offense at being identified by their ethnicity and consider themselves part of a nation deserving of an independent state. The Turks, Kurds, Arabs and some other ethnic groups fall into this category. Even some Oroshan Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan and Zazas in Turkey's Kurdistan believe they should be recognised as an independent ethnicities.

All these complexities made me proceed with caution. In academic research and this biography, I am fully aware of the distinction between ethnicity and nationality and have made an effort to use both terms. Although my own belief about being a Kurd is clear, I have always believed that peaceful coexistence in Iran is fragile and that if a serious social problem were to arise, it would lead to a major crisis. In Iran, these peaceful relationships have not been due to the efforts of ethnic groups or nationalities but have been constantly disrupted by the intervention and provocation of ruling systems. In addition to the historical records, we witnessed during the early years of the Revolution and the wars that Iran has the capacity for internal conflict: the Turkmen-Sahra war, the Kurdistan war, the war in the south and the armed conflicts among political groups all testify to this claim.

I conducted my research on ethnic groups not only from my own perspective and the available documents, but also by exploring their concerns and problems. Ethnic groups and their self-perceptions; their perceptions of others and the othering process; their positions within the political and economic structures; their views on convergence, political participation, and gender and religious discrimination; and their native language and centre-periphery dynamics were among the topics I examined to gauge their demands and assess how much they had accepted the system's superficial responses to their ethnic demands. Through experience, I knew that economic disparities and related inequalities were

the most significant grievances driving ethnic groups, who felt deprived or underprivileged in the distribution of national wealth.

In the questionnaire, I raised important questions about the role of religion, inquiring about its position in governance and daily life. The two ethnic groups I focused on, the Kurds and Baloch, were predominantly Sunni and did not identify with the official religion of the country. Both groups lived on the margins, having a long history of protesting and criticising the Shia ideological and religious system in Iran. I also included questions on social issues, women's rights and gender equality in the questionnaire, and set out with a new team.

The issue of child marriage in Iran was becoming increasingly pressing and sensitive. Political and judicial institutions were paying attention to my research, and the situation was tense and nearly out of control. A group opposing the increasing age of marriage considered me a theorist and mastermind behind the plan to raise the minimum age of marriage and reform Article 1041 in parliament. I felt I didn't have much time and was constantly working, traveling from province to province.

We began our fieldwork in Azerbaijan, focusing on the Turkish-speaking regions. These areas were not too far from the centre but extended to the vicinity of my birthplace in West Azerbaijan province, or Urmia province. After studying the Turkish region, we moved on to the Kurds, and with my prior knowledge and connections our work progressed more rapidly.

Next, we turned to the Arabs in southern Iran and spent two weeks in Sistan and Baluchestan, eventually reaching the Fars ethnic group. A question always lingered: given the ethnic diversity resulting from migration, how many residents of Tehran and Fars or Farsi speakers were there in the population? This question was also relevant to Isfahan and Semnan.

As usual, the questionnaire underwent several revisions during the fieldwork. After consulting experts in the field, we initially targeted elites and individuals from each ethnic group and nationality in cultural, religious, social and economic spheres, and interviewed bazaar merchants, clergy, civil activists, academics, writers and intellectuals. In this exploratory and analytical approach, individuals were connected through multiple phone calls and face-to-face interviews, like a snowball effect.

It was enough to find one economic activist at the beginning, who would introduce another person at the end of our conversation, and so on. Compiling the initial list and establishing connections with this group was crucial. In this project, I collaborated with excellent field researchers and analysts, mostly from the ethnic groups under study.



Image 349: Twitter screenshots talking about MPs who invited me to a presentation

Mohammadreza Boroumand (@rezamehr1369): "The lady sitting to the left in this photo is Tayebeh Siavashi (Member of Parliament), and yesterday, Parvaneh Salahshouri (Member of Parliament) was also present at his book unveiling ceremony."
Mohammadreza Boroumand (@rezamehr1369): "Furthermore, he is one of the main advisors to the bill for raising the age of

> marriage in the country. A bill whose goal is to declare marriage under 18 illegal."
> **Mohammadreza Boroumand (@rezamehr1369):** "He considers Islamic laws to be 1400 years old, advocates for free sexual relations, has a Bachelor's and Master's degree from England, and has no job other than researching in line with UN objectives. More importantly, he is one of the main advisors to the Women's Fraction of the Islamic Consultative Assembly. #Kameel_Ahmday"
> **Ahmadreza Yekta (@ahmadreza_yekta):** "Really, the documentary *King Naser-al-Din the Cinema Actor President* [a comic movie about the inactive king] should be screened for the public again."

Security was a vital concern in this research from two perspectives: firstly, the issue was sensitive from a political and even a security standpoint, and, secondly, as a dual national I had to be cautious after conducting research on sensitive social issues and then shifting focus to a highly sensitive and political topic.

Roughly 75% of the statistical population in this research consisted of elites, while 25% were ordinary people, who were asked different questions. Contrary to our expectations, sometimes the responses from ordinary people were more compelling than those from the elite class. These individuals shared their life experiences and placed great importance on security and peace. Throughout the field research, they provided examples of wars in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan and emphasised that they did not want Iran to be embroiled in war, bloodshed and revolution like some countries in the region. In my opinion, this sentiment was heavily influenced by the dominant propaganda in people's minds. On the other hand, the elite group talked more about power, defiance and rebellion, often believing that a popular uprising was imminent.

There was a high level of tension and discontent among most border residents and those living in underprivileged areas. This feeling was particularly pronounced among the Baloch, Kurds and Arabs, and those in the southern and eastern regions, such as the Turkmen. The reflection of this discontent was explicitly evident in the words of social and religious



Image 350: Field interview with Judge Javad Tariri, tribal elder and former representative. Baluchestan, 2019.

leaders, and during our stay in Zahedan as guests of Molana Abdolhamid and his son-in-law, we closely encountered these grievances.

In terms of resource distribution and power, we also came across some interesting points. The main question from the ethnic groups and nationalities living in Iran was why they did not benefit from resources and power as much as did the Fars-dwelling regions.

I claim that, during this research, I engaged with thinkers, intellectuals, successful business groups (and occasionally failed ones), economic activists, and civil and religious organisations from all five ethnic groups to the extent possible. Valuable quotes from those who spoke with me but did not want to be named were taken into consideration, and finally, the book, *From Border to Border: A Comprehensive Study on Identity and Ethnicity* was published in London in the summer of 2021. A revised and fully edited version of the book will} also be published soon in three languages.

I hold this research very dear because it is closely tied to an important part of my life. Both in Iran and abroad, identity and ethnicity have been crucial aspects of my life, and, as an immigrant, I have always, willingly or unwillingly, taken on an identity from the ethnicity to which I belong. Throughout these years, and aside from other determining factors in life, my ethnicity has shaped and propelled me forward.

I could never distance myself much from my identity and nationality. In the early years of my residence in the UK, I tried to put my identity aside and view issues from a transboundary perspective, but I returned to my



Image 351: *From Border to Border* research report in three languages.

roots. In addition to the experience of living in another country, my migration to Tehran had an impact on all aspects of my life. When Alan was born, we lived in Mahabad and spent two years of his life in that city. He learned to speak and acquired a good command of Kurdish there. During the last months of our stay in Mahabad, he would often go to kindergarten and talk more. He would listen to and speak Kurdish.

When we migrated to Tehran, my language switched from Kurdish to Farsi within six months of enrolling him in kindergarten. I was astonished by how quickly I picked up Farsi, and most of my sentence structures and grammar became Farsi. It was clear to me how education and upbringing can dominate one's mother tongue and impact one's thought process. This was proof that language shapes one's mental world, and this formation, in turn, influences one's perception of reality and social behaviours. Even one's external analyses and recognitions are affected, and no matter how much



Image 352: With Alan. Tehran, 2018.

scientific expertise one has on the subject of language and learning, it is in these moments that the importance of mother tongue becomes evident.

One cannot ignore the profound impact of geography on issues of identity and ethnicity, and I, who have been forced to change my living geography multiple times, became deeply invested in this research. The fieldwork was completed in the shortest time possible, but the analysis stage was a long and arduous journey. With the analysis team, we navigated numerous debates and discussions until we reached the final stage of coding and the desired Grounded Theory model.

I was fully present in this project, and wherever I felt the team was being negligent or had limited information, I would intervene without imposing my views. Sometimes, I would even challenge the group members to achieve the best analyses. This research was eventually completed with a larger team of researchers, and the fieldwork was conducted in 13 provinces. Considering the vast geographical scope and importance of the topic, the project was eventually affected by financial constraints, and the coding stage became exhausting and tedious. Due to the difficulties and complexities that had arisen in my life, I knew this work, like *The Forbidden Tale*, would not be granted publication permission in Iran.

I was left with a massive amount of data and scattered, unedited analyses that encompassed diverse, contradictory and incoherent perspectives. At the same time, I was involved in a volunteer project with the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights, but in every spare



Image 353: Meeting with Molana Abdolhamid, the leader of the Sunni Iranians. Zahedan, 2017.

moment, whether during travels or otherwise, I worked on this project and asked several individuals from the fields of political science and ethnicity, who were not part of the original team, to collaborate with me in reviewing and providing consultancy.

The fieldwork for this research began in 2017, and the analysis, editing and review took over a year to complete. Before my departure from Iran, I managed to complete the research, although it was eventually taken out of my control due to my arrest and subsequent limitations, and I was unable to participate in the final review and output, including some crucial corrections. Unfortunately, they were omitted due to the constraints on expressing the truth and self-censorship in the hope of obtaining publication permission.

Some interviewees were extremely conservative and opaque during their interviews, making it difficult for me. Another challenge of this book was the citation of quotes; some individuals' statements had to be included in the book with their names, and I had to check the final texts with them. As a habit, I self-censored the text, while constantly reminding myself that this book might not be published in Iran, so I didn't need to worry about censorship. One aspect of self-censorship was highlighting the issue and importance of peace as the main message of the research, while the final message of the research from the elites' perspective, and even from the



Image 354: Coding phase. Tehran, 2018.

public's viewpoint, was that continuing the current situation in Iran was no longer possible.

The majority of the statistical society believed that maintaining the current situation would lead Iran to a dead-end, and a crisis would engulf all pillars of power and society – a crisis that might start from ethnic and religious conflicts, leading to unrest, insecurity and social and political collapse. This collapse was predictable in the social structure, as signs of it were already visible, but, according to these individuals, it would manifest later in political and other forms.

It was a frightening message. Based on the data and our analysis, a time frame of one to four years was predicted for its occurrence. The situation in Iran in 2018 and 2019 proved to me that the worrying results of this research were in line with reality. The current state of the country, especially after the 2020 elections, confirms the analytical achievements of this research, and the signs of collapse are now more palpable than ever. Many experts believe that the Iranian people witnessed appointments instead of elections. The boycott of elections by the people and the rise of a radical parliament have given more legitimacy to the possibility of Iran's collapse. Of course, I know that the collapse is the despair of the oppressed masses and classes, but its realisation is even more heartbreaking and terrifying than before. Our findings predicted the same outcome, and even more.

Childhood Yawn

Working in the realm of children's issues has always been a concern for me. I had a good connection with NGOs active in the field of child welfare in Iran and abroad, which was reassuring for working in this area. I had a good connection with the NGO Association for the Protection of Children's Rights and used to visit their office on Sohrevardi Street in Tehran. I had unveiled two research projects, white marriage and mahramiat, and delivered a speech about these two works with the collaboration of this esteemed organisation. Mr Farshid Yazdani, the manager of the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights, was an aware, kind and concerned individual. My Isfahani friends, Parvin and Ahmad, introduced us, and when Yazdani proposed studying the child scavengers in Tehran, I accepted.

The Association was interested in doing this work, but it lacked research resources and a professional team. I evaluated the obstacles in my mind: NGOs usually face financial constraints and have no choice but to rely on volunteer forces, who are initially motivated but gradually lose their enthusiasm. Internal conflicts, tensions and differences of opinion among NGO members can slow down or even stop the research process at any stage. With my experiences of working in Turkey, Africa and even in the West, I usually avoid working directly for organisations. However, I accepted this time for two reasons: the issue of children was at stake, and I was interested in conducting fieldwork and empowering NGOs.

I agreed to collaborate with Yazdani on a limited basis, and we scheduled a two-week training session to teach volunteer forces how to work in the field. Not everyone can enter the field out of mere enthusiasm; they must acquire the necessary knowledge for this task. For a while, I was preoccupied with the projects on ethnicity and identity, devoting most of my weekdays to them, and Fridays were one of the few days I could allocate time for Alan and Shafagh. However, I dedicated several weeks to training volunteer forces for the Association.

The issue of waste-picking in Iran had not been scientifically studied. Only one university thesis and a few articles had been written about it. Therefore, I had to start from scratch again. Most of the available and reliable information came in the form of translations of global research findings, which did not particularly apply to the Iranian context. As a result, there was a lack of information about waste-picking, its types and forms, and its impact on children in Iran. As for my other research projects, I had to find a local model and train the new members on what to do.

The project started with classes on how to work in the research field. I would discuss the feedback from these classes with the board members and Mr Yazdani. He was a steadfast supporter of the project until the end, and his support never wavered, even when the project faced opposition and criticism. Initially, we lacked a budget, and the work was arduous. After resolving this issue, the research encountered opponents, and some Association members even joined the critics. Mr Yazdani, however, acted as a responsible manager, supporting the project against these unfair criticisms.

From the beginning, I knew that volunteer forces would eventually dwindle, and we were not at a level where the work would yield significant

results. After re-examining this issue, I realised that, if I were to take charge of the project and ensure its quality, I would need to hire a more professional team. Negotiations continued within the Association until the project was included in the board of directors' agenda to secure the necessary funding. Days turned into weeks, but there was no news about the funding. Field forces constantly asked about their wages, and I, as the project supervisor, was worried about this issue. With Mr Yazdani's support, we overcame these obstacles and began working full-time in the field.



Image 355: Child waste-pickers in Tehran and its suburbs. 2018.

Waste-picking was a significant issue, and it seemed to take place in an organised and goal-orientated system. In Tehran, contracts were signed between the municipality and waste-collection companies, which included a mafia-like and rent-seeking mechanism. Whatever the case, the tangible result of these deals was visible on the streets, and many children entered the profession.

During our research conducted in 2017 and 2018, we found that over 90% of child waste-pickers were illegal Afghan immigrants. The bosses, who were usually referred to as *arbab*, would bring or attract children from Afghanistan to Iran, providing them with a place to live in exchange for collecting waste and delivering it to their bosses. This entire process was child exploitation, and both Iranian institutions and illegal Afghan immigrants were involved in it.

Typically, the municipality would hold auctions to award contracts, but there were many ambiguities surrounding these auctions. The contractors who won the bids for the neighbourhoods were often permanent fixtures. Some of them were former municipality managers who undoubtedly had connections with their previous localities and officials. It was clear that a systemic, mafia-like network was at play, with bribes and corruption embedded in the system. There was no doubt that relationships were the deciding factor, not the rules.

Later, when our research was published in the media, the municipality and waste management of Tehran denied the existence of such a system, which prevailed in at least twenty-two regions of Tehran. The most disheartening aspect of this trade was the meagre profit that the child waste-pickers received from this billion-dollar industry. Even adults involved in this system did not earn substantial incomes, with the main profits going to the contractors and municipality officials.

The modus operandi of the waste-pickers was to start their work after the official waste collectors had finished. Some of them would begin their



Image 356: Child waste-pickers' residence and sorting area, a brick kiln. South Tehran, 2018.

work after schools and offices closed. The waste-pickers' places of residence were often shantytowns in south Tehran and surrounding areas like Aminabad, Ashrafabad and Varamin. The children would be transported to Tehran in cargo trucks and dropped off at designated points, where they would collect and sort waste. Child waste-pickers typically carried large bags that were too big and heavy for their small statures. Some of them used small carts to scatter around the city. After completing their work, they would board covered vans and Isuzu trucks at a specific hour and location to return to their sleeping quarters.

The waste-pickers worked in different groups, each with a foreman or boss who had rented a specific area from the contractor. If the foreman or their group entered another area, they would face severe consequences from the contractor who owned that region. Sometimes, the children would even face physical violence or be fined for stealing waste. In some cases, real waste-theft did occur, where an independent or addicted waste-picker would steal from a group or region they did not belong to. These waste thieves would be treated even more harshly, and the contractor's security guards would 'teach them a lesson'.

We gathered this information through our field visits and interviews with the waste-pickers and gradually became more familiar with this organised trade and its mechanisms. This research was fascinating for me; it was the first time I had seen them, although I might have passed by them many times without noticing or realising their presence.

Based on the waste-pickers' work schedules, our fieldwork would begin in the afternoons. I would accompany other team members to the field one day a week, and on other days we would conduct our surveys in pairs, according to our regional division plan. Part of our work involved visiting the waste-collection points, which also served as rest areas for the waste-pickers.

To gain more insight, we would sometimes conduct interviews with the child waste-pickers or their bosses at these locations. In some neighbourhoods, local residents and shopkeepers were aware of the waste-pickers' gathering points and would report back to us. During our field research, we also met with waste-management officials and municipality managers to conduct interviews. Our fieldwork began at the start of winter, when the days were short, darkness fell early and accessing waste-

picker areas was difficult due to rain and snow. However, we stuck to our plan and covered most regions of Tehran by the end of spring.

We had conducted numerous field interviews with children and adults, which had caught the attention of the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights, particularly its member lawyers. If I recall correctly, the founders of the Association were Mrs Shirin Ebadi and Nasrin Sotoudeh, and the management was handed over to one of its members through periodic elections.

Given the Association's track record and performance, younger individuals with radical perspectives would collaborate with them as child-rights activists and campaigners. One of them emerged during the final stages of our research, making things difficult for us. We experienced a tense period, especially with one of them. The issue wasn't about obstructing the project or putting a spanner in the works; they were trying to take ownership of the project. This individual would often stir up factionalism, leading to a power struggle, and the same old, exhausting narrative of 'I care more for children than you do' would emerge. The Association's elections were approaching, and such individuals had even turned the Association's atmosphere into a factional and competitive space.

In research involving children, the sensitive issue of research ethics is always present, and, despite all precautions, mistakes can occur. The city's outskirts, where the garbage collectors lived, had warehouses where they would sort through the trash. These warehouses usually had large, metal doors with holes drilled into them, allowing individuals to open the doors using a rope attached to the hole. During one of our field visits, after waiting for a while, I peeked through the hole on the door to see if anyone was inside. A young team member who was very sincere, simple, but also somewhat idealistic, had been working with us. I naively mentioned the incident to one of the project's staunch opponents, not expecting it to be weaponised later — but it was.

Another example is when one of our new field assistants, who was undergoing training, took a photo of a child collecting garbage on their first day of work. The same idealistic and often angry group member, who wasn't even present in Iran, got wind of it and accused me, as the team leader, of violating children's rights and disregarding ethical principles.

As the team leader, I tried to balance the work, but the inappropriate behaviour of some individuals caused discomfort and anger in other team members. Toward the end, I was also exhausted and just wanted the project to be finished as soon as possible. When we reached the reporting stage, I was even accused of violating the Association's charter. I am committed to the majority of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and I believe that childhood ends at eighteen. I have also provided solutions in my research based on this principle, including addressing female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage. However, on this topic, I am among those who take a realistic view and believe that the laws governing work in Iran differ from the international convention.

According to Iranian labour law, albeit imperfect and ambiguous, teenagers can start working from fifteen or sixteen years of age, provided they receive vocational training and work part-time or daily jobs to support their families or earn pocket money. While this rule has some positive aspects, it can lead to exploitation by employers, mafia-like systems and



Image 357: Garbage storage and living quarters. Varamin, 2018.

rent-seekers, who take advantage of their lack of legal protection and inability to formally enter the workforce or receive vocational training.

My proposal was to establish a law that would regulate child labour at a certain age, to prevent their exploitation. I still believe that, if this proposal were implemented, the situation would improve since, after all, legal work is less risky than completely informal work and can provide individuals with skills for adulthood and their future lives. I wished that this perspective of mine would be considered in the research *Childhood Yawn*, but the Association, like other child-rights advocacy institutions, insisted on the legal working age for this group and were unwilling to negotiate on the matter.

I have lived in the poorest and most deprived regions of Iran. As a child, I experienced various forms of labour, and, later, through fieldwork, I observed how children's rights were being violated. The Convention on the Rights of the Child cannot be universally applicable to all countries' conditions, and unconditional reliance on it does not solve the problem. Employing adolescents at an older age could have been a solution to prevent the violation of their fundamental human and labour rights, for instance, through official employment, such as through the municipalities themselves. This might not have been the ideal solution, but it could have been a way out of the discriminatory situation in which children's rights were being violated. The reality of society is that countless children are working and facing harsh conditions. One cannot impose ideals on reality. By accepting this reality, one could have tried to change the mechanisms and think of strategies to minimise the harm to working children.

The more complicated issue was that the child waste-pickers were mainly Afghan immigrants who, due to their circumstances in Iran, had no legal rights. This research also had recommendations for paying attention to the presence of Afghan working children in Iran and proposed that Iranian NGOs, with the help of the Afghan Embassy or international organisations based in Iran, such as UNICEF or even the United Nations, should form a task force to address this problem in the country of origin, Afghanistan itself.

A society like Iran, which has never granted legal rights to Afghan migrant workers and has even refrained from accepting them as second-class citizens, has employed discriminatory and selective mechanisms in a ruthless manner, affecting their legal, social, economic and cultural rights.



Image 358: *Childhood Yawn* research report.

This idea did not sit well with a few individuals, and, later, they criticised me, even accusing our group of being anti-immigrant. Most astonishingly, when I faced sexual misconduct allegations the following year, some of these issues were brought up in the media for exploitation, and the Association also referred to these differences in a statement they wrote in support of the Iranian #MeToo movement.

That statement was published when my collaboration with the Association had ended long ago, and I had not received a single rial for my

work on the project for a year and a half. Although I had been formally assigned a salary, I had announced at the beginning of the project that I would dedicate my salary to the project and perform the research supervision entirely free of charge. I believe the Association's move to denounce me for an issue that had no connection to my research on children's rights was unfair, unethical and a form of personal vendetta, especially coming from individuals who were thirsty for power and seeking to gain prominence.

When I was arrested, the Intelligence agents of the Revolutionary Guards raided the Association's office in Soroushi Street, interrogating Yazdani and others; confiscating mobile phones, computers and some of the Association's files; and causing distress, anxiety and growing fear among the members. The Government had always had a problem with the Association's views and opinions, which were occasionally featured in the media, and now it had the perfect excuse to crack down on the Association and use its usual tactic of intimidation and fearmongering, which proved effective for a while.

God bless Yazdani. He was not without opponents within the Association and had been put under immense pressure due to the security forces' interference in the Association's affairs, which some attributed to my involvement and Yazdani's support for me. This became a tool to discredit him, alongside other issues, in the upcoming elections.

Under such circumstances, I managed to complete *Childhood Yawn* project, pouring all my efforts into producing a professional and defensible work, a study on recognising, preventing, and controlling the phenomenon of child scavenging (waste picking). I was disheartened, remembering my colleagues' words that we would never collaborate with the *samans* (a derogatory term for regime-affiliated entities). The samans form a miniature model of a system fraught with tension and conflict, operating similarly to the system they criticise. Although I know that one should not judge everyone based on a few individuals who dedicate their lives to the cause, at that time, I was saddened and disheartened by the unfair behaviours I witnessed. Of course, I knew that my emotions would eventually give way to rationality.

Mashhad Seminar, *Keyhan* Newspaper and Mobile Snatch

When we were about to finalise our research on waste-pickers, I was invited by the Soroush Women's Lawyers Association in Mashhad to speak at a seminar related to child marriage. This Association had good connections with the Mashhad Municipality and was run by reformists.

The head of the Association was a female lawyer who was active in the field of children's and women's rights. She had a particular personality that seemed to have closed off the path for others to participate in management, lest she lose her totalitarian control over the Association – a familiar pain for many Iranian NGOs.

The seminar was a significant event, featuring several prominent child-rights activists. I was not a child-rights activist, but, as the researcher of An Echo of Silence project, I would occasionally be invited to speak at events related to child marriage. It was a period when, due to the heavy pressures, discussions of this topic had been pushed aside, and I was focused on working on identity and ethnicity issues.

Ladies Shahindokht Molaverdi and Masoumeh Ebtekar were also present at this seminar. A number of representatives from the people of Mashhad and Tehran in parliament, representatives from the prevention and social units of the judiciary, and the new head of the National Child Reference Centre were among the other guests. The conference was at the policymaking-recommendation level.

I had hoped that, with this seminar, we could change the policymakers' views and, as always, I presented some of my research findings. Lady Molaverdi, who was seated at the other end of the hall, recognised me because of my works and probably my research on child marriage. She greeted me with a nod from a distance, and I reciprocated. This was the only interaction between us, and I didn't see her again. I didn't even have a brief interaction with Lady Ebtekar, and she didn't recognise me at all. Later, however, two accusations against me were influencing the Government and parliament bodies, and collaborating with Lady Molaverdi to increase the age of marriage for children.



Image 359: Conference on the pathology of child marriage. Mashhad, 2017.

The conference was met with extensive media coverage, providing an opportunity to once again highlight the issue of child marriage and find solutions for it in Iran. I made a strategic mistake by giving two media interviews shortly after the conference.

A day or two after the conference, I was busy working on the project about child waste-picking when I received a message from Lady Siavoshi, a parliamentary representative, via WhatsApp. She had sent a link to an article from the *Keyhan* newspaper, whose front-page headline read: 'The Tsunami of Iran's Aging Population: Kissinger's Formula on Parliament's Agenda!' Although the author didn't mention my name, they introduced me as the mastermind behind lobbying for women's and children's rights in the Government and parliament, emphasising that I had studied in England and majored in anthropology. The rest of the description made it clear that the person the *Keyhan* newspaper was referring to was me. The article, dated 17th Azar 1397 (8 December 2018), further stated,

> For two years, a coordinated team, consisting of several female parliament members, social activists and an

individual trained in England for social policymaking, with the support of international organisations like UNICEF and at a staggering cost for holding conferences, producing films and media productions, has been working to 'ban child marriage'.



دستگیری عوامل نفوذی در حوزه کنترل جمعیت؛

نسخه هنری کیسینجر روی میز مجلس!/ بزک سیاست‌های کنترل رشد جمعیت در غالب‌های مختلف، راهبرد پیشنهادی کیسینجر

همه‌چیز به 44 سال پیش برمی‌گردد، روزی که هنری کیسینجر، وزیر امور خارجه و مشاور امنیت ملی ایالات‌متحده، سند NSSM200 را در کاخ سفید روی میز رئیس‌جمهور ریچارد نیکسون گذاشت و در جلسه‌ای با حضور وزیر جنگ، رئیس‌سازمان اطلاعات مرکزی آمریکا و دبیر آژانس توسعه بین‌المللی به شرح گزارش محرمانه «بررسی امنیت ملی آمریکا»، با موضوع «پیامدهای رشد جمعیت در جهان برای امنیت ملی و منافع خارج از کشور ایالات‌متحده» پرداخت.

به گزارش سرویس اجتماعی پایگاه 598، حدود دو سال است که یک تیم هماهنگ، متشکل از چند نماینده مجلس شورای اسلامی (عضو فراکسیون زنان مجلس)، چند فعال اجتماعی در جمعیت امام علی(ع) به همراه فردی که در کشور انگلیس برای سیاست‌گذاری اجتماعی آموزش دیده است با حمایت نهادهای بین‌المللی مثل یونیسف و صرف هزینه‌های سرسام‌آور برای برگزاری همایش، نشست، ساخت فیلم سینمائی و تولیدات انبوه رسانه‌ای حول محور «ممنوعیت قانونی ازدواج

Image 360: *Keyhan* newspaper report on Kissinger guiding my projects! 2018.

> "According to a report by the 598 social service website, for about two years, a coordinating team—consisting of several members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (members of the Women's Fraction in Parliament), several social activists from the Imam Ali (AS) Society, and an individual involved in social policy-making in the UK—has been observed receiving support from international institutions such as UNICEF, spending exorbitant sums on holding conferences, meetings, producing films, and creating mass media content focused on 'the legal prohibition of child marriage'."

This radical newspaper, which has been managed by Hussein Shariatmadari for years, has close ties with the leadership and security agencies. Whenever *Keyhan* newspaper focuses on someone, it means the

situation is serious. Some friends who had been detained in the past considered *Keyhan's* reports to be dangerous and the starting point for subsequent events. The seriousness of the situation depends on the page where the news or report is placed. For example, it's significant whether someone is featured on the front page, second page or fourth page. Therefore, someone who has become a headline or a news story in the newspaper should expect to be arrested.

Accepting this theory and imagining that such an incident could occur so easily was both bewildering and terrifying for me. Especially since a group or faction had been introduced that sought to increase the marriage age of children in Iran, linking it to Kissinger's project as the US secretary of state in the 1960s and 1970s. Kissinger allegedly had a plan for the Middle East that I had never seen or read about until then. Frankly, it never mattered to me before. Later, when I researched it, I found that, according to this plan, the Muslim-population growth-rate in the Middle East could be decreased to benefit Israel. Years later, the *Keyhan* newspaper, or rather the IRGC's Intelligence experts, had revived Kissinger's forgotten plan and portrayed me as the leader of Western ideological goals. Their imaginations were incredibly vivid, and I couldn't fathom why a country's security system would stoop so low and engage in such childish speculations.

On the day *Keyhan* published this report, my father-in-law had come to Tehran from Kermanshah. When I showed him the newspaper, his face turned pale. From his reaction, I realised the matter was more serious than before, and I couldn't downplay it or calm him down by taking a step back. It was crystal clear to me that, as a dual national, I was a valuable hostage.

I emailed the Consular Section of the British Embassy in Tehran, reporting my situation and requesting a meeting with the ambassador himself. I had previously visited the embassy twice, once for my family's trip and again to obtain a British passport for Alan. In 2008, when I returned to Iran, I visited the embassy and registered my presence. I had deliberately maintained a connection with the embassy, occasionally sending them emails to confirm I was still in Iran. Although I had become aware of suspicious activities, I hadn't reported any incidents until I saw the *Keyhan* article.

They agreed to my request for a meeting with the ambassador, and I headed to the embassy. As you enter the British Embassy on Ferdowsi

Street in central Tehran, you experience a different, calming world. After passing through the courtyard, I entered a beautiful garden and was guided to the meeting location with the ambassador. I explained all my concerns and the implications to the ambassador, showing him the *Keyhan* article. He, like me, was guessing what was going on. The arrest of dual nationals had become serious, and it wasn't unexpected that I would soon join Nazanin Zaghari, Aras Amiri and Anousheh Ashouri in prison. The UK Government didn't want to add another person to the list of prisoners. The ambassador suggested that I leave Iran for a while and make a better decision about my work and life when the situation calmed down. I told him I would consider his proposal.

Although it was the best decision to return to England for a while, I kept thinking to myself, would I return to Iran again or was this my last appearance? Many questions swirled in my mind, but I had no doubt that I had to leave to at least clear the air in my own mind. Later, I realised that my phobia of security agencies was not unfounded. I had understood the system I was dealing with, which was fabricating a case against me. It wasn't the Ministry of Intelligence or a part of the Government; I had become entangled with the IRGC's Intelligence organisation, which made the story much more complicated.

As I sat facing the ambassador, watching him calmly sipping his afternoon tea in his grey suit, I wished I were in his shoes. Robert Macaire, amid all the chaos and tension in Iran, enjoyed diplomatic and political immunity, whereas I, sitting across from him, felt vulnerable and exposed in my own country. I knew that, if I were arrested, as a dual national, I would have certain privileges and immunities beyond those of a political prisoner, but that very thought terrified me. A dual-national prisoner is always a potential pawn, and security agencies exploit them as political and security levers, especially in Iran, where they have a lengthy track record in this regard.

My meeting with Rob was brief. There wasn't much he could do for me, and he was likely relieved that I was preparing to leave for England – removing the risk of further complications. I always tried to put myself in his shoes and understand that, if I were in his position, I would probably have made a similar offer.

I had another meeting with Rob, and he preferred to meet at a café near the embassy rather than have me return to the embassy, which might have

raised suspicions. I assumed my phone was being monitored, and my movements were being watched, but Rob thought our meeting at the café would be safer.

The fieldwork phase of the waste-picking project had come to an end, and we had entered the content-analysis-and-reporting phase. I didn't have another project lined up, so I decided to take a break from Iran. The day before my flight, I headed to Revolution Square to collect some of my books from the publisher. I planned to give a few volumes to the British Library and some to my friends at universities. I picked up the books and was standing on the corner, waiting to hail a ride on the Snapp app, when Farshid Yazdani called. We were discussing the final stages of *Childhood Yawn* project when I reached the intersection of Revolution and Freedom Avenue.

I continued my conversation as I walked, waiting for my ride, even leaning on the police kiosk for a while. Suddenly, a motorcycle roared behind me and someone snatched my phone from my hand. Two riders sped away quickly, heading south on Kargar Street. I shouted and chased after them, asking the motorcyclists in the area for help, but each one made an excuse. Exhausted and breathless, I returned to the police officers who had arrived on the scene. They were astonished that the thieves had brazenly stolen my phone right in front of them. They told me that all I could do was go to the telecommunication centre, cancel my SIM card and then come back to file a report. Maybe, just maybe, they would be able to recover my phone. They would also review the security camera footage, but those motorcycles usually didn't have plates.

This incident occurred when I was on my way to London. I had lost all my information and was left bewildered, wondering what to do. I hastily made my way to one of the Mobile Iran offices to have my SIM card blocked and obtain a new one. My phone was an iPhone, and I managed to recover some of my contacts and data from my iCloud account on Apple.

I shared the incident with a lawyer friend, who said, 'In my opinion, the security forces must have stolen your phone, and, if that's the case, they've got complete control over you. A thief wouldn't dare steal your phone in broad daylight right in front of a police station!'

Several others confirmed this suspicion, telling me that the country's telecommunications are controlled by the Revolutionary Guards, who had access to my phone's data, contacts and passwords. They had done their

job quickly. When I checked my Apple ID on my new phone, I discovered that a large amount of my data, emails and social media accounts had been recently logged into and downloaded. Apparently, they had downloaded the content during the time my phone was stolen and unlocked. By the time I cut off the SIM card, they had achieved their goal.

A Brief Stay in London

The next day, I nervously went through passport control at Imam Khomeini Airport. The sound of the officer stamping my passport was the most reassuring sound in the world. I thought to myself, 'You've escaped this time, but can you return to Iran again?'

I spent eighteen days in London, visiting some universities. Previously, I had been invited to speak to students about my work, and I saw this trip as an opportunity to reconnect with the academic community in England.

During my time in Iran, I used to travel to England almost every year, and I had returned several times for conferences and seminars. For instance, I had spoken at an international conference on 'Girl' through an NGO working on female genital mutilation/cutting in Africa, which was managed by a friend. The conference was inaugurated by David Cameron,



Image 361: (From right) at the University of London Law School and with my publisher, Toby, at George Washington University. 2017 and 2018.

the then-prime minister of England, and Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel laureate and the UN secretary-general, delivered a speech. I had also visited Cambridge and Oxford to showcase my work. We had made family trips to England, such as when our son, Alan, was born and when the Basij forces attacked the British Embassy in Tehran, prompting us to travel to London for passport renewal. However, this trip was focused on reconnecting with England's academic sphere.

In a relatively short period, I became a candidate for two awards. In 2017, the Kurdish Iranian Women's Rights Organisation awarded me the Real Honour prize at the University of London's Law School, in recognition of my and my colleagues' research and work on gender and children's rights. Additionally, in 2018, I received the Global Peace Foundation's literature and humanities award at George Washington University for my research and fieldwork on social harms, which I dedicated to all my colleagues and the community that benefited from my research.

The ambassador had informed a personal contact on the Cultural Council that I would be returning and had emailed me a list of universities and professors in the humanities field who worked on Iran and the Middle East. Using this list, I visited universities and introduced myself through mutual acquaintances. When I met with a few university professors in London, I thought to myself, 'Why are they taking me so seriously?' The reason was that the ambassador had sent official emails to them, saying that someone named Kameel Ahmady would be visiting and needed career advice. Perhaps they thought I was a high-ranking expert!

During this time, I visited various places, from the London School of Economics to other universities in the city and my own alma mater in Canterbury. I met with my supervisor and one or two professors who still worked at the university. It had been ten years since I'd moved away from England, and many of the professors I knew had retired. Others I knew had changed jobs or left the UK. It seemed that my generation, with whom I'd studied and socialised, had either emigrated or returned to their own countries. As a result, I felt like I didn't know anyone, and this made reconnecting with the British environment more challenging. The job market and working conditions had also changed, and when I asked about career prospects, people would say that many contracts had become temporary and job security had plummeted.



Image 362: A seminar on harmful traditions with my friend and colleague Lorraine Koonce. Cambridge, England, 2018.

Despite all these factors, universities had undergone significant changes, with many becoming increasingly commercialised. Most of their policies focused on attracting international students to boost financial resources. Local students could take out loans with high interest rates, which they were responsible for repaying, and deductions would be made from their salaries after employment. They had also reduced various academic benefits. I estimated that if I returned to England in the current situation, finding a job would be tough for me. This was especially true since I had exclusively worked on Iran and issues that weren't even recognised in Iran itself. I came to the conclusion that, if I hastily and without a plan left Iran for England, I would face career and economic difficulties.

I also thought that, if I had no choice but to leave Iran, I could conduct research in neighbouring countries, but, considering Iran's history of abductions in neighbouring countries, I might not have personal and professional security there, either. Moreover, I might be forced to change my research area and focus. I had recently entered the fields of child labour

and identity, which were specific to Iran and might not be applicable elsewhere.

I thought to myself, 'Kameel, you're not alone. You have a family, a wife and children, and, if you decide to come here, you'll have to discuss continuing your life, housing . . . All that you've achieved through years of hard work would be put on hold, at least for a while.' I was thinking about all these matters, but I was also worried about my stolen phone and hacked information, and I suspected that I would be arrested as soon as I returned. With all the fear and anxiety I had, I returned to Iran, but nothing happened.

Email Hacks and Social Media Breaches

I returned to the country and continued the final stages of the child-scavenging study project. During this time, I was also working on the consultancy-and-review phase of the initial text on identity and ethnicity. My interviews about child marriage were being re-published, and I was receiving new interview requests, which I either rejected or ignored. The requests were numerous. BBC Persian wanted to air a report on white marriage and had contacted me for an interview. My internal interviews and research summaries were available on my site, and they had seen them, saying that my research was one of the few studies conducted in Iran. I refused the interview and asked them not to even mention my book. The journalist said, 'You've made it public, and it's accessible everywhere' – so, they would just reference it. He was right. I asked, at the very least, not to mention my name and only cite the title of the research, *A House with Open Door*. That report increased my concerns. Those active in this field knew well that the book belonged to me. The intelligence system had been monitoring all this and knew that no one in Iran besides me had conducted field research at that level. The intelligence system had been blocking the publication of this research for a long time.

When the pressure from all sides intensified, I thought that, with the approaching summer, I would leave Iran with my family for a few months to let the situation calm down. I didn't want to leave forever. I wanted the situation to subside, and I wanted to stay. On the day I went to the office to finalise the child-waste-picker project and hold a meeting to finalise the research categories, I realised in the middle of the meeting that I couldn't

access one of my email accounts. I entered my password, but it was not accepted, and I was logged out.



Image 363: A Tweet by hardliner individuals describing me as anti-family

A.Dastaran (@a_dastaran): "This Kameel Ahmady, who is the intellectual source and content provider for all those advocating for the prohibition of adolescent and youth marriage—from Tayebeh Siavashi to the Imam Ali Society—has written three books: one opposing *sigheh* (temporary marriage), one praising 'white marriage' (cohabitation), and another about the falsehood of 'child marriage'. Get the full video: [Link]"
Zartosht (@1Zartosht): "One should strictly call him an opponent of the family. I am just amazed at how someone like this is able to operate so freely within Iran."

I wasn't entirely sure, but I felt that the mobile theft and email hacking were related. Iran's security and information programmes were being implemented one after another. That same day, my email problem was resolved, and I hoped it might have been an internet glitch. When I returned home that night, everything seemed normal; I worked on my system until late at night.

The next morning, when I woke up and checked my mobile, I saw that at least twenty email and text messages from Gmail, Hotmail, Facebook and Telegram networks had arrived, indicating someone's attempts to access my accounts. The first message said, 'You've been attacked', and the next one said, 'Someone has accessed your account, but we've blocked it for you.' They were reporting, asking for confirmation and requesting password recovery on my phone and the first line of my mobile operator. All these attacks had happened simultaneously. I had one Hotmail account and two Gmail accounts, and all three of them, plus WhatsApp, Telegram and Instagram, had been hacked. I had no experience of being hacked before, but I knew that there were sophisticated phishing attacks. What had happened was highly professional and coordinated through my mobile operator, allowing them to access my passwords and ISP information by recovering my passwords.

I discovered that my emails had been blocked, and I couldn't access my accounts. I contacted Gmail via email. They responded, pointing out that my accounts had likely been hacked. They advised me to 'check your login history to see when the incident occurred and report back to us so we can investigate'. I found that the attacks had started around 3 am and continued until approximately 6 am. The hackers had managed to download my information and create backups, particularly from my Hotmail account, which had more vulnerabilities and wasn't as secure as Gmail.

Almost all my emails, dating back twenty-five years, had been downloaded. My mobile phone was flooded with texts asking me to change my password. I knew that the Ministry of Communications, which was under the control of the Revolutionary Guards, had access to my texts. They had downloaded my entire mobile phone history. My day was disrupted, and I spent the morning trying to recover my accounts.

When I went to the office and at 2 pm, the attacks resumed, and another one or two of my accounts were compromised. Overwhelmed with anxiety, I abandoned my meeting halfway through and went to the toilet to hide from my colleagues. In the toilet, with shaking hands, I emailed Gmail to request that they block my accounts. I suspected that they had downloaded another part of my emails. It was clear to me that the game had reached a new level.

Another concern I had was that, like many people, most of my professional and research connections were through email, while my personal, private and family connections were through WhatsApp and Telegram. This meant that all or most of these messages were now accessible to the hackers, and the Revolutionary Guards had gained access to them. After that, nothing else happened, and everything went back to normal, but the calm before the storm was terrifying. I knew something bad would soon happen.

A Show Trial and the Judicial Commission

I was contacted by the women's faction in the 10th Parliament and told, 'The plan to increase the age of child marriage, which has been prepared, will be put to a vote in the open session and will be reviewed by the Judicial Commission. If it passes there, it will go to the Guardian Council, and there's a high probability it will be finally approved.' They also invited me to attend the Commission as an independent expert, alongside supporters and opponents of the plan, to discuss the importance of the issue and the harms of child marriage.



Image 364: The result of the vote, posted by Mrs Siavoshi, MP. 2018. 'Parliament approves urgency of bill to raise minimum average marriage age. Out of 209 MPs present: 151 voted in favor, 34 against, and 7 abstained.'

I knew that the Government was upset with me over the issue of child marriage and the public debate on increasing the marriage age. I told myself, 'This is the path you've taken, and this is the work you've done. This research is a scientific appendix to a bill that has gained approval. You've always wanted your work to influence policymaking and not

just gather dust in the university libraries. So, this is the best opportunity – why not take it and defend your work? If they want to arrest you, they will, but at least go and fight in your final stronghold.' To me, it seemed like the best and most dignified decision, and I still defend it. The most reasonable thing to do was to continue with this strategy.

I attended the Judicial Commission meeting at parliament. The second-floor chamber was relatively large, with chairs arranged around the periphery. A clergyman named Haji Aqa Norouzi, the Commission chair, sat at the head of the room, flanked by a large table. Just like the previous session, the opponents and proponents of the bill had taken their respective sides, divided by the table. The proponents, mostly well-dressed reformists and experts from various fields, sat on one side, while the Government-backed conservatives, including the commander of the Women's Basij, Sina Kalhor, and his entourage, occupied the other. A psychologist, who didn't seem to fit into either group, and some media activists were also present.

Another psychologist had been invited by the proponents to discuss the psychological harms and damages. A legal expert was in attendance to provide professional opinions on the legal vacuum and the feasibility of the plan. Lady Salahshouri and Ms Siavoshi, two representatives who had worked tirelessly on the issue, were also present. Lady Salahshouri, as the facilitator and leader of the proponent group, had been chosen to steer the discussion. It seemed that the usual procedure was to put all opinions up for debate and discussion. The five or six members of the Judicial Commission would then deliberate and vote to accept or reject the bill.

The session began and ended quickly. Each person was allotted five minutes to speak. During the session, I watched as Lady Salahshouri and Ms Siavoshi encouraged their team members to speak confidently. Lady Salahshouri, a well-known reformist and courageous political activist, was someone whose thoughts and views on children's rights resonated with mine. I admired her for her bravery and sincerity. When it was my turn, she whispered to me, 'Go on, speak up! Go to battle! Go, Mr Ahmady!'

I presented my arguments about the problem of early marriage and its consequences and suggested solutions. The opposing group was homing in on me, eager to hear what I had to say. I knew that, after the session, they would again create a Twitter hashtag or write another article about me in *Keyhan*, or in *Mashregh News*, the official website of the Revolutionary Guards' information centre. Kalhor was also present, taking notes

throughout my speech. His entourage, led by Hamed Jalali Kashani, who always showered me with tweets and hashtags, was searching for points to use against me later. My argument with Kalhor and the Parliamentary Research Centre was that we had conducted research and presented real findings. They should bring their own research and arguments and compare them with mine.

Norouzi was distributing a large number of brochures to the attendees, highlighting the benefits of marriage and the advantages of marrying at a young age. As a representative to parliament of the Robat Karim district, he was a staunch defender of child marriage and a radical figure.



رئیس کمیسیون قضایی مجلس:

طرح افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج در کمیسیون قضایی رد شد

بخش: اخبار | مجموعه : اجتماعی | تاریخ ایجاد در ۰۲ دی ۱۳۹۷ | ساعت ۲۱:۱۴

طرح افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج در کمیسیون قضایی مجلس رد شد.

به گزارش پایگاه خبری یافته به نقل از فارس، الهیار ملکشاهی نماینده مردم کوهدشت در مجلس شورای اسلامی با اشاره به نشست امروز کمیسیون قضایی مجلس گفت: در جلسه امروز طرح اصلاح ماده ۱۰۴۱ قانون مدنی در رابطه با افزایش سن ازدواج مورد بحث و بررسی قرار گرفت.

وی افزود: در این طرح آمده بود که از سن ۱۳ سال به پایین اجازه ازدواج داده نشود و سنین ۱۳ تا ۱۶ با اذن ولی و دادگاه این کار انجام شود و طراحان در این طرح دنبال افزایش سن ازدواج بودند.

رئیس کمیسیون قضایی مجلس اظهار داشت: کمیسیون قضایی چند جلسه را به بررسی این موضوع اختصاص داد و کارشناسان در حوزه‌های مختلف پزشکی، حقوق و فقه و... و همچنین نمایندگان نظر خود را درباره این طرح ارائه کردند.

ملکشاهی خاطرنشان کرد: درنهایت کمیسیون در بررسی این طرح به این نتیجه رسید که این طرح امکان ادامه بررسی آن وجود ندارد و از جهات فقهی و هم اجتماعی دارای اشکالاتی است و تصمیم گرفته شد تا طرح دیگری بتواند برخی از مشکلات

Image 365: Rejection of the bill by the Judicial Commission of parliament. 2018.

Head of the Judicial Commission of the Parliament: Proposal to increase the minimum age of marriage rejected in the Judicial Commission
Category: Social
Date created: 23 December 2018 | 21:14
The proposal to increase the minimum age of marriage has been rejected in the Judicial Commission of the Parliament.
According to the news website Yafteh, quoting Fars, Allahyar Malekshahi, representative of Koohdasht in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, referring to today's meeting of the Judicial Commission of the Parliament, said: "In today's session,

> the proposal to amend Article 1041 of the Civil Code regarding increasing the age of marriage was discussed and reviewed."
> He added: "Under this proposal, marriage for those under 13 years of age was not to be permitted, and for those aged 13 to 16, it was to be done with the permission of the guardian and the court. The proposers were seeking to raise the age of marriage."
> The Head of the Judicial Commission of the Parliament stated: "The Judicial Commission dedicated several sessions to examining this issue, and experts in various fields, including medicine, law, jurisprudence, etc., as well as representatives, presented their views on this proposal."
> Malekshahi noted: "Ultimately, during its review of this proposal, the Commission reached the conclusion that it is not possible to continue examining it, as it has both definitive and social flaws, and it was decided that another proposal could address some of the problems..."

At the end of the session, we were asked to leave the room and wait in the corridor until the Commission members voted and announced their decision. I had never attended such sessions before, and it was strange for me to wait in the corridor while they made their decision, without even allocating sufficient time for scientific and expert reviews of the bill or for conducting any thorough research. I chatted with one or two people. Suddenly, the tea-bearer emerged from the room and announced, 'The Judicial Commission has rejected the bill.'

We all gazed at each other in shock. We had genuinely hoped that the proposal would be approved, as it had gained a high vote and even conservative and radical groups, who usually opposed such changes and reforms, had given their consent because the future of children was at stake. We saw the opposing group standing calmly and happily in front of us. They seemed to have known the outcome beforehand. Someone asked, 'How did the vote go? How many votes were against, and how many were in favour?' A little information, please!

Mr Abdarchi returned and said, 'It was rejected with an overwhelming majority.'

We asked, 'Does that mean not even a single vote was in favour?'

It became clear to us that the outcome had been orchestrated, and no one had dared to vote in favour or even abstain. Overwhelmed with astonishment, we left the assembly.

I realised that my optimistic views about change in the system were far from reality. I asked myself, 'How long will it take for these changes to occur?' This was a small example of the trial and error I experienced during the several years I worked on the child-marriage project, for which I faced immense pressure.

Confronting the findings of the *From Border to Border* research on identity and ethnicity, it became even more evident to me that the system would soon reach a dead end and, if it continued on the same path, would eventually collapse.

Lady Salahshouri later sent me and others a message, trying to console us. She was also very upset, but her opinion was that they might return to this bill later and, as in the second and third parliamentary terms, when representatives and social activists worked on it, they would work on it again in future terms. She said we had done something that revived the proposal, or at least allowed it to move to a higher stage. Her words were true. This achievement and effort had been documented in history and would remain forever. Later, I discussed this incident with a few others and concluded that perhaps we could hold a session with the opponents of the plan.

National Library Meeting and a False Accusation

Two weeks after this incident, a lady named Sayeh Rahimi contacted me, introducing herself as the head of a campaign called Mal-Parent Children are More Alone. She asked me to meet with her to discuss holding an open session between the proponents and opponents of Bill 1041. I think she had also shared this idea with Mrs Siavoshi, who had recommended me. The meeting would be held in the presence of a former member of the board of directors of the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights, at their personal office. I said, 'It's a good idea. In my opinion, we can't revive this bill and its dead body, but we can hold a civilised seminar on the key points of the proponents' and opponents' views, and I'm willing to participate in it.' Later, a list of proponents and opponents was prepared, and the campaign took charge of organising it.

It was decided to hold the session at Al-Zahra University, with Mrs Siavoshi also in attendance. As usual, I was responsible for presenting the scientific aspect of the work, and the Farshid Yazdani Children's Rights Association had accepted our invitation. The opponents of the plan, including Hassan Norouzi, the spokesperson for the Legal and Judicial Commission, who was a staunch supporter of child marriage, were also invited. He was very outspoken in his opposition, and the organisers thought that, given his clerical background, representation, influence and radical views on the subject, he could have a significant impact on rejecting the plan.

The day before the session, the university contacted us and cancelled the event, citing bizarre reasons such as a lack of security or the summer break for students. It was clear that the security forces had pressured the university to cancel the session through the university's security office, and the university didn't have the courage to say no.



Image 366: Mr Norouzi, the spokesperson for the Judicial Commission: 'The 15-year-old girl is not a child. We need to cosider the girls who want a husband.'

23 January 2019 – 15:21

What do the opponents of raising the minimum age of marriage for children say?

> A 15-year-old girl is not a child / We must think of a solution for girls who seek a husband
> Hassan Norouzi, spokesperson for the Legal and Judicial Commission, said: "A 15-year-old girl is not a child and is ready to take on life's responsibilities. We must think of a solution for girls who seek a husband, not prevent others from marrying as well."

The session was then transferred to the National Library. I'm not sure who exactly facilitated this move. The head of the National Library, Ms Ashraf Boroujerdi, was a reformist and had previously served as the deputy minister of interior for social affairs and councils in the Khatami Government. The hardliners, who seemed to despise her, claimed that the National Library had become a haven for counter-revolutionaries and reformists.

Contrary to my expectations, only a few reformists attended. At the end of the seminar, Mr Norouzi arrived with great fanfare. The speakers and attendees spoke to him in more informal tones. The discussion centred on what we could do to reduce the harm caused by early-age marriages. How could we reach a consensus to increase the minimum age of marriage, so that it could be reviewed later on? Mr Norouzi's argument, both jokingly and seriously, was that his grandmother had gotten married at the age of nine, and he didn't think there would be any problem for girls at that age. He said that his grandmother didn't die in childbirth, nor was she subjected to sexual violence. In his opinion, this age was suitable for girls to get married.

Several journalists were also present and reported on the session. The next day, *Shargh* newspaper sensationalised Mr Norouzi's remarks, and another uproar ensued. *Keyhan* newspaper published a report on its front page, titled 'Feminist Conference with the Exclusion of Critical Experts for Marriage Age Limitation'. The article stated that supporters of increasing the minimum marriage age were claiming that the plan had been rejected for political reasons. Some of them, by excluding critical experts, had reduced the scientific and research-orientated session to a feminist and political gathering. After the plan to increase the minimum marriage age was rejected in the Judicial Commission, the supporters of the plan wanted to hold a session at Al-Zahra University. First, they cancelled the session

and played the victim, placing the blame on the opponents of the plan. Then, with cries of outrage, they transferred the session to the 'haven of counter-revolution' – namely, the National Library. *Keyhan* continued its report by stating that the organisers had invited opponents of the plan but didn't allow them to speak, and that Kameel Ahmady's impudence exceeded all others, as he said, 'Let's negotiate and find a principled solution.'


کیهان

آرشیو یکشنبه ۷ بهمن ۱۳۹۷، شماره ۲۲۱۱۱

اخبار کشور

همایش فمنیستی با حذف کارشناسان منتقد برای محدودیت ازدواج

موافقان محدودیت سنی ازدواج در حالی اظهار می کنند که طرح افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج به دلایل سیاسی رد شده است که برخی از آنان با حذف کارشناسان منتقد، نشست علمی و پژوهشی را به سطح همایشی فمنیستی و سیاسی تقلیل می دهند.

پس از رد کارشناسی طرح افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج در کمیسیون حقوقی و قضایی مجلس شورای اسلامی که براساس نظر کارشناسان و صاحب نظران حوزه ازدواج انجام شد، موافقان طرح با

Image 367: *Keyhan's* headline: 'Feminist Conference with the Exclusion of Critical Experts for Marriage Age Limitation'.

Keyhan Daily: Feminist conference with the removal of critical experts regarding marriage age restriction

Proponents of marriage age restrictions claim that the bill to raise the minimum age of marriage has been rejected for political reasons, while some of them, by removing critical experts, reduce a scientific and research gathering to the level of a feminist and political conference.

> Following the expert-level rejection of the bill to raise the minimum age of marriage in the Legal and Judicial Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis), which was carried out based on the opinion of experts and specialists in the field of marriage, agrees...

The climax of audacity and shamelessness by advocates of increasing the minimum marriage age at this political gathering goes back to the accusations against Kameel Ahmady. Ahmady, referring to the absence of critics, stated: 'With regret that opponents of the plan to increase the minimum marriage age of children did not attend, despite being invited, I will continue to research and present my independent opinions, which I have conducted in a research framework. However, it would have been good if these friends were here and we could hear each other's logical reasons.' Ahmady's expression of regret took place while the reason for the opponents' absence was the sudden and confidential transfer of the meeting from Alzahra University to the National Library.

It was as clear as day that they wouldn't let go. More than ever, they confidently wove lies and distorted the truth. That's why I decided to take my family to London for a while and refrain from making any further comments about child marriage. Officially, the plan had been scrapped, and it was no longer possible to engage in dialogue with the part of the establishment that had taken on the project and opposed increasing the minimum marriage age for children.

Marginal Notes on the Unveiling of *Childhood Yawn*

Before my trip, the launch ceremony for the research on child waste-picking was supposed to take place. Everything had been planned for the day before my departure.

From the moment the work reached the stages of editing, writing and content analysis, tensions and criticisms within the group had intensified. Most of these tensions came from two individuals who had brought one of the research team members along and persistently had bitter arguments in the research group's Telegram chat. They would say things like, 'You treated me this way', and 'You took advantage of my good intentions and

child-loving nature.' They would attack the executive manager, accuse each other . . . it went on and on.

Some of these disputes were directed at me, and some at the first assistant of the research and their theoretical perspective on child delinquency, which they had written an article about. A few reckless individuals did not want the book to be published and tried to create obstacles. They even filed an official complaint, which reached the management of the Association. In that protest meeting, I attended as the head of the research and apologised for my previous remarks in a private gathering about one of these three individuals, but their intention was something else, and we all knew it. That person thought the project was not in the interest of children and had brought one of the board members along, who had all these thoughts when the work was almost finished and the final text was being reviewed.

The project was almost complete, and the final output was ready. We had to submit the last draft to the board of directors for approval. Typically, researchers invest a considerable amount of time on a project, and when the results are finally ready to be shared with others, everyone becomes an expert. We received some astonishing comments and feedback that left us perplexed. However, the book went into publication, although many compromises were made, with some sections unintentionally altered. We were unable to reflect some of our findings that highlighted harsh realities because of organisational interests and other reasons. Those who have worked independently before and then collaborated with organisations will better understand this. The notion that you can maintain independence in your work is an illusion, and, ultimately, the organisational approach and its limitations will influence the process and output.

As the launch date approached, the pressure and threats from opponents intensified. One opponent's track record worried us. The person was capable of disrupting the launch event. I was accused of violating ethical principles due to the 'peeking through the garbage hole' incident, and we were all reprimanded for a photo taken by a colleague in my absence. Toward the end of the research, a mock 'Research Ethics Training' class was organised for us, led by a researcher-turned-instructor. This encounter provided the perfect opportunity for them to 'teach' me a lesson in research ethics.

Admittedly, such training workshops are often beneficial, as they offer a chance for self-reflection and equipping oneself with new research methods and techniques, which are constantly evolving. However, the intention and the goal behind this particular session were different and altogether suspicious. The instructor, from a certain university, claimed they had no knowledge of the research, but was asked to volunteer as a member of the Association to teach us research ethics. What was even more ridiculous was that, during the training, they referred to specific details that required firsthand experience in the field, which suggested that someone had fully briefed them on the matter.

Despite all this, I convinced the research team to participate in the training and decided that we would remain silent and focus on the positive aspects of the workshop, addressing any shortcomings and ensuring that nothing hindered the progress of our work.



یک سوم زباله‌گردان تهران کودکان هستند

مدیرعامل انجمن حمایت از حقوق کودکان گفت: بر اساس پژوهشی مشخص شد که 14000 زباله گرد در تهران وجود دارد که 4700 نفر از این افراد یعنی معادل یک سوم آنها کودک هستند.

به گزارش دیده بان ایران؛ فرشید یزدانی درمراسم رونمایی از پژوهش یغمای کودکی که روز گذشته در آستانه روز جهانی مبارزه با کار کودکان در باب شناخت، پیشگیری و کنترل پدیده زباله‌گردی کودکان تهران برگزار شد گفت: نام این پروژه را یغمای کودکی گذاشتیم زیرا به به این معنی است که کودکی به تاراج رفته و زندگی کودکان زباله‌گرد در این دایره قرار می‌گیرد.

Image 368: News coverage of the launch of *Childhood Yawn*

One third of Tehran's waste scavengers are children
The Managing Director of the Society for the Protection of Children's Rights said: "Based on research, it was found that there are 14,000 waste scavengers in Tehran, of whom 4,700 — equivalent to one third — are children."
Reported by Dideban Iran, Farshid Yazdani

> At the unveiling ceremony of the research titled *Childhood Yawn*, held yesterday on the eve of the World Day Against Child Labour, regarding understanding, preventing and controlling the phenomenon of child waste scavenging in Tehran, he said:
> "I named this project 'Childhood Yawn' because it means that childhood has been plundered, and the lives of child waste scavengers fall within this circle."

The launch ceremony was well received, with many city council members attending as guest speakers and a few others delivering side talks at the seminar. A high-ranking official from the Ministry of Welfare was also present, along with prominent figures in the field of child education, and the event received good media coverage.

The overall impact of the project was significant, and, during that period, people in Tehran and other major cities became more aware of the issue of child scavenging, which was previously little known. In my opinion, the research contributed significantly to increasing public awareness and social consciousness, elevating the topic of child scavenging to a level of general knowledge and raising public awareness.

This research provided solutions for the collection and segregation of waste and garbage, as well as consumerism among citizens, which had not been adequately addressed until then. Environmental issues had arisen from this, and the problems it created in urban society had not been previously discussed. Educating people about these problems could be highly beneficial. Part of these solutions focused on child labour and waste-picking children, who were vulnerable to severe harm. The research also made practical recommendations for establishing a systematic approach to urban waste-management, alongside eliminating profiteering and the mafia-style scavenging in Tehran's twenty-two districts.

This research was later utilised extensively, and among child-rights activists it became a tool for negotiating with authorities.

Because of this project, I became acquainted with another crucial aspect of the child-rights domain. My previous work in this field had mainly focused on social harm, but this time it was about child labour, another front that required effort to make a positive impact, no matter how small.

Travel to England, Child Labour and Contractual Conditions

The day after the launch of *Childhood Yawn*, I set off for London. It was meant to be a multi-month trip to recharge and take a break from the high-stress environment of Iran. Simultaneously, I had been working on the waste-picking and identity projects, and the pressure from both jobs, as well as the suspicious security incidents, had left me exhausted. I needed a good rest and quality time with my family, including Shafagh and Alan, whom I had not seen for a while.

I thought to myself that, during my months-long stay in London, I should fill these gaps. During our travels to cities, tourist attractions and children's parks, I tried to spend more time with my family. Occasionally, I would visit the British Library to study global issues related to children and acquire more knowledge. I was preparing myself to focus solely on this domain for a while, which seemed more tranquil and less troublesome. I had also selected my next subject and was in the process of studying and planning for a research project on various forms of child labour.

My experience researching waste-picking taught me that child labour in Iran takes many forms, which had not been thoroughly investigated. Even existing research was not in-depth, and many problems in the world of childhood remained unknown or outdated. During the fieldwork for *Childhood Yawn*, through my own observations and consultations with the research team, I concluded that my next project should focus on the most significant forms of child labour in Iran.

I had decided to explore this topic extensively across Iran's geography, but I knew it was financially impossible for me. It was clear that this project would have to start from Tehran, and I was confident that I would begin when I returned. With this goal in mind, during my time in London, I initiated my preliminary research on forms of child labour at the British Library, a unique treasure trove of research in this field, and studied some of the legal, theoretical and empirical texts on the subject.



Image 369: The National Gallery. London, 2019.

I prepared the framework, initial plan and timeline for the project, and even estimated the initial expenses. About two years prior, I had developed an interest in the conditions of marriage and had prepared a proposal to conduct a research project on it at an opportune moment. I was hesitant, wondering if the subject warranted a single article or had the potential to be expanded into a book. At that time, there was widespread discussion about astronomical dowries and marriage conditions, with the Vice-Presidency for Women's Affairs and the 10th Parliament focusing on the issue.

I decided to embark on a research journey to several provinces to observe and conduct an initial assessment for the 'conditions of marriage' research before delving into the complexities of child labour. During my time at the British Library, I studied communities with marriage and dowry customs similar to those in Iran. I discovered that similar issues had occurred in Jewish communities, bearing striking resemblance to the situations in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India. British researchers had collected a rich dataset of these studies.

I prioritised my work. I planned to start a short reconnaissance trip to the Turkmen-dominated regions of Iran and a few other provinces after returning to Tehran, with the aim of reaching an initial conclusion.

Opportunities, Africa and Escaping Again

During my stay in London, an opportunity arose for a trip and two work projects. One was a conference on identity and nationalism at the University of Middlesex London. My good friend from university days, Dr Janroj Yılmaz Keles, now the head of the Social Sciences Department at the university, was the organiser. He invited me to participate in one of the panels and speak about FGM/C with an emphasis on social empowerment in Kurdistan. I was also scheduled to present on social identity and nationalism. I chose to focus on the LGBTQ+ community, although it didn't have a direct connection to the Kurdistan Region, as my research was primarily based in Tehran, Isfahan and Mashhad. However, I had statistical information on other ethnic groups, including the Kurds.

In the final stages, the topic of LGBTQ+ individuals in Iran was selected for presentation. The conference had attendees from various countries, some of whom I had met in Europe and London, while others were from Turkey's Kurdistan. I was familiar with both groups, and it was a great opportunity to reconnect.

When my panel began, I saw that only three people were present, one of whom was scheduled to speak about LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey's Kurdistan after me. There were only four of us in the large hall, with one person tasked with managing us. At a conference with hundreds of attendees, where some rooms were overcrowded, only a handful had shown up to hear our presentations. Perhaps it was because the majority of topics focused on politics, nationalism, borders and political tensions in Kurdistan, Syria and other regions, taking precedence over social issues. Even in the women's panel, there were fewer than ten attendees, which was disappointing, considering the conference was supposedly academic but had become so politicised.

There is a prevailing view regarding ethnicities and nationalities that face discrimination and oppression. It is said that one should not overly emphasise the problems related to gender and sexuality within them, as it could reveal their vulnerabilities to their enemies and overshadow more



Image 370: Reunion with Osman Baydemir and other friends at Middlesex University. London, 2019.

critical issues. It seemed like an excuse for the lack of transparency and denial that has always been pervasive in the layers and levels of a society like Iran.

In this session, I met my old friend and colleague, Osman Baydemir, the former mayor of Diyarbakır, and was deeply affected by his situation. After serving as the mayor of Diyarbakır, Osman became a member of the Turkish parliament, but when he was invited to a conference in Scotland, he was stripped of his diplomatic immunity by the Turkish Government and was unable to return to his country because of multiple arrest warrants against him. We were delighted to see each other at this conference and shared stories about our current situations. I told him about my temporary asylum, and he shared his experiences of living in a coastal town in southern England. We laughed at the tribulations of life and reminisced about our collaborative work in Diyarbakır. However, his wife Reyhan and their children were far from him, and he was not in a good place.

Other friends were also present, including Professor Abbas Vali, a pioneering scholar in Kurdish studies, and Hassan Qazi, a television presenter from the Qazi Muhammad family in Mahabad. I had appeared on his programme several times on Roj TV and Media TV, which were close to the PKK in Turkey's Kurdistan.

The second significant event that took place during my summer break was being invited to the United Nations conference in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, to speak as an independent expert on FGM/C and child marriage. The UN Human Rights Office and UNICEF had organised the conference to gather data and the latest updates from countries, which

would be used in a report to be presented to the UN Human Rights Committee. It was crucial for all activists in this field to attend the conference and present their evidence. For me, it was perhaps even more important, as I had been trying for years to get Iran listed in the UN records as one of the countries that practise FGM/C.

The UN has always had a unique policy toward countries like Iran, either remaining silent or tiptoeing around social issues and human-rights violations. Iran has pressured the UN not to interfere in its internal affairs, social and cultural matters, and the UN has refrained from addressing FGM/C and child marriage in its periodic reports. The UN has been wary of losing its operational space and closing its offices in Iran, which has led it to avoid confronting these sensitive issues.

Over time, this approach has intensified, and one can clearly observe the UN's amplified policy of appeasement toward the Iranian Government. I'm not saying this based on hearsay or indicators, but from my personal experiences. When I lived in Iran, I repeatedly contacted the UN office to collaborate on the critical global issue of FGM/C and child marriage, but they didn't even dare to engage in a simple conversation, fearing to venture into sensitive topics. Although they occasionally touched on the issue, they never held Iran accountable in their major reports for taking action to address these harmful practices. When my book *In the Name of Tradition* was published in 2015, *The Guardian* and *Reuters* wrote about it, forcing the UN office in Iran to react, albeit with a cursory and fleeting response. The reactions were so limited that the Iranian Government began monitoring my activities from the very beginning. Later, I discovered that the UN had been informally discussing the issue of child marriage with Iranian authorities.

At this conference, I intended to shed light on the existing harms in Iran, hoping that my words would, at the very least, influence subsequent reports on the human-rights situation in Iran. If these issues made it into international documents, everything would take on a more serious tone. During my few days in Ethiopia, I attempted to establish connections with key activists in the field and engage in discussions with the conference organisers. I also shared my recent concerns regarding security issues. After my arrest, I realised that this conference and my acquaintance with the attendees had a significant impact on many of them, and most of them

reacted to this incident. From foreign NGOs to the United Nations, they all played active roles in campaigning for my release.

During my student days, I had once travelled to southern Ethiopia for charitable work. In some rural villages, I helped establish schools and facilitated teachers' training. I didn't have much connection with the capital city and urban society, but this return trip provided an opportunity to get acquainted. Most of the population in Ethiopia is traditional Christian and deeply committed to the faith. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the largest Eastern Orthodox churches and has a rich history. Members believe in the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ, similar to the Coptic Church, which is known as Miaphysitism or Monophysitism. This doctrine emphasises the unity of Christ's divine and human natures within a single composite nature — a Christological position known as miaphysitism. In Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, this doctrine is referred to as *Täwaḥədo*, which is often transliterated into Persian as *Tawahidi*. The term literally means "making one" or "unity", reflecting the belief that Christ's two natures are united indivisibly into one nature without mixture, separation, or confusion.

Ethiopia is also home to a large Muslim population, who are equally devout. The country has made significant economic and urban-



Image 371: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2019.



Image 372: My Instagram post on my visit from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2019.

Translation of the caption:
I was in Ethiopia (formerly Abyssinia), located in the Horn of Africa, for a few days. It had changed a lot since the last time I was here. Stronger economies, and of course full of cheap Chinese goods; a younger generation; modernisation of the education and health systems; a stronger civil society; somewhat more democratic (although three weeks before my arrival, there had been an unsuccessful coup here...

development progress. The African Union's headquarters in Addis Ababa continuously hosts representatives from various countries, contributing to Ethiopia's growth.

While I was in Ethiopia, there were ongoing protests against the Government, and police were omnipresent. When I inquired about the reasons behind these events, I was told that a coup had taken place the previous year, and the country was under military rule. It was also the season of student exams, and the internet had been cut off to prevent cheating. It was hard to believe, but UN officials confirmed this. There was widespread corruption in the education system, with exam questions

being sold online. Of course, the UN had its own independent internet connection, which we could use.

On this trip, I met many friends, including Masoumeh. She belonged to a Shia sect from India known as the Bohra Shiites. They have significant differences with Twelver Shiism and are closer to the Ismaili sect. Interestingly, unlike in most Shia sects, FGM/C is prevalent among them.

We all tried to find opportunities to explore the city and surrounding villages. During one of these adventures, I made a mistake – not out of bad intentions, but out of cultural unawareness. At a local barber shop, I was assigned a woman to trim my hair. Curious and fascinated, I took a selfie during the process. I posted it on Instagram and wrote a few lines about gender equality and the differences between societies. Ethiopian society was very religious, but it had a different perspective on gender and women's roles in such jobs. Later, I learned that sharing (even with good intentions) images of people at work, especially women, without their consent could be considered inappropriate or disrespectful. To avoid repeating the mistake, I have blurred her face below and have become far more mindful about respecting local customs and privacy.

After the conference, I returned to London, preparing to head back to Iran soon. Ms Khazaei, Sina Kalhor's assistant and colleague at the Parliament's Research Centre, kept contacting me through Telegram. She would constantly ask me where I was, and I would respond that I was busy with work and would get back to them later. She'd ask why my phone was always unavailable and when I could schedule a meeting with Sina Kalhor. When I inquired about the purpose of the meeting, she said, 'Mr Kalhor wants to reach an agreement with you. He thinks you're an obstacle and won't let his idea about not increasing the minimum age of marriage for children come to fruition.'

I told her that, if he thought I was an obstacle, I would step aside and let him handle the matter himself. However, he was aware that the radical NGOs had more extreme views than I did. They believed in childhood up until the age of eighteen and wouldn't compromise on any other proposal.

Khazaei kept saying, 'I feel like you're abroad!', and I'd respond that I was in the Turkmen Sahra villages, working on my project, which was why my phone had no signal. I told her that we would schedule a meeting once I returned to Tehran. I was more than happy to meet at Mr Kalhor's

workplace, and we agreed that I would visit the Parliament's Research Centre the morning after my return.

Around the same time, two people from the Ministry of Interior's Research Centre for Social Sciences and Social Harms also contacted me, inviting me to present a paper on child marriage at a seminar. The Government at the time had a more moderate and flexible stance on the issue of child marriage and was willing to amend Article 1041 to some extent. The Government's supportive arm, the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs and the Women's Parliamentary Fraction, were counted among the advocates for increasing the minimum age of marriage for children. The invitation to the seminar was, in effect, a show of support for the issue, encouraging the Government to take action and potentially present a bill to parliament. The seminar would be attended by deputy ministers and department heads from various ministries, providing an excellent platform to discuss the topic.

I set my schedule and headed back to Iran. I had planned to visit Turkmen Sahra after meeting with Kalhor and start my research on exorbitant dowries. However, deep down, I was worried that I might be arrested as soon as I arrived.

Our luggage was extremely heavy, and I would often grumble about all the clothes and purchases, wondering why we needed to carry so much. Of course, most of the shopping was for others! Like my previous trip, I was anxious about being arrested as soon as I entered Iran. Under those conditions, I had to arrange for others' purchases to be delivered from the other side of the world to Iran, and I'd even have to pay extra for excess baggage at the airport. I would often joke that, while everyone is happy to leave, I'm happy to return. Well, it's more accurate to say that I'm happy after my passport is stamped at the airport gate and I've entered Iran. Everyone loves leaving, and I love returning.

Part Six: This Is The Prison of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Introduction

I knew it would happen eventually, and I was waiting for it. I knew that, just as it had happened to my father in my childhood and to me in my adolescence, I would be involved with the IRGC again, but this time more seriously. I hadn't done anything wrong, just as my father hadn't committed any offence, but our research was lifting the lid on pains that, one could say, the Government enabled by ignoring and sweeping them under the carpet.

It was natural that they would arrest me and, like so many other innocent people, label me a 'security prisoner'. But it wasn't natural that they would accuse me of having connections with, as they put it, 'a hostile government', all because of my research, and that they would try to destroy my life, would torment me during countless days of solitary confinement and repeated interrogations, and would deny me even basic human rights. Of course, I didn't expect them to respect human rights or anything like that. We Kurds had seen these things for years, and our memories were full of reminders that they didn't respect us as human beings.

After many years, I was again where I had been in my youth. Their system hadn't changed much. I saw the same treatment, but in a different guise and sometimes more cunning.

In this Part Six, I, Kameel Ahmady, am arrested for doing research, because knowledge and enlightenment are not something the Iranian Government wants for its people.

Chapter Twenty-One: Arrest

Before entering Iran, I had some meetings arranged. One was about child marriage, organised by the social-affairs section of the Ministry of the Interior, and I had been invited to attend. The meeting started at 10 am, and there were representatives from almost all sections and departments of the Ministry. After the fallout from the National Library incident and the scathing article in the *Keyhan* newspaper, I didn't intend to participate in any more meetings related to child marriage, but this time it was different. The meeting was being held by a government body, and there weren't supposed to be any public announcements about it.

Furthermore, holding it in the Ministry of the Interior gave the subject legitimacy, and, in that situation, it might even create a safe haven for me. I felt in danger and was clutching at straws for some kind of safety net. I had also heard that some middle managers in the Ministry were more well-meaning and somewhat logical, and I was hoping that raising the issue at the level of the Ministry of Interior's managers would benefit the children and the target community. The meeting was, in my mind, a positive sign, telling me that it was too soon to give up hope.

In one corner of the hall, a number of very veiled women and bearded, buttoned-up young men with aggressive and agitated demeanours were sitting. From their appearances and the type of questions they asked, it was quite clear that they were in favour of child marriage. I think some of them were members of the Ministry of Interior's Basij (Mobilisation Resistance Force) and the governorate's research centre. At the end of the meeting, they cornered me, saying, 'Why can't you see that people want their children to marry young? Why do you interfere in people's personal and family matters?' They had read our research and were looking for a fight.

As always, I tried to create a dialogue and told them about the harms of child marriage, but it was useless; they had blocked their ears and didn't want to hear anything. The situation was scarier than I thought. I said to myself, 'Are you looking for trouble, Kameel? Why are you here again, arguing with these people?!'

I was supposed to go to the Shush district in the afternoon to provide consultation and brainstorming to a centre supporting addicted children. In this neighbourhood, some social harms were very acute, and I encountered phenomena that I couldn't have imagined. I saw teenagers and children who were called 'mules', whose job it was to transport drugs. Even more bitter was that many of the children had become addicted or were involved in drug use. There was no end to the bitterness at this centre. There was no shortage of children who had been born addicted or had become addicted as a result of their parents' drug use. Some of their mothers, who had jobs such as prostitution and begging, handed their children over to this centre in the morning and picked them up when they returned at night. The centre had two sections, one for keeping babies and the other for children and teenagers. This charity and public institution had developed a support programme for the children, from accommodation, food and clothing to health and treatment. The centre's officials said they needed professional help and support, and I promised to help and support them.

After my return, I had a meeting with Sayeh Rahimi, the head of a campaign called The Neglected Child is More Alone, and we talked about the project of children scavenging through rubbish. With the help of this campaign, the book *Childhood Yawn* attracted the attention of cinema people and forced the municipality officials to react. Then, like every meeting in those days, the conversation turned to the article in the *Keyhan* newspaper and the issues that had arisen. I told Sayeh that I would no longer be active on the subject of child marriage at the public level, and I advised her not to be active either, because I could see that their campaign had also attracted the attention of the security forces.



Image 373: Instagram account of The Neglected Child is More Alone.

It was then time for the meeting I had been repeatedly messaged about. Kalhor and his cronies had done their bit, and the bill to increase the age of marriage had failed. They weren't open to dialogue, so I found it odd that they wanted to have a meeting with me. I raised the issue in a message with Ms Siavoshi, who agreed with me. She said, 'If you go, tell Kalhor to

look at the issue from a more humane perspective, for the sake of the children who are being harmed.'

Two days before the meeting, Kalhor's assistant messaged several times on WhatsApp and Telegram to make sure the appointment was still on. I thought it was strange, but I didn't pay much attention. The usual procedure was for final arrangements to be made the day before, with a phone call or message, but Ms Khazaei messaged repeatedly. Once she said, 'Shall we send a car for you?' I said, 'No, I'll come myself.' Then she sent another article about child marriage. She pretended to agree with some of my work and kept the conversation going. I politely said that we'd talk about it in the upcoming meeting, but she sent another message with yet another excuse.

At 10 am on a hot summer's day, I had the meeting with Sina Kalhor. The meeting wouldn't last more than an hour, so I planned the rest of my



Image 374: Morning of the meeting. Tehran, 7 August 2019.

day. I decided that, after this meeting, I would head to Turkmen Sahra to begin the fieldwork for the project on prenuptial agreements. Several members of the team were supposed to accompany me on this trip. I had told them to come to my house before leaving, so we could review the arrangements together. A PhD student also wanted advice on her dissertation. I had told her to come at 12 so I could answer her questions in the building's meeting hall.

Around 9 am, I was ready to leave for Kalhor's office when Ms Khazaei called again. Sounding strained and apparently upset, she said, 'Mr Kalhor's car has broken down on the way back from Isfahan. He asked me to apologise to you.' She postponed the meeting until the following week. The cancellation of the meeting despite Ms Khazaei's many follow-ups was a bit strange. I even thought to myself that perhaps the security agencies had prevented the meeting from taking place.

I called my colleagues and the student and said that, if possible, we should hold our meetings earlier. The student welcomed the idea and said she lived close to my house. She arrived very quickly, and it was agreed that the project colleagues would also get here as soon as they could.

We decided to wait for my colleagues in the meeting hall. One of them was coming from Karaj and the other from near Sanat Square in Tehran. My meeting with the student had just finished when someone rang the doorbell. A man brought his face close to the intercom and said calmly, 'Mr Ahmady's residence? I'm the postman, and you have a parcel.'

It didn't even occur to me that I wasn't expecting a parcel and that I hadn't been in Iran for several months. I told him to come up in the lift, but he replied, 'Please come down, and bring your ID card with you.'

I grabbed my national ID card, and, just as I opened the apartment door to head down in the lift, a hulking man shoved me and entered the hall with his shoes on. Another person followed behind him. After a while, more people arrived, who at least had the decency to take their shoes off that is customary in Iran. They all immediately started searching the house. One of them was yelling, 'Give me your phone! Give me your phone!' He also yelled several times for me to sit down on a chair. I had just come to my senses and was saying to show me the arrest warrant first, but he kept repeating, 'You are under arrest by order of the public prosecutor!'

I was shocked. I couldn't understand what was happening around me. My astonishment only increased when about eight more people entered



Image 375: View from my apartment.

the house, followed by another four, one of whom was a woman wearing a chador. The men were almost identical: bearded and wearing pistols under their shirts, which came down over their trousers. It was a bizarre scene. One was searching Alan's bedroom, another had thrown Shafagh's clothes out, the next had emptied the kitchen cabinets . . . they all went calmly about their work. These individuals were violating the sanctity of my life in the name of the law, and they wouldn't even say what my crime was.

They had everything with them, from extension cords to flasks and disposable teacups. One of them turned on my laptop without any permission. He plugged in his mobile internet device and said, 'Give me the laptop password.'

I said, 'I'm not giving it to you!'

A person who seemed to be his superior said, 'Break it and get in!'

All this was happening when I hadn't even been formally charged.

A little later, their group leader said, 'You are being arrested under Article 508[1] on charges of collaborating with the hostile US Government!'

1 According to Article 508 of the Islamic Penal Code, anyone or any group that cooperates with a hostile foreign government in any way against the Islamic Republic of Iran shall

I suddenly understood what the story was with the cancelled meeting. It didn't even cross my mind that the main job of Mr Kalhor and Ms Khazaei was to fix things for the security agencies. They were obliged to keep me in Tehran so that their colleagues could arrest me.

I asked what all these people were doing in my house. He replied, 'We are here by order of the public prosecutor to arrest you along with any potential evidence of the crime.' He also wanted the passwords for my laptop and mobile phone, but I refused again, saying, 'This is illegal.'

Sixteen men and one woman had occupied my house, and the woman who was with them had taken my colleague into one of the other rooms. I could hear her voice, crying and saying, 'I swear to God, I haven't done anything!'

I was under pressure myself, and worrying about my colleague made me feel even worse. I said to the leader of this security team, 'This woman has nothing to do with your case. Let her go. If you release her, I'll give you the laptop and phone passwords after meeting the prosecutor and being formally charged.'

He said that if I gave the passwords at that moment, he would release my colleague. They wanted to use her as a hostage. I said the prosecutor had to come online and guarantee her release. I wanted to get water from the fridge, and I even had to ask permission from the officer standing over me. I was worried about the rest of my colleagues and was praying they would arrive late. I went toward the window once or twice, but the officers snapped at me to go back to my chair.

After a while, they hacked my laptop and backed up all the information it contained. The only things they hadn't accessed were my email and iPhone, which proved stubbornly resistant to their hacking attempts. Frustrated, they changed tactics and threatened my colleague directly. They said if I didn't hand over my email and phone passwords, they would call her parents, drag them all the way from Karaj to Tehran, fabricate a case against her and ensure she was both imprisoned and expelled from her PhD programme.

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be sentenced to one to ten years' imprisonment if they are not recognised as a *Mohareb* (one who wages war against God).

Understandably, she was terrified. A PhD student with her future on the line, she pleaded with me through tears, 'Just give them whatever they want, Kameel, please, so they'll release you.'

I tried to reassure her, 'They can't just imprison or harm you without any legitimate reason.'

But the officers were relentless, twisting the knife, saying to her, 'Look at him – this human-rights advocate is perfectly happy to sacrifice his own colleague.'

Without them knowing, two more of my colleagues had arrived. They rang the caretaker's doorbell, saying they were there for the meeting hall. Luckily, the caretaker, a man from Turkmen Sahra who knew about our planned fieldwork and had even assisted with local contacts, realised what was happening. He discreetly warned my colleagues, who, understanding the danger, quickly left the building, avoiding capture themselves.

I had read a lot of prisoners' experiences. I knew that the moment of arrest was very decisive in the prisoner's fate, and the more one kept one's composure, the better it would be. This is easy to say, but not easy in practice. The officers are experts in launching psychological warfare, and they had taken me and my colleague hostage in an unequal battle. I knew if I let go of myself or showed weakness, I would be the loser. That's why I was trying to control my emotions and actions.

They came at around 12 o'clock and within a few hours they had ransacked the house. They threw everything into the middle of the living room, searched all the nooks and crannies and even went to the air conditioning vents. At the end, they were writing a list of the things they had seized and chatting. Inside the closet, there was some Sterling I had from my recent trip to England and some documents, which were also listed. It was important to me that they write down everything they were taking. After five hours, they put a long list in front of me to sign.

I was still resisting giving the passwords. The officers were constantly calling the prosecutor and reporting the matter. When I had refused for a long time, I heard the prosecutor say, 'Tell him I'll get him later.' They constantly threatened that if I didn't give the passwords, my colleague would also be arrested and expelled from the university, and she would start crying and begging.

In the final minutes, when they had maximised the psychological pressure, one of the officers screamed at me, 'Who do you think you are,

saying no to us and talking about the law!? Do you think we came from Nematabad[1] police station!? Do you know what we can do!?'

When they had finished, they only allowed me to turn off the water and gas. I repeatedly begged them to let me call my family, but it was useless. When I put on my suit to leave, they mocked me, saying I wanted to go to prison with a chic, formal European look. One said I was going to polish my shoes too, and another said I wanted to enjoy 'a bit of a lie down' in my suit, and then they all laughed together. If these behaviours weren't psychological torture, what else could they be?

Everyone went downstairs, but I, the group leader and one or two others remained. They called their leader Seyyed. As he was going downstairs, one of them said to the leader, 'Seyyed, come here. We haven't listed this.' We took our shoes off again and went inside. He had a piece of black stuff in his fist, which he held up to his nose and said, 'The gear's good. I think it's Kermanshahi.' They thought I was a Kurd from Kermanshah.

Angrily, I asked, 'What is this?'

He said, 'You have to tell us. It's yours. It was on your desk. It looks like good opium.'

I, who had only seen opium once in my life, said, 'You've pinned all sorts of accusations on me, but you can't pin opium on me! I, the so-called modern European, am not into opium.' I couldn't contain my anger; I was seething. I couldn't help but raise my voice, just a little: 'There has to be a limit to injustice! A limit to this impudence and lawlessness! After all this psychological pressure you've put on me and my colleague, you still want to pin this on me?!'

The group leader responded with another threat, saying, 'Whether we pin the opium on you depends on how cooperative you are. You will cooperate eventually! We've been here for five hours already, and you still haven't given us the passwords. From now on, you'll be responsible for whatever happens.' He pocketed the opium and added, 'You also had half a bottle of booze, pepper spray and a stun gun, but, don't forget, the opium case is still open!'

1 Nematabad is a district situated in the southern part of Tehran, known to be one of the city's poorer areas.

In the lift, for a few fleeting seconds, I forgot my own predicament and the fate that awaited me. My mind drifted to the words of my maternal grandfather, Mine Qazi, who always used to say that politics has no parents. I reflected on just how cruel and tyrannical people can become. They had arrested both my colleague and me. Four or five men stood around us, and they escorted us to a car. They pushed me into a Xantia that had not only a standard car lock, but also an additional security lock.

As the car turned onto Saadat Abad Boulevard, the group leader, who was in the front passenger seat, took out a pair of handcuffs. 'We have to handcuff you,' he stated.

I tried not to react outwardly, consciously maintaining my composure. Deep down, I told myself, 'Kameel, you knew this was coming. Nothing unexpected has happened, so there's no need to be so scared and worried.' I observed the streets with a detached calm, watching people going about their lives. A desperate longing to see the streets, the houses, the cars and ordinary people washed over me. I realised I was likely to be deprived of these simple, everyday sights for some time. Would it be ten years, or just a month, before I saw Saadat Abad Boulevard again? It was a chilling thought. In moments like that, my heart would turn cold. It was a sensation like being half-drunk – numb and frozen. I told myself, 'From this point on, nothing is in your control. Just calm down and let things unfold.' From the moment they lied at my door and barged into my house, they had begun their psychological threats and torture, trampling on my basic rights and attempting to break my spirit. My only recourse was to try to regain some control by staying focused and composed throughout this ordeal.

Evin Prison Entrance

We were driving north on Yadegar-e-Emam Highway when the driver received a radio call telling him to head toward the Evin exit. I realised that I was going straight to prison. I asked, 'Weren't we supposed to go to the public prosecutor first?'

They said, 'Don't you worry about that!'

A little later, I realised that a branch of the Revolutionary Court was inside Evin Prison. The driver went up from the prison checkpoint under



Image 376: Evin Prison.

the highway bridge, and we reached a grey, iron door. Finally, I ended up exactly where I didn't want to be: Evin Penitentiary.[1]

We entered and, after passing through a dirt area, proceeded to the car park. After that was an administrative area with iron stairs. In another car, my colleague was sitting next to a female officer, and several officers were holding my seized belongings. They started the psychological pressure and games again and said to give them the passwords so they could release the woman. I said that they were not trustworthy, and I had to see the prosecutor first. They said that the prosecutor in my case had finished his shift and only the duty judge was present.

1 One of the most infamous prisons in Iran, located near Saadat Abad in Tehran. Some sections of this prison are not under the supervision of the judiciary of the Islamic Republic of Iran and are run by other institutions. Evin Prison has single and multi-person cells known as 'suites', which are under the control of the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC Intelligence Organisation. The movement of political prisoners outside the cells is only possible with blindfolds. The Government claims that this prison has one of the most well-equipped libraries among Iranian prisons. Many writers, poets and artists have been imprisoned in Evin, and some have created works during their imprisonment. In April 2021, the European Union sanctioned three Iranian prisons, including Evin, for human-rights violations by the Islamic Republic and the suppression and killing of protesters in the November 2019 protests.

I said I had to see someone who could tell me what was going to happen to me. At least I had the right to be formally charged and to know by what authority and by whose order I had been arrested.

About an hour later, they took me to see the duty judge. Entering the room, I saw a Mulla seated behind a desk. The moment I walked in, he began, 'Why didn't you cooperate with the officers? Why did you resist and refuse to give them the information they wanted?' He appeared calm and patient, and then employed the same tactic, promising that, if I handed over the passwords, he would release my colleague. It seemed even he, in his judicial position, was resorting to 'hostage diplomacy'.

I decided to challenge him directly, framing my questions legally. 'The officers said I was arrested under Article 508. Could you explain to me what exactly this article entails? What is this supposed "connection" I have with the hostile Government? Why have they taken my colleague hostage? And finally, what exactly do they expect to find by accessing my passwords?' Of course, I already knew the answers, but I wanted to force him to address these points formally.

He listened to all my questions attentively and then gave his reply: 'I can't divulge much about Article 508,' he said. 'It is a serious charge, and one you will need to answer. Regarding the woman, it appears there has been a misunderstanding, and she shouldn't be here. Apparently, you resisted, and the officers became . . . agitated. As for the passwords, we need to examine the information on your phone and computer, which is likely pertinent to the charges against you.'

I pressed him further, wanting him to elaborate on Article 508 and reveal what evidence they possessed to support such a grave accusation. I also challenged his promise regarding my colleague's release: 'What guarantee do I have that if I give you these passwords, you will actually release her?'

He simply repeated, 'I give you my word. Your colleague will be released. And you can discuss Article 508 with the investigator tomorrow.'

It wasn't long since my phone had been stolen and my accounts compromised, so I knew there was nothing in my emails they hadn't already accessed. Desperate to secure my colleague's freedom, I gave them the passwords.

They verified each password, one by one. Then, abruptly, they placed a document in front of me to sign. It stated, 'By order of the Revolutionary Court and for a period of one month, you are under temporary detention.'

I knew it was futile, but I protested again, stating I did not accept this detention and insisting on seeing the investigator the next day. They brushed aside my protests, saying my signature was a mere formality. The Mulla judge then picked up a law book and began reading aloud from it, but my mind was racing, and I couldn't properly grasp what he was saying. I was left with no option but to sign.

After I did, they took down my colleague's student-card details and address and finally released her. However, I later discovered this was far from over. About a week later, they pressured her to testify against me, subjecting her to considerable harassment. Even after I left Iran, they contacted her again on several occasions, attempting to coerce a confession. Thankfully, she managed to extricate herself from that situation and avoid further trouble.

They escorted me into the car park and handed me over to another officer. As he led me to the car, he offered some unsolicited advice: 'We arrest all sorts of people here,' he said, 'from university professors to economic criminals. You seem like a decent bloke. I don't know what you've done, and, frankly, I don't care, but you should cooperate with these people.' It seemed that in addition to his duty of transferring me to prison, he had another role – to try to, as they say, 'get inside my head'. He assured me they were taking me to a place with good food and water and that I should try to please the investigator so he would treat me well.

I asked when I might be able to speak to my family. Again, he deferred to the investigator. 'It all depends on the investigator,' he replied. Every question I asked was met with the same response, reinforcing the idea that, within the prison system, the investigator wielded absolute power.[1] I later

1 In principle, preliminary investigations at the prosecutor's office should be carried out by the investigating judge (*bazpers*), but in the Iranian judicial system, investigations into most human-rights cases are conducted by interrogators from intelligence and security agencies under the title of 'judicial police' (*zabetan-e dadgostari*). In political cases, which often carry heavy penalties, the key influence lies with interrogators from the agencies and specific officers such as 'officials from the Ministry of Intelligence, the IRGC Intelligence Organisation, and officers from the IRGC Basij Resistance Force'. This was formalised in amendments added in late Khordad 1394 (June 2015) as Clause (b) to Article 29 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Prolonging the interrogation period for

came to understand the truth of this. Even the smallest requests, like an extra cup of tea, required the investigator's permission. If you asked for more soap or extra time for a shower, the guards would say, 'Your investigator hasn't authorised it. Ask him tomorrow. If he agrees, we'll sort it out.' The reason behind this was clear: the investigator's intention was to gain complete psychological control over the accused, to manipulate them throughout the interrogation processes and steer them in the directions he had pre-determined. As you have likely already realised, and as you will see unfolds, this group employs every tactic to systematically dismantle the characters of the accused.

When we reached the car, the officer blindfolded me as well, so that I would travel to prison with handcuffs and a blindfold. From the car's movement, I realised that we were travelling a winding road and finally entering an area that was clearly very well guarded. The officer radioed and told someone on the other end of the line to open the door. Two people took my hands, and we entered a space that was cool. They sat me on a wheeled chair and told me to turn the chair to the left and sit in that position. Then they said to lift the blindfold a little and sign the paper that was there. When I lifted the blindfold, I saw that I was in an administrative room. The paper said, 'You are in Evin Detention Centre', and it listed a series of disciplinary matters that I would be obliged to implement with my signature. They explained to me that in the second stage they would provide me with a set of clothes, and I would enter the detention centre and register my name. They would then take me to the doctor. The officer explained all this and said forcefully: 'Understood?' and I had no choice but to say yes.

Two other officers put the blindfold on my eyes, and we entered another room. Again, I sat in the chair and was allowed to lift the blindfold a little. It was a small room with several lockable boxes. I realised this was where I had to change my clothes. They put a set of clothes on my lap. They pointed to the changing room opposite me and said I could go there to change. They also gave me a plastic bag in which I had to put my clothes. One of the officers said, 'When you've changed, call us.'

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many detainees and leaving them in a state of uncertainty is one of the most common methods used by interrogators in political and ideological cases.

The only place I was allowed to see with my eyes open was that small changing room. The prison uniform was a clean and ironed set of blue clothes. It was too big for me, and I folded up the trouser legs and sleeves. I looked at my clothes with longing, put them in the plastic bag and handed them over. Again, I closed the blindfold, and they took me to the guard room. After re-registering my details, the officer said, 'Haji, take delivery of your new prisoner.'

The Revolutionary Haji

In the administrative discourse of the Islamic Republic, 'Haji' is said to someone who has age and rank. Haji did not come alone; two other people were with him. He slammed his hand hard on my shoulder and said to get going. My assumption was that physical tortures had been abolished and that another type of torture called 'white torture',[1] or psychological torture, was prevalent. Torture that is far worse than physical abuse. Throughout the arrest process, I had not seen any physical abuse, but when Haji's hand slammed hard on my shoulder, I realised that this system had no intention of stopping abuse and had only changed its methods and made them more subtle and painful. The closed eyes and Haji's authoritarian hand on my shoulder evoked many feelings and memories for me, taking me back years to when I was a teenager and I was being beaten with my hands and eyes closed in the IRGC detention centre. I hadn't known which side the next

1 'White torture' is a type of psychological torture based on sensory deprivation and isolation of the prisoner, which is applied with the aim of destroying the person's personal identity and integrity. White torture is applied temporarily or permanently to the prisoner's psyche to disrupt its functioning. White torture is not applied to the body and leaves no visible trace. Among the tools used to destroy the identity of the prisoner are forced insomnia, jarring and annoying noises, constant light or darkness, denying access to the toilet, low or high temperatures, damp or dirty and polluted rooms, forcing them to stand, mock executions, stripping, depriving food or drink, denying access to medical and sanitary facilities, movement, blindfolds, insults, terror, sensory disturbances, disrupting the perception system, keeping the prisoner alone and cutting off their connection with others, and dozens of other things. Efforts are made to take the prisoner out of their own order and empty them of themselves. Unplanned interrogations have a multiplication effect on this process. In this type of torture, the individual, not the group, is the focus. Psychological torture is the best way to break a prisoner, and, in this regard, isolating them in solitary confinement can be as effective as beating, starving and depriving them of sleep (see Mohammadi, 2021).

blow would come from and which area of my body it would hit. That hand on my shoulder had many messages for me. In unspoken language, it was telling me that I was in his fist and should expect any kind of behaviour. All these memories were running through my brain and taking control of my mind.

We walked through a short corridor, and from the fact that I bumped into the left and right sides several times, I knew it was narrow and winding. I could hear the sound of a cooler, and it was clear that its belts were dried up from lack of water. There was no smell in the environment, and I was walking barefoot and without socks on the carpeted floor, which was rough. We reached a place where they stopped me again with force; a door opened, and they pushed me inside.

The distance from the corridor was so short that I bumped into the wall. I had entered solitary confinement.[1] Again, Haji put his hand on my shoulder and said in a gruff voice, 'From now on you are 98127. You have no name and no surname. You have no father, no mother, no sister, no brother. Here you are only known by the number 98127. Even if you are going to die here, you will die with this number. Understood?'

I was silent. I didn't want to answer, but he raised his voice and said with a strange anger, 'I'm talking to you, lad! Understood?'

Again, I had no choice but to say yes.

He had come to show his power and was not going to give up so easily. He said, 'By order of the officers who arrested you, you will be held and interrogated in this environment. You will sleep, you will shower, you will go to the toilet, and from now on this will be your place of residence. Until when? God knows.' Then he read the detention centre's manual to me: 'One shower during the week and on Friday. Toilet four times a day: dawn prayer, noon prayer, afternoon and before bedtime. Even if you are not at

1 Imprisonment in solitary confinement is a horrific experience, and every time I speak or write about it, it reminds me of the old pain and evokes the nightmarish days and nights that prisoners endure, in a cold, dark cell where the light is on at all hours of the day and night (see Vahidi Rad, 2021). Although the Administrative Court of Justice, by invalidating Paragraph 4 of Article 175 of the Executive Regulations of the Prisons Organisation, which authorised the disciplinary use of solitary confinement for a period of one month, has, in a unanimous ruling, considered keeping defendants in solitary confinement to be a clear example of torture and contrary to Article 39 of the Constitution – i.e. contrary to the dignity and human worth of defendants – those in authority are not even bound by these laws.

prayer, you will learn here. If you need the toilet beyond those four times, that's your problem. You'll have to hold it. Can't hold it? Then wet yourself. Defecation? Still your problem. You're expected to manage it outside the permitted times.'

Each time he read an item, he also said, 'Understood?', and if I didn't say yes, he wouldn't go to the next item. 'You don't talk to anyone. No one hears your voice. Whenever they talk to you, you answer. You don't start a conversation with the prison guard for no reason. We are just prison guards here, and you write down your requests and give them to us. We hand them over to your investigator to issue the necessary orders.'

I later realised that this ceremony, which is a combination of physical torture and psychological abuse, is called 'orientating the prisoner', and Haji loved this process. After that day, I repeatedly heard his voice from other cells, engaged in 'orientating' newly arrived prisoners in the same way.

Later, I heard some funny stories about him. Apparently, he had a tic; his left eye twitched, and, along with this twitch, he shook his head, so that if he looked at your face you could imagine he was winking. When I went to the communal cell, I also saw his face, but that day I could only hear the snap of his voice and feel the power of his hands on my shoulders. When he finished his speech, he said to me, 'You'll stay here like a good lad until they take you to the doctor. Then you can have dinner and go to sleep. Have a pleasant stay at the Evin Hotel. Good night.' He slammed the door shut and left.

The rough sound of the iron door and its locking echoed in my ears. My eyes were still closed, and I was standing stunned in the middle of the room, not knowing what to do. They had opened the handcuffs, but the blindfold was still on my eyes. When I got a little braver, I lifted the blindfold, adjusted it on my forehead and looked around. There was a blue carpet under my feet. I was in a small, narrow room with a few blankets in the corners. A few seconds later, someone from outside said, 'You can take off your blindfold.' I think this is also a routine to psychologically abuse the prisoner; otherwise, he could have said to take off your blindfold sooner. I realised that Haji was watching me through the hole in the door. Maybe they enjoy seeing people's despair and suffering. A loop-shaped pendant had been installed on the wall, and he said I could hang it on that, and then he left.

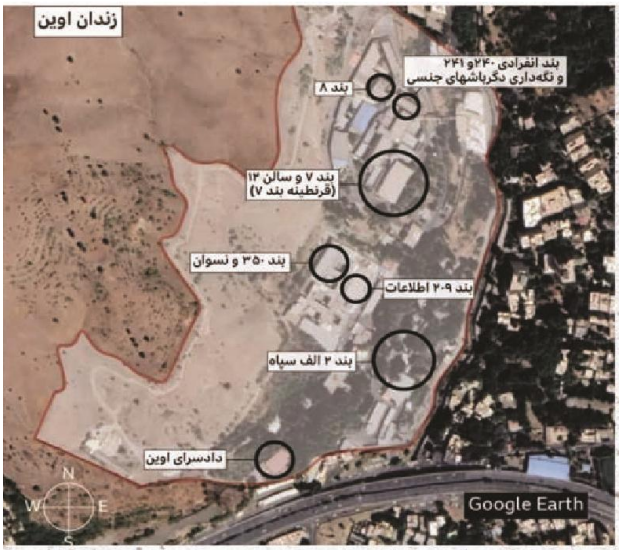


Image 377: Map of Evin Prison.

After a while, a guard from behind the door said, 'Close your blindfold and stand in front of the door.' Without explaining, he took me with him, and we stopped at a point. He said, 'Inside are three showers, but you're alone. I'm standing here, and they are watching you from the closed-circuit camera in the guard room. Take a quick shower to go to the doctor for an examination.'

I opened the door, and I saw three toilet-showers, which had cameras installed all around. I said, 'Take a bath naked with the presence of a camera?'

He replied, 'You have no other choice!'

I reluctantly took off my clothes and entered the shower. Fat, large cockroaches that had come out of the drain hid themselves.

They gave me Golnar soap and toothpaste, and a very poor-quality red towel and a toothbrush. When I dried myself, the red colour of the towel was all over my body. I was standing with my red-stained body when the guard shouted, 'Why don't you come out?'

I said, 'This towel has turned my body red. I've showered a few times, and my body is still red.'

He said, 'You can't do anything; you have to wash your towel a few times to fix it. Stand under the cooler to dry yourself.'

Later, I washed the towel several times, but it didn't get better; it turned grey! When I came out of the shower, they took my belongings, which were inside a plastic bag, and said we had to go to the doctor. Again, I went to the guard room and waited for a while with my eyes closed until a car came and I got in. Two minutes later, we arrived at a place they said was Clinic

Number One. They took me down a winding path and said, 'Sit on this chair.'

A man stood in front of me and said to the guard, 'Should I take off his blindfold? Do you allow?' I realised it was the doctor.

The guard took off my blindfold from behind. I saw a young man in white clothes in front of me. He asked me if I had any underlying illnesses. I said I didn't have any particular illness, only shortness of breath sometimes. I immediately remembered that I also get anxious in small spaces. I said that small cell was bothering me and had messed with my mind. He listened carefully, took off all my clothes and examined me from head to toe. He said, 'It's clear from the crease in your clothes that you've just arrived.' I said I was worried about my family, to which he replied that these matters were not related to him.

The officer shouted, 'What right do you have to talk to the doctor about this?' He wouldn't let the examination follow its natural course.

Afterward, they took me through the same winding space, again with a blindfold, we got in the car and I was returned to my cell.

About an hour later, a hand reached in through the hatch at the bottom of the door and placed a plastic container, along with a disposable spoon, fork and glass, on the floor. Despite being very hungry, I had no appetite. I managed a spoonful or two. The first meal I had in prison was lentil rice. I really wanted to drink water, but I was afraid it would run out and they wouldn't give me any more. The number 98127 was written on my food container, and I later realised that '98' represented the year I was arrested and '127' meant I was the 127th prisoner that summer to end up in solitary confinement. Even then, I still didn't know which section of Evin Prison I was in, or which intelligence or security organisation controlled me. I only suspected that I was in Ward 2A of Evin Prison and in the hands of the IRGC, but I wasn't even sure of that.

My height is about 170 centimetres. The solitary confinement cell was about twenty centimetres longer than my height. Its width was only enough for two people to lie next to each other without being able to fidget. When I slept and tossed and turned, I would hit the opposite wall. Perhaps I can say it was slightly wider than a grave, and you couldn't do anything else in it but sleep. There were three blankets made of rough, coarse army material there, one of which I spread under myself because the ground was very hard and rough. I used one as a pillow and threw another over myself.

Because they were rough and coarse, I itched for a long time, and it took me a while to get used to them. The food was given in plastic containers through the iron door that was built at the bottom of the room. All I could see was a hairy hand; I couldn't hear a sound or see the face of the person bringing the food. Water or sometimes a yoghurt drink was given with the food. If they gave tea, it was also in the same disposable plastic cups, with two sugar cubes next to it.

The prison had a high ceiling. The walls were marble up to about one metre, and from there they were cement. There was a camera in the right corner and another camera in the left corner in the opposite direction. Two cameras had been installed in that small environment! A telephone was placed on the wall, of which two numbers worked – one number to communicate with the guards and the other to communicate with the duty officer. We were only allowed to contact the duty officer in very necessary cases, and for other matters we had to contact the guard. If your number of calls was high or they were not in the mood, they wouldn't answer the phone. They could see my condition from the monitor in the guard room, but they wouldn't answer, even if I was sick! When they did answer, they would snap with anger and contempt, 'Why are you calling so much?'

A few months before my arrest, something happened to me that made me realise that I was afraid of small, closed environments and that I had a phobia of them. For the funeral of a relative in Tehran, I went to an apartment, and I and a few other people got stuck in the small lift of that building. The air was hot, and there was no ventilation. The child who was with us was in a critical situation, so we broke the lift door. That day, I realised I was a little afraid of small environments, and I became short of breath.[1] The solitary confinement cell evoked the same feelings for me, and I was constantly telling myself that I had to get used to the new environment. I knew that I had no other choice but to accept it.

After dinner, I heard the azan – the call to prayer. The light above my head went out, and another one came on. It was a coloured light, which was less bright than the previous one. I was wondering how to sleep with that much light. My worries about where I was and what was going to

1 Fear of enclosed and confined spaces usually originates in childhood or adolescence and progresses with age. This type of fear is an anxiety disorder, and a person with such a disorder will experience problems with breathing, distress and cognitive impairment.

happen to me were increasing every moment. I remembered my son and wondered when I could see him. What if there was no possibility of seeing him again? What if he were a teenager when I got out of prison? What if he were seriously hurt in my absence?

Then I remembered Shafagh and how much trouble she would have taking care of Alan in my absence. I was thinking about when I could talk to her and tell her what had happened. What would my family do when they found out what had happened? Would this system allow me to have a lawyer? Why had they arrested me in the first place? What questions were they going to ask me in the interrogations? What would they do to me?

Later, I remembered that, in my absence, my family would have financial problems. I knew that my own family and my wife's family were mindful of everything, but I had a duty to provide for my family, and they would have problems without me. What would happen to my responsibilities, commitments and mortgage to the bank, and who could manage all this in my place? At the height of my mental worries, I remembered my Aunt Zeynab's daughter's wedding, which was supposed to be held in a few weeks. I had planned a lot of it. These confused thoughts continued and repeated so much that at one point I felt I would soon get dizzy. My heart started pounding, and my blood pressure rose. My temples were aching, my stomach had turned cold, and I was saying to myself, 'How long am I going to be imprisoned in this small room?' For a moment, I wished I hadn't come back from London, and, then again, I told myself that I had had to come back eventually. Thoughts wouldn't leave me for a moment. I was saying to myself, 'I wish I had kissed my son twice instead of once when I said goodbye!' I remembered the day he asked me for an extra toy, and I didn't buy it for him . . .

Without realising it, I was talking to myself loudly. Someone from outside shouted, 'Mate, we know it's your first night, but please don't talk so loudly.' The guards were seeing all this from their room, and I later realised that the investigator also sees these videos, especially the tape of the first days.

Near morning, I finally fell asleep but woke to the sound of the guard shouting in the corridor, 'Dawn prayer! Dawn prayer!' Broadcasting the prayer meant that they would open the door so you could go to the toilet. I never thought that one day I would be so happy to have access to the

toilet at this early hour. I wasn't into prayers and religious worship, but the dawn prayer was pleasant for me for that reason. Usually, the guard stood behind the prisoner in the toilet, and you had to pretend to perform ablutions. I would prolong it so that I could return to that damned cell a bit later, so much so that the guard would get angry and say, 'How many times are you performing ablutions? Do you want to have a shower?'

In the distance from the toilet to the cell, they would also blindfold us. Seeing anything other than the cell was pleasant. Even seeing the tap, the degree that it turned to the left and right, a window that was broken in the corner of its glass, a mosaic that was cracked, and pipes that were rusted. Seeing all this was attractive to a solitary prisoner, because he was coming out of a small and extremely simple space that was messing with his mind.

The first time I performed ablutions, I wondered what to do. I knew they were watching me from the guard room, so I sat down and pretended to pray in a bent position, but later I protested and said that I had no desire to pray. It was interesting that my protest was accepted, and they warned the guard who was forcibly waking me up for prayer. This behaviour from an inhumane system was strange and unexpected!

The Game Begins

They know everything about you. Even what you like and what upsets you. They know how to turn a person into a number and then suggest to him that he is not a number! They, those interrogators whose interests lie in crushing you, take strange pleasure in this and seem to be addicted to it.

They start games that they know they will almost always win. They have set up the playing field in advance, and everything is in its place. They enter the field to have fun and enjoy this winning feeling. However, they are not well and will not be.

They make the condition of the accused worse – often someone who wouldn't be considered accused under any law except the Islamic Republic's – but they go one degree further. It's as if they want to take revenge on you for their bad mood – as if they're saying, 'Since I'm not well, neither should you be.'

I don't know who tortured them, but I know that the Iranian judicial system is now full of these torturers who, with white and black methods, are responsible for making society pay.

Interrogation

Finally, the first night came to an end. I was sitting in the corner of the cell with puffy, red eyes. I had been awake all night. My body was swollen, and the headache was unbearable. I begged them to give me my glasses so that my headache would be less, but it was useless. The high prescription my eyes needed and the resulting pain didn't matter to them. They just said, 'Talk about it when you see your expert.' The prison guards called the interrogator the 'expert', and, throughout my time in prison, I kept thinking about how miserable the word 'expert' had become! It was as if they didn't even accept their own profession. They knew it was inhumane, and they were trying to reduce the ugliness of their work and give it a human dimension by changing the name 'interrogator' to 'expert'.

After reading the fake morning prayer in the cell, I was again sleepless and ruined when they brought breakfast – some cheese, a few pieces of bread and tea. We had to keep the food containers and wash them in the toilet block. After breakfast, I heard the guard's voice from behind the door: '127, put your blindfold on. We want to open the door.' It seemed too early to me. They should have come at least a few hours later, but nothing would go according to my expectations!

We entered a corridor and followed the path we had come down the night before, in reverse. I heard a door open, and fresh air hit my face. They put a pair of slippers in front of me. With my eyes closed, I found them one by one. They took me into another corridor, and the guard who was with me shouted, 'Seyyed, 127 is ready. Take him over.'

Two people came up from a basement, took my hands, and led me down. They sat me on a chair and left. I could hear two people whispering, but they had lowered their voices so much that I couldn't understand anything they were saying. After a while, one of them started talking. With my eyes closed, I knew that I was hearing their voices from nearby. My guess was correct: the interrogators were two people. Throughout the interrogation, one of them called me 'Kameel', and the other called me 'Doctor'. They started their conversation without any greetings, but with sarcasm: 'Doctor, it seems like you had a rough night!'

I said, 'Yes, it was a long night.'

'How did it go?' he asked.

I said, 'It was difficult. I didn't sleep. I think you know how it went. You saw it yourselves . . .' I knew the situation I was in must have been reported, which is why they were asking about it.

He said, 'It's good that your level of understanding is high. Because our work becomes easy: you don't ask obvious questions, and you answer our questions correctly!'

The other continued, 'Do you know what's going to happen to you or do I need to explain?'

'The hierarchy is predictable,' I said. 'My interrogation is about to begin, and it will certainly be long. You have questions that I have to answer, or you have come to answers that you want me to confirm!'

After I said this, the other interrogator burst out laughing and said, 'Kameel, you've watched too many films. What were you doing for those two or three months in London? Watching interrogation films? Of course, your British interrogations have better quality and technique. You people work very regally and like royalty. What is it really like there from this point of view, Kameel? For example, were you being taught what to do? Do you know how to cheat the lie detector?' They were talking so frankly and setting up the playing field in a way that would condemn me! One would say, 'Were you hired during your student days or after?' The other would say, 'What year was it?' The first would answer, '2003', and the second would say, 'No way! He was at the University of Kent in 2002 and 2003' and so on. In this way, they were telling me they knew everything about me.

With surprise, I asked, 'Do you really see me as a high-ranking intelligence officer? You yourselves know that these things don't suit me!'

They said, 'Kameel, no, we are not that amateur, and we don't mean that you are spying! We know that your degree is much higher than these things. The things that you have done for them, or you are ordered to do, your influence in the Iranian Government and parliament . . . shows that we should not underestimate you! You were constantly connected to this place and tried to change policies. A spy's job is to steal four pieces of information and deliver them. Your job has been something else. We understand these things ourselves, and we respect your status!'

When the verbal abuse and threats subsided somewhat, one of them said, 'Take off your blindfold.' I hesitated, unsure about doing so, and he

repeated, 'Take it off. Take it off! Aren't you finding it difficult to sit there with your eyes covered?'

When I removed the blindfold, I saw a large mirror directly in front of me, reflecting only my own image. The interrogators were watching me from behind the mirror, just like in police films. I stared at my reflection: a figure in a blue outfit, hair dishevelled, sitting in a small room with a single, heavily barred window. Through that window, I could see the trees of Evin prison, and the sound of crows[1] only amplified my anxiety.



Image 378: Single cell with toilet, Ward 2A of the IRGC. Evin Prison, Tehran.

After I had argued with them for a while – asking why I was even there, saying how ridiculous the charge they'd presented the day before was, and wanting to know where they'd even dreamt it up – they simply stated, 'We are the interrogators. If you want to know more, ask the case investigator in due course.'

1 In the view of some people in the East, these birds are ominous, but the poor crows, compared to humans – and especially the interrogators hiding behind the mirror – are innocent creatures!

With that, the interrogations began, taking on a more formal, written structure.[1] They would write out a question, and I was expected to provide a detailed, written response for them.

I had anticipated they would begin by questioning me about the child-marriage research or the project on homosexuals; instead, they went straight to my earliest work, asking about female genital mutilation/cutting. This line of questioning made me realise the interrogation was following a chronological order, proceeding in line with the publication dates of my research. Moreover, I later understood that the FGM/C project provided them with the strongest grounds on which to accuse me of collaborating with a hostile government. Otherwise, FGM/C itself would likely have been of little concern to them, as it holds no significance in their Shia ideology.

The next question was about my work history with Ms RM – the colleague who had briefly worked on the project and whom I mentioned in Part Five. My answer to this question was also of great interest to them, and they wanted a full account of how I met her and how we collaborated.

Midway through my explanation, one of the interrogators interjected, saying that I had arrived on the scene and snatched a project that RM considered hers. 'She's furious,' he claimed, 'and says you've fraudulently claimed the work on female genital mutilation/cutting as your own!' They

1 According to the provisions of the basic rights of defendants, those arrested at the time of arrest and during the interrogation period, which is often long and exhausting, have basic rights that are rarely heeded and respected. Firstly, the defendant's right to silence: this right is mentioned in Article 197 of the Criminal Procedure Code, but despite the legislator's emphasis that 'the defendant can choose to remain silent', this legal right is usually met with harsh or mocking treatment by officers, interrogators and investigating magistrates. Secondly, the right to have a lawyer: the legislator states in Article 190 of the Criminal Procedure Code that 'the defendant can have a barrister with them during the preliminary investigation stage' and emphasises that 'this right must be communicated and explained to the defendant by the investigating magistrate before the investigation begins. If the defendant is summoned, this right shall be stated on the summons and communicated to him. The defendant's lawyer can, after being informed of the charge and its reasons, state anything that he deems necessary for the discovery of the truth, the defence of the defendant, or the implementation of the law. The lawyer's statements shall be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.' In practice, though, in political and ideological cases, these political defendants are in situations for long periods after their arrests where neither they, nor their lawyers, nor their families have any information about the arrest and the investigation process, and it is not known exactly what has happened to them.

were grasping at anything to provoke me. These so-called 'experts' clearly didn't understand that genuine researchers don't compete to steal each other's work, and that no research topic is ever exclusively tied to a single researcher. Of course, I later understood the real reason for bringing up this particular person and this issue.

Gradually, I learned to avoid answering personal and family-related questions, responding only to those they presented in writing and demanded written answers for. However, it was striking that, on the very first day, within the first hour of interrogation, we had already reached this person and that period of my work. I surmised that the security services were, in their own words, remarkably well-informed about my work and knew precisely who was working on which project. The subsequent questions concerned when this research had begun, when it had concluded, who the active team members were and in which provinces I had conducted fieldwork interviews.

The interrogation was structured so that they would first pose a question verbally and discuss it with me before it was committed to paper. For example, they might say, 'You started the FGM/C research in 2009. Explain where you went in West Azerbaijan.' I would respond with places like Bukan, Baneh and Sardasht, providing them with the field information. I knew they had already accessed all this information from my mobile phone, laptop and emails. That's why I had decided the previous night to be completely transparent – and, more importantly, because I hadn't done anything wrong that I needed to conceal!

When I asked for my glasses to write the answer to the first question, they initially refused, saying they weren't necessary! However, as my eyesight is quite poor, and I also deliberately wrote illegibly, the interrogators took the paper and couldn't decipher it. Laughing, they said, 'Bring in 127's glasses.' The arrival of my glasses, in those grim circumstances, felt like a stroke of unexpected good fortune, and I started writing. The interrogator kept pushing me to write more, but I insisted I had nothing further to add, suggesting they should consult my laptop and research, where they would find everything, as a researcher has nothing to hide. And as I mentioned in Part Five, they had indeed hacked all my accounts on two occasions, and, in another instance, snatched my mobile phone while I was talking in the street.

That day, I was interrogated non-stop until noon. Around one in the afternoon, the phone behind the mirror rang. One of the interrogators answered and announced it was time for prayer and lunch. One of them then addressed me: 'They'll be coming for you now for prayer and lunch. You do pray, don't you?' They burst into laughter, and another interrogator continued, 'Doctor, you'll have your lunch and a bit of a rest, and then we'll be back to work with you. We'll be working together temporarily for the next few months.' And the first one added again, 'Kameel, you're known for your persistence and stamina. I don't think you'll be too pleased if our work drags on, but, come on, work with us for this period.'

These two interrogators were trying to play those classic and hackneyed roles: good cop/bad cop. From the very beginning of the interrogation, when the bad cop was being harsh, the good cop tried to play his role well. Laughing, I said, 'Even my son, who is a child, has seen this good cop/bad cop game in the films!'

The bad cop said, 'Are you aware that you said something very bad?! I didn't expect this from you. We are law enforcement officers here, and you are stealing information and not telling us what you should. I certainly have to deal with you!' He played the role of the bad cop until the end of his presence, and later he was removed so that I and the good cop could continue the work alone. Of course, later the good cop also left, and another one came.

That day, they blindfolded me again. I went to the toilet and pretended to perform ablutions. Then they took me back to the cell and brought my lunch, which I think was Khoresh Gheimeh. The food in the detention centre, where I was, was good. I later realised that this food was prepared outside the prison and was equal to the good takeaway restaurants in the area.

About an hour after the food, we went back to the interrogation room, and, for the first time in the corridor, I heard the voices of some women, who seemed to be outside the cell and were playing some kind of game or sport with a ball. When they put the slippers in front of my feet, I heard a woman's voice saying, 'Prisoner, be strong. Don't lose yourself!' It was strange to me that I was hearing someone's voice other than the prison guards', and even the voice of another prisoner saying not to lose myself. Later, I realised that one of their fellow prisoners was in the same ward as

me, and the woman was one of the environmental prisoners who had been in there for years. That voice and its encouragement made my day. That voice was like a ray of hope that shone on me.

In detention and in solitary confinement, when your connection with the outside world is cut off, thousands of worries rush toward you. That voice was a promise that I was not alone. Even inside the cramped cell and surrounded by those hostile people, I was still not alone. The courageous owner of that voice made me stronger with one sentence. In the following days, I also heard her voice saying, '127 be strong.' Apparently, every day she heard the prison guards hand me over to each other and say, 'Take 127.' I didn't understand anything about the code-giving inside the prison, but that voice was a source of strength for me.

In the afternoon, we worked again on the same topic of FGM/C, and we were involved in it for the next few days as well. One day I asked, 'Have you really brought me here for the work on FGM/C, five years after that work has been published? Do you want to get a confession about it?'

Later, I realised that the role of the HIVOS Foundation, which funded the FGM/C research, was a legal and decisive issue for them. According to them, one of the hundreds of funders of this foundation was American, and they used this issue as an excuse to arrest and convict me under Article 508 on charges of collaborating with the hostile US Government.

I told my interrogator that the topic of FGM/C was old news! I barely even talked about it any more. 'The most I might do,' I said, 'is put up a post on my Instagram on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM/C.'

But the interrogator dismissed this, saying, 'This issue is far more profound than you seem to think! We'll get to your other work as well, but this particular project is different. You've worked on female genital mutilation/cutting. Do you realise the significance this issue holds in high-level documents and within feminist circles?'

I retorted, 'Where have you all been all this time, then? Why didn't you stop me before? Why did no one say my work was illegal, especially when my book was granted a publishing license?'

He just replied, 'Patience. We'll get to all of that, too!'

Mid-way through the interrogation, I reiterated, 'Seyyed, you have detained me unlawfully. Since yesterday, I've had no access to a lawyer,

nor to my family. It's time I was granted these rights, as per prison regulations.' I used the honorific 'Seyyed' that they themselves used.

Upon hearing this, he said, 'We were expecting you to ask about that. However, you are under security detention, and in security cases—' in the lexicon of the Iranian judicial and intelligence system, 'political prisoners' do not exist— 'lawyers are not permitted to be present during interrogations. Frankly, lawyers are ten a penny! We'll consider the matter of contacting your family and a lawyer in the coming days. It depends on your level of cooperation, you see.'

I challenged him: 'Where in the law does it say I shouldn't have access to a lawyer?'

From beneath the mirror, he slid a book toward me, telling me to read a specific page. It was the Code of Criminal Procedure. 'I don't accept this book,' I stated firmly. 'I must have access to a lawyer, and I need to speak to my family. I was supposed to be somewhere else in the country by now. I know they'll be constantly calling, unable to find me, and they must be incredibly worried.'

He just said, 'Right, we'll see what we can do!'

Sunbathing with Ants

Anxious about my family, I told my interrogator that I needed to call them the next day, before any further interrogation, otherwise I would refuse to



Image 379: View of the prison and the hills of Evin.

cooperate. Before they took me back to my cell, they mentioned it was my 'airing' time. I didn't know what this entailed or how it would be conducted, but it didn't really matter; I was just supposed to feel some fresh air. They led me near the exercise yard and adjusted my blindfold slightly, just enough so I could see the ground in front of my feet. They pointed out a row of paving stones at the start of the path and instructed me to walk back and forth along that line.

I scanned my surroundings, seeing that the yard was located behind the cells, including, as I realised, the one I was now occupying. The paving stones were a reddish purple. At the far end of the yard, there was a small pool and a couple of saplings planted beside it. It was a rectangular space, roughly five by fifteen metres, and I later noticed that the high walls were topped with barbed wire and the whole area was under constant surveillance by numerous cameras. The windows of the cells overlooking the exercise yard were also blocked with grey metal sheeting.

We were allocated twenty minutes of 'airing' time each day. Prisoners were brought out in groups of three, instructed to walk on their designated paving stones, blindfolded, and breathe in the 'fresh air'! We prisoners could only see each other's feet, and the constant presence of the guards prevented any conversation. Even smoking depended on the investigator's orders. If you were permitted, your cigarette ration would be brought to you. I wasn't a smoker myself, but I noticed that they would sometimes light cigarettes for some of the other prisoners.

Sometimes, I would sit with my back to the wall of the yard and carefully examine the details of the environment. For example, I had found an ant nest and counted their numbers. I paid attention to what things they were taking to the nest. Later, when they gave me paper and a pen to write down anything I remembered for the interrogators, I made a table and recorded the schedule of the food that the ants were taking to the nest. For example, I would write on the 13th day, 'three grains of rice, one sunflower seed, etc.' Or I would write that there were several saplings in the back yard and what their height, diameter and type were, where the pigeons had gone to the toilet and dropped their droppings, and how the ants were feeding on these droppings.

I had never paid attention to these things in my daily life because I was constantly pursuing my projects. I didn't have the time or interest to pay attention to such details. I wished that the first guard would take the other

two prisoners away so that I could be in the open air a little longer, or that he would be delayed on the way back and that a task would be assigned to him, so that this twenty-minute airing would become, for example, twenty-two minutes. I would record the sounds around me in my memory and could distinguish, for example, a nightingale, a sparrow, a crow or a pigeon in that area. Although very infrequently, sometimes I would hear a car, which was a connection with the outside world. I would imagine the path of the car and try to guess what car it was from its sound: 'This is a Peugeot, this is a Pride, this is a tractor, this is a tipper truck, this is a Khavar truck . . .'

Solitary confinement forced you to find excuses to live. Sometimes I would get caught up in the sound of other prisoners' footsteps. I wanted to guess from the rhythm of the steps whether they were fat or thin and create a face for them in my mind. If they coughed, I would see if it was prolonged and whether they had a chronic illness or, for example, had caught a cold in the cell. Colds were common in the solitary confinement unit. The coolers were on most of the time, and the sound of their dry belts was always on my nerves. I knew that someone who had been walking next to me the day before had been crying. Probably he was next to me again today and was crying. If he was not there the next day and for several days after that, I would worry that something had happened to him, and I would ask myself, 'Has he been released? Hasn't he? Has he been transferred to the General Ward?' These cases were the only contacts I had with the outside world, and airing and even interrogations were better than the cell.

When I returned to the cell and it was sunset, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I had undergone heavy psychological pressure, and the questions they had asked had worried me even more. I could see that the matter was serious, and it was not clear what was going to happen to me. I generally hated sunset, and sunsets in prison were even harder. When I entered the cell from the open air, it was as if I had stepped into a grave. I was so unwell that my heart wouldn't stop pounding. I touched my face and found that it was wet with sweat. I knew I was red and flushed and it was as if there were no oxygen inside the cell. I couldn't sleep either, and I was afraid to look around me.

My condition deteriorated to the point where I contacted the duty officer. He responded, 'There's nothing wrong with you, mate! It's just your first few days! You'll be fine!'



Image 380: Evin Prison, aerial view

After a short while, my condition worsened, and I rang again. The duty officer said it wasn't their problem. He told me to speak to my guard. The guard, in turn, simply said he wasn't a doctor and hung up! My dizziness intensified, and my condition further declined. I instinctively started banging my fist on the door, and when the phone rang, they demanded, 'What's all this commotion? Didn't Haji explain things to you yesterday? Do you think this is some kind of barn?!' I said I wasn't feeling well – that I couldn't catch my breath. They just repeated that the first day was always like this, and I'd get used to it.

'Get used to it!' I exclaimed, 'What do you mean "get used to it"? I'm struggling to breathe!' In short, I put so much pressure on them that they finally took me to the clinic.

Again, it was the turn of the previous day's duty doctor. As soon as he saw me, he said it was a panic attack. Then he asked if I had gone to the airing today. I said yes. He said my heart rate was high. 'You've had a panic

attack, but I don't have any medicine. I'll give you two painkillers and sleeping pills so you can sleep better, because tomorrow you will probably have a worse day. If you endure too much pressure in the interrogation, you may be hospitalised here, which is not a good experience. I recommend you don't let it get to that point.'

The doctor spoke caringly, but very cautiously. He wanted to calm me down, but the guard was constantly interfering and saying, 'That's enough!' He wanted to take me back to the cell sooner and go to rest.

I fell asleep after taking the pills and woke up in the middle of the night. My whole body was sweating, and I was nervous. I don't know if it was a side effect of the pills or the result of the situation I was in. Negative thoughts invaded again, and I began pacing in the cell. As soon as I fell asleep, the guard shouted, 'Dawn prayer!'

I washed my face and went back to my cell. I think I fell asleep again from exhaustion until they woke me up for breakfast.

After breakfast, it was again the blindfold, the trip to the basement, the slippers and the interrogation. I was on the verge of breaking, but I had to endure. There was no other way. Before starting the interrogation, I reminded them that I had to talk to my family, and when they didn't pay attention, I decided to resist. I was annoyed, and I was sleepy. Whatever question they asked, I said I had no opinion until I talked to my family.

The interrogators constantly threatened that, if I didn't talk, they'd do this and that, and they said, 'It doesn't matter any more if you don't answer. We'll write the report ourselves. You're going to get a twenty-year prison sentence, and it'll become forty years. You might even get the death penalty because of this behaviour, and this issue is beyond our control.'

When I didn't back down, they changed their approach a little and said, 'Kameel, you are a respected and scientific figure. We don't want to talk to and treat you like the others. Don't miss this opportunity and don't do anything that makes us leave and interrogators come for you who will behave differently.'

The day before, I had noticed that, in other rooms, sometimes the voices of the prisoner and the interrogator would rise. Mostly it was the interrogator who was shouting at the prisoner: 'Why are you lying? Why aren't you telling the truth? Why aren't you writing?' In the last months of my interrogation, I heard the voice of a woman who was constantly shouting at her interrogator, and that gave me strength. There was also an

Isfahani prisoner with a very beautiful accent who was defending his rights and shouting back at the interrogator's questions. These voices were what my interrogators were referring to. They said it was possible for them to behave like that, but they didn't do it.

I didn't back down until, finally, at the end of the interrogation, they said, 'You can contact your wife for one minute and say you're OK.' But I didn't accept.

I felt that I was at a stage where I had to have a quid pro quo, and they should show some flexibility. My interrogator understood this well and constantly said sarcastically, 'Kameel, I know you are good at negotiating. That's why you have acted so effectively and taken the increase in the age of child marriage to parliament with your friends for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic. You learned lobbying from the English, didn't you?'

Finally, we came to an agreement, and it was decided that I would contact Shafagh in the afternoon.

On the first day of interrogation, they deliberately didn't give me a chance to breathe, to increase the pressure, but on the second day I had a chance to breathe. This day also passed with the discussion of FGM/C. Around 11 am, the interrogation stopped, and the guard took me out of the room for about half an hour. Later, I heard from other prisoners that the first week to a maximum of ten days is very important to the interrogators. They consider it a security window. So, they try to get all your information, because, after this period, the prisoner's psychological state may be disrupted by the atmosphere, and his memory may be impaired, or the prisoner's relatives may take over or erase his information such as his email and virtual accounts.

In the cell, there was only the Quran and a prayer stone. I wasn't into prayer, and, if I were, as a Sunni-born, I wouldn't use a stone for praying. The Quran I had was entirely in Arabic and had no Farsi translation. I wanted them to give me at least a Quran with a translation. I had read it a lot before and used its verses in my work. When I asked my interrogators for a book, they laughed at me and said, 'The only book available here is the Quran.'

During breaks, the prisoner who was always walking to my left was reading the Quran. His voice bothered me. I wanted to look at the ant nest and count the ants, but this gentleman was reading the Quran loudly and

wouldn't let me be in my own state. Later, when they changed my cell, I was unlucky enough that this gentleman was in the cell opposite mine, and he was constantly reading the Quran and crying in a loud voice. In the evenings, when I felt worse, apparently he felt worse, so he would read the Quran and weep. Later, in the communal prison, I understood that he was one of the deputies of Akbar Tabari,[1] the deputy of Sadegh Larijani, the former head of the judiciary. I will talk about him and his gang later.

When we reached the evening of the second day, the interrogator said, 'Kameel, unfortunately, the bosses are not allowing you to contact the outside world. The only option is to contact them with your own phone, but it's stuck in the Imam Hussein barracks, which is the administrative information centre of the IRGC.'

I knew he was lying. I said, 'It's been forty-eight hours since I talked to my family, and they don't even know where I am. You also promised me, and you weren't supposed to break your word.'

He swore and said, 'I give you my word of honour, you'll talk to your family tomorrow.'

When I returned to my cell, I again had a shortness of breath, but the doctor's words were running through my mind, so I tried to control my situation. Although it was difficult to bear, I somehow coped with this torment.

Cooperation with the Hostile Government

On the morning of the third day, the first thing I did was declare that I would not answer another question until I had spoken to my family. The 'good cop' then placed my mobile phone in my hand. I immediately noticed that the lenses of both the front and rear cameras were covered

1 Akbar Atabaki Tabari, known as Akbar Tabari (born in the village of Mati Kola, a suburb of Babol), was the former director-general of financial affairs and former executive deputy of the judiciary of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the presidencies of Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi and Sadegh Larijani over the judiciary, and a former member of the board of directors of the Kung Fu and Martial Arts Federations. Seven days after the start of Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi's work as the head of the judiciary, Tabari was the first official to be dismissed, and he was arrested on 23 Tir 1398 (July 2019) by the IRGC Intelligence Organisation in Amol. In Tabari's indictment, he was named as the first defendant. Money laundering, bribery and exerting influence in judicial cases were the main charges.

with something. He took the phone back, searched for Shafagh's number and said, 'You have twenty-three missed calls from your wife and loads from your sisters, your father-in-law and others.' I also had countless messages, but since they had already accessed these applications on my laptop, they seemed indifferent to my phone itself. They already had access to everything about me.

Throughout the interrogation, they repeatedly alluded to personal details, saying things like 'Your book was published in London', or 'So-and-so friend is worried about you', or 'This one's got married.' It was a calculated psychological operation, designed to constantly torment me. They would deliberately select hashtags created to support my freedom and show them to me.

They would read out messages from people saying they missed me, and then one of them would start: 'Oh, Kameel! Look who misses you . . .' Then another would chime in, 'Look what she's writing for you', or, 'Oo la la, this one's very hot. You should see what she's saying about you', or, 'Aha! That person you travelled with twenty years ago – they've heard you've been arrested and launched a "Free Him" campaign for you!' 'This foreign colleague of yours has just found out, and look what he's written for you on Facebook – what loyal friends you have, Kameel! What good friends . . .' And yet another would add, 'I had a look through your emails. Where are those travel photos from? Where in Spain is this photo taken? You went on a sea trip with so-and-so, and you're still friends, huh? What a trip you had together! What a time that was! We never had any of that. Such a strange and free life, eh? We just studied and then were honourably hired by the IRGC.'

These words triggered a torrent of emotions – anger, fear, hatred . . . I felt like my privacy, my home, my family and my friends had all been violated. I wanted to shout, to accuse these men who were torturing me and my loved ones, without any justification – to tell them not to speak to me of honour. If they were so 'honourably hired', they wouldn't treat even a murderer in this way. But I knew I had to remain calm – not let them gain any further control. They held the physical power, they had seized control of my life, but I couldn't allow them to take control of my mind as well.

Later, when I saw the face of my interrogator, Seyyed, he would say, 'Do you like these olive-green trousers? The IRGC trousers?' He would come with clothes that had the IRGC logo on them, and seeing them would



Image 381: The IRGC logo.

revive the same old childhood fears in me. He was a sharp person and knew when to use everything; for example, when to raise the subject of cohabitation and connect it to memories from fifteen years ago in my life. They knew a lot about me, and in their supplementary and subsequent reports, which were read by the prosecutor's representative in court with Judge Salavati, several references were made to informants in the case or 'our informants', which showed that they had also interrogated and taken confessions from people who had collaborated in the projects, to use against me. After my release I understood better who they had interrogated.

Let me get back to the topic of the phone call. They emphasised that I couldn't talk for more than a minute and told me what I should say: 'I've been arrested, I'm fine and I don't know when I'll be allowed to call or visit again.'

Shafagh answered the phone and said with surprise and joy, 'Kameel, where are you?' She is the type of person who doesn't show her worries too much and is self-contained. I knew how upset and restless she was, but she was talking calmly.

I said, 'I don't know where I am. I've been arrested, but I'm fine, and I'll try to call again. Tell the lawyer about the matter.'

She said, 'I know. Don't worry. We're fine. Alan is fine, too. We're following up on your work.'

My family had found out about the matter before my call. They had called many times that first night of my arrest. They imagined I was on the way to Turkmen Sahra. When they realised I wasn't there, they got worried and started calling constantly. They were searching here and there and calling the traffic police and hospitals in case I had had an accident. Then they call one of our friends in Karaj to take the spare key and visit the house. Inside, our friend was faced with a note of my arrest and a ransacked house.



Image 382: News headlines about my arrest.

Before my call, Shafagh had spoken to the BBC, Voice of America, and several domestic media. I had always told her that, if I were arrested one day, she should definitely inform people about the matter. My strategy, unlike many prisoners', has always been to inform the public about a matter, because the Iranian system is very afraid of this issue and the media, and, with all the pressure it creates on the individual in prison, it is generally considered an advantage.

The rest of the day was again spent on the subject of FGM/C, and the discussion turned to the HIVOS Foundation[1] and its background, about which I didn't have much information. When they alleged that I had collaborated with the hostile US Government, I said, 'I have no qualms about answering for my work. Everything was written transparently, but, for God's sake, tell me where and how this America issue can be pinned

[1] Hivos Foundation (Hivos) is a humanist development cooperation foundation based in the Netherlands. It provides financial support to organisations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and facilitates knowledge-sharing, particularly in the areas of social transformation, digital activism, and rural innovation. Humanist values play a fundamental role in the organisation's policies. The core elements of Hivos' humanism and policy include the empowerment of human dignity, opposition to dogmatic and authoritarian regimes, political pluralism, democracy, solidarity, respect for responsible citizenship, and social identity.

on me? I have never had any connection with America, and, in fact, my positions toward this country are clear. I have always been critical of parts of the American political system, its style of governance and especially the policy it has adopted toward the Middle East. I have talked about this, and everyone knows what position I take. How do these words fit into any of my work and activities – to any of my ideas and views?'

They said, 'On the contrary, it suits you very well! Wait, we'll tell you . . .'

They kept asking, 'How did you get acquainted with HIVOS? Who did you talk to when you went to their office in the Netherlands? Who signed the final draft of the project? Through what person or organisation in Iraqi Kurdistan did you get acquainted with HIVOS? Do you know who they are cooperating with?'

Their questions constantly revolved around this, and copies of the documents they showed me made it clear that they recognised HIVOS as a non-governmental organisation that funded part of my research on the subject of FGM/C through the WADI organisation[1] in Sulaymaniyah. They perceived that HIVOS received part of its annual budget from America, but they didn't say from where and what part of the American Government, and I had no means of verifying their statements.

They showed me documents and evidence, such as news and financial reports that HIVOS had published on its website. What they showed me seemed real, but I didn't trust anyone, and I was saying to myself that maybe they had tampered with them using Photoshop.

I said to the interrogator, 'Well, perhaps HIVOS has implemented projects with America or has been funded from there, but it has thirty-four offices all over the world, working on the subjects of social harms, fertility, children, women, AIDS, sexual health and hygiene, and, like any other NGO, it receives funding from various places. It is possible that America is also on the list of these funders. This has nothing to do with my research on FGM/C. How can you accuse me of cooperating with the American Government with such logic?'

One day, the interrogator reassured me and said, 'You started the work on FGM/C with WADI in the Kurdistan Region, didn't you?'

1 Women Advocacy and Development Initiative.

I said yes, but our cooperation had not been financial and progressed more in terms of information and science. I shared with it information about FGM/C and the prevalence in each area and other aspects of our field of work. WADI had only funded the first part of my work, which was the initial scanning of the areas. I had become acquainted with HIVOS in the Netherlands through WADI. Our relationship was research-based, and I didn't know much about the organisation otherwise.

The interrogators said, 'We agree so far, but did you work with HIVOS and send your reports on FGM/C to them or not?'

I said I would have sent them. That was the rule of every contract and piece of research, and it was natural to provide the organisation with feedback and the results of the work, according to the contract we had. My scientific and field reports were sent out, provided my reports were not used organisationally and, because of the security situation that prevailed in Iran, no name was mentioned of the project in the media. The work was purely research-based, and those at the organisation kept their word.

They repeated, 'So you worked with HIVOS?'

I said I had a work contract with them for a specific period of time, and it ended years ago.

In a general summary, they said, 'So, the way it works is that you worked with WADI, and WADI worked with HIVOS, which is dedicated to supporting the rights of women and young people. Then WADI connected you to HIVOS, and you implemented projects with it. Well, HIVOS has seventy-two funders, one of whom is American, so this America is also considered to be the funder of your work, and you have collaborated with the hostile US Government and you are a criminal!'

The reasoning was strange, and even they seemed to find it ridiculous. Whatever I said was useless, however; they had already made their decision about my 'crime'.

I said, 'You are looking for a so-called legal flaw in my work to legitimise your work, but I believe I have not committed a crime. Your problem with me is because of other issues.'

They wanted to force me to confess and say that I had collaborated with the American Government, while I had no direct cooperation with the American Government and was even unaware of indirect cooperation. They said, 'Go and tell these things to the investigator and the judge', and

constantly mocked me and psychologically tortured me with sneers and bitter words.



Image 383: Field work. Khuzestan, 2010.

My head interrogator, Seyyed, would chuckle and say, 'Everything about you is "Yek-o-yek", Kameel. Do you know what that means?'

When I said no, he explained, 'You know that really famous promotional dairy brand, Yek-o-yek ["One and One"]? Well, that's you! Everything about your case is Yek-o-yek. Firstly, you're in the hands of IRGC Intelligence, in Ward 2A – the absolute top of the line in Iran and Evin Prison. Secondly, your investigator is from Branch One of the Revolutionary Court, also the most important investigation branch in the judiciary. And they're sending you to Judge Salavati,[1] the country's most high-profile judge. Anyone who ends up before Salavati is truly Yek-o-yek, – meaning top-tier, first-class, very important. You're the complete package, Kameel – worthy of being Yek-o-yek in every way!'

They were trying to demoralise me, saying, in effect, 'We'll see how quickly we wipe that smile off your face.'

Their taunts and psychological tortures were endless. Sometimes they'd say things that I would understand the meaning of later, in my cell. One day, they brought a printout of a letter showing that the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had put HIVOS on the list of organisations and institutions with which it is forbidden to work. Mockingly, they said, 'Your own government friends have put HIVOS on the blacklist.' He meant the reformist government and emphasised that HIVOS had been banned because of its dubious activities in Iran. He didn't say that this law was

1 Abolghasem Salavati (born 1346/1967), nicknamed 'the Judge of Execution', is the head of Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court and an alternate judge of the General Courts of Tehran. In a decision dated 23 Farvardin 1390 (13 April 2011), the European Union banned thirty-two Iranian officials, including Salavati, from entering its member countries due to their roles in widespread and severe violations of the rights of Iranian citizens. It ordered all assets of these officials in Europe to be confiscated.

announced in 2011 and my research started in 2009. He was contradicting his own words that our own government had enacted this law!

I said to my interrogator, 'You know better than me the history and reasons for starting my work on this topic. My acquaintance with FGM/C started very independently. After my mother's death and my return to Iran in 2006, I made a film about it, and after a long time and several years of working on it, I became acquainted with WADI, and two years later I connected to HIVOS. Now, one of the seventy-two funders of this organisation is American, and I am answering why one of the funders was American! What you need is a person on whom to impose Article 508 and say that he has worked with the so-called hostile USA. You are doing this to me, and no words or explanations matter to you.'

Research on Homosexuality and the Interrogators' Sensitivity

On the third day, the interrogators jumped from the subject of FGM/C to the subject of LGBTQ+ issues and our 'research on homosexuals', as they put it. This issue is completely a matter of honour for the Islamic Republic, and, according to the interrogators, I had put my finger on one of the most sensitive social harms. My research was with a publisher in London, and they had agreed to print and publish it at a suitable opportunity, but on coordination with me.

My interrogators said, 'Explain about the LGBT project.'

I started explaining and said that, during the research on cohabitation, I had encountered the issue in a more tangible way and went after it. Then I said, 'You must have seen this research on my laptop yourselves.'

I realised that they had printed the research, and it was on the interrogators' desk, but its cover was different from what I had used. The supposedly kind interrogator said: 'Congratulations, Kameel, your book was printed in London during these few days you've been our guest.' I didn't believe his words, but I later found out that the publisher *had* printed and published the book.

He said, 'Tell me about your colleagues.'

I said to refer to the ones mentioned in the Acknowledgements page. He chose a name and said, 'Focus more on this person and tell me about her.' It was the second woman I had been asked about, and the first person who later accused me of sexual assault.

The interrogations about my colleagues went like this: he would say, 'How many colleagues did you have in the child-marriage research?' I would say, 'Six people.' He would say, 'Names?' I would say, 'The names are in your hands. I don't remember everyone's names.' He would give me the book and say, 'Explain about so-and-so and say how long you worked together.'

He also chose several of my colleagues in the child-marriage project and said to talk about them. This would happen, but there was more attention and focus on Ms RM and the woman I had met in Isfahan. Both of them had worked with me for short periods of time. I said, 'She was someone who was following my work. I met her at the unveiling of the book on FGM/C in the city of Isfahan. She continued her relationship with me until I went to Isfahan for the child-marriage project. There, she also came with me on the field work for one day, but, because her father was against it, her cooperation was cut off. When I was working on cohabitation, she conducted a number of field interviews and worked more actively on the research on the subject of homosexuals. That's it.'



Image 384: Announcing the publication of my book on Facebook. Mehri Publishing.

The interrogator knew that this woman knew the LGBTQ+ community of Isfahan well. During her collaboration with the project, this woman had called one day with a trembling voice and said they had summoned her. Then she explained that she might be interrogated and that, since she didn't want to harm the research, she was keeping her distance from us. We were all shocked and scared, both because the issue was serious and because the subject of our research was sensitive. I said that I thought it was the most correct thing to do, and I thanked her for being transparent with us. She said she would contact us herself. After a while, she also contacted us and said there was nothing to worry about.

The interrogators were saying that this woman was a member of the LGBTQ+ community and were angrily asking, 'Why don't you tell the main story? You had a close relationship with each other. We saw in your chats that you were giving her advice. Tell us about these and other things too! Also tell us that she is one of the managers of so-and-so Telegram channel, a Telegram channel that has several thousand members.'

I really didn't know these things. My mind was messed up. Everyone believes that many of the things raised against the accused in interrogations are just bluffs or they're not entirely accurate, but you can't tell which of their words are true and which are from their sick minds.



Image 385: Interrogation room with mirror.

I had a very difficult period of interrogation. Sometimes they started at eight in the morning and continued until eight at night – so much so that, in some cases, the prison guard would come and say that the accused should not be in interrogation for more than six hours and it was against the law. It was very interesting to me that they were reminding each other about the law – or pretending to. If I had been with the prison guard and said that I was tired, I would naturally have lost many privileges. The next day they would have made it harder for me, and I would have been more psychologically tortured, so it was better to endure and say nothing.

Apart from these things, life in solitary confinement is truly terrifying and sad. You don't want to go back to the cell, and you are willing to stay in interrogation. To endure verbal torture, humiliation, ridicule and offensive jokes, but to have someone to talk to. The anxiety of returning to the cell was always with me, and later, when I talked about it with other prisoners, I saw that many had had my experience. The prisoners know that the more they sit in front of the interrogator, the more vulnerable they become, but they take this risk. The interrogator knows that the accused doesn't want to go back to the cell, so he keeps him there and talks comfortably to 'get more evidence', as they say.

Some time later, my interrogator no longer sat behind the mirror, and I could see him. At first, he would put my chair with its back to him, facing the wall, but gradually this situation also ended, and we would talk face to face. I would sit on an armchair, similar to a student's chair, answer his questions and then write the answers on paper. I had never written so much by hand in my whole life! I had always typed with a computer, but in this period of interrogations, they were constantly giving me paper and a pen, and I had to write. The writing was difficult for me, and the interrogator's pacing drove me so crazy I couldn't concentrate.

My interrogator was about forty years old, had a stomach, was tall, and had chestnut hair and a beard. His face was completely like a stereotypical interrogator's, and he also had a Mashhadi accent. The group that was in charge of my case in the IRGC Intelligence were from Mashhad and were part of Alamolhoda's[1] gang. He was intelligent and clever, his English

1 Ahmad Alamolhoda (born 10 Shahrivar 1323/1 September 1944) is a Shia cleric and a hardline conservative. He is the Friday Prayer imam of Mashhad, and since Esfand 1394/March 2016 he has been the representative of the Supreme Leader in Khorasan Razavi province. Since 1386/2007, he has been a representative in the Assembly of

language was not bad and he knew most of the activists in the fields of women's rights and social harms. He himself said that he was a graduate of sociology from the University of Tehran. I never knew his name, but he claimed, 'I was the one who interrogated Nasrin Sotoudeh. I was the one who interrogated Mehrangiz Kar. I was one of Shirin Ebadi's interrogators, as well.' He said he was in the group monitoring feminist activities and that he knew those who were holding training workshops in feminist groups outside of Iran, in the Persian Gulf countries and other neighbouring countries. He had also chosen names and titles for them: Show Feminists, Yellow Feminists, Lesbian Dirty Workers, Funded Feminists . . .



Image 386: Iranian tanker released by the British Navy.

Later, he told me, 'Thank you to the American funders. Thank you that they are putting on training workshops in Georgia. Some ladies who crave free travel and alcohol and want to become heroes are fooled into going. We wait for their training workshop to be held and for them to return to Iran. Then we bring them here. They sit on one of these chairs and answer questions, they resort to crying and begging, they go to prison and the matter is over.' He would laugh and say, 'A hundred mercies on those who get foreign funding but at least don't dirty their hands with this filth or ruin other people's children!'

Kameel, You're Rather Delicious!

One day they took me to the interrogation room, and the interrogator came after me. I knew the sound of his footsteps and realised he was on his way.

Experts from Khorasan Razavi province. From 1361/1982 to 1384/2005, he was the vice-chancellor for education and postgraduate studies at Imam Sadiq University, and he is one of the founders of this university and also a member of the Combatant Clergy Association.

He was tasting something on the way and saying, 'Mmm, how delicious you are!'

I asked what delicious food he had eaten first thing in the morning. Trotters?

He said, 'No. Not trotters, but I was thinking about why I didn't know you were so delicious before!'

'What do you mean?' I asked. That sounded like dangerous language – loaded with meaning.

Laughing, he said, 'No! No! I don't mean that, and the thoughts that have come into your head are not my doing! I've just realised you're very delicious bait, and I didn't know that before! Now I'll tell you . . .'

He went to the hallway, retrieved a glass of cold water and said, 'We got our ship back.'

I, who was unaware of the events of the outside world, but was aware of the seizure of the Iranian ship, said, 'Which ship?'

He said, 'The one that your country, Britain, stopped in Gibraltar and forced to anchor. Today we took it back, but we seized their ship in the Persian Gulf due to fuel leakage and environmental threats, and we won't give it back any time soon![1] I'm really grateful to you. You've helped us a lot.'

I said, 'Do you think it was released because of me?'

He said, 'Yeah, Dad! You are the cradle of civilisation and human rights, and with all this, you may be acquitted. You belong there. You have been given a lot of training, and they have spent time on your training. They have invested so much in you that they are releasing a ship for your sake! Thank you for doing the best service to the Islamic Republic – although I know you are not very committed to the Islamic Republic, and your commitment is more to the Queen.'

I was laughing. I wanted to know if his words were real or not. I said, 'So, after lunch we'll say goodbye to each other, then?'

He said, 'No! That's the point! I said that you are a very delicious morsel. You have only done part of your service to the Islamic Republic, and the other parts remain. God willing, we will get to the rest of the work, as well. You are a complete package, and you can be used in various aspects. I am the luckiest interrogator who has faced you, and your case is in my hands.

1 Hall, 2019.

When a ship can be taken back because of you, other things can certainly be done as well. You are both a dual national and Kurdish and Sunni. In all your activities, you have also gone into sensitive social issues. However I look at it, you have a lot of potential elements that can be used. In fact, each of these can be turned into separate projects. We have a lot of Kurdish prisoners here who were arrested because of political activities or who are separatists. A lot of Sunni prisoners – especially since your friends in Salafi groups and Balochs also have a prominent presence, and dual nationals are also numerous, thank God. Two of them are right here with you. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was also here until recently, and I was her interrogator myself. In your research work, you have also gone to the inflamed ethnic and identity areas and have entered such important arenas. Do you want to take all of Iran into your hands?'

I felt that parts of his words and theories were correct, but he was saying these things with a mocking smile that chilled me to the bone.

I was a dual national and a researcher. I was also Kurdish and Sunni. Each of these had the potential to keep me in prison for a long time. If the Intelligence system wanted to, it could constantly make my case heavier and heavier. That day I thought about whether being a dual national affected what had happened, and then I went back to the events that had occurred. They had been wanting to arrest me for a long time, but they did it exactly when their ship was seized in Gibraltar by the British Navy. They could have arrested me a few weeks earlier or later, but it seemed that they wanted to do such a thing in a suitable situation, and they had a plan for it. As always, they wanted to use dual nationals to solve their problems, and now they were happy that they had taken their ship back. My interrogator felt like a hero. I said with an angry and helpless smirk, 'Seyyed, I hope you get a medal, you get promoted . . . !'

کد خبر: ۱۵۳۲۹۴ تاریخ انتشار : ۰۶ بهمن ۱۳۹۷ - ۲۱:۰۲

سرویس کیهان » اخبار

الف الف

همایش فمنیستی با حذف کارشناسان منتقد برای محدودیت ازدواج

موافقان محدودیت سنی ازدواج در حالی اظهار می‌کنند که طرح افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج به دلایل سیاسی رد شده است که برخی از آنان با حذف کارشناسان منتقد، نشست علمی و پژوهشی را به سطح همایشی فمنیستی و سیاسی تقلیل می‌دهند.

پس از رد کارشناسی طرح افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج در کمیسیون حقوقی و قضایی مجلس شورای اسلامی که براساس نظر کارشناسان و صاحب‌نظران حوزه ازدواج انجام شد، موافقان طرح با عوام‌فریبی و سیاه‌نمایی موضوع، سعی در اعاده طرح به صحن علنی مجلس را دارند.

با توجه به اهمیت مسئله افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج و نپذیرفتن رد طرح از سوی طراحان، بحث و تبادل‌نظر پیرامون بررسی طرح ایجاد محدودیت سنی برای ازدواج افراد به همراه جدال رسانه‌ای ادامه یافت.

در همین راستا، نشستی با عنوان «بررسی علمی- پژوهشی طرح افزایش حداقل سن ازدواج» و با حضور مخالفان و موافقان طرح مذکور در دانشگاه الزهرا (س) تدارک دیده شد. این نشست که قرار بود در مورخه اول بهمن ماه 97 در دانشگاه الزهرا برگزار شود بدون اعلام رسانه‌ای و کاملاً مخفیانه در محل کتابخانه ملی برگزار شد.

Image 387: *Keyhan* articles against me.

Feminist conference with the removal of critical experts regarding marriage age restriction

Proponents of marriage age restrictions claim that the bill to raise the minimum age of marriage has been rejected for political reasons, while some of them, by removing critical experts, reduce a scientific and research gathering to the level of a feminist and political conference.

Following the expert-level rejection of the bill to raise the minimum age of marriage in the Legal and Judicial Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis), which was carried out based on the opinion of experts and specialists in the field of marriage, proponents of the bill are attempting to bring the bill back to the open floor of Parliament by using secondary factors and painting an overly grim picture of the issue.

Given the importance of the issue of raising the minimum age of marriage and the rejection of the bill's rejection by its proponents, discussion and exchange of views regarding the examination of

the bill to introduce age restrictions for marriage continued, along with a media battle.
In this context, a session entitled "Scientific-Research Examination of the Bill to Raise the Minimum Age of Marriage" was organised with the presence of opponents and proponents of the said bill at Al-Zahra University. This session, which was scheduled to be held on 21 January 2019 (1st of Bahman 1397) at Al-Zahra University, was held without media announcement and completely secretly at the National Library.

To prove his words about the ship, he put a newspaper in front of me the next day and said, 'Did you see I was telling the truth?' Then he said, 'Kameel our work is easy now.' He took out a table-like programme from his pocket and continued, 'Well, according to this newspaper, we have finished our words about FGM/C and homosexuals. From now on, we will talk about child marriage or child wives. Then you go to the secret marriage and the research you had about cohabitation. Then about the work *From Border to Border*, which is about ethnicities, and then about the children scavenging through rubbish.' He said, 'We have read your works and interviews, and we have tweeted a lot in opposition to you, and we have written in the media.[1] You have been headlined several times in *Keyhan*,[2] and we have been aware of what you are doing.'

I said, 'Thank God, you are at least not hiding that it was your job.'

I realised that he and the other interrogators had a personal sensitivity to the subject of child marriage. He would say to me, 'Why do you think the age of marriage should be raised? Haven't you heard Aqa's[3] speech on his trip to Kermanshah, where he said that our generation is aging and we need to think about it? Aqa's words are the final word, and when he says that population policies have been wrong and need to be corrected, there is no room for argument. Population control was achieved during Rafsanjani's time. He himself later apologised and admitted he was wrong.

1 Islamic Republic News Agency, 2019a.

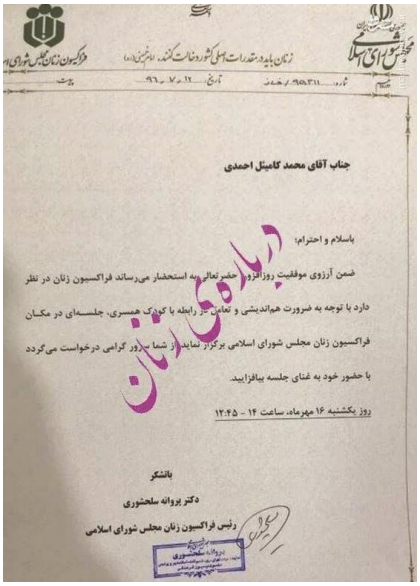
2 Keyhan, 2019.

3 *Aqa* translates to 'sir' or 'master'. It is a title of respect commonly used when addressing individuals of high social or religious standing. Notably, it is the term often employed by government personnel in Iran when referring to Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader.

Now a government order has come that these things must change, and you are openly pursuing a law that prevents many of our young people from marrying and disrupts their Islamic lives and sexual desires!'

The atmosphere was beyond an interrogation, and our conversation had gone in a direction where I could see how committed and faithful they were to their ideas and thoughts. When I asked him at what age he got married, he said under eighteen, and later I realised that all three of my interrogators had married under eighteen and wanted their daughters and sons to marry younger than that. I was the face of an ideology and point of view that constantly pushed a plan to increase the age of child marriage, and they were willing to do anything to discredit it.

Islamic Consultative Assembly
Women's Fraction
To: Mr. Kameel Ahmday
Greetings and regards,
Wishing you continued success. We would like to inform you that the Women's Fraction of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, recognizing the necessity of collaboration and consultation regarding 'child marriage,' intends to hold a meeting at the Women's Fraction office. We request your esteemed presence to grace this meeting with your attendance.
Date: Sunday, 8 October 2017 [16 Mehr], Time: 14:00 – 14:45
With thanks,
Dr. Parvaneh Salahshouri
Chair of the Women's Fraction of the Islamic Consultative Assembly


جناب آقای محمد کامیل احمدی

باسلام و احترام؛

ضمن آرزوی موفقیت روزافزون حضرتعالی به استحضار می‌رساند فراکسیون زنان در نظر دارد با توجه به ضرورت هم‌اندیشی و تعامل بیشتر رابطه با کودک همسری، جلسه‌ای در مکان فراکسیون زنان مجلس شورای اسلامی برگزار نماید از شما سرور گرامی درخواست می‌گردد با حضور خود به غنای جلسه بیافزایید.

روز یکشنبه ۱۶ مهرماه، ساعت ۱۴ - ۱۴:۴۵

دریادلی از زنان

پروانه سلحشوری
رئیس فراکسیون زنان مجلس شورای اسلامی

Image 388: Formal invitation of parliament.



Image 389: Shafagh's interview.

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Report on the latest situation of Kameel Ahmady in an interview with his wife: Held in solitary confinement, unaware of the charges and place of detention

28 August 2019
Freedom of Expression

They would laugh and sometimes shout, 'Sina can you hear me? Come out! Come here!' In court, they also asked questions that made me sure that Kalhor, my so-called scientific rival, had been following up on the matter all the time and was giving direction to everything. I called him 'the interrogator-researcher', and that upset my interrogator. I didn't back down and said, 'Your reporter on that TV show, *Libido*—' meaning Ehsan Rastegar— 'was also an interrogator-journalist.'

One of the things they emphasised a lot was my relationship with the members of parliament. I had connections with Ms Siavoshi and Ms Salahshouri, but it was clear what path we were following. From their point of view, these relationships showed that I was in the process of soft infiltration into the Government and parliament, to target Islamic culture. I said, 'None of these things are a crime, and your behaviour is in contradiction with the religious democracy you are talking about. Communication with representatives and demanding a healthier society is a service, not a crime.' The interrogator also didn't back down, but emphasised the writings of the *Keyhan* newspaper, which he or one of his

colleagues had probably written.[1] Apparently, I intended to reduce the population of Iran by increasing the age of marriage and, through a soft overthrow, to change the coexistence of Islamic society and to take steps in favour of the Zionists.

It had been nearly ten days since I had spoken to my family. No matter how often I made my request, I got no response. The interrogators were upset that Shafagh had publicised my arrest in the media and were constantly grumbling that my wife was talking to these networks. I said, 'If you're telling the truth, show me that my wife has done this, and, secondly, I'm not in contact with her to tell her what to do and what not to do.' I had told Shafagh that, if such a situation arose, and even if I called and begged her not to talk to the media, she shouldn't listen to me, because they would have forced me to say this under mental and psychological torture. I said, 'Let me talk to her and tell her not to do this', but they wouldn't agree and were too clever for that.

Every interview she gave, the interrogators would skin me more that day and punish me properly. Their behaviour worsened with every contact my wife had, as they put it, 'with the foreign media'. Several more days passed until they finally agreed to let me call her. More than anything, I wanted to talk to my son, but Shafagh said very briefly that Alan was at nursery and to call after three o'clock. I told the interrogators to call in the afternoon so that I could talk to my son as well.

My heart was in my mouth that afternoon, and I don't know how the time passed. I was constantly looking at the clock and thinking about what to say when Alan picked up the phone and how to talk to him. How could I stop myself from crying? How could I tell a two-year-old that I 'went on a trip' in such a way that he would accept it? I called in the afternoon. Alan didn't say anything except 'Baba! Baba!' once or twice. He always said something on the phone, but that day he couldn't connect with me. Of course, we had always talked visually before, and it seemed that he still didn't understand talking only audibly. The interrogator said that under no circumstances could we connect to the internet, and he added that I

1 Sadeghi, Mohaddeseh. "Hivos Infiltration Led the Tenth Parliament Astray in the Field of Family Affairs," Keyhan Newspaper Website, 26 Khordad 1399 (16 June 2020): https://Keyhan.ir/000ndJ

should say what I needed to quickly; otherwise, he would hang up the phone.

I spoke to Shafagh and said, 'These people are saying that you have given interviews to the media. If you give interviews, my situation will get worse here.' I was telling the truth, but deep down I hoped she would go her own way.

She said, 'I haven't done anything wrong. I'm telling you everything that has happened. I'm going to the investigator. I'm saying, "Where is my husband and why won't you let me see him?", but they don't answer me. Until these issues are cleared up, I won't give up.'

The interrogator flushed and frowned, and he said, 'Hang up!'

I managed to say, 'I'm in Ward 2A of Evin Prison and in the hands of the IRGC Intelligence' before the interrogator hung up the phone and said, 'That wasn't our agreement!'

I started shouting. 'I didn't know my family was so unaware of me and didn't know where I was! At the very least, you should tell them I'm in custody.' I added, 'I won't say another word until I see my investigator.'

The interrogator, now clearly losing his temper, retorted that the BBC would be having a field day tonight: '"Kameel Ahmady Arrested by IRGC Intelligence" – that'll be the headline.' They were terrified of the media, desperate to avoid any negative publicity.

I refused to back down, repeating that I needed to speak to my investigator, face-to-face. Several times the interrogator pretended to make calls, then claimed it was impossible for me to see him. I stood my ground: it was impossible to continue the interrogation under these conditions. 'I made a mistake on day one,' I said. 'I should have insisted on seeing him first, before saying a word.'

The next day, around noon, they finally took me to see the investigator. It was the first time I'd left the prison block since my initial trip to the clinic. Even though I was still blindfolded and handcuffed in the car, I could sense the world outside – the sounds of life, of other people, the fresh air . . .

Outside the prosecutor's office, tucked away in the far corner of Evin Prison, they removed my blindfold and led me up a metal staircase. I was in a terrible state of mind, not having slept at all the previous night. The panic attacks were coming more frequently, and nobody was helping me. They ushered me into the investigator's office. He was a dry, severe man, short, with a large belly. He had a Mazandarani accent and, without even

looking at me, he barked, 'What is it you want? Why are you sending messages every day? Why the urgent need to see me? Is the food not good enough? Being tortured, are you? What's wrong? You're getting the best food we have. Have we hung you up by your feet? Why all the messages?'



Image 390: Ali Qana'atkar, the investigator at the time of my arrest.

I said I wanted to discuss my case: why was I arrested, and for what? What was their problem with me? Why had he issued a one-month temporary detention order, and on what grounds did he claim I was collaborating with the hostile US Government?

He shot back, 'You insolent git! You dual-national researcher! You're the ones messing up the world, spreading corruption and vice! You and your globalist cronies are trying to destroy the Islamic, ethnic and cultural fabric of the world – of our Islamic Iran! And now you're making demands?!'

I protested, 'What's any of that got to do with me? I'm here to talk about my situation.' But whatever I said, his response was the same: dual nationals like me were inherently destructive and intent on regime change.

'You do things that are completely unsuitable for our civil and social norms, especially when it comes to children. What's this obsession with children, anyway? Why are you telling people when children should marry? Who made you the guardian of the people? Children belong to their parents, and they know what's best. Islam, with its 1400-year history, doesn't understand these things, but you, with your Western ideas, are going to come in here and disrupt our whole way of life?'

He abruptly changed tack: 'Anyway, I'm not interested in all that. Just answer one question: did you work with HIVOS – yes or no?' I said yes. 'Right, that's all I needed to know.'

He turned to an officer. 'Legal orderly, take this case away. He's here to make trouble.'

What he said confirmed what my interrogator had implied. I realised then it was all just a pretext, and their real agenda was something else entirely. The core issue was my research on child marriage – or 'child wives', as they preferred to call it – and, in their eyes, my attempt to raise the legal age of marriage. From their perspective, I was a British national, and they were exploiting my arrest at this moment to get their ship released. Now, however, their focus was on my research itself. They were determined to silence me, to shut down my work, by any means necessary. The system, it seemed, could no longer tolerate Kameel Ahmady and his research, and my case had to be closed, one way or another.

I felt dreadful. Utterly distraught. I pleaded with the investigator that I couldn't bear solitary confinement any longer. Surely, the fact that I'd been hospitalised three times was proof enough? At the very least, could he move me from that tomb of a cell? But he just repeated himself: 'You're not being tortured. You're getting good food . . .' His justifications were bizarre; my words completely futile.

When they forcibly took me out of the investigator's room, I felt someone was looking at me. I didn't know it was Mr Amir Raisian,[1] the lawyer chosen by my family. He was taken aback and hadn't recognised me. After he realised, he contacted Shafagh and said he had seen Kameel and that he was not well at all. He tried hard to make the judicial system understand that I needed to be examined psychologically by a psychiatrist, but it was useless.

From the next day, the interrogations started again. Some days, when I had had a difficult interrogation and returned to the cell under a lot of stress, there was not much sleep to be had at night. Although I was feeling unwell, I knew I had to prepare for tomorrow's session and concentrate. Every night I tried to chart the course of the next day's conversation in my mind and plan for it. I was saying to myself, 'Well, tomorrow they'll talk about secret marriage.' I reviewed all aspects of that work. If I made a mistake, it would become a tool for pressure and further accusations, so I tried to review everything and not write anything that would later be used as evidence against me.

1 Amir Raisian, a senior barrister and member of the Central Bar Association, is a prominent lawyer who specialises in political and human-rights cases.

It was a very difficult situation, but gradually I gained the necessary tactics and skills. I was constantly analysing my interrogators' behaviours and trying to understand how and in what way to act against them. Little by little, I was learning the game, but this didn't reduce its danger. If I made a mistake, I would get into trouble, and sometimes, when my calculations turned out wrong, I would get very tired mentally and want to focus on nothing else but the questions and the course of the days ahead, which was almost based on the chronological order of my work.

At night, I would review my words in the interrogation, and obsessive thoughts would come to me: 'I wish I hadn't said that. I wish I hadn't used that word . . .' It would continue like this. I would review all my dreams, I would forgive all the people who had hurt me, I would ask for forgiveness from those I had hurt, and then I would think about the people I love, and my longing would increase. The image of Alan was constantly coming before my eyes, and I would feel guilty that I had spent so little time with him. I was arguing with myself: 'I wish I hadn't done that', or 'Why did I talk to my son harshly that day?' I reviewed my whole life, and my wars and peace and quarrels and reconciliations were like a film in front of my eyes.

Sometimes I would make a mental list of the people I loved. In short, I was doing everything so that my mind wouldn't forget freedom and the outside world. In my imagination, I would go to my home and reconstruct my life before being imprisoned. When I woke up in the morning and rolled over, my bed would creak. I would check my phone. I would pull the curtain aside. I would wear a t-shirt and go to the toilet. I would secretly pee standing up (if Shafagh found out she would get angry). I had to be careful not to get anything dirty. If it got a little dirty, I would gently wipe it with a tissue. I would brush my teeth. I would go after my projects. I would say to myself, 'You will finally be released, and you will do all these things again.'

I came to better understand the changes in personality and sudden conservatism of many prisoners.

Don't Take Our Islamic Sexual Lifestyles Away from Us

I had realised that the only excuse the judicial system had found to arrest me was this budget from years ago for the FGM/C project. My interrogator

always said, 'Kameel you are very mean! Why didn't you get funding for some of your other projects as well? I wish you had done this; then your case would have been much bigger.' He laughed and said, 'You cunning devil! Getting funding just the once, then telling yourself and everyone else that, the more funding you got, the smaller your "security circle" would become. So you decided to stop getting funding from anywhere else. You know, that's really bad for me, your interrogator! It means you're not connected anywhere – not working in a network! Oh, if you'd just taken a bit more funding, been part of a network, I could have arrested at least twenty more people – wouldn't that have been great? Now, should I really go after a few of your poor colleagues, question them and arrest them? What would be the point? The poor sods haven't done anything!'

He went on, 'Of course—' and here his tone shifted slightly, becoming almost confiding— 'you'll come to realise we've already summoned several of your colleagues and got some "side information" from them.' When I got out of prison, I found out they'd selectively contacted with even more people. They'd interrogated a couple of them before they arrested me.

From a certain point onward, he would critique and review each of my research projects, talking about them in general ways. I jokingly said to him, 'What kind of interrogation is this? When you start going through my research texts, it means you've got nothing concrete on me and you're just looking for some legal excuse.'

The interrogator retorted, 'You foreigners, you have good morals, but all this order and accuracy of yours is a joke to us. We just laugh when you think you can swan off to another country for a bit of "love and pleasure", then miss Iran and waltz back in here to change the system. Do you really think it's that simple? That you can stroll in like heroes and bring some idea or bit of science you picked up in the West to make everything rosy? You deserve this situation, mate. You open your eyes, and you realise you've fallen down a well so deep your career is finished. Some of you scarper, but others, like you, are a bit tougher – hang in there long enough to become a delicious bit of bait for us!'

He concluded, with a sudden shift back to a more complimentary tone, 'But with all that said, whatever you are, I have to thank you. You are so organised – not complicated like Iranians. Everything's there on your laptop; you don't try to deny anything. Wherever you went, whatever you

did, you documented it all perfectly. Honestly, how wonderful you lot are! How convenient for us that you're here, and we can have a nice, transparent chat based on the documents in your writings and emails!'

They would never clearly state their main problem with me, but they hinted that they believed my work aimed to reduce the population. They argued that sigheh ('temporary marriage') was just as valid as any other form of marriage. My views, they claimed, posed the same threat to the family as those of radical feminists. They seemed particularly fixated on sigheh for adults, asking, 'Do you want to take away this one pleasure from Iranian men?' – a pleasure, they stressed, that Sharia law and our own laws permit. In their eyes, a woman's primary role was to create a family, and, secondarily, she was to be a tool or plaything for a Muslim man's enjoyment.

They accused me of targeting men's 'legitimate sexual entertainment', and claimed my research on sigheh, *A House on Water*, was my weapon. 'And yet,' the interrogator continued, incredulously, 'the Ministry of Guidance, no less, gave you permission to publish it! Did you really think we'd just sit back and let you do whatever you pleased? You want to spread permissive relationships . . .'

Then they shifted to my personal life, relentlessly probing my 'free' relationships outside the boundaries of Islamic law, implying I wanted others to live the same way. 'Do you know how angry people like Alamolhoda, the Friday Prayer leader of Mashhad, are with you?' the interrogator demanded. 'Your research on sigheh has dragged Mashhad's name through the mud – made it a national scandal.'

When the conversation turned to LGBTQ+ individuals, things took a nasty turn. Their justification was always the same: it was all just filth. The interrogator sneered, 'These phony, funded feminists come in here, sit on this chair and at first roar like lionesses, but then they lose their nerve and start begging and crying. But those lesbians, they're just pure filth. Reading their private messages, all that sexual stuff from their phones and emails, makes me sick. The Islamic Republic more or less tolerates their existence – knows where they gather and what they get up to. But it's left to the families and the community to deal with. Now and then, if they get too lairy, someone might raid one of their parties and shut them down.'



Image 391: Sigheh Telegram channels.

Left Screenshot:
Hashtags: #Menopausal #Hourly
Profile: #Code9_Karaj | Age: 52 | Weight: 60 | Height: 167 | Skin Tone: Wheatish | Eye Color: Black | Residence: Yes (#Karaj)
Terms: Requested Duration: #Hourly | Requested Mehrieh (Dowry): 900,000 Tomans | Introduction Fee: 300,000 Tomans | Availability: 10:00 to 18:00 | Fridays: Closed | Note: Sensitive to unreliability and delays | Holds a Health Card |

Right Screenshot:
Channel Name: Pure Marriage (Ezdevaj-e Pak)
Post: Sigheh Mashhad | #Monthly_Entry_Mashhad
Profile: Lady | Favorite: - | Age: 40 | Height/Weight: 160/50 | Skin Tone: Fair | Residence: None
Details: She accepts gentlemen between 30 and 45 years old.
Availability: Anytime.

According to my interrogator, I shouldn't have been researching their situation – their lived experiences, their need for jobs and so on. He was implying that they were outcasts who didn't deserve normal lives. He said that even talking about them legitimised their existence, and that was something the system couldn't abide.

He then moved on to my most recent project, which was about identity and ethnicity. 'Doctor, this isn't really my area,' he said. 'The lads from the political section will be along to see you about this.' He continued, 'That's another one of the regime's red lines. When you're doing fieldwork on the five main ethnic groups in Iran, you're straying into a security matter!' Apparently, if you talk about mother tongues, life on the border or anything similar in Iran, you're branded a separatist.

'Ahmady, others have dabbled in these subjects before, but it's not like your work, where you conduct interviews in the field, draw conclusions, turn it into a book and then send a copy of the report to the UN. And you're still not satisfied! You want to infiltrate the Government and disrupt Iranian society!'

They even criticised the project on child waste-pickers, saying, 'That's the job of your own city council!'

I replied that I wasn't a reformist and wasn't aligned with any faction.

'All right, maybe not. But deep down, that's where your thinking leads. In all your work, you're targeting the very core of the system, and you think we haven't noticed!'

Gradually, I concluded that talking to these people was useless and the less I said, the better it would be for me. From a certain point onward, I mostly kept silent. Only occasionally, when I could give a concrete answer, would I engage in discussion. Sometimes he would seem satisfied and say, 'All right, we have problems in this area, but that's no reason for you to go your own way and inject the thoughts of "that side" into Iran. We know that we sometimes have issues in the field of children and women, but your interpretation of the gender field is very different from what we believe, and we cannot accept and implement your beliefs and plans, which are not taken from Islam. Islam and Aqa are the final word for us, and any change must be approved and done through these two lenses. Aqa's word is final, but when he says that population policies have been wrong and our generation must increase again, you say that the age of child marriage should go up, and, with this, one hundred thousand fewer marriages will

occur in two years and at least one hundred thousand fewer babies will be born! This will create many problems for us in the future.'

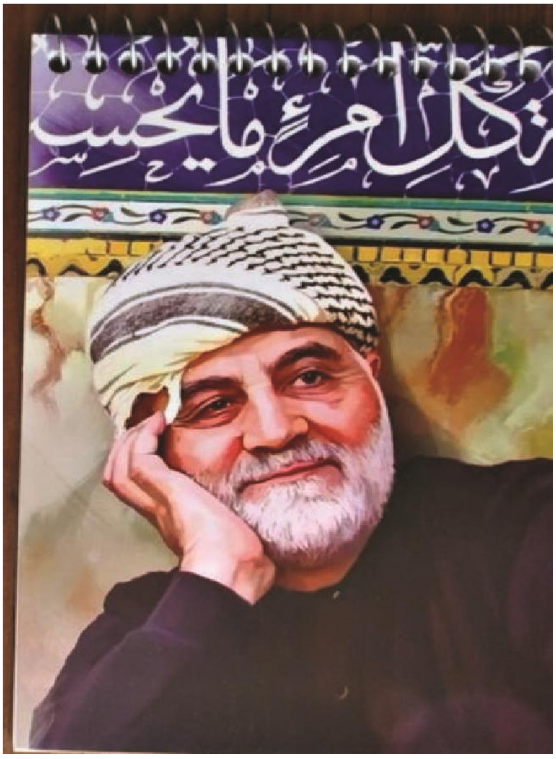


Image 392: Notebook with picture of Soleimani.

His notebook was always in his hand; it was as if he took it with him every night and came up with new questions. He believed in an ideological and revolutionary viewpoint, and on his notebook was a picture of Qasem Soleimani. I was faced with such a person, and these characteristics and his beliefs made conversation with him more difficult. On days when he was in a good mood, things went better, and on days when he was not well, everything went differently. He also didn't like short answers. When he gave me paper and a pen to write the answer to his question and I wrote briefly, he would get angry and say, 'Kameel, write at length. Three or four full pages. What use are these four lines? I spend ages designing questions, and you give answers like this! Write something more substantial. Write, man!' He acted completely contrary to my wishes – if I tried to talk less and write more, he wanted me to talk more and write less. This was one of our constant arguments.

I was constantly requesting to have a book in my cell, but my interrogator would say, 'You cannot have any book other than the Quran.' He would say, 'Just read this one book so that you may be guided to the right path. If we give you a book and you go into the world of books and stories, you will no longer be able to focus on our questions.'

I was in a bad situation, and in solitary confinement I sometimes wanted to confide in my God and cling to something, but even then I would review the Quran and see how much some of the things written in it contradict

today's human experience. One of the contradictions and inconsistencies was this: I was faced with a group who would cherry-pick any verse they wanted and interpret any law in their own favour.

My interrogation in Ward 2A was interrupted for a period and then resumed. I don't know if this interruption was intentional or not, but spending my nights and days in that small cell was unbearable.

After this absence, when I saw them again, it was Muharram. They would come late and leave early. When I saw them, they were wearing black clothes and said, 'Kameel, we were at the chest-beating ceremony last night. You don't know what love it has. In a few days, we will reach Arbaeen and go to Karbala on foot,[1] and you will be alone here again. Imagine, in twenty years, when you are released, you will come out and do good anthropological research about the Arbaeen walk. This one has a lot of prestige, and by then you will have given up sensitive topics and you will know what to research in Iran, won't you?'

He was constantly humiliating me in this way and reminding me that they would put me in prison for twenty years. This was very hard for a person in my mental state.

Here's a New Cell! Happy Now?

My cell was really getting to me. It was so cramped. I'd completely lost track of time when, one day, the guard unlocked my door and said, '127, blankets! Let's go.'

'Where to?' I asked, but he just repeated, 'Let's go.'

1 During the Arbaeen Pilgrimage, a large number of Shia Muslims travel from around the borders of Iraq toward the city of Karbala, south of Baghdad, to gather and perform mourning rituals on the fortieth day after the death of the third Shia Imam, Husayn ibn Ali, in the Battle of Ashura. Most Iranian pilgrims choose the Najaf to Karbala route for their pilgrimage on foot. The walking distance between these two cities is approximately 80 kilometres. From the perspective of the Islamic Republic, this march and gathering is not only a cultural ritual, but also a display of the power of Shia Muslims against their enemies. After the fall of Mosul at the hands of ISIS, followed by the massacre of Shia soldiers and civilians, this gathering took on a political form for the first time, and Shia Muslims used this ceremony to express their social power. In line with the realisation of the Shia Crescent, the rulers of the Islamic Republic, while exploiting the religious sentiments of the Shia Muslim masses, spend exorbitant military, economic and cultural sums in Iraq and other Shia-dominated countries.

I gathered my blankets and put on my blindfold, and he led me out into the corridor, then down another hallway and up a few steps. Finally, another door opened, and he gave me a shove inside. 'Blindfold off.'

I was in a new cell. It was a bit bigger than the last, and there was a stub wall jutting out in one corner. Peering behind it, I realised with a jolt of happiness that it had a toilet! I was absurdly grateful, as if they'd given me a penthouse suite at the Savoy. I actually paced around the cell in delight, thinking, 'Blimey, it must be a whole half-metre bigger! You can actually walk around in here without getting dizzy and banging into the walls.' In the old cell, turning around properly had been a struggle.

This felt like luxury. I was particularly pleased with the short wall, which gave a small sense of privacy from the ever-present camera. There was even a cloudy glass window high up in the ceiling. Compared to the box I'd been in, it felt palatial. I started examining everything with a kind of manic enthusiasm: the plasterwork, the concrete, any tiny variation in the surfaces . . . This cell change made a huge difference to my spirits. For the first time in days, I felt a flicker of genuine happiness – a sense that I might actually endure this – maybe even get through it with my mind intact.

The next day, my interrogator was beaming. 'Kameel, see what you've got now? Not bad, eh? A decent cell at last. Now you can sit down and write for me like a good little bee. Even got a window, for God's sake. It's not to be sniffed at, this, you know!'

I thanked him for the fact that my new cell had a toilet, and that it was, indeed, a whole toilet-cubicle bigger than the last one! He smirked, then started with the taunts again, apologising that this wasn't exactly the penthouse suite – 'Not quite up to your house in Saadat Abad.' But then he delivered his real zinger: 'D'you know why I moved you to this cell?'

I feigned a guess. 'Maybe because I'm your favourite prisoner and accused?'

'Yes, you are,' he chuckled, 'and I am learning a lot from you, but this cell – this cell is rather famous, you know.' He leaned in conspiratorially. 'Ask around about it later. Everyone here knows the story.'

Then it hit me. 'Don't tell me! This isn't . . . Kavous Seyyed-Emami's cell?'[1]

'God, blast it, man!' I thought to myself, a chill running down my spine.

I said out loud, 'Really?'

'Really,' he confirmed. 'The very one. The cell where he strung himself up. Though we've made a few adjustments since then – spruced it up a bit.' He explained, 'There used to be an iron bar at the top of the window – Seyyed-Emami managed to hang himself from it with his undershirt. We took that out; made a few other changes. But it's a decent cell now, all things considered. Especially for dual nationals like Seyyed-Emami . . . and you. He was Canadian-Iranian. Couldn't hack it in the end. Finished himself off.' Then he added, almost as an afterthought, 'Though they say we killed him. His cronies are still around here, doing bits for us. God willing, you'll meet them. Have a chat. You've got plenty of time, after all.'[2]



Image 393: Leaked image of anisolation cell with a toilet

1 Dr Kavous Seyyed-Emami (born in 1953 in Shemiranat) was a PhD in Sociology, a professor at Imam Sadegh University in Tehran, and a graduate in Sociology and International Affairs from the University of Oregon in the United States in 1976. He was murdered in Evin Prison on 8 February 2018. His death was announced as a suicide by officials of the Judiciary. He was an environmental activist who began his scientific activity in 1979 by teaching Sociology at Jundi Shapur University in Ahvaz. With the start of the Iran-Iraq War, he volunteered to be sent to the war front and was wounded in Khorramshahr. In the early 1990s, he began teaching as a faculty member at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Political Science at Imam Sadegh University. Seyyed-Emami authored and compiled several Persian and English books on ethics, political science, the environment, culture and nationality, and social sciences, and conducted numerous research projects on air pollution, environmental crises, ethnicity and identity.

2 Perhaps my interrogator was one of the few who knew whether Seyyed-Emami had been murdered or had committed suicide, but to wage psychological warfare on Kameel Ahmady, it was necessary to refer to the scenario of his suicide. Kavous Seyyed-Emami's death was one of the suspicious and problematic cases in Evin Prison, which also provoked many international reactions. There were many signs of torture and bruising on his body, and it was not logical that a man of Seyyed-Emami's mental stature would only last 15 days before hanging himself.

Any pleasure I'd felt the night before about a slightly bigger cell evaporated. The psychological weight of knowing that Mr Kavous Seyyed-Emami had hanged himself – or been killed – in that very space was oppressive, making the cell feel even smaller than before. I kept wondering, if it was suicide, what despair must he have felt to do such a thing? Could I end up the same way? The first few days in that cell were truly grim. I felt constantly pressured, and the panic attacks grew worse. I avoided looking directly at the spot where Seyyed-Emami had supposedly killed himself, sleeping with my back to that corner of the room. Still, in the early days, I dreamt about him. I would wake up in the middle of the night in cold sweats, heart pounding, screaming silently into the darkness.

One evening, back in my cell, I heard women's voices from just outside. One of them was the same woman who'd shouted 'Be strong!' before my interrogation. Sometimes I could hear the women talking among themselves, speaking in Farsi or English. It was strange, but also comforting, to hear voices other than my own and the guards'. One spoke English with an Australian accent, another was French and the third spoke Farsi. There were different women, and I heard their voices at different times, but their airing and exercise time was always when I was returning from interrogation. It was as if they waited until dark before bringing them onto the roof terrace, to, I suppose, maintain Islamic proprieties – ensure no 'un-related' men could see them.

A few days later, one of the female prisoners threw a few pebbles at my window and said in a low, husky voice, 'You there?'

'Yeah,' I replied.

'What's your number?' she asked.

'127,' I told her.

'All right. 127, you okay?' What are you in for? How long have you been here?'

These strange, snatched conversations happened a couple of times. I'd hold my hand over my mouth, trying to hide my lip movements from the camera. One of the women was Australian. I later found out her boyfriend was in the men's section of Ward 2A. They'd been arrested together in Iran for flying a camera drone near a military base south of Tehran – accused of spying. I later heard they were swapped for an Iranian prisoner.

I think the French woman I heard was Fariba Adelkhah.[1] She was a dual national and an anthropologist, like me. Her case, like mine, was being handled by Qana'atkar in Branch One, and she was eventually sentenced to five years by the same judge who would later sentence me – Judge Salavati. During her imprisonment, Amnesty International and other international organisations issued statements calling for her release and an independent investigation into her case. But international organisations and figures know full well that Iran simply ignores such requests. These demands are more about formality – a public show of concern.

There was someone in the cell opposite mine – I've mentioned him before – who would start reading the Quran and weeping as evening approached. It was really getting to me. One day, I whispered a protest from behind the door, telling him, 'For God's sake, we're not in good moods, either. You start reading the Quran and crying every day. I'd be grateful if you would consider our situation, too.' He improved for a couple of days but then started again. He was Tabari's deputy, the executive deputy of the Judiciary, who was later brought to our communal cell with some of his fellow defendants, and I finally understood who he was and why his case was so important. Even when he was pacing in the yard, I could see the Quran and rosary in his hand as he constantly moaned.

Around that time, the wedding of my cousin Zeynab's daughter, Delnia was supposed to be held in Mahabad. When we were in London, we had planned to return to Mahabad for Delnia's wedding, so that, after my trip to Golestan, we would all go there together. After days had passed, when they allowed me to make another phone call, my sister Kani was with Shafagh, and I spoke to both of them. Hearing Kani's voice, who was in charge and in her father's place, made me very sad, as if I were far away

1 Fariba Adelkhah (born 24 April 1959 in Tehran) is an Iranian-French dual national, anthropologist and research director at Sciences Po University, arrested on charges of espionage. She received her doctorate from the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences in Paris and specialised in Iranian studies, Islam and Shia Islam. Adelkhah had lived in Qom for several months, researching the theological seminary and investigating the behaviours of Shia clerics in Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. She was sentenced to a total of five years in prison on charges of 'assembly and collusion to act against national security' and 'propaganda against the system' but was acquitted of espionage. Finally, in February 2022, she was released from Evin Prison, ultimately managing to leave Iran in October 2022 and return to France.

from my two children. Bless her, she was trying to appear normal and was holding back her tears. I remembered the time of my father's arrest, when we were children, and we went to see him in the IRGC prison for the first time. I felt happy for my father, who at least could see us in person. I told Kani, 'Thank you for coming, but go back. Go to Delnia's wedding instead of me and congratulate them on my behalf.'

My interrogators would stand over my head and wouldn't let me talk comfortably. I said I wanted a face-to-face meeting and kept contending that it had been more than a month and a half since I had seen my son and wife. I hadn't seen any human being other than them, and I was still in solitary confinement.

They said, 'Our hands are tied, and the investigator does not allow it. You can't even see your legal counsel.'

We reached a point where the interrogation was interrupted for four or five days, and nothing happened. I was going crazy. I was constantly contacting the duty officer and asking, 'Where is Seyyed? Why isn't he coming? Why doesn't he say what my situation is? Call so-and-so, talk to so-and-so, etc . . .' Later, I guessed that this was also one of their strategies: they suddenly leave you alone so that you break down.

At that time, the substantive discussion of the research was over, and it was time to turn to work experience, NGOs and the field of social and civil works. They said I had to talk about my executive activities. We were at that stage when the interrogation suddenly stopped. When it started again, the interrogator said with a smirk, 'Did you miss me so much that you were constantly calling and asking where I was?' Then they would stare at me to see my reaction. It is very sad when a person misses his interrogator! Later, when Taher Ghadirian, one of the environmental prisoners, told me about Stockholm Syndrome[1] and his and others' experiences, I realised that

1 The origin of the term 'Stockholm Syndrome' goes back to a hostage situation in a major bank in Stockholm, Sweden. In 1973, during a failed robbery, criminals took three women and one man hostage for six days. However, after the end of this ordeal, the hostages came to the defence of their captors and testified in their favour in court. Many researchers believe that Stockholm Syndrome is useful in explaining the specific behaviours of a wide range of psychological-trauma victims, including those in abusive relationships, prisoners of war and cult members. The syndrome is characterised by feelings of trust or affection felt by a victim of kidnapping or hostage-taking toward their captor. These feelings are often considered irrational in light of the danger or risk endured by the victims.



Image 394: The Blue Girl.

maybe I was also suffering from this condition, and, when I paid attention, I realised that the prisoner seems, in a way, to fall in love with his interrogator!

My interrogation restarted, and they relentlessly grilled me about my activities before my military service, during my shopkeeping days and before I left Iran. Then they moved on to my life and work in London – my volunteer work with Oxfam, my trips to Africa with it, and my work as a translator in immigration centres and family courts, preparing reports for child-custody cases. Anything in my work that involved money or payment was of particular interest. They'd fire questions at me: 'How much were you earning?' They delved into every aspect of my life abroad, especially my studies: where and when, what subjects, my university friends and their backgrounds, my supervisors, where I'd published articles, my emails, my contacts at the UN, conferences I'd attended, even meetings with junior staff – they asked about everything you could possibly imagine.

As I mentioned before, the cultural attaché at the French Embassy, who spoke fluent Farsi, had come to the National Library for the unveiling of my child-marriage research. He'd invited me to attend a Christmas celebration at the Swedish Embassy. It was there that I'd met Mr Gary Lewis, the UN representative in Iran, just once. It was our first meeting, and when he learned about my work on FGM/C, he mentioned that his assignment in Iran was ending and he was moving to Kenya, his next

posting. Mr Lewis's wife was planning to write an article about FGM/C in Africa and asked for my help. I put her in touch with a woman I knew from my trip to Kenya, who was part of the network of FGM/C activists. My interrogator tried to spin this casual Christmas party encounter into some kind of clandestine connection between me, European embassies, the UN and my work on raising the legal age of marriage for children.

All these question-and-answer sessions became part of the charges against me in the Revolutionary Court, to which I would later have to answer. They even suggested another purpose of these connections: promoting homosexuality!

But they didn't stop there. They wanted to extract more information from me, to add even more charges to my file. For example, while they were interrogating me, the 'Blue Girl' incident happened. Sahar Khodayari, or 'Blue Girl', was arrested and tried for trying to enter a football stadium. In protest against her six-month prison sentence, she set herself on fire in front of the court. They said to me, 'Kameel, look what these feminists are doing! What do you think about all this media hype?' Then he showed me a news report on his mobile phone from the 2030 programme.

I was completely cut off from news of the outside world. I just smirked inwardly. Anything reported on 2030, I knew, was propaganda. Years before returning to Iran, I'd worked on the issue of Kurdish women self-immolating in Iraq. During one of the sessions, the interrogators said, 'You have a successful media track record – all that hype you created in Iraq. You've been doing the same thing in Iran. You've got form for this.'

The interrogations about my executive and academic background were coming to an end, so I kept asking to see my family. But they kept refusing: 'Not today. Not possible tomorrow. The public prosecutor and the investigator are not happy with you. Your wife is talking to the media, stirring everyone up. Tell her to stop that, and maybe we'll grant you a visit.' It was the same old game – stringing me along.

The interrogations became less frequent; I no longer had evening or night sessions. Sometimes the head interrogator was absent, and the second interrogator would say he was busy writing the final report for the investigator and had to submit it in two or three months. 'What difference does the investigator make?' I thought. 'They've planned everything in advance; no one's really in charge.' But aloud I said, 'What is the investigator, anyway?'

He replied, 'You lot always get the wrong idea about the Iranian judiciary. The judiciary is independent. If the investigator so much as frowned at us, we'd have a heart attack.'

I knew he was talking rubbish. I guessed the investigator would later say the same thing – that everything was down to the judge.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Take Off Your Blindfold

They had written down everything they wanted. It's not as if they wrote down what I told them; they'd already written everything and just needed the formality of some paperwork and a staged interrogation. They'd made the most of those 'golden days', when they thought I would still talk and argue, when my mental link to the outside world hadn't been completely severed. They exploited that time, subjecting me to interrogation after interrogation, day after day.

After those gruelling days of performance and playacting, that phase finally ended. Of course, saying it like this, in a single sentence, can't possibly convey the hardship of those days. I was exhausted. Sometimes the intensity of my anxieties pushed me to the brink of madness, and I was constantly being seen by the prison psychiatrist. Depressed, with lifeless eyes, I'd curl up in the corner of my cell. Its larger size was now meaningless to me. In fact, the very story of the cell just made me feel worse; it was a nightmare in itself.

My life had ended. I couldn't even think straight, and it seems they sensed that they'd gone far enough. 'Kameel,' they seemed to decide, 'this pawn in our game, whose guilt we've already predetermined, can spend a bit of time in a communal cell.' They didn't understand that if I regained a bit of strength I'd revert to being the researcher I was, and I'd even find new subjects within the prison itself. Although I'd never be the same again and they'd inflicted wounds that would always remain, my inner self remained unchanged. They couldn't imprison my mind, and I wouldn't let hopelessness and depression take over completely. My mind was the only domain left to me, and I couldn't allow it to be lost.

From here on, I'll describe the many bizarre events that occurred during my days in prison – incidents that would sometimes rivet me so intensely that I'd forget my own situation and become engrossed in analysing my surroundings!

The Man Who Wanted to Assassinate Qasem Soleimani

I was exhausted and gaunt, depleted in both body and spirit. I'd lost a lot of weight, and severe insomnia and panic attacks had brought me to my knees. Things had gotten so bad that even the prison guards and interrogators were concerned and regularly sent me to the clinic. The psychiatrist readily prescribed medication, and I was on a cocktail of drugs. Depression had eroded my concentration. I worried about inadvertently causing myself more trouble in the interrogations. Eventually, the interrogators relented and changed my conditions. They had essentially achieved what they wanted; they had made their point, and I had made mine.

The Friday Prayer sermon was being broadcast over the loudspeaker when a guard knocked on the door and said, '127! Blindfold on and gather your blankets.' I was moving to the next stage. Stress gripped me entirely. I was constantly worried they'd send me to Mahabad prison or somewhere else. I tried to reassure myself, 'Kameel, don't worry, they're probably just changing your cell. Maybe you'll even be lucky and be swapped with another prisoner.'

The guard took my hand, and together we entered another building. We stood for a moment, and he spoke quietly with someone else. I didn't understand what was happening, but he signed a register and left. A door opened, and a new guard gently nudged me inside. I could smell food and hear the sound of a television. Several people were talking. I was uncertain what to do when everyone fell silent. One person said, 'Welcome', and another said, 'Take off your blindfold.'

Surprised, I asked, 'Take it off?'

He replied, 'Yes, take it off. We're prisoners too.'

When I removed my blindfold, I saw there were three other people in the room besides me. Like my first cell, it had no windows, or they were covered with sheet metal, but it had a television, a shower, a toilet and, most importantly, people! They had brought me to a communal cell. I

didn't know the other prisoners, but when they asked why I'd been imprisoned, I started talking. I think I talked non-stop for twenty-four hours. The poor guys took turns sleeping. I begged them not to sleep and to keep talking to me!

The occupants of this room sometimes changed. Someone would leave, someone else would arrive, and everything would constantly start anew. In this room, I met Amir Hussein, the CEO of Avazeh Rice. He and his family owned a portion of the Refah chain stores. According to him, he was supposed to import rice from India and Sri Lanka using Nimai currency,[1] but his shipment hadn't arrived, and he'd been arrested for disrupting the currency market.[2]

I also met a prisoner from Chechnya during this period. He spoke neither Farsi nor English, only Chechen and Russian, and occasionally a few words of English. He had previously been a bodyguard and part of the security escort for the president of Chechnya. His friend was imprisoned in another room – they had deliberately separated them. These three had entered Iran from Turkey, intending to go to Afghanistan, and had been arrested for having links to ISIS. He was religious, powerfully built and athletic. He had made several unsuccessful suicide attempts and was generally a strange character. Although harmless, living alongside him had its difficulties.

The mayor of Malard City had been brought to prison for economic corruption and was my cellmate. Six other mayors from the same region and the outskirts of Tehran had also been arrested and were in other rooms. This man would cry from morning till night, saying it wasn't his fault and he'd been brought here innocent. He cried about his situation, his wife and

1 Nimai currency is a type of foreign exchange offered to control and develop imports and exports, and its price is more favourable compared to other currencies. Unlike the stock exchange, the Nimai rate does not fluctuate much, and its price is determined by the central bank. The central bank determines the Nimai currency price based on supply and demand, inflation rates and the extent of currency coverage.

2 These prisoners were called 'economic prisoners'. At that time, Raisi, who was the president of Iran from August 2021 to April 2024, had just taken over the Judiciary from Larijani, and his slogan was to fight economic corruption. Before my arrest, I would occasionally read in the news that so-and-so had been arrested, that the managers of such-and-such company and bank had been detained and so on. It was in Ward 2A of the IRGC Intelligence Organisation that I realised that the majority of the people there were economic prisoners – influential economic prisoners – the so-called 'big fish'.

children, his clan and lineage, his reputation – basically, anything that came to mind. He said it was all the fault of another mayor who had slandered him, and if he ever saw him, he'd do this and that. One day, the door opened, and that very mayor walked in. They were both stunned. The mayor who was with us, as usual, started crying, then hugged the newly arrived mayor and said 'forgive me', 'pardon me' and so on.

We asked, 'Who is this gentleman?'

He said, 'Mr So-and-so.' Having heard his name so often, we immediately realised it was the very mayor he'd been badmouthing all this time. He didn't kill him or cut off his head; seeing each other changed everything!

My time in the communal cell began with these few individuals, although later some faces changed. One day the door opened, and they brought in someone who was clearly no ordinary prisoner. He brought in loads of belongings with him: books, biscuits, fizzy drinks and many other things we didn't have. Even his blindfold was different from ours. We had military-issue blindfolds, while his was made of fabric. He said, 'I'm Taher Ghadirian,[1] an environmental prisoner, and I've been in detention for two years.'

The number 'two years' hit me like a sledgehammer. To have spent over 700 days in IRCG's Ward 2A was deeply shocking. Given his background and experience, he knew all the prison guards. This was good for us, and he didn't seem to mind becoming the head of our room – in fact, we more or less made him so.

He told us that he was, in effect, living there. After a long period in solitary confinement, he'd been in another room and had even shared a cell with six ISIS members. He said the room had been so small that it had affected his vision and pupils. He understood the prison system inside out and helped us with our ongoing interrogations. He had a similar case to mine, as they had charged him with Article 508 and a couple of other things. He and, to some extent, Amir Hussein were the closest to me in

1 Taher Ghadirian, an environmental activist, was arrested in Bahman 1396 (January/February 2018) during the mass arrest of environmental activists by the IRGC Intelligence Organisation. After years of imprisonment, he, along with other imprisoned environmental activists Sepideh Kashani, Niloufar Bayani, Houman Jokar, Sam Rajabi and Amirhossein Khaleghi, were granted a two-week furlough in Esfand 1401 (February/March 2023).



Image 395: News coverage of the assassination plot.

A New Account of the Assassination Plot Against General Soleimani / [They] Had Excavated Under the Husseiniyah / [The] Terrorists Had Prepared a 400-Kilogram Bomb

"Fars [News Agency] wrote: A representative of the people of Qom in Parliament, referring to the issue of the assassination of General Soleimani, said: 'The terrorists had made contact several times with Hebrew and Arab intelligence services, had received training, had prepared a 400-kilogram bomb, and from a house...'"

terms of shared thoughts, while most of the rest were economic prisoners. We also had one or two others who had spent three weeks in interrogation and solitary for staging a sit-in and protesting the relocation of Tehran University of Art; they were released soon after.

There was also a young lad who radiated trouble and had been imprisoned for drug trafficking, though we didn't know why the IRCG Intelligence had arrested him. According to him, he lived in southern Tehran. He had a tattoo of his girlfriend's kiss on his neck, which is why he was known as 'Lippy'. The interrogators had tormented him a lot because of this large, red, fiery tattoo, and he'd also been badly beaten during his arrest and transfer. The Chechen man and another prisoner considered Lippy to be impure and told him to keep his distance!

Another prisoner was from Mazandaran. He and his son had obtained Nima currency. They had taken out a loan to import machinery from Russia, but, after it cleared customs, they had sold the machinery.

I met another prisoner named Ali. Generally, prisoners weren't in good shape after solitary confinement, but Ali was in a particularly bad way when he came to the communal cell from isolation. He came to the far end of the room and dropped his blanket next to me. When we asked why he was imprisoned, he said, 'My case is very serious.' We replied that we were all in serious situations to be here! After hearing our reasons, he said, 'No, my case is far more serious than yours. You might not believe it. They say I wanted to assassinate Qasem Soleimani.'

When he said this, we were all shocked. The first reaction came from the conservative old man from Mazandaran, who lowered his head and said he was going to say his prayers. For as long as Ali was there, the old man didn't speak much to him and would constantly mutter under his breath that he was a dangerous man.

I asked, 'Did you really want to assassinate Qasem Soleimani?' The accusation was so unbelievable to some of us, and it didn't seem like these people were capable of carrying out such an operation.

As far as I remember, he said, 'Yes, I'm a mechanic and I lived in Kerman. I had a lot of debt, and someone invited me to work with them. We became a group of five and went to Qatar. They accused us of meeting Mossad intelligence officers and plotting to assassinate Soleimani. We were all arrested except for our contact, who was Baluchi!'

Soleimani's father had built a mosque, or Husseiniya, in Kerman, where the son would give a speech every year on Ashura. Another part of the accusation was that this group of five had rented houses near the mosque to tunnel into the mosque from the basement and plant bombs inside. IRCG Intelligence claimed that they had cleverly arrested them during the operation. Later, the group also realised that the Baluchi person was a member of IRCG Intelligence! A few days later, the 2030 news programme covered the story. They told him that he would certainly be executed. Assassinating Qassem Soleimani was no joke and carried the charge of *Moharebeh* ('waging war against God').

Later, after I was released, Soleimani and his companions were killed by America in Baghdad using several missiles. In 2023, near the same mosque, on the fourth anniversary of his death, two bombs exploded, leaving more than a hundred dead and hundreds wounded. I thought to myself, 'At least it was good for Ali. Now that Soleimani had actually been

assassinated – and not by him – maybe they'd finally re-evaluate the absurdity of his charge in a different light.'

Before I left for the General Ward, Ali gave me his wife's number. I called her and told her that Ali had been with us and was still in the hands of IRCG Intelligence. I don't know what happened to him, but, overall, he was an interesting character.

Tabari and his Associates

The other prisoners who joined us were mostly there for economic crimes. For a while, all the new prisoners were connected to Mr Tabari, and in the General Ward I also saw many prisoners who were linked to Tabari's case. They said Tabari had bought a lot of property and registered it all in the names of his wife, daughter, driver and tea boy. Mr Tabari's cronies were constantly reading the Quran, crying and saying it wasn't their fault. They reminded me of a Pakistani man I used to work for in London; he also read the Quran all the time but would steal from his customers using rigged scales!

One of the deputies from the legal department of the Judiciary, who was also involved in the Tabari case, was brought to us, along with a whole host of odd and bizarre individuals, each somehow entangled in the financial corruption of the Judiciary. When you listened to their conversations, they would say, 'Yes, it's true, we've pocketed and exchanged money, but if we hadn't done this, we wouldn't have been able to carry on. Because some people, like Mr Tabari's opponents, were afraid you wouldn't be complicit in their crimes and would expose them. It was better to become a partner in crime!'

I met the builder of the famous twin towers on Kish Island. I don't know exactly why, but he had been arrested for selling an apartment to Tabari's wife. He had recently returned from Canada and had been in Evin Prison before. He explained that, once their work with us was finished, we'd experience newer and more interesting phases of our imprisonment, which was actually quite good. Prisoners had access to phones, could come and go, and could have conjugal and in-person visits. You could even hire a chef for yourself, and a prisoner who spent money could live comfortably.

Taher had been in this environment for a long time and knew all about these things. He said, 'You have no idea what marvels there are in here.



اکبر طبری چگونه بازداشت شد و در حال حاضر کجاست؟

داستان دستگیری و محکومیت طبری و اخباری که مبنی بر عدم حضور این محکوم در زندان مخابره شد؛ از موضوعات داغی است که نقل محافل خبری و غیرخبری شده است.

به گزارش مشرق، سردار نقدی، معاون هماهنگ‌کننده سپاه در سخنان اخیر خود گفت: «اگر امثال طبری در وسط بازار تهران شلاق بخورند بسیاری از مفاسد شکل نمی‌گیرد و برخورد با این گونه مفاسد باید جزو مطالبات ما باشد.» اما طبری چه جرایمی مرتکب شده و آخرین وضعیت محکومیت او چیست؟

اکبر طبری سال‌ها در سمت‌هایی همچون معاون امور اجرایی و مدیرکل امور مالی قوه قضائیه حضور داشت. او یک هفته پس از ریاست ابراهیم رئیسی بر این قوه در سال ۹۷، از سمت خود برکنار شد. اندکی بعد، طبری در ۲۳ تیر

Image 396: Headline from *Mashregh*, a news agency affiliated with IRGC about Tabari

Headline: How was Akbar Tabari arrested, and where is he now?
"The story of the arrest and conviction of Tabari, and the news concerning his absence from prison, has been one of the hot topics circulating in both news and non-news circles."
According to a report by Mashregh, General Naghdi, the IRGC's deputy coordinator, said in his recent remarks: 'If people like Tabari do not face severe punishment in the middle of the Tehran bazaar, corruption will not be eradicated; dealing with such corruption must be among our demands.' But what crimes did Tabari commit, and what is his latest status?
Akbar Tabari held positions for years, such as Deputy Executive and Director General of Financial Affairs for the Judiciary. He was dismissed from his post one week after Ebrahim Raisi took over the leadership of the Judiciary in 2018. Shortly thereafter, on 14 July..."

I've been in rooms with some of the economic prisoners and seen things that are unbelievable.' Comparing myself to them, I could see how different we were. The economic prisoners would laugh at my research on FGM/C and child marriage. They'd say, 'What kind of work is that? Why

is it even a crime? Go and make a bit of money. What's it to you when other people get married?'

Taher and I didn't really belong with that group, and Ali also had a poor view of the economic prisoners. He said, 'I became involved in the Qasem Soleimani assassination plot because I was penniless, but these people who have sucked the blood of the nation will be released soon.'

In those days, under the immense pressure on our nerves, Taher and I would reflect on how unfair the world is. While we and people like us were doing our bit to build a better world, there were others who were engaged in economic profiteering, and now our situations were the same. We were even being mocked by them. For me, who had done research on waste-pickers and child labour, this inequality was even more galling.

Lippy saw eye-to-eye more with the economic prisoners and thought our kind of work was just asking for trouble. He'd say things like, 'Go after girls and do drugs. What's it to you, getting mixed up in all this?' He was always talking about being high on drugs, describing what each one felt like. 'Ecstasy gets you like this,' he'd explain, 'and crack gets you like that. Crystal's like this, and heroin's like that.' He boasted about his fights and girlfriends, saying, 'If you've got money in Iran, you can do whatever you bloody well please.' He was always telling the economic prisoners, 'When I get out, let's keep in touch. I'll sort out your weekend parties like you wouldn't believe!'

In some ways, I could see Ali's point. Some of these economic prisoners had taken advantage of the chaotic economy and the country's mismanagement. Thanks to their wealth, connections or just being plain smart, they'd completely turned their lives around – in a crooked way. Some of the economic prisoners told stories about their interrogators. They were often very young men, barely out of their twenties, who didn't even understand basic economics or how markets worked. Yet, these young interrogators were questioning people who had forty years of business experience. It was clear those interrogators didn't know what they were doing and resorted to the same shouting and threats I'd heard in the corridors. Back then, the whole system had been mobilised to, in Mr Raisi's words, 'eradicate corruption', and look how well that went!

The Bittersweetness of Meeting

There wasn't much time left before my interrogation review started, and Taher tried to guide me. The interrogators also explained the procedure.

After constantly asking, I got to see my family in person. It was our first meeting in two months, and I was really excited to see them in the visiting room in Ward 2A. I'd heard that other prisoners met their families and lawyers in this same room. They said that, even before the families arrived, they'd put a fruit basket on the table to make the IRGC Intelligence Organisation look respectable. Prisoners with visitors would wear their best clothes, but I didn't have any of my own. I borrowed some, but we had no iron. We put the clothes under the mattress and asked the Chechen man, the heaviest of us, to sleep on them to flatten them a bit. There was no mirror in the room, so we used the silver foil from fizzy drink-bottle labels as mirrors, only catching a ghostly, unrecognisable reflection of ourselves. On the morning of the visit, I went for a shower and tried to tidy myself up as best I could, even without a mirror. I waited for them to call my name, really excited to see Shafagh and Alan. But then, suddenly, they gave me a striped prison uniform in zebra colours and told me to put it on. I said, 'I have a visit. I want to wear my own clothes.'

'No,' they said, 'you're going somewhere else.'

However much I insisted, they just repeated that the plan had changed. I put on my blindfold and set off. When I opened my eyes, I was in the prosecutor's office courtyard. They took me upstairs to Mr Qana'atkar's room. I protested, 'I'm supposed to see my family today! Why have you brought me here?'

They said, 'The interrogating magistrate wants to see you.' We were still arguing when I saw Shafagh and Alan sitting outside the interrogating magistrate's door. Alan was staring at me, bewildered. He'd never seen me with a long beard, and I looked like a stranger to him. Shafagh also seemed shocked and suddenly said, 'A-A-Alan, look, it's Baba! There's Baba!' ('Alan, look, it's Dad! There's Dad!'

Instinctively, I ran to Alan, wanting to hug him, but the interrogating magistrate snapped, 'Hey, not in here! What's going on?' He shouted at me and asked the prison guard, 'Why are you letting them hug here? Get permission from me first. They're not allowed any contact, especially not like this!'

If the interrogating magistrate – who is now the deputy prosecutor of Tehran and sanctioned internationally for his role in accusing dual nationals[1] – had even an ounce of humanity and kindness in his heart, he wouldn't have treated a child like that. I found it incredible that these people, who were devout Shia Muslims and regularly spent two months of the year talking and weeping about the events of Karbala and the injustice and oppression inflicted on the children and women in that story – and for whom the story of Ashura was a key part of their Shia identity – could allow themselves to treat a child like this. What I had done was not a crime or against the law in any accepted sense, and, even if it were, why should my child be subjected to such harshness because of it?

The merciless interrogating magistrate took me into his room and said, 'You're going with two officers to such-and-such a room and you can see your family. The visit will last ten minutes, and if you say a single word about your case, the visit is over – finished.'

I said, 'Agreed. I just want to see my wife and child.'

Then he called my wife in and gave her the same ultimatum: 'You are not to talk about anything, and, of course, you are not allowed to speak in Kurdish, either.' When I pointed out that my son didn't speak any language other than Kurdish and asked what language I was supposed to speak to him in, my question went unanswered.

Two security officers took us to a room at the end of the corridor. There was also a Kurdish security officer present, to prevent any possibility of Shafagh and I exchanging information. It seemed they had considered every eventuality. All my attention was on Alan, who looked unwell. Shafagh, trying not to worry me, said it was nothing – just a cold/virus going around the nursery, affecting all the children, but my heart still wasn't at ease. I started to draw the only picture I knew how to, to make Alan happy: a house with a pitched roof, a pond, some flowers, a car and

1 According to published information, there are now dozens of dual-national prisoners in Evin Prison and other Iranian prisons. American and European countries have the most dual-national prisoners in Iran. Most of these prisoners have been sentenced to long prison terms on charges of 'cooperating with hostile governments', which refers to the United States, Britain and other Western countries. This is despite the fact that, according to an official document published on 23 Azar 1392 (14 December 2013) by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran considers no country other than Israel to be an example of a 'hostile country' or 'enemy' of the Islamic Republic (Rostami, 2019).

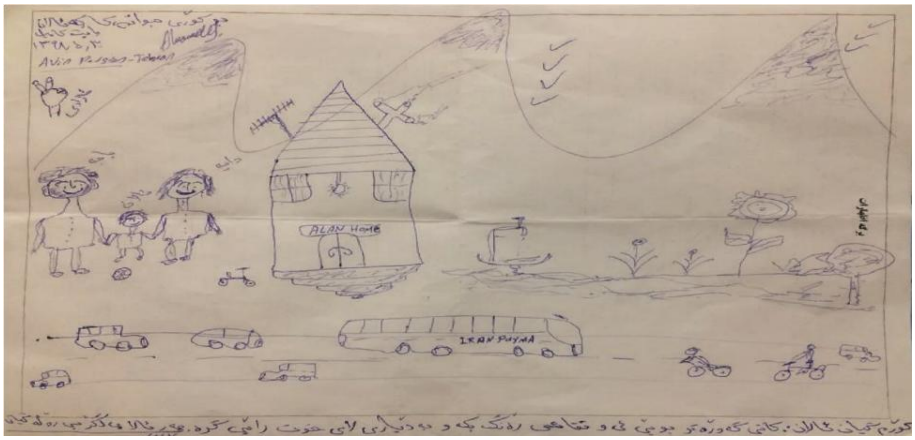


Image 397: My drawing on the back of my interrogation statement form for the day of my visit with Alan. Ward 2A, Evin Prison, 2019.

a motorbike. In Kurdish, I wrote underneath it, 'My son Alan, when you're bigger, colour in this picture. May you remain a standard-bearer, my Alan ["Alan" in Kurdish means "standard-bearer"].' At the top I wrote, 'For my beautiful son Alan. Your father, Kameel, 03/05/89, Evin Prison.'

Shafagh said, 'Kameel, we're all fine', and tried to give me a couple of coded messages, saying, 'Tomorrow at 11 o'clock the head of the Judiciary is speaking. Watch it.'

The translator said, 'They're giving each other codes', and immediately cut short our visit.

When I realised the visit was over, I hugged and kissed Alan. I inhaled his scent and felt like crying. My chest was bursting, but I couldn't let Alan see me cry. Just sensing the tension in the air was enough for him. When the officer's voice rose, he got scared. He clung to me and said, 'Baba, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at home?'

I said, 'This is my workplace, this is my desk and I work here in the mornings. I've grown a beard because it's cold at the moment, and this way I feel the cold less.' I wanted to explain the situation to him in a way that would make him worry less, but he sensed that we were in an uncertain and unfavourable situation, and this showed in his behaviour.

Shafagh was also anxious and upset but tried to appear strong. She always used to say, 'If you're arrested, I'll talk to the media,[1] a campaign

1 Asr-e Iran, 2019.

will be launched for you and, in the end, everything will be all right.' That was how she viewed events, but I knew I was in a terrible mess, and things wouldn't be resolved that easily. On the other hand, I was worried about her. She was alone with a child, and my accounts had been blocked. I didn't want her to borrow money from her family. Even the thought of it made me feel humiliated, but I couldn't do anything about it.

After this failed meeting, I was depressed for several days and constantly said to myself, 'I wish I hadn't gone.' These people had disrespected me and my wife and child. What difference was there in me and Taher Ghadirian, who had also spent months without visits? Why was it that the economic prisoners didn't have much difficulty getting visits and could even send gifts for their children's birthdays, yet political prisoners couldn't even have a comfortable few minutes' visit with their families? I could see that economic defendants could use the phone every day, but we political prisoners, or 'security' prisoners, as the interrogators called us, couldn't even call our families once a month.

I kept myself occupied with Taher's books and would read for more than twelve hours a day. Bless him, he had all sorts of books on the environment and animal life, poetry and mysticism. There were poems by Rumi, Saadi and Hafez, too, and, for me, having not read much Farsi poetry, it was a good opportunity to connect with Iranian literature and mysticism. During solitary confinement, I insisted that my interrogator give me a book other than the Quran. Eventually, he was kind enough to tell my prison guard to bring me a book. He brought me a book entitled *Memoirs of Martyr Amini*, who was a battalion commander and deputy. When I read it, my night terrors got worse. In my dreams, I would see people entering minefields and their legs and arms being blown off. Blood would be everywhere. They would tie tourniquets around their bodies and wait to die. Then they would collect the body parts and send them to their families in sacks. Most of the memoirs were about the Valfajr 7 and 8 operations, and I think they had deliberately given me such a book. When I asked about this, they said it was the only book they had, and if I didn't want to read it, I didn't have to. I would decide not to read it, but then I'd go back to it again, read sections and get worked up. I'd put it aside and wrap myself in my blanket, but I would still go back to reading it because



غلامحسین اسماعیلی، سخنگوی قوه قضائیه ظهر امروز در یازدهمین نشست خبری خود درباره بازداشت کامیل احمدی گفت: «اصل بازداشت این فرد صحت دارد و موضوع آن بحث ارتباط با کشورهای بیگانه و موسسات وابسته به سرویس‌های بیگانه است.»

Image 398: Announcement of the reason for my arrest by the Judiciary spokesman at a press conference.

Press conference of the Judiciary spokesperson
Gholamhossein Esmaili, spokesperson for the Judiciary, said this afternoon during his eleventh press conference regarding the detention of Kameel Ahmady: "The fact of this individual's detention is correct, and the issue concerns connection with foreign countries and institutions affiliated with foreign intelligence services.

there was nothing else to do in that dreadful cell, and these things were a form of psychological torture.

In the general ward, everyone watched the 2030 news programme, and it was even more important for the economic prisoners. Shafagh had told me to watch this programme, so I did. A reporter from *Shargh* newspaper asked the Judiciary spokesman about my case. He confirmed my arrest[1] and said, 'Kameel Ahmady has been arrested because of his connections with foreign institutions that are subversive', implicitly referring to the

1 Kurdistan Human Rights Network, 2019.

same accusation that the interrogators had been focusing on. This hit me very hard, and for days afterward I was dazed and even more depressed.

In the communal cell, and among the economic prisoners, there was talk of the 'discovery fees' paid to officers, and I realised that the effort to accuse people had another side to it – it was a good source of income for the Government and IRGC Intelligence. The officer who had worked on the case and spent night and day fabricating charges knew that these 'discoveries' would ultimately bring him several hundred million in profit, and that's why they were always after juicy cases!

Meeting the Sultans of Haft Tappeh

Two or three new people were brought in who were clearly old-timers. They were wearing civilian clothes and had come from Ward 4 of the main Evin Prison, which was mostly where well-known economic criminals were held. These newcomers were from the famous Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company; I'd read about them in the news. They were a few sharp, energetic young men in their thirties, who clearly couldn't be trusted. As Lippy would say, they were the type to 'fleece you in a heartbeat'.

In their short lives, they'd travelled and experienced so much, and the interesting thing was that they had all come from impoverished backgrounds and ended up in the business of cronyism and financial corruption. Their justification was that the whole system was corrupt anyway and that the Government was practically begging people to buy bankrupt, state-owned factories that had accumulated huge debts. One of them said, 'I bought this factory at this price. No one else would buy it, but I did. Now that I've bought it, everyone's acting like a lion, trying to claim their rights.' He said workers were just lazy and wanted to exploit the situation. I didn't agree with him. We would argue, and I challenged him about his words. I couldn't have a positive view of the actions of people who had embezzled the wages of hundreds of workers and blamed everyone else. Fortunately, I heard that, in 2021, Haft Tappeh was returned to the public sector and was no longer privately owned.

It was during that period that they said they were sending me to the General Ward. I spoke to Shafagh on the phone, and she said the interrogating magistrate had given his word that I would be released on

bail, but my interrogator denied it and said there was no such news. People with more experience said, 'Kameel, your interrogator's work has reached the "chatting up" stage, and the interrogator has nothing more to say to you.' They said that if your case was, in their words, 'security-related', they would film you and then you would go to General Ward 4. From there, things could go one of two ways: either they would take you to Judge Salavati to be tried and serve your prison term, or you would remain there until a bail amount was set for you and you were released until your court date.

All I could think about was getting to the next stage as quickly as possible.

Facing the Camera

A few weeks later, they took me to my interrogator, who said, 'We've reached the filming stage. Kameel, it looks like you're going to be leaving us soon.'

The system worked like this: you'd sit in front of a camera in the same studio where, in their words, they'd shown the ringleaders of the 2009 disturbances and many others. Behind you, there was a colourful backdrop. You'd wear the clothes you had on the day of your arrest, and, with a shaved and tidied-up face, you'd say whatever they wanted you to



Image 399: *Off-Screen* documentary logo

say! I knew this film would probably become part of a documentary intended to prove what plots I and other dual nationals had hatched to destroy Iran. They called these documentaries *Off-Screen*. The newer episodes of these documentaries were about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and the infiltration of Babak Namazi and his father, and the previous episode had been about environmental activists. I guessed that the new episode would be about cultural infiltration, focusing on the 'conspiracy project' by me and others to reduce the population.

They told me how I should behave in front of the camera and what to say. They said that if I didn't cooperate, my case would be delayed. My interrogator sat behind the camera next to the cameraman and asked me questions: 'Describe your role and position in the FGM/C project. In what way did you carry out the child-marriage project? In what circumstances did the white-marriage work take place?' And they repeated all the questions they had asked me during interrogation, asking for short answers in front of the camera. All the interrogator's questions revolved around the idea that I had intended to infiltrate the Government, and, according to the advice of the other prisoners, I gave short answers – just 'yes' and 'no'. But this didn't satisfy them, and they asked the questions again in a different way.

The interrogator said, 'When you come out of solitary confinement and into the communal ward, you're taught a thousand tricks and dodges. A prime example is how you've learned to act in front of the camera. Stop fidgeting so much and don't give such brief answers. With voice-over systems, we can easily simulate your voice and move our work forward. Besides which, we can tamper with and cut parts of the film!'

The televised interrogation[1] lasted a week. The cameraman would say, 'Do you know who's sat in this chair? Mostafa Tajzadeh, Zeidabadi,

1 Televised confessions in Iran were initially started by SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, in the early 1970s and escalated after the 1979 Islamic Revolution by the security authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Montazeri's fatwa, those who order, orchestrate and carry out fabricated televised confessions and interviews, using force, torture and threats are sinful and criminal and are religiously and legally deserving of punishment. Televised confessions are often accompanied by physical and psychological torture. The International Federation for Human Rights in Paris and the Justice for Iran organisation in London announced in 2020 that, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, at least 355 forced confessions were broadcast on Iranian State television between 2009 and 2019 (Gol, 2019).

Seyyed-Emami and all the bigwigs, and, of course, the dual nationals and environmental spies. I've filmed them all from behind this very camera. They've all come to answer for themselves, and, in the end, they all did. So don't be so stubborn, and don't give short answers. We've had plenty of people like you, and they all eventually loosen their tongues.'

I was constantly subjected to psychological pressure to make me talk more, and they even said I could talk about things I hadn't mentioned in the interrogations. In short, they pushed everything toward forced confessions in an intense psychological battle. That way, no one could say that they got these confessions from me under torture. 'That is you, sitting there in a suit and trousers, clean-shaven and smart, with a beard added if you like, talking about all your charges and confirming them; that's something you can't deny.'

My interrogator kept saying, 'Kameel, everything's in sync for you. Your interrogating magistrate and your judge are in sync. From now on, you're going to be dealing with the interrogating magistrate; my work with you is finished. It's between you and the interrogating magistrate now. You know Judge Salavati, don't you? Even if he doesn't write you a death sentence, he won't write less than twenty to thirty years. You're going to a place where no one can find fault; go and tell your stories to the interrogating magistrate. Your interrogation review sessions will start next week, and you can say whatever you like there. I wanted to help you, but you don't want me to, and you're still sticking to your positions. You still say that none of the so-called "academic" work you did was carried out as infiltration, even though you know yourself that that was your intention, and you were trained and sent here for that. This is your last chance. Come and confess everything in front of the camera, because it could have a big impact on your case.'

He kept pressuring me until finally those few days of filming were over. On the last day, my interrogator said with a smirk, 'My work with you is finished, and you probably won't ever see me again, but if you do see me and say hello, I'll pull out my gun on you. There'll be no more "Seyyed" and no more "Kameel" then. I know your lawyer will teach you a thousand tricks and dodges, and you'll unfairly say things about us, but be fair and tell the truth.' I said I would tell the truth and that I would certainly not write anything more than the reality anywhere, and I have indeed remained faithful to that promise to this day.

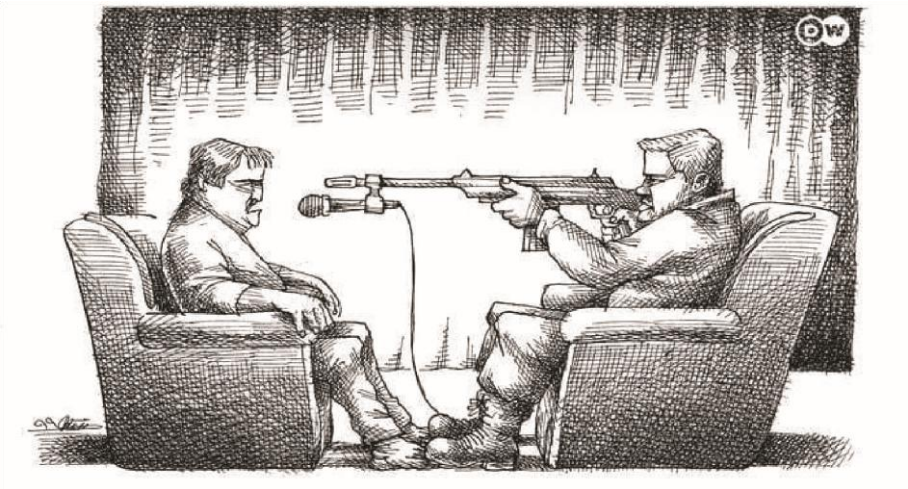


Image 400: Forced confession.

When saying goodbye, I said, 'Seyyed, whatever your name is, I don't know you, but I want to say a few words to you. Deep down, we're all ultimately good people. It's circumstances that sometimes make us bad or change us. You acted according to what you believed in, and so did I. Now, I don't know if your issue is financial or ideological, but I hope it's ideological and that you interrogated me and others like me for your beliefs, but . . . both of us know the truth, and I hope that one day you will ultimately face up to this truth. But I hope you get to a point where you change your behaviour. You turned my whole life upside down, and this will stay with me for the rest of my life.'

gHe avoided my gaze. He even got angry and moved away from me. He was running away from the truth. He told the officer to take me away. I stood facing him as they put the blindfold over my eyes. I never saw Seyyed again, and after seventy hard days in solitary and the communal cell, I was transferred to the General Ward.

My interrogating magistrate had a normal, religious appearance. He wore plastic sandals and slurped his tea. In my previous meeting with him, I'd seen aggressive behaviour, but after I was taken to him from the General Ward, it was as if he were a different person. He said, 'Dr Jan, come in and sit down.' He ordered tea for me and jokingly said, 'You're not a tea drinker, are you? Shall I get you a cappuccino instead?' I thought he was taking the mickey and would start shouting any minute, but he spoke

calmly and continued, 'Today I want to tell you what will happen to you in the interrogation-review phase. You know your interrogation is over, and from now on it's my job to verify and see if the things you've said are true or not, so that you can't later claim that you were tortured and forced to confess.'

I found it laughable. I thought, 'You're even lying to yourself, and how easy lying is for you!' And right there and then, I said, 'Mr Qana'atkar, wasn't I put under pressure? How else did you get evidence and confessions? You snatched my mobile in the street, hacked my emails and, at the time of arrest, forcibly took the passwords for my phone, email accounts and social media. You dragged me out of my house and kept me for a long time in a place like a grave. I was psychologically disturbed and had no control over myself, and the ten-to-twelve-hour interrogations destroyed me. Do you remember how my wife and child's visit went and how long it lasted?'

He repeated his previous words and added, 'But did anyone hit you?'[1]

I said, 'Why do you only consider physical assault to be



Image 401: White torture.

1 The definition of 'torture' held to by all security officials and the judicial system in Iran is limited to physical abuse, and they claim that it has been abolished. However, there are many accounts from prisoners who have been physically tortured during detention. Anyone who publicises these accounts will have new cases opened against them, and they will be re-arrested, imprisoned and tortured on charges of slandering the just system of the Islamic Republic! They will be accused of disturbing public opinion, as happened to Esmail Bakhshi, a labour activist and one of the brave workers of Haft Tappeh. Although I was not subjected to physical torture, there is no doubt that solitary confinement is a severe form of torture. It is also known as 'white torture'. White torture is a type of psychological torture based on sensory deprivation and isolation, which leads to the destruction of personal identity and the reduction of intellectual capacity. Recently, Narges Mohammadi, an Iranian journalist and human-rights activist, wrote a book on this subject, with an introduction by Shirin Ebadi. In addition to Narges Mohammadi herself, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Shokoufeh Yadollahi and Atena Daemi narrate their acute psychological conditions in solitary confinement.

torture? The impact of psychological pressure and torture is far worse than physical torture.'

He said mockingly, 'Would you have preferred to be tortured instead of this treatment?'

'No one likes to be tortured.' Nothing about Qana'atkar's simplifications rang true. I said, 'Do you know what nights and days I've been through? I've had panic attacks repeatedly, and sometimes I couldn't even breathe. I'm taking nerve and psychiatric medication, and I can't sleep without them. The psychological pressure of the day you wouldn't let me see my child properly . . . ! How can you offer me a cappuccino now, when you were a different person back then?'

He said, 'These are the regulations, and I'm bound by regulations here. I don't have the authority of Mr Amir Naseri, who is the prosecutor of this court.'

In short, Qana'atkar passed me on to someone higher up than himself and said that, when it was his turn to question me again, I would have to answer his questions again. I said, 'The officer's work with me is finished, so why aren't you issuing a bail order so I can go home and get on with my life?'

I hadn't touched my tea, out of anger. He said, 'You haven't drunk our tea. Are you worried about being bewitched!?' He was a strange man. Everyone who



Image 402: Amir Raisian on Twitter talking about my work in *Echo of Silence*.

> Amir Raisian - 04/09/2019:
> "Right now, as you are using the hashtag #Child_Marriage, Mr. Kameel Ahmday, one of the most credible and influential researchers in this field, has been in temporary detention for over 20 days."

knew him – from the environmental activists to Siamak Namazi and Abdolrasoul Dorri-Esfahani, a senior member of the nuclear-negotiating team who was in prison on espionage charges – said he was a fox-like and two-faced character. He changed very easily from one extreme to another, but, ultimately, he was powerless, and everything was in the hands of the officer and IRGC Intelligence.

Since 2009, since working for years in the country, and since watching the election debates on television, I've realised that lying and hypocrisy have become so normalised in Iranian political culture and their reprehensibility so diminished that people don't even try to hide it any more. During my detention and imprisonment, this became even more apparent, and I understood it with my very flesh and blood.

In prison, I was unaware of events outside. Apparently, a wedding ceremony had been held in Mashhad for a nine-year-old girl, which the Welfare Organisation broke up.[1] This event had been triggered by public pressure from activists and caused a great stir in cyberspace. Many people also mentioned my name, saying that I had worked on this issue and was now imprisoned. My lawyer, Mr Amir Raisian, wrote on Twitter that someone who had worked on the issue of child marriage was in prison because of this very issue. One of my cellmates had a visit from his family and heard about the situation. He said that someone who had worked on the issue of child marriage was with us in prison, and they started publicising it and using hashtags. Later, when he told me about this event, I was very happy. I saw that at least I had been able to do a small thing for public awareness, and society had become sensitive to the issue.

1 According to a report by *Asr-e Iran*, the deputy of the Welfare Organisation of Razavi Khorasan said, regarding the details of the incident, 'That night, the nine-year-old Afghan bride was married to a 36-year-old Afghan groom, but we made it clear to their families that they should protect the bride until the morning so that the court could annul the sigheh (temporary marriage).' Nayereh Abedinzadeh, deputy prosecutor of Razavi Khorasan, also confirmed the explanations of the deputy of the Welfare Organisation, saying, 'After we went to the ceremony, we took a pledge from the bride and groom's families that the bride would remain in custody until the next day and then they would come to my office with her.' She also referred to the issue of the child's lack of mental and physical maturity for marriage, adding, 'The next day, we spoke to the child with a psychologist and a social worker. She had no information about marriage, and her understanding of the wedding ceremony was only about wearing a wedding dress. She was so weak and small that they had tried to make her look taller with 7 to 9 cm heeled shoes, and she could not answer our questions and was illiterate' (Asr-e Iran, 2018).

Chapter Twenty-Three: Entering Wonderland

Iranian governance, for the ruling class, is akin to the management style I observed on Evin Prison's General Ward. It's a chaotic system in which money equals power. As long as you refrain from criticising the Government, you can mostly avoid being labelled a serious criminal and bypass severe restrictions. Just don't badmouth 'the King', and you're free to do as you please. Even if you commit a crime, you might end up in prison, but there, depending on your financial means, you can arrange amenities for yourself, much like you can outside the prison walls.

On the General Ward there is a diverse cast of characters, from sigheh (temporary marriage) brokers with their photo albums, to masseurs, cooks and organisers of religious gatherings. For some, Evin seemed almost agreeable – not so different from the outside world as to discourage repeat offences. When you can pocket billions of dollars and still enjoy private meetings and photo-album selections in prison, life isn't too bad.

In this section, I'll recount the curiosities of the General Ward, as far as my memory serves. It struck me as a microcosm of Iranian society, teeming with potential research topics. The 'authorities', as they called themselves, and my interrogators, as I knew them, were conspicuously absent, perhaps missing out on seeing how Kameel constantly unearthed fresh subjects for study!

Entering the General Ward

One day, my transfer order arrived. I would soon be entering the General Ward. I danced a Kurdish dance in the shower to avoid showing my happiness to the others. My days in a shared cell were over, and I had

progressed to another stage. I had five minutes to gather my belongings. The prison guard was waiting, but the Chechen man wouldn't be hurried. He stood over me, insisting we pray together. Although we didn't share a language to converse, Vis and I had learned to understand each other. He had been in solitary confinement for about six months. He hadn't spoken to his family in all that time and was psychologically broken down. It was odd to me that he was happy about others going to the General Ward and showed no ill will or negativity.

He was pleased that I too would soon be entering the General Ward, but I had mixed feelings and avoided showing my joy. When he noticed this, he said, through an elderly northerner who spoke Russian, 'You must keep your promise!' He was a devout Muslim and always said, 'Get up and pray.' I had told him that, if my transfer order ever came, I would pray with him. There was no escaping it. I performed my ablutions and prayed with him. The prison guard couldn't disrupt our prayer, and he, like the others, remained silent until our prayer was over.

Vis watched me carefully to make sure I didn't make mistakes in the prostration and bowing, and he intentionally lengthened his prayer. After the prayer, he was very happy that his wish had come true and that I had become a Muslim again. Saying goodbye to the Chechen man, Taher and Amir Hussein was very difficult. We were all both happy and sad. The others were happy that I was leaving, but in their hearts they must have thought with envy, 'So-and-so has gone, and we're still here.' I had experienced this feeling myself in the shared cell.

To enter the General Ward, I didn't need to wear prison clothes, and I experienced the good feeling of wearing my own clothes again. In the same room where they had taken my clothes on the first day, they forced me to fill out and sign a form stating that I was healthy and had not been abused or tortured; naturally, I had no choice but to sign. Then, I was registered in the Evin Prison system. They took my picture and recorded the date of my imprisonment. It was strange to me that, until that moment, I had not existed in the prison system at all!

Afterward, they kept me in quarantine for a week, which seemed ridiculous to me. I had spent many days in solitary confinement and in a shared cell. How could I possibly have used drugs in a way that required detoxification in quarantine? It was a quiet section where only new arrivals to the General Ward and those returning from furlough entered.

Interestingly, after entering General Ward 4, I realised that, if you wanted them, drugs were readily available!

On the third day of quarantine, ten to twelve foreign nationals were also brought into our section, transferred to Evin from Tehran's notorious 'Big Prison'. Most of them were black men, hailing from countries like Nicaragua, Cambodia, Kenya, Sudan and Somalia.

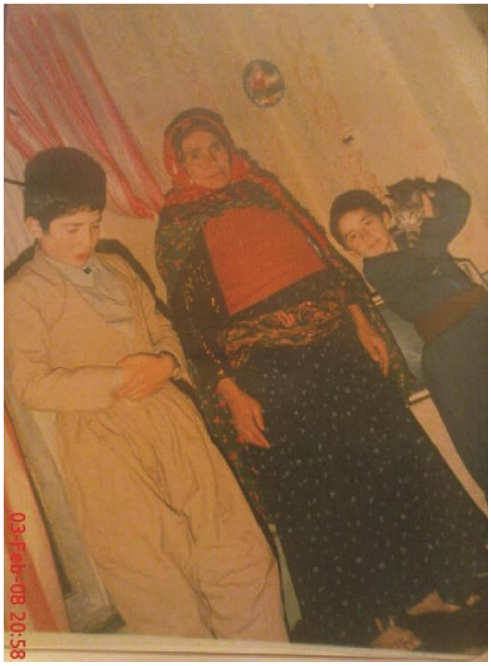


Image 403: Learning to pray under Grandmother's supervision. From right: my brother Rasul/our cat (Gigi Ge), Grandmother and me. Piranshahr, 1983.

A number of them were Somali pirates who had, as fate would have it, ended up in Evin for drug trafficking. Several in this group had been imprisoned for over a decade and could speak Farsi. Some also knew English and would converse in a mixture of English and Farsi, coloured by their own accents. Some had been incarcerated for so long, they seemed to have been forgotten by the system, yet they possessed a keen understanding of the Iranian landscape, the prison system, the judiciary and sentencing norms.

The Quarantine Ward authorities permitted those of us arriving from solitary confinement and communal cells to contact our families, knowing we were yet to encounter the phone-card mafia. The prison administration was a miniature version of the Iranian governing system, with the mafia pulling the strings on everything. The phone-card mafia operated a peculiar scheme. First, one had to open an account with Saman Bank and arrange for family to deposit funds. This money was then frozen, and a phone card was issued in exchange.

From quarantine, I contacted Shafagh. I finally began to grasp the situation in the outside world and unfolding developments concerning my case. Later, on entering the General Ward, I managed to acquire a phone card – with the mafia's approval, of course. However, it was common

knowledge that prison phone lines were monitored, making unguarded conversation unwise. Shafagh and I gradually became adept at indirect communication. She filled me in on the atmosphere beyond the prison walls, media coverage about my situation and who had been making enquiries about my wellbeing.

In those first few days, I constantly called Shafagh, my family, friends and colleagues to check on them. I realised that my arrest hadn't caused trouble for anyone except my family. My worries for others subsided, and I breathed a sigh of relief. However, I was deeply hurt by the reaction of one person – Ms ZP, an editor who had worked on one of my research projects. Shafagh told me she had been asking after me, so I imagined my call would make her happy. Contrary to my expectations, she spoke very formally and distantly on the phone, and I realised she was frightened or something similar. I had called to ask her to check a few news websites for me.

The next day, when I followed up, she said, 'Kameel, I don't want to have any contact with you, and I can't be bothered with the hassle!'

I said goodbye politely and didn't call her again, but her behaviour broke my heart. In prison, there's plenty of time to think. As I said before, I thought about my friends and wondered if they were thinking of me, too. I had called her to ask how she was and to get a sense of the atmosphere outside prison from her perspective – I wanted a more complete picture of the situation. For me, a researcher who had always been at the heart of society, this isolation was difficult, and I was thirsty for news from the outside. But she seemed to think I was doing this at the request of the interrogator. After my release, she expressed regret and messaged me several times, but I could no longer consider her a friend. Her behaviour that day felt like a bucket of cold water had been thrown over me. I thought to myself, aren't friends supposed to stand by each other in difficult times? I didn't disrespect her, so I don't know why or how she suddenly became hostile toward me a while later. When I found out that she was also one of the people who had accused me of sexual harassment, I was genuinely surprised. I will discuss her and what happened between us in detail in Part Seven.

At the end of the quarantine period, a soldier escorted me to the General Ward. Each hall there had its own story and system, and it was clearly run on favours and connections. Following the advice of one of the Haft Tappeh prisoners, I introduced myself to the ward boss, who was also an inmate. I'd been told that if I mentioned I'd been with them in Ward 2A, I might get a better room. The ethical implications bothered me, and I was sure I wouldn't do it, but when I arrived at Ward 4, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. After dropping a couple of their names, I heard a few 'at your service' and 'devotedly yours' comments and was sent to Room 13 in Hall 2.

The prisoners in this room were specialists working in cultural sections, the kitchen and similar roles. After getting to know the environment, I realised that, in the end, they would have sent me to this very room anyway, which eased my conscience about playing the system. Before entering Room 13 in Hall 2, I had spent a few days in Hall 1 of Ward 4, waiting for space to become available. Lentil stew, broth, potatoes, eggs and rice were the staple prison foods, and it was rare for a meal to include meat. In Ward 4, a private cook, on the ward-boss's orders, cooked separate meals for me and a few others. I ate a couple of meals but then asked them to stop bringing it. I felt uneasy having access to something that others didn't.



Image 404: Public telephone in prison.

Hired Sigheh Wives for Prison Visits

In Hall One, there were prisoners with significant money and influence, as well as individuals imprisoned for failing to pay their *mahr* (religious dowry). The latter group essentially served as servants to the former, performing tasks like massage, escorting, delivering letters, running errands, cooking and washing clothes, receiving packets of cigarettes – the prison currency – in return. The discrimination and inequality prevalent in society were thus openly visible in prison, too. The lifestyle of the first group hadn't changed in prison, and whatever they wanted was provided for them. Several of them had albums of photos of young and middle-aged women. Wealthy prisoners would leaf through the albums and choose one.

Their lawyer outside the prison would handle the sigheh arrangements. Then, the chosen woman would come to the 'hotel' – the prison's religious meeting place – to have sexual relations with them. Most of these men were married and naturally kept these relationships secret from their families. It sometimes happened that the man's actual wife would coincidentally come for a religious visit on the same day, and the man would have to feign illness.

What was even more interesting was that prison staff and security forces sometimes used this information against individuals, leading to the breakup of many marriages. It was as if a significant portion of the actions of prison staff and security forces were not in line with their duties, but part of a petty game they played with prisoners to feel powerful.

Later, I managed to understand this situation a bit better. Adjacent to the in-person visiting hall, there was a building for religious visits where male and female prisoners could meet their spouses privately. It was a two-story building with several rooms along its long corridors. One day, after visiting with our families, we were waiting for the van to return to Ward 4 when I saw an opportunity to peek into this section. The receptionist for this section wasn't at her desk, and I managed to see inside one of the rooms through a gap in the door. The sign on the door read 'Please Clean',



Image 405: Postal sigheh contracts.

and it was a large room with a dining table and a double bed. It had a refrigerator, a shower and a toilet, and there were some modern paintings on the walls. There were a few used condoms and crumpled tissues on the bedside table.

Whenever we were waiting for the van, prisoners would steer clear of the rubbish bin near this building, laughingly saying it was full of condoms and smelled of sperm. A common joke was that if flies came out of these bins and landed on you, you might get pregnant.

They said that the male prisoners cooked the meals, and the women brought the necessary sex paraphernalia – since bringing food from outside wasn't allowed, the men were in charge of cooking. It was interesting how the traditional roles were reversed. However, it was the opposite for female prisoners. They cooked, and their husbands brought the necessary items. The spouses of these prisoners would present their identity cards or sigheh contracts on the day of the religious visit. They said that the guards and prison staff sometimes saw the women off with smirks and lustful looks, harassing them.

A few days later, I was transferred to Room 13 in Ward 4. This ward had been used to house female prisoners from before the Revolution until a

decade earlier, and Shahla Jahed[1] had been the 'chief' of this ward before her execution.

Ward 4 was a two-story, rectangular building with a small yard, the walls and roof topped with barbed wire. One of the advantages of being in the General Ward was that I could easily go to the exercise yard and explore my surroundings. I would read the writings of female and male prisoners on the walls. Names, dates of entry and exit, and other things were written there. Older prisoners said that some executions in the early years of the Revolution had taken place in the northern part of Ward 4's yard.

The lower floor also had another set of rooms. The rooms usually held fifteen to twenty-five people, with military-style bunk beds that were three tiers high, and in the middle of the rooms were those who had just arrived and were floor-sleepers. The room was meant for twenty-five people, but about forty lived there, and it was sometimes hard to bear. You couldn't walk in the hall, and the yard was also crowded in the mornings. When you were a floor-sleeper, you had to wait for someone to leave the room or be released from prison to get a bed.

Disputes over phone turns were also constant. If you talked for two minutes longer than your allotted time, the next people in line would start arguing with you, saying you were hogging the line.

The warden of each hall sat near its entrance, monitoring movements. Each prisoner was only permitted to move within their designated hall. However, there were a few places where prisoners from different halls could meet: the yard and the kitchen – which was mostly monopolised by the 'capitalists' and their cooks. Until they had finished, no one else was allowed to cook. The Husseiniya ('religious assembly hall') was another place where prisoners could gather, and the cultural section, which included the library, offered a quieter meeting space. I started working in

1 Khadijeh (Shahla) Jahed, born in 1348 (1969/1970), was the sigheh wife of Nasser Mohammadkhani. In 1381 (2002/2003), she was convicted of murdering Laleh Saharkhizan, Mohammadkhani's permanent wife, and sentenced to *qisas* ('retribution in kind'). She was executed in Evin Prison in Azar 1389 (November/December 2010). Jahed's case was one of the most controversial and complex premeditated murder cases in Iran. A short documentary film entitled *Red Card* was made about this case, but it was not allowed to be screened in Iran. *Fury and Frenzy*, directed and written by Houman Seyyedi, is another film that was made based on the story of Shahla Jahed's life and was popular with the public and at film festivals.



Image 406: Ward 4 prison library.

the prison library, which, of course, had its own mafia, making entry difficult. Some prisoners produced handicrafts, some of which were bought by other prisoners, and some of which were sent outside. The prison also had a small gym and a chess room. These were managed by two inmates: a well-known calligrapher and a chess champion, both imprisoned for financial offences.

Band-based factions existed in all parts of the prison, even in the cultural section and the Husseiniya. Many bank presidents and CEOs had entered the prison, and their presence intensified these cliques and power dynamics. For instance, one of them had all the taps in the cultural section repaired and had parts of the prison clad in marble. He had become the head of a section, and his life was unlike that of the other prisoners – he had a job in prison and his own office. He would find jobs for his fellow inmates. In short, the prison had become a lawless city in which the wealthy lived and worked as they pleased. Some even managed their factories through their lawyers. They often had connections and knew each other from the stock market and other circles. Interestingly, there was also a power struggle among them. Where did their wars, which were essentially cold wars, take place? In the Husseiniya!

For every religious occasion, they would offer Nazri food (votive food offered to religious figures or in fulfilment of a vow). One would announce, 'Lunch on the martyrdom anniversary of such-and-such imam is on me,

and I'll provide *ghormeh sabzi* [herb stew].' They would bring in 200 kilos of meat, 300 kilos of fruit, and 100 kilos of rice from outside.

The next time, another person would try to organise an even more lavish ceremony!

My research instincts had resurfaced, and I began to note down every behaviour I observed as field notes. I recorded everything in my notebooks. After I'd exhausted my observations on one group in prison, I would turn my attention to the next. The laundry had its own boss and mafia; the shop in the yard, which belonged to the prison, was run by another gang. When money was deposited from outside for a prisoner, they had no choice but to buy from the prison shop, which was a good monopoly for those who ran it.

In Room 13, we had two cooks who cooked for us and, in return, received a few cigarettes per meal. In our room, everyone had money for food, but I saw people who didn't have bank cards and whose families had completely disowned them.

Baba, Bawesh, Bawesh – Father, Embrace, Embrace

The day I went to the library, the manager said cryptically, 'You borrow books from here, and you return them here. That's it. Don't try to stir things up or get creative!'

I didn't accept this, so he became stern with me. After a while, he said I shouldn't go to the library from the next day. When I asked why, he said, 'Because you are political.'

I said, 'There are so many political people working here!' I complained to the main boss of Ward 4. He said there was no such ban and told me to go back to work!

If you worked in one of the prison sections and provided services to the prisoners, you could have two in-person visits and a telephone visit every two weeks. Telephone visits took place in a large hall on Tuesdays, and prisoners would talk to their families by phone from behind glass screens. Conjugal visits between couples were every two weeks. The first time I went for a phone visit, I regretted it and wished I hadn't. Seeing your children from behind glass and not being able to touch them is very hard. Alan had come to visit with Kani and was banging his hand on the glass to come into my arms, but it wasn't possible. From behind the glass, I put my

fingers on his and played with him to distract him. But he kept screaming, 'Baba, Bawesh, Bawesh!', which in English means 'Father, embrace, embrace!' I felt so bad that I thought to myself, 'I wish I were an ant or an insect, and I could go through the holes in the glass – the nail holes – and take him in my arms.' I became depressed after this visit. Alan was a child who didn't talk on the phone, but he understood video calls and that I wanted to hold him. I gave up on that type of visit and preferred to have the in-person visits twice a month.

A week after my arrival on the General Ward, I saw my lawyer for the first time. Mr Raisian was a young man, committed and ethical, who had defended many political cases and had a good grasp of these matters. I could see that his efforts for me were genuine and heartfelt. I hadn't known him before, and my family had chosen him because he was a lawyer for important political cases. Sepideh Qolian,[1] Esmail Bakhshi[2] and for periods Nasrin Sotoudeh, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Ms Kylie Moore-Gilbert[3] and

1 SepidehWintour, P. (2020) 'British-Iranian academic sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran', The Guardian, 14 December. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/13/british-iranian-academic-sentenced-to-eight-years-in-prison-in-iran (Accessed:ian (born 1 Mehr 1373/23 September 1994) is an Iranian civil and political activist. In Aban 1397 (October/November 2018), she was arrested along with Esmail Bakhshi, a labour activist, and a number of workers from the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro-Industrial Company during labour protests in Khuzestan. SepidehWintour, P. (2020) 'British-Iranian academic sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran', The Guardian, 14 December. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/13/british-iranian-academic-sentenced-to-eight-years-in-prison-in-iran (Accessed:ian, who had been temporarily released from prison on bail, provided an account of the torture carried out by officers on 19 Dey 1397 (9 January 2019). She has been arrested several times since then and is currently in prison.

2 Esmail Bakhshi, born in Dezful, is a young worker at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro-Industrial Company and a representative of the Independent Workers' Council of Sugarcane in the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Workers' Syndicate. He was arrested and imprisoned during the protests by the company's workers in Aban 1397 (October/November 2018) for organising protests and planning labour gatherings. Bakhshi played a significant role in organising the protests of Haft Tappeh workers against the privatisation of the company and proposing the demand for council management.

3 Kylie Moore-Gilbert is an Australian-British researcher and university lecturer in the field of Islamic studies. In the summer of 2018, she travelled to Iran at the invitation of Al-Zahra University and the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom to participate in the seventh 'Shia Studies' conference. After participating in the conference

several other dual nationals who had been caught up in the system had been among his clients.

Up until my arrest, as a precaution, I had given my power of attorney to another lawyer who was a friend of a friend, but in my absence and with the family's consent Mr Raisian had been hired instead, which the other one hadn't liked. Before meeting in person, we spoke on the phone a few times, and he reminded me that the day I first went to see the interrogating magistrate about my case, he had seen me there and realised I wasn't in a good state of mind.



Image 407: Amir Raisian on Twitter.

In our first face-to-face meeting, he said that the charge against me was very serious and that my case file highlighted 'cooperation with a hostile government'. He mentioned that they hadn't allowed him to speak to the interrogating magistrate, but he had obtained a promise that he could accompany me in the first session with the interrogating magistrate. He continued, 'Mr Ahmady, they've targeted the institute you were working with, which has American funding, but everyone knows that their real issue is something else.' Then he said I should be hopeful about being released on bail.

After he left, I saw my family in another hall – my wife and Alan, my older sister Mahbubeh, as well as my father-in-law and mother-in-law. These individuals, being family members, were permitted to visit.

Seeing them filled me with such happiness, especially seeing Mahbubeh. I knew how sensitive and vulnerable she was, and she had travelled all the way from Kurdistan just to visit me. It must have been

and while returning to her country via Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran, she was arrested by security forces and sentenced, after a trial, to ten years in prison. Accused of espionage, she was serving her sentence in Iran when she was released on 5 Azar 1399 (25 November 2020) in a prisoner exchange involving three Iranian prisoners in Thailand accused of a failed bombing attack against Israeli diplomats.

incredibly hard for her in those months. Since our father's death, she had looked to me as a father figure, and these events had undoubtedly caused her immense distress. I knew my in-laws were also deeply worried – anxious about what the future held for their daughter and grandson.

Our entire visit lasted only half an hour, much of which was taken up with greetings and small talk. Alan sat quietly in my lap, completely still. He kept asking, 'Where's your *khaneh* ['house']? Where do you work?' I took him over to one of the windows that looked out over the Evin hills and pointed to a building, telling him it was my workplace. He kept repeating, 'Baba, take me to your khaneh', and when I explained it wasn't possible, he asked, bewildered, 'Why? Can't I see your house and your work? You used to let me come to your office. Why not now?'

I had asked the men working in the woodturning workshop to make a Kung Fu Panda figure for Alan. He was his favourite cartoon character. I knew how much he was missing me and that he couldn't grasp what was happening – only that he saw his father for thirty minutes every two weeks and then I vanished from his life again. The other prisoners told me that everyone feels depressed after each visit and falls silent for a while afterward. When Alan came to see me, the prison environment made him agitated and irritable, and after the visits he would become withdrawn and quiet for days. This pattern was heartbreaking. My greatest worry and concern during my imprisonment was the impact on my child. I kept thinking about how we would cope if they gave me a long prison sentence, and my mind was constantly filled with thoughts of other children whose parents had been imprisoned for years on baseless charges, just like me.

Bourse Training Class

As I mentioned earlier, the Government had declared a campaign against economic corruption, and most of the prisoners were accused of financial crimes. They all had staggering sums involved in their cases, with even the 'lowest' starting at several hundred billion! The cultural unit organised several training classes, and, for a while, I even taught English. There were also art classes, attended by a handful of people, but on the days they held the Stock Market and Investment class, the room was packed. The classes were run by experts in the field, who the mahr ('dowry') prisoners called a bunch of charlatans, fraudsters, thieves and economic criminals. Yet, it

seemed that these very individuals were the pulse of Iran's economy. They were from Export Bank, Economy Bank, Trade Bank and New Economy Bank and included almost all the directors and managers of Sarmayeh Bank! Room 9, next to mine, was where the Sarmayeh Bank managers[1] resided, and they often argued with each other, mainly about who was to blame. I think they meant who had caused them to be exposed!

There were others, too: companies that had circumvented sanctions through illegal oil sales, the Babak Zanjani gang[2] and his deputy, said to be Zanjani's 'black box', and so on. According to rumour, the IRGC had kidnapped Zanjani's deputy from a South American country and brought him to Iran inside a sack of potatoes! This deputy had a room to himself and two or three servants. He would always sit under a tree in the corner of the yard with a flask of tea on a velvet blanket, holding court – or 'spinning yarns', as other prisoners put it. Of course, there were always a few people around him, pouring tea from his flask for him and his guests, and, figuratively speaking, 'fanning' him. From a distance, you'd think one of the pharaohs of Egypt had come to sit under a tree! Through one of my roommates, I got close to him twice to see what kind of person he was, and I noted it down in my notebook.

1 The main shareholder of Bank Sarmayeh is the Teachers' Investment Fund, and the bank's case came to light after the discovery of 15,000 billion toman of corruption within the fund.

2 Babak Zanjani (born March 1974) is a businessman, a capitalist and the founder of the Sorinet Group, which owns one of Iran's largest holding companies. His name became prominent for large-scale financial activities related to circumventing international sanctions against Iran, and the blocking of his foreign-currency funds in foreign banks during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. As the main defendant in the oil case, he was sentenced to death by Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court on charges of 'spreading corruption on earth', and his sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court. In 2016, Alireza Zibahalat Monfared, known as Zanjani's 'black box' in the oil corruption case, who had been arrested in the Dominican Republic for financial irregularities, was handed over to Iran by Interpol.

I gathered that he was a kid from the south of Tehran who had married a Spanish woman. He was very hopeful that Babak Zanjani would pay back the money from the oil sales and everyone would be released. He did add, though, that Babak would have to pay back the money bit by bit to prevent them all from being executed. Like the Haft Tappeh prisoners, he argued that he had managed to change his social standing and become wealthy through his hard work and genius. So, he deserved a gold medal, not Evin Prison!

As I described earlier, in Part Four, in England, due to my job, I was in close contact with prisoners and was constantly going to and from prisons. I was very familiar with the prison environment in England, and now I had become a prisoner in Iran. The differences were stark. In England, prisoners had



Image 408: Report from prison.

Headline: A Report from the Financial Ward of Evin Prison: "Dowry Debtors" at the Table of Gold Coin and Currency Moguls

"Despite anecdotal and informal reports about men being imprisoned for failing to pay Mehrieh (dowry) and Nafaqeh (alimony), personal field observations during my time in Evin Prison indicate that the prison doors remain open for such men, and judges continue to sign orders sending men to prison for failing to pay dowry, alimony, and Ojarat-ol-Mesl (wages for housework)."

to spend most of their time in their rooms and were allowed in the exercise yard only for specific and limited hours of the day. Prisoners did not have much opportunity to socialise with each other in that way. In Iran, when you entered the General Ward, it was as if you had entered a gathering or a social get-together. Not that I'm saying the conditions were humane – quite the opposite.

Justice was also absent in prison. Many prisoners believed that those who had committed economic crimes and trampled on people's rights were now doing the same thing in prison, in different ways, having servants and attendants for themselves. Prison hadn't changed anything for these kinds of people. Perhaps it was even better for them in some ways: they were freed from the hustle and bustle of life for a while and had taken refuge in prison, without stress. In prison, they had social lives and even entertainment. They also had cooks and masseurs at their service, religious visits and even the opportunity for sigheh.

I often talked to the prisoners jailed for mahr.[1] They generally held misogynistic views and casually used crude language about women. The mildest thing they'd say was that a woman is a 'beautifully patterned but empty snake' – if she gets the chance, she'll ride you and ruin you. They would constantly ask for my opinion, and I would avoid answering directly. Consensual marriages were also common among them – marriages in which, in their words, the man only wanted sex and the girl only wanted mahr!

Having heard that I was a researcher, some wanted to tell me their stories, perhaps as a way to unburden themselves. Some were in prison for

1 *Mahr* or *mahriyeh* ('dowry') and its associated laws, particularly the issue of imprisonment and the situation of mahr prisoners, have been a source of much controversy in recent years. Following the increase in mahr cases in recent years, the high amounts of mahr stipulated and the inability of most men to pay them, which results in women seeking arrest warrants and imprisonment, many men have been imprisoned. Apparently, these prisoners have imposed significant consequences and costs on the Government, the Judiciary and families. Therefore, a few years ago, to solve this problem, Article 22 of the Family Protection Law was passed, stipulating that imprisonment of men for non-payment of mahr could only be applied up to a maximum of 110 gold coins (*sekkeh*). This law only helped to empty the prisons of mahr prisoners; women still face difficulties in receiving their mahr. In many cases, men transfer their assets to others and claim they have no money to pay the mahr, and because there is no imprisonment, the women have no recourse. Therefore, the problem of mahr is not solved by this law (Mohammadi, 2021).

failing to pay just two or three gold coins, as in those days the price of gold had risen sharply and the number of mahr prisoners had increased accordingly. One would say, 'I really have no money, and even here I'm getting nothing by doing manual labour.' Another would say, 'I hit my wife, I tormented her and I cheated on her, but she deserved it!'

The law had given these men a free hand to exploit women. On the other hand, the women believed that mahr was a tool that would deter these misogynistic men.

Political Prisoners in the Ward of Economic Offenders

Political prisoners, or 'security prisoners' as the system called us, were also present in Ward 4, which was mostly for mahr and economic prisoners. Abdolrasoul Dorri-Esfahani,[1] a senior member of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team with the West, had been in prison for three years on espionage charges. Political prisoners visited the library more often than others, and I interacted with them there. For example, Mr Siamak Namazi (an Iranian-American prisoner) and his father were both convicted of espionage. His father was banned from leaving the country and, due to his old age, was under house arrest, while Siamak was imprisoned in Evin. Fortunately, Siamak, along with Emad Sharghi, Morad Tahbaz and two other unnamed prisoners, left Iran for America on 18 September 2023, as part of an agreement between Iran and the United States. He had been imprisoned for two years, was constantly anxious and regularly writing letters to the Prosecutor's Office and the Judiciary to get a week's furlough to visit his elderly father.

These fellows were very helpful to me at the beginning, teaching me the legal ropes. One of them had received a ten-year sentence and had spent five years without furlough. They said that the fact I hadn't spent long in solitary confinement was a good sign and that it seemed my 'crime' wasn't

1 Abdolrasoul Dorri-Esfahani (born in Isfahan in 1945) was the representative of the Central Bank and in charge of banking affairs for Iran's nuclear negotiating team with the P5+1. He holds Canadian citizenship. He was also a staff member of the JCPOA Follow-up Headquarters. In Bahman 1394 (January/February 2016), he received the Order of Service, Third Class from Hassan Rouhani during a ceremony honouring the nuclear negotiating team. After a while, Dorri-Esfahani was accused of spying for the other parties to the negotiations and was arrested on an aeroplane while travelling to Turkey and sentenced to eight years in prison.

as serious as theirs. Some political prisoners said they had been tortured to extract confessions. Siamak Namazi once mentioned that they had threatened to attach electric shocks to his testicles, to intimidate him.



Image 409: A leaked image of the private room of Hossein Fereydoun — brother of Hassan Rouhani — in Evin Prison.

Everyone in prison had become highly sensitive, and we had no choice but to look out for each other. Arguments were common, especially for those of us who were floor-sleepers and in worse conditions. We each had a plastic basket in which we kept our belongings, and every time we needed to take something out, we had to move everything around. I also saw another dual-national prisoner on this ward. He had spent six months in IRGC Intelligence solitary confinement and, bless him, had completely lost it. He said Iran and England were in cahoots and had arrested him for being a Mason. He believed that Freemasons had conquered the world and that even the Supreme Leader's office in Iran was run by their stooges. He was so out of touch with reality that he didn't realise his words contradicted each other. He would walk around the yard all day, smoking cigarettes and repeating these things loudly.

There were also a few journalists, including a former editor of the *Eghtesad* ('Economy') newspaper, an experienced man who knew the system well. He had a calm demeanour, and his analyses of the situation in Iran and its future were insightful.

There were other prisoners, too, who had been arrested on charges of membership in the People's Mojahedin Organisation or of collaborating with them, as well as a number of activists from Kurdistan province,

members of Salafi groups and those who had attempted to assassinate the Friday Prayer leader of Baneh. There was no shortage of well-known political prisoners, either. Najafi, the former mayor of Tehran,[1] was also brought to Ward 4; we heard on the television news that he had shot and killed his temporary wife. There was also Hussein Fereydoun,[2] the brother of Hassan Rouhani, who was still the president of Iran. These individuals, unlike us, had separate rooms and yards on the lower floor near the entrance of Ward 4. Their environment was special – VIP – and they had special guards and furlough privileges. We felt the discrimination and class-based treatment quite acutely there, too. In short, our lot was floor-sleeping, while their share of the system's largesse, even in prison, had created good situations for them.

Being in Ward 4 also had its advantages. It was the entry point for new prisoners, and for this reason we were often informed about the situation outside. It was something of a thoroughfare: many prisoners stayed in this section before being distributed to other wards. It seemed to be mostly a holding place for prisoners whose fate was yet to be decided. For example, Siamak Namazi had remained in this ward, in limbo, for years. Older and dual-national prisoners tended to stay in this ward, but prisoners who received long sentences were sent to other places, such as Ward 8, which was a more permanent and comfortable place to reside.

Naturally, we were eager for news from the outside and would always enquire about current events during our phone calls with friends and family. There were a few journalists imprisoned with us, who were usually well-informed about events beyond the prison walls, and I often sought

1 Former Tehran Mayor Mohammad-Ali Najafi held positions as economic advisor to the president, member of the Supreme Council for Cultural Heritage and Tourism, and member of the Educational Research and Planning Organisation. On 28 May 2019, he confessed to police in Tehran to the fatal shooting of his temporary wife, Mitra Ostad, and was sentenced to *qisas* (retribution-in-kind) in court, but was pardoned by her family on 14 August of the same year.

2 Hossein Fereydoun (born 1957) is the brother of Hassan Rouhani, the former president of Iran. He served as former special assistant to the president of Iran and advisor to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and was a former member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team and the P5+1 group. Hossein Fereydoun has been sentenced to five years of definitive imprisonment and ordered to return 31 billion tomans for bribery. In the final ruling of the Court of Appeal, Fereydoun's seven-year prison sentence was reduced to five years.

them out for updates. In short, we were all keenly following the outside world and its happenings.

One day, while speaking to friends on the phone, I learned about a group of young women and men who had been handing out flowers on the metro in protest against the compulsory hijab. I hadn't imagined that I would very soon be meeting some of these young men in Ward 4.

When they arrived, several of them were constantly tearful, and all were clearly terrified. They would often huddle in the corner of the yard or the Husseiniya, speaking quietly among themselves. One day I asked them what had happened. They explained that they were students from Tehran University and had decided to stage a peaceful protest against the compulsory hijab, together with their girlfriends, by handing out flowers. They said they hadn't anticipated their action going viral on social media and international news outlets, or being linked to the My Camera is My Weapon campaign.[1] As a result, they were arrested and imprisoned. Another political prisoner, who was serving a six-year sentence and was banned from working in the media, remarked that those who sat beyond Iran's borders and incited young people to protest probably knew little of the heavy price these youngsters would pay when facing judges like Moqiseh (also spelled Moghiseh)[2] and Salavati.

1 In the early months of 2014 (May 2014), the My Stealthy Freedom campaign was launched by journalist Masih Alinejad. In this campaign, women from all over Iran published online photos and videos of their protests against compulsory hijab. The campaign was welcomed by some women, attracting half a million participants in the first month. However, the My Stealthy Freedom campaign, and subsequently the White Wednesdays campaign, was not supported by all women's-rights activists, and the activism of women opposing compulsory hijab was met with silence, neglect and sometimes even ridicule or denial. Following the campaign, the phenomenon of the Girls of Revolution Street emerged. Vida Movahed's removal of her headscarf was repeated in other areas of Tehran and other cities in Iran over the next few days, and it was reflected in cyberspace under the headline 'Girls of Revolution Street Multiply', to the point that, in a few cases, even men joined the movement. This phenomenon, which became known as the Girls of Revolution Street, once again drew attention to the struggles and campaigns against compulsory hijab in Iran (Iran Human Rights, 2018; Ranjbar, 2021; Rezaei, 2015).

2 Mohammad Moqiseh (born 1956, with the alias Naserian) was the head of Branch 28 of the Tehran General and Revolutionary Court, which is responsible for the trial of many political prisoners. He is said to have been one of the decision-makers regarding the mass execution of Iranian political prisoners in the summer of 1988. Moqiseh, who had a history of being present in the operational areas during the Iran-Iraq War, had been in the

I could understand their reasoning and even sympathise with their viewpoint. I had had a turbulent childhood and adolescence myself, which had negatively impacted my education in Iran. I believed these young people belonged in educational settings. This was the time for their talents to blossom and for them to be empowered. These kinds of activities, in a country like Iran, were wasting the best years of their lives. I thought to myself that young people of their age in Europe lived calmer, more carefree lives and had the opportunities and the luck to better understand themselves and their desires in relatively safe environments. Like other prisoners, I too was puzzled as to why these so-called 'exiles' paid no attention to this ethical dimension of the issue.

Many in prison believed that the security and judicial gangs' policy in Iran was like the famous parable in which the minister announces three very harsh policies of the King to the people and writes in the fourth clause: 'Burping is forbidden!' When the King asked why, he replied that they would persecute people for burping, so that they wouldn't even think about the other three laws! They believed that the governing system in Iran had imposed punishments and persecutions on issues such as hijab and virtual activities so that people would think they were starting a revolution by removing their headscarves or using hashtags. I was reminded of the old advice of my maternal grandfather, who used to say that politics knows no parents, and, in prison, I truly understood that politics has mercy on no one.

I became acquainted with a man who worked in the prison barbershop. He often came to the library and was a member of the Mojahedin-e-Khalq. He was from a village near Sonqor and had been living there when he was recruited into the group through Telegram. They had promised to find him work in Tehran, and, with this promise, he had left everything behind and headed for the capital. In Tehran, they told him that he had to distribute leaflets in parks and write slogans on walls. He said he never understood how he was arrested so soon after. In prison, there were many people like him, and most of them had received heavy sentences of three to seven

Revolutionary Court for 33 years and was considered one of the most experienced judges of that court. The cases of the Baha'i leaders, the Green Movement protesters and the members of the National Front are among the cases that Moqiseh was responsible for handling. He was mysteriously assassinated in his office on 18 January 2025.

years. Among these individuals, there were many who had been victimised and exploited by political groups.



Image 410: A leaked footage reveals the harsh conditions inside Evin Prison, with prisoners forced to sleep directly on the floor.

As my interrogator had promised, in Ward 4 I saw many people who had been arrested for participating in a workshop on human rights. They said that the organisers had not considered the safety of the participants, and these individuals were arrested upon their return. The Iranian Government could not touch the organisers, but it punished the participants and their families. The result was a number of poor young people receiving heavy sentences, spending the best years of their lives in prison for no good reason.

Some of them were individuals who had participated in gender or human-rights training workshops and said they were unaware that these workshops were funded by certain sensitive organisations and so-called 'hostile countries'. They had gone, they said, out of interest and conviction, or even for an opportunity to get out of Iran for a while. A number of young people, without knowing what threats lay in wait for them behind these programmes, had participated in these classes, which were held in countries neighbouring Iran, and they were arrested as soon as they returned home.

Now, each of them had been in prison for several months, but their cases were still undecided. When I spoke to them, some of them did not deny it and said that they had no particular goal other than to participate in a training workshop. Some of them had even gone to these classes as a pretext for travel and recreation. But politics had placed them on a path where the best days of their lives were being wasted. When I sat and talked with them, I realised that some groups and organisations outside the country had recklessly and even unethically recruited them, without considering the situation of young people inside Iran and the difficult

conditions that might be created for them. And now, all they did for them was hashtag their names and maintain and strengthen their positions as 'defenders of human rights'. They did nothing else for them, or perhaps could do nothing.

While I was in Evin Prison, another event occurred that exploded like a bomb in the prison. It was announced that Ruhollah Zam[1] had been abducted from a foreign country and brought to Iran. For twenty-four hours, all prison telephone lines were disrupted to prevent information from being leaked. Those were strange days, and security guards repeatedly entered the prison hall, closed the doors and searched all the rooms. No explanation was given for these events, but it was not long before the regime executed its new prisoner, managing to rid itself of Zam, who had gained influence among ordinary people.

Watching Porn Stars Under the Blanket and a Mulla Who Renounced Religion

In prison, we had access to everything – in relative terms. I've described many of our 'possessions' in the context of ordinary and government prisoners up to this point. Now, I'll move on to another aspect of what we 'had'.

In prison, we had various kinds of insects, especially bedbugs, whose bites caused itching for ages afterward. On a few occasions, we collected money to buy iron beds, but nothing ever came of it. So, the bedbugs feasted on both the wooden beds and us.

1 Ruhollah Zam, son of Mohammad-Ali Zam, was a cleric who distanced himself from the Government in 2004 and weakened his ties with the Supreme Leader's office and Ayatollah Khamenei. Ruhollah was the son of a revolutionary family who became the founder of one of Iran's most influential anti-government media outlets, Amad News. He made important revelations about the Islamic Republic on Amad News and was eventually arrested in an operation by the IRGC Intelligence Organisation. After being transferred to Iran, he was executed at dawn on 22 Azar 1399 (12 December 2020). A day after Zam's arrest, the French magazine *Le Figaro* claimed in an article that Iranian security services had sent a young woman to meet Ruhollah Zam at his residence in France. This woman convinced Zam to travel to Najaf, Iraq to meet with Ayatollah Sistani. On entering Najaf, Zam was kidnapped by Iranian security forces and transferred to the country.

In the beginning, my whole body had swollen up and turned red from the bedbug bites, and everyone in prison was constantly scratching themselves. We had a prisoner from Qazvin who had been arrested in the 2017 protests and had received a five-year sentence from Judge Moqiseh. Poor fellow, he was so allergic to bedbug bites and scratched himself so much that blood would drip from his arms and back. Sometimes he would be hospitalised for a day or two, but he would return, and the story would repeat itself.

Sometimes the alarm bell would ring, and we were forbidden to move from our places. All the prisoners would be brought under supervision to the yard while they searched everywhere. It was during one of these instances that I realised things were happening beneath the surface of prison life that I wouldn't have imagined. All the rooms had televisions, and there were a number of DVD players belonging to the prison that inmates could rent. That day, the riot squad gathered all the DVDs in the prison in the middle of the hall, and we realised that some of the mahr prisoners had been renting pornographic films. Prisoners would secretly gather at night, throwing blankets over their heads and the television, to watch pornographic films. After this incident, the devices were collected from all the rooms, and the rental and use of the devices was suspended for two or three weeks.

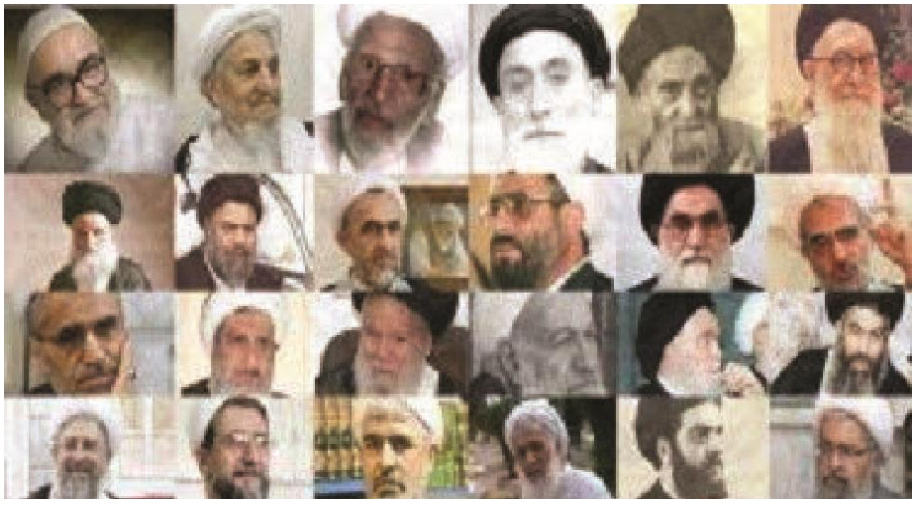


Image 411: Clergy under the wrath of the regime.

They said Wards 12 and 7 were larger and quite different from the other halls. There was also a separate ward for women, known as the Women's Ward. Women imprisoned there were charged with various offenses, including some who were protesting against the compulsory hijab. During my visitation days, I would sometimes encounter some of them, seeing them in the visiting hall or getting into the prison van. It was interesting that, although the prison was completely segregated by gender, we could still see each other in the visiting halls, along the corridors and at the clinic.

Apart from Wards 12 and 7, which were said to be different from the other halls, there was another distinct section: the ward for the *rouhanioun* – the Mulla. Individuals who had renounced religion or, for example, had claimed prophethood, or made statements contrary to the beliefs of the system and the Government – whether Shia or Sunni – all Mulla prisoners were held there.

On this ward, there was a defrocked *akhund* ('cleric') who chose rather unusual methods of protest. To get to the visiting hall, we had to get into a van in front of our ward and travel by car to the hall. One day, as we were getting in, we saw Special Forces and the Fire Brigade gathered outside. This akhund had climbed a tree. No matter how hard they tried to get him down, it was futile. He had tied several bedsheets together, and had written something on them: 'Khamenei, you do not have the merit or legitimacy to be a *Marja Taqlid* ['Source of Emulation'], and you have never studied *hawza* ['seminary'] and *fiqh* ['jurisprudence'] as much as I have.'

He had hung the fabric from the top of the tree, so that his words could be read. Firefighters were trying to bring him down, but he threatened to jump if they approached. His action had blocked the main route from most of the prison wards to the visiting hall. In effect, no visits would take place that day unless the Fire Brigade went and brought that individual down from the tree.

Some prisoners were cursing him, saying, 'You're bothering us. We want to see our families. Come down and let us go to the visiting hall!'

But he kept saying, 'They have imprisoned us all with their arrests and detentions!'

It was then that I realised how personal interests can sometimes take precedence. That day, my sisters had come to visit me from Mahabad and Urmia. Nothing mattered to me except for that akhund to come down from the tree and let us go to the visiting hall!

Some prisoners were cursing him as much as they could. One said, 'You yourself were part of this system until yesterday, and now that your interests are threatened, you've turned against it and are bothering us!' This conflict of interests was a recurring theme in various situations in the prison.

During that period, I read more books in the prison library, which, contrary to common perception, had some good titles. We could sometimes even order books from outside, although they had to pass through several stages of checks and approvals before reaching us. Nevertheless, we had access to some good books. There was also a collection of donated books specifically for the political prisoners' ward, which were kept in a section of Hall 4 before being merged with the main library. Occasionally, there were exchanges between the libraries of Ward 4 and other wards, and we would lend each other books.

I mentioned that I was held in a space with about forty other men, but, ultimately, how much can one really talk to others? This situation led me to seek refuge in reading. I would usually find a corner for myself in the yard, curl up and read. Sometimes I would also stay for hours after my shift in the library, immersed in the pages and words of books. If it weren't for the library and books, I might not have been able to endure prison.

I read many books about the experiences of Jewish people in captivity. I reread George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and his other works repeatedly during that short time, each time gaining new insights from them. Everything resonated with the reality of my own time. It was as if history were repeating itself. The library also held a collection of historical books. I studied works on the reign of Nader Shah Afshar and other Iranian kings and members of royal families. Although everything was censored to some extent, reading history books was not without its appeal.

I also developed a greater interest in books about world history. However, what particularly drew me in at the prison library were certain psychology books. The specific conditions of prison and the psychological and emotional states of a prisoner naturally incline one toward books on psychology, even those considered 'pop psychology'. Spiritually, one feels a need to read some of these books to soothe one's wounds and to strengthen hope for the future.

In that environment, there was no longer any mental space for reading theoretical or weighty books. You wanted to deceive yourself and cling to

the hope that everything would be all right one day, and that day was going to arrive as soon as possible. A limited selection of mainstream newspapers was available there, but only certain papers were distributed, which I also read daily.

Sometimes, I would also revisit books on astrology, reminiscent of my teenage and young adult years, and glance through them. When we opened the library in the early morning, we would see a number of prisoners already waiting to read the first newspapers of the day.

In prison, one experiences many dreams and nightmares, and one imagines that there must be significant meanings for them all. It may sound strange, but the most requested and read books there were dream-interpretation guides. Some prisoners were driven by the hope that their dreams would turn into reality. In prison, you lose your sense of logic and resort to a series of beliefs in supernatural or religious forces that you feel are controlling worldly affairs.

Waiting for Release on Bail

During my last in-person visit, my family mentioned that there was a possibility I might be released on bail. Shortly after, the officers told me that the interrogating magistrate wanted to speak to me.

In that first interrogation-review session, which was followed by several more – even after I was released on bail, I still had to attend his review sessions – my lawyer was present. We even had a separate session to discuss the half-empty bottle of alcohol that had been found in the house.

The interrogating magistrate began his questioning by asking about the HIVOS Foundation, and then he asked how I had become acquainted with WADI. I had to write down my answers, and I realised that he wasn't particularly concerned with the extent of my work with these foundations. They knew the real reason for my arrest was something else entirely.

In contrast to the interrogator, who always wanted long and elaborate answers, the interrogating magistrate kept saying, 'Write briefly . . . answer concisely . . .' It was as if he too knew that he was a mere figurehead in this process and that we were sitting opposite each other simply to fulfil a formality. The interrogator had not been like that. If I gave a short answer, he would crumple up the paper and throw it away, demanding more detailed explanations, and sometimes rephrasing the question. This made



بسمه تعالی

دادگستري كل استان تهران

شعبه 1 بازپرسي دادسراي عمومي و انقلاب ناحيه 33 (شهيدمقدس

ابلاغ الكترونيكي

شماره ابلاغيه : 9810100276100392

شماره پرونده : 9809980276100045

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تاريخ تنظيم: 1398/11/16

نام امير نام خانوادگي رئيسيان فيروزآباد شماره ملي: 0492668620

نوع ابلاغيه: ابلاغ اخطاريه/احضاريه تعيين مهلت جهت انجام كاري براي شخص ذي سمت و مرتبط

مهلت حضور: 5 روز پس از درج در سامانه ابلاغ

نوع علت حضور: دفاع از اتهام انتسابي

متن ابلاغيه: مهلت حضور : 5روز از تاريخ رويت(در اولين ساعات اداري) نوع علت حضور : دفاع از اتهام انتسابي موكل آقاي محمد احمدي مبني بر نگه داري گاز اشك آور و مشروب الكلي.

مقرر است در معيت موكل در اين شعبه حاضر شويد.

صادر كننده ابلاغيه: علي قناعت كارماورديائي سمت: بازپرس امضا صادر كننده ابلاغيه:

كيفيت امر ابلاغ: - ابلاغيه در تاريخ 1398/11/16 به سامانه ابلاغ ارسال گرديد.

همراه داشتن كارت ملي جهت احراز هويت الزامي است.

نشاني: تهران - انتهاي شمالي بزرگراه بادگار امام - جنب درب اصلي زندان اوين - دادسراي عمومي و انقلاب ناحيه 33 (شهيد مقدس) تهران

Image 412: Official summons for Amir Raisian to appear at a prosecutor's office near Evin Prison

it clear that the interrogation-review period was just a formality, and that the interrogator was instructing the magistrate on how to proceed with the case.

During one meeting with Qana'atkar, something happened that made me slightly happy and even hopeful. In a questioning, almost sympathetic tone, he asked, 'This female circumcision issue that you're accused over – what exactly is it, and where on a woman's body do they perform the circumcision?' He even exclaimed, 'It's strange! I get all sorts of cases brought before me, from spies to embezzlers, but you've been brought in for [investigating] female circumcision . . .'

To prove my innocence, I explained fully what female circumcision or female genital mutilation/cutting was, and what happens to children's bodies during the procedure. I even took a marker from him and used the whiteboard in the room to illustrate everything with diagrams. He told his clerk to close and lock the door, as he didn't want anyone to walk in while I was drawing diagrams of genitalia. In conclusion, I explained to him that

I had collaborated with WADI in Iraqi Kurdistan and that they had funding from an organisation called HIVOS.

My lawyer whispered to me that the questions being raised by the interrogating magistrate formed the basis of the charges against me. In fact, he was questioning me about the very points for which I was to be tried. It was based on these questions that Mr Salavati reviewed my case and issued his verdict. In addition to the FGM/C project and the funding I had received, I was also questioned about child marriage, LGBTQ+ individuals and my contacts with embassies. Essentially, the three main pillars of the accusations against me were the FGM/C research and its funding, the child marriage research and 'infiltration' into government bodies and parliament, and my work on LGBTQ+ rights. They alleged that I had collaborated with the United Nations and individuals outside Iran and had been proceeding according to a specific plan.

In the days that followed, however, new questions also arose. The more we progressed and the more questions were asked, the more I lost hope. I realised that the intelligence system was pursuing my case very seriously, and because news of my arrest had received extensive media coverage, they had become highly sensitive and had tasked their media outlets with characterising me negatively. These websites, such as *Mashregh News*, *Fars* and *Tasnim*, typically had access to IRGC Intelligence case files. In fact, even before the accused individual's lawyer gained access to the case file, the writers at *Mashregh* – who many believed to be the interrogators themselves – had already seen it.[1] In effect, IRGC Intelligence interrogators had their own media arms and were influencing court verdicts and public perception through content production.

My wife, who had given several interviews to various media outlets up to that point, stopped doing interviews from a certain point onward, following our lawyer's advice. However, *Mashregh News* and IRGC Intelligence's media arms were relentless.[2] These websites constantly published negative articles about me, and my interrogation-review process continued until Qana'atkar stated that he had reviewed the case and that my file was now in the hands of the prosecutor.

1 Mashregh News, 2020a.

2 Mashregh News, 2019.



کد خبر 998906 تاریخ انتشار: ۱۵ مهر ۱۳۹۸ - ۱۴:۲۹ ۵۶ نظر چاپ

سیاست

بازنشر/ مشرق گزارش می‌دهد؛

«کامیل احمدی» کیست و چه پروژه‌ای را در ایران دنبال می‌کرد؟ +تصاویر

چندی قبل خبر بازداشت یک عنصر دو تابعیتی نفوذی در پوشش "مردم شناس" و "پژوهش‌گر" اجتماعی منتشر شد. در این گزارش با تفکرات و اقدامات این فرد آشنا می‌شوید.

سرویس سیاست مشرق - در ۲۲ مرداد گذشته، اخباری منتشر شد که یک فرد با تابعیت ایرانی-بریتانیایی، با حکم قضایی و توسط نیروهای امنیتی بازداشت شده است. این فرد که **«کامیل احمدی»** نام دارد، در اخبار پوششی رسانه‌های فارسی‌زبان خارج از کشور، به عنوان «مردم‌شناس» و «پژوهش‌گر اجتماعی» معرفی شده است.

Image 413: Headline from *Mashregh News*, affiliated with the IRGC Intelligence Organisation, calling me an 'infiltrator under the cover of anthropologist and researcher'

News Code: 998906
Date of Publication: 7 October 2019 | 14:29
Politics

"Who is Kameel Ahmday and what project is he pursuing in Iran? + Photos"

"A while ago, news of the arrest of an infiltrator [agent] under the guise of an 'anthropologist' and 'social researcher' was published. In this report, you will become familiar with the thoughts and actions of this individual."
>

> Mashregh Politics Desk – On 13 August [last], news was published that an individual with Iranian-British dual nationality had been arrested by order of the judiciary and by security forces. This individual, named Kameel Ahmday, has been introduced in the news coverage of foreign-based Persian-language media under the titles of 'anthropologist' and 'social researcher'."

Amir Naseri was the head of the Evin Prison Prosecutor's Office, and prisoners were allowed to meet him once a month. We in the cultural unit, having a status akin to 'employees', were able to see him before others. I knew that I was supposed to be released on bail, but the process was dragging on. During a group meeting, I raised the interrogating magistrate's words about my bail with Mr Naseri, but he said, 'Your case is with the *zabeteh* ['law enforcement'], and the matter is not related to me.' They were all lying, and I was getting tired of it.

One day, my lawyer said, 'They're afraid you'll escape. That's why they don't want to release you!' I told Mr Raisian that I would stay until the very last moment, because it was important to me to remain in this country and continue my life and work. I hoped that I would be judged fairly. I had explained everything honestly, hoping that even the smallest amount of fairness and justice existed, at least within the judicial and court systems. Despite all the negative things I had heard about Judge Salavati, I imagined to myself that he too was ultimately human and would not unjustly try an innocent person.

Perhaps I had forgotten how many innocent people had been executed or sentenced to long prison terms in this very court and Revolutionary Tribunal. Other prisoners had told me not to trust the system and IRGC Intelligence, and not to be hopeful, but, deep down, a glimmer of hope remained. I really had no choice but to hope for justice and release on bail, even though I knew my advisors were right, but my heart just didn't want to believe it!

Chapter Twenty-Four: Commuting Between the Court and the Research Field

Life teaches us to regard every opportunity as if it were the last, and every moment as potentially unrepeatable. The chance to kiss Alan again, to buy him an extra toy, to have tea with Shafagh, to see friends and family, and so many other things – these moments might never have returned. Having them back was sweet, but I learned forever that the distance between having and not having is shorter than we imagine.

Outside of prison, although living in uncertainty and awaiting a court verdict, I felt perhaps even more alive than before. I yearned to truly live, to breathe in the free air, to be with my loved ones and, of course, to continue my research work alongside all of this.

Prison hadn't scared me off or stopped me. I knew that, even if I were imprisoned again or if I had to leave Iran, I would find a way to pursue my research. In my days of temporary freedom, I remained the same Kameel they didn't want me to be. Despite all the harassment and limitations I faced after prison, I once again took to the field to bring my new research to fruition!

End of Pre-Trial Detention, Solitary Confinement, Interrogation and Prison

The prison guard said, 'I'll come for you tomorrow morning; the interrogating magistrate has summoned you.' These words alone were enough to banish peace of mind and sleep.

The next morning, when I sat before the interrogating magistrate, I felt like a sleepwalker. He said, 'Kameel Khetne, I have good news for you. I've decided to bail you.' It was because of my explanations about FGM/C, he joked with me, but there was always an undercurrent of contempt in his jests.

I was happy, and I remembered how many times he had said that granting bail was not in his power! I wanted to call him out on his lie, but it was better to remain silent. Just being temporarily released was a huge joy. After delivering his good news, the interrogating magistrate stressed, 'I hope you don't run away!'

He set bail for me at five hundred million tomans. I said that the only thing in my name was a car, which was worth far less than that amount. He replied, 'Surely your father-in-law can help you, or even your sisters could bring the deeds to the inherited shops you have on such-and-such street in Piranshahr.' Right up to the last moment, they wanted to humiliate me and make me understand who held the upper hand. He handed me a piece of paper and said that signing it meant I accepted bail and that he would set my case in motion.

I was overjoyed at the prospect of leaving prison after nearly a hundred days. I longed to see my family and friends again and felt ready to start making plans for the future. The thought of hugging Alan tightly and seeing Shafagh, who had been carrying such a burden, filled me with anticipation.

My immediate concern was figuring out how to pay the bail. My pride made me want to raise the money myself, perhaps by selling my car or property, but I knew this would take too long. In the end, Shafagh's father stepped in and offered his house deeds as security, and it was thanks to his generosity that I was granted temporary release. Despite my happiness at being freed, a sense of unease lingered. It was a completely new and somewhat demeaning experience to rely on someone else to secure my freedom. It felt like a blow to my independence.

The night before I was due to leave, the price of petrol suddenly shot up, causing widespread panic and chaos. As a result, the bureaucratic process for my bail took longer than expected. The prison was in turmoil, overflowing with people arrested during the recent November 2019

protests.[1] From Hall 4, we could see into the Ministry of Intelligence's section of the prison, and it was disturbing to witness how roughly the new detainees were being treated as they were brought in. Some of these new arrivals were placed in our ward. They recounted horrific stories of detention centres so overcrowded they were forced to sleep in the toilets for days. Many had clearly been beaten and arrived with untreated injuries – broken bones and wounds from batons and pellet guns. The atmosphere was heavy with pain and despair, with many groaning and crying through the nights. Yet, amid this grim reality, some prisoners clung to a fragile hope that the regime was on the verge of a collapse that would echo the 1979 Revolution, when prison doors were thrown open.

Finally, on the third day of these escalating protests, my release was processed. The prison was clearly struggling to cope with the sheer numbers; security was tightened everywhere and even the phone lines were unreliable. Around 5 pm, my name was called. After heartfelt goodbyes to my fellow inmates, I went downstairs, handed in my prison garments, collected my belongings and signed the release forms. But as I walked toward the exit, a growing sense of foreboding washed over me. I knew I was changed. Prison, and especially solitary confinement, had left invisible scars on me. Moreover, I was acutely aware that this freedom was only temporary. As Kurds say, this was just the *le-li*, 'the lullaby of freedom', and the *lu-lu*, 'the real ordeal', was still to come.[2] The court case and the verdict still hung over me, and I faced an uncertain future, possibly months or even years of waiting. The threat of returning to prison was ever

1 These protests began following the rationing and 200% increase in petrol prices on 24 Aban 1398 (15 November 2019). The protests were mainly concentrated in working-class and poor urban neighbourhoods and were initially relatively peaceful, but they gradually turned into a widespread movement against the ruling regime. When security forces began to violently suppress the protests, the protesters became angry, and many cities and streets became war zones. Government buildings, vehicles, police cars, banks and some shops were vandalised by security forces and protesters, disrupting normal business and traffic. On Saturday, 25 Aban, on the orders of the National Security Council, the internet was shut down throughout Iran. News agencies and human-rights organisations outside the country, based on their investigations and sources, reported the number of deaths to be from several hundred to 1,500. There are no exact figures available for those arrested, but a summary of the statements of official authorities of the Islamic Republic, as well as reports from human-rights organisations, indicate that at least 8,600 people were arrested in 22 provinces of Iran (Radio Farda, 2019).

2 In Kurdish, *Kurdotenî ememe lêlê ye û lolokey mawetewe.*

present. Yet, I tried to push these anxieties aside, reminding myself to focus on the present joy: tonight, I would be home, holding Alan in my arms and seeing Shafagh's welcoming smile as she brought me a cup of tea.

It was about six in the evening when I stepped out of the prison gates. The cold autumn wind in the twilight felt like the cool air of late spring in my hometown. Freedom had made even the cold meaningless. Shafagh and her family had come to welcome me. I took Alan in my arms, kissed and hugged him deeply and embraced everyone. At home, we held a small celebration. As I ate the kebabs, I looked around in amazement. It was as if I had come to believe that I would never experience these simple joys again. Being back with my family and in my own home created a hope in me that maybe everything would be all right. From the interrogator to the magistrate and everyone in between . . . they knew I hadn't committed any wrongdoing.

Lost in these thoughts, the first sign of my changed state emerged. I had become accustomed to the prison system, and I felt sleepy at 10 pm sharp. In prison, we were often forced to go to bed early like children, unless the ward orderly allowed us to watch a film secretly. In prison, I had even started following the TV series *Prophet Joseph*,[1] which surprised my family and friends because I continued to follow it even after prison to see how it would end.

Prison also changes the level of your relationships. Many people kept their distance from me after my release, while others established friendlier relations. From some perspectives, associating with me was trouble, while others showed empathy, indicating that they knew I had done nothing wrong. The Islamic Republic calls prison a 'correctional facility', but it is more a place to punish those who think or act against the system. I had returned from this environment, and my tastes and spirit had changed to a great extent. I soon realised I needed to seek help from a psychologist. My heart would tremble with every smile and playful act of Alan, and I

1 *Yusuf Payambar* (*Joseph, the Prophet*) is an Iranian television series based on the life story of Joseph, written and directed by Farajullah Salahshour. The first episode of this 45-part series was broadcast on Channel One on 7 Tir 1387 (28 June 2008) and was widely watched in Iran's neighbouring countries as well. Salahshour was planning to make a series about the life of Moses, but cancer did not allow him to do so, and he passed away. The series was entrusted to another government-affiliated director, Ebrahim Hatamikia.



Image 414: Release day, prison security and gathering of prisoners' families. Evin Prison, 15 November.

loved to hug him for hours, but I also couldn't tolerate his noise and screaming. I was depressed and had nightmares about my solitary-confinement cell at night. Most nights in my sleep, the lift would stop on our floor and officers would swarm the house like ants and locusts. Even when awake, I was afraid of the lift door opening, and I had become extremely withdrawn and isolated. I would almost run away from gatherings. My condition was worrying. Sometimes I would reproach myself for turning a blind eye to the Government's sensitivities and not paying attention to the fact that I would eventually end up in prison.

Sometimes I would reproach myself: what exactly had I incurred this cost for? Had I taken the wrong path, or was it others who thought of nothing but money? Was I a misfit in this society? I would go over everything that had happened to me, and the memories of solitary confinement and interrogations wouldn't leave me alone.

Going over prison memories robbed me of peace. No one physically tortured me, but I had become my own torturer. The public view is still that torture means physical and bodily harm, and, in prison, I was constantly faced with the question of whether or not I was being tortured. I would say no, but I *was* tortured, in a different way, by the cell and the interrogation methods, and this type of torture has a much worse and more lasting effect than physical torture. In this type of torture, interrogators target the psyche of the prisoner and can disrupt their life forever.

Psychology sessions helped me to adapt to my new life, but I constantly remembered my lead interrogator's words. On one of the first days of interrogation, he had said to me: 'Kameel, you may not realise it now, but if you stay here for a few days, a few months or a few years, it doesn't matter. When you get out, you'll realise you're not the same person you were before!' Seyyed's words were true, and in the very first days of my release, I realised what prison had done to me.

The psychologist's professional view was that I had become withdrawn and isolated. It had been the same in prison: I'd wanted to spend hours of the day in my own shell and alone. I'd pretended to study, but after a while I stopped reading books, too, and couldn't control my mind. I was the same at home, and because I knew my phone was being monitored, I had restricted my relationships even further. I had restricted some myself, and some people didn't come to me of their own accord.

For a long time, I didn't have access to my mobile phone or laptop. We needed to register Alan at nursery and needed his birth certificate. What still bothers me is why my child had to become part of these punishments and have his basic human rights violated. I went to the Evin prosecutor's office repeatedly to get our belongings and documents back, and each time I returned empty-handed. They would call the interrogating magistrate to say I was there. One time he said, 'Tell him I'm not here'; another time he said, 'Tell him to come tomorrow'; and sometimes, just like before my release, he would send a message saying it was nothing to do with him. I was out of prison, but the torment was not over.

In the midst of trying to get my documents back at the prosecutor's office, I also saw one of my interrogators and told him, 'My whole life has been paralysed. You've done your job; at least give me my belongings back.'

He said it was nothing to do with them and brushed me off. He even mocked me, saying that my case file was with Judge Salavati. 'You used to say you believe in dialogue. Now go and have a dialogue with Judge Salavati!'

I was forced to go to Amir Naseri's office in the Evin Revolutionary Prosecutor's Office. His secretary mistook me for someone else and sent me in. I said to him, 'Do you remember me?'

He said, 'No. There are thousands of prisoners here. Why should I remember you?'

I said, 'I came to see you a few months ago. I was a prisoner, and now I've been released on bail. My documents are still with you, and my whole life is locked down.'

He gave me a letter, and I finally managed to get some of my belongings back. All the information on my mobile phone and laptop had been hacked, and many files were gone. I was afraid myself, and others said that these devices would be under surveillance. I put my mobile phone aside and wiped the hard drive and programmes from my laptop.

Freedom Without Freedom

I was free, but I knew I wasn't truly free. Not only was my phone being monitored, but I also didn't have the right to attend meetings or visit organisations, and no media outlet dared interview me. Most institutions and universities had cut off cooperation with me without a word, and the majority of my writings and articles had been removed from academic and university websites. Two video interviews I had given on FGM[1] and sigheh mut'ah (white marriage) with Mr Yaser Arab in the 'Sexual Wisdom'[2] series had been ordered to be removed from his website.[3] Everywhere there was a trace of me, IRGC Intelligence had removed it, and they were even careful to prevent any interviews with me from being published in the media.

A few weeks after my release, during Research Week, I did an interview with the Iranian news agency *IRNA* entitled 'Let's be Kind to Researchers',[4] which only remained on the site for a few hours. The journalist secretly told me that it had been removed by order of the IRGC, and they had had no choice.[5]

1 Ahmady, K. et al. (n.d.) 'Sexual wisdom/Female Genital Mutilation/Kameel Ahmady' [YouTube video]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFC0aNRCrvE (Accessed: 15 May 2022).

2 The 'Sexual Wisdom' documentary series is a work by Iranian documentary filmmaker Yaser Arab and is available on the Aparat website. In the 'Sexual Wisdom' programme, Yaser Arab tries to shed light on the different aspects and various influential angles of the sexual lives of people in society. He says, 'With each presentation, we put one puzzle piece next to another so that, gradually, we can achieve a macro picture and a common understanding of the field of sexual lives in Iran.'

3 This is documented here: https://comments.app/view/lhg7l58j.

4 See Islamic Republic News Agency, 2019b.

5 See Islamic Republic News Agency, 2019c.

Sexual Wisdom Think Tank
Greetings to friends and the audience of Sexual Wisdom,
Yaser Arab
1. In this series, we have endeavoured to provide a clear description of the Iranian sexual landscape and a systematic framework of its challenges and related issues.
2. This series was produced without any state or governmental support, and solely with the assistance of our audience and the cooperation of the Aparat website.
3. To date, we have presented thirty-nine episodes to you. However, the thirty-eighth episode (on Female Genital Mutilation in Iran, presented by Mr. Kameel Ahmday) was removed after forty-eight hours at the request of a security institution. In total, he has provided three presentations; currently, due to the decision of the security institution and the compliance of the Sexual Wisdom editorial board, it is not possible to upload them.
4. Now, we have reached the end of the second chapter of the description and are ready to record the third chapter. This chapter will include a collective discussion among the professors who presented the previous two chapters, as well as the presence of...



Image 415: A Telegram post that reveals the removal of my articles and interviews by the order security forces.

The situation had become frightening. I was certain that I was completely under surveillance. I had dedicated my whole life to research, and the signs were telling me that I could no longer work in Iran. My friends told me to rest for now, but this isolation and professional silence were unbearable for me and fuelled my depression.

With the help of a psychologist, I got a little better. I decided to organise my writings and online activities and update my website.[1] I was still terrified of the evenings and tried to work during those hours. One night, I suffered a panic attack. I experienced a situation similar to what I had gone through on the first nights of solitary confinement. I had come out of prison, but it seemed prison was destined to be with me everywhere. The worse I felt, the more I immersed myself in work. I spent most hours of the day and night working in the house's communal lounge. I published posts in cyberspace, and my communication with relatives and friends was mostly in this space. Although this type of relationship had its sweetness, it was also painful and constantly reminded me that I no longer had the freedoms I once did.

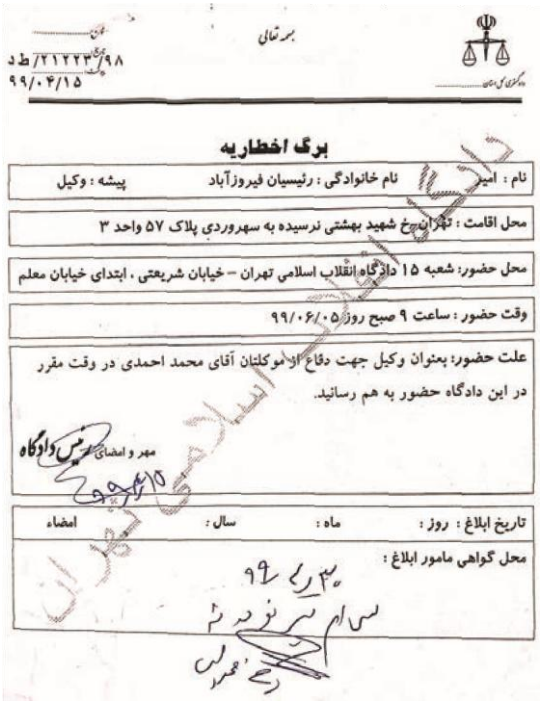
A few months later, a media outlet interviewed me about child labour, and in a general way I quoted some researchers as saying that there might be as many as seven million child labourers. This issue received a lot of feedback in foreign media and put me in a dangerous situation. I was forced to write an explanation about it and take the sting out of the story. After this interview was published, less-important media outlets sometimes approached me, but there was no news from official media. I knew that I had been restricted and placed on a blacklist, and this restriction meant no cooperation with foreign media, but anything could give the judicial system an excuse, and it was better to remain silent.

In the beginning, I still wholeheartedly hoped that the court verdict would be fair and unbiased, and that I would be able to live in Iran. When the court summons for my trial came to my lawyer and I realised that my case was in Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court under Judge Salavati, I lost hope. My acquaintances had said from the start that I had false hope, and later they stressed that the case was under Judge Salavati, and everything was clear! Mr Raisian said that I should try to prepare myself

1 https://kameelahmady.com/

to present my defence for an important event, and in a situation where sentences of ten and twenty years, life imprisonment and execution were constantly being issued and Judge Salavati[1] was the judge in most of these cases, I wouldn't get a good sentence, either.

But I had vowed to myself not to leave the country until the last moment. I didn't want to accept the reality that I, like everyone else, would receive an unfair and heavy sentence and be forced to endure imprisonment or leave my homeland.



برگ اخطاریه

نام : امیر نام خانوادگی : رئیسیان فیروزآباد پیشه : وکیل

محل اقامت : تهران خ شهید بهشتی نرسیده به سهروردی پلاک ۵۷ واحد ۳

محل حضور: شعبه ۱۵ دادگاه انقلاب اسلامی تهران – خیابان شریعتی ، ابتدای خیابان معلم

وقت حضور : ساعت ۹ صبح روز ۹۹/۰۶/۰۵

علت حضور: بعنوان وکیل جهت دفاع از موکلتان آقای محمد احمدی در وقت مقرر در این دادگاه حضور به هم رسانید.

مهر و امضای مسئول دفتر دادگاه

تاریخ ابلاغ : روز : ماه : سال : امضاء

محل گواهی مامور ابلاغ :

Image 416: A summons from the Revolutionary Court to Amir Raisian, my lawyer

The Islamic Republic is so unpopular among the people that if someone goes to prison, they often become popular among the people! This had happened to me too, and even those who distanced themselves from me had looks of respect. The people's relationship with the Government has also made them distrustful of domestic media. People mostly follow foreign media, and these media outlets mostly focus on people who are critical of the regime. In such an atmosphere, when a person enters prison for political or human-rights reasons, they have the potential to quickly become a hero. Their name is included in the reports of the United Nations and similar organisations,[2] and if they are also a dual national like me, they receive even more attention. The regime is accused of hostage-taking. In everyone's eyes, I too met these conditions and was

1 People likened Salavati to an executioner who condemns innocent people to death. At that time, the death sentence he issued for Ruhollah Zam made him even more hated by the public.

2 See Abramson, 2019.

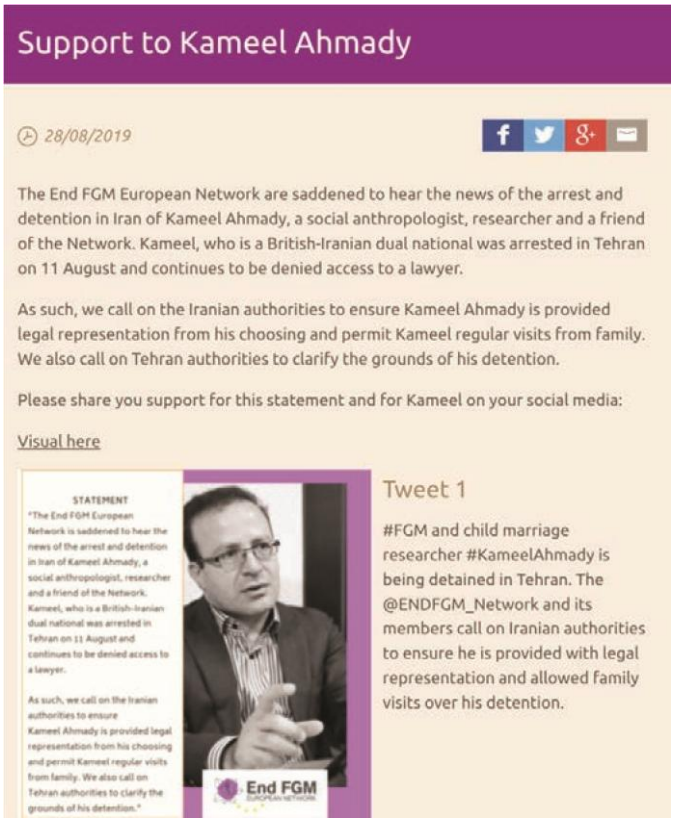


Image 417: Support groups.

the Government's latest hostage. When I came out of prison and read the news about my arrest,[1] I saw how much reference was made to my work history, how everything had such a slant that my research topics were weapons and tools to confront the Government and the regime, and how my arrest had a wide global reflection.[2]

Before my arrest, I imagined that the system wouldn't take the risk and would forego arresting me so that our research topics wouldn't attract attention, but the diplomatic conflict between Iran and Britain and the story of the seized ships had outweighed this expediency.

At the time of my arrest, campaigns were formed abroad and inside the country, and people who knew me and my work used hashtags in cyberspace and called for my release. Initially, a campaign was formed for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Siamak Namazi, Aras Amiri, me and other dual nationals, and my friends and university colleagues in Britain and abroad

1 BBC News (2019) Iranian-British Researcher Kameel Ahmady has been arrested, 13 August. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-49332126 (Accessed: 28 June 2022).

2 BBC News (2020) Kameel Ahmady: British FGM/C academic 'jailed in Iran', 14 December. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55300694 (Accessed: 28 June 2022).

also started their activities. The leader of this group was my friend, Ms Hilary Burrage. She is a self-made, feminist, intellectual sociologist, energetic and active, who has done good research in the field of child marriage and FGM/C in Britain, with an emphasis on African countries, and we have several joint works and articles.

Another campaign also took shape in the African Committee to Combat FGM/C, which sociologists and researchers from different countries such as Belgium, Germany, Italy and the United States joined, demanding my release.

Although the Islamic Republic usually does not pay attention to such activities, the reflection of my arrest became widespread, and this was what the Iranian security system feared. Many well-known people signed the statement of this campaign, and when I saw this statement and the signatures after my release, I was very happy.[1]

Activities for my release also took shape inside the country. Members of the Sociology Association's Childhood Group had signed a letter and so on.

I was voluntarily a member of the Sociological Association[2] and paid membership fees. Before my arrest, I was supposed to take over the secretariat of the small Sociology of Childhood group. When I was arrested, two members of the Association wrote and signed a letter in support of me, but they soon regretted it and refrained from publishing it because the number of signatories was small and they were afraid of causing trouble. I saw this letter later, and it was interesting to me that it was ultimately written in a conservative manner, and that, out of an Association with hundreds of members, only twenty-something people had signed it. Of course, the members of the board of directors had not signed it, and it was strange that such an association was not willing to defend me as one of its members. At the very least, they could have asked the arresting institution and authority to clarify the reason for my arrest,

1 Burrage, 2019.

2 The Iranian Sociological Association (established 1370/1991) is an association in the field of sociology and social sciences. It is a member of the International Sociological Association and the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils. Most of the Association's activities revolve around holding regular meetings, seminars, conferences and workshops, publishing articles and books, undertaking research projects in various fields of social science and operating within various scientific-specialist groups.

but they did not even make this simple demand. After my release, I attended a meeting about children's issues as a listener. Hussein Serajzade, the chairman of the Sociological Association's board, saw me and welcomed me, but during the brief conversation we had in his office, he avoided eye contact so that he did not have to explain the Association's lack of support for me.

Of course, not everyone behaved like the Sociological Association, and many people, individually or in groups, supported me in cyberspace. The campaign The Neglected Child is More Alone also supported me, but at the same time as my arrest their Instagram, Twitter and Facebook pages were hacked[1] and completely destroyed. Some of my own social media pages were also blocked, but, after my release, I was able to recover them. Supporting me had consequences, but some stood by me despite the repercussions and didn't let me feel alone in that bad situation.

After my release, I emailed the British Embassy in Iran and requested a meeting with the British ambassador. As a citizen of that country, I needed to express my grievances. When I met him, I asked why they hadn't helped my wife when she contacted the embassy and requested a lawyer. 'You knew that our lives were practically locked down. Why didn't you support my wife and child? I am a British citizen, and you were obliged to at least help me find a lawyer.' I stated explicitly that I had been arrested because of the diplomatic conflict between the two countries and the ship seizures, and that I was considered a hostage by the Iranian security system.

He listened to everything I said carefully, nodding in acknowledgement, and finally said, 'I know you're right, but we can't do anything for you. I apologise that you were left alone and suffered hardship, but we couldn't help.'

He asked me what my decision was, meaning whether I intended to stay and go to court, or whether I wanted to leave Iran. I replied that, firstly, all my documents and passports, and those of my family, were in the hands of the Government, and secondly, I intended to stay in Iran until the last

1 *Bad Sarparast Tanhatar Ast* ('The Neglected Child is More Alone') Campaign. Persian Wikipedia: https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%DA%A9%D9%85%D9%BE%DB%8C%D9%86_%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%BE%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%AA_%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B1_%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA.

moment. I added that I expected him to ensure his consulate would not withhold support from my family and would even put pressure on the Foreign Office to release me. He said that raising the issue at the Foreign Office level was contingent on my permission. 'You know yourself,' he said, 'we have no power over IRGC Intelligence, and they won't give us this permission.' Then, very indirectly, he suggested that it would be better for me to leave Iran. His words were logical. He knew Judge Salavati and knew what sentences he handed down to dual-national prisoners.

When I left the embassy, I was hesitant, but very soon I reminded myself, 'Kameel, you've made your decision. You're staying and you're going to fight Judge Salavati.' I knew that IRGC Intelligence would be the real winner in this campaign, but I was still, it seemed, waiting for a miracle!

The Spread of Corona and the Discovery of Mobile Phone Eavesdropping

About a month later, the first court summons arrived, and I had to await the court verdict. It was close to the parliamentary elections when the first news of the spread of corona in Iran was published. Panic-stricken people were buying disinfectants and sometimes even arguing over the purchase of alcohol or disinfectant gel. In the early days of the corona pandemic, news broke that Hamed Jalali Kashani, who worked for *Mashregh News* and the wealthy Ofogh media group, had contracted corona and died. In cyberspace, especially on Twitter, he wrote extensively against me and my work, and hardly a day went by without him hash-tagging my name as a 'spy' or 'infiltrator'. He tried to accuse the female representatives of the Tenth Parliament of having relations with Western governments because of their work on the child marriage bill.

When I was arrested and imprisoned, he also wrote on Twitter, 'The root of the conspiracy will surely be dried up.' After my release, he wrote, 'Judge Salavati will settle your account!' I wasn't happy about his death,[1] and when his sister published the news of his death, I even felt sorry for him. He was a fiercely religious young man, and I had seen him in

1 See Balatarin, 2025.

parliament and seminars on underage marriage advocating for child marriage with conviction. He himself had married in childhood and claimed that this ancient Islamic tradition had brought him benefits. Occupational and financial benefits were certainly also involved, and as the IRGC's media arm he must have been well paid. When the news of COVID entering Iran was announced, he mocked the disease and claimed that they had invented this disease to prevent people from participating in the parliamentary elections. About a week later, he himself died of the very virus he had mocked.

Several friends congratulated me on his death. This part of the story was a joke, but they said I should write something about him. At first, I tried to say nothing, but so many people wrote about him that I broke my silence and wrote in a Tweet, 'You tormented me so much and were one of the causes of my arrest, but I forgive you and cleanse my heart of your actions. I know how your sister and family feel because I, myself, have experienced this feeling of a brother's death. The least I can do as a human being is to sympathise with your family.' Many people reproached me, saying that everyone had written badly about him, and I shouldn't have written such a thing either, but I knew that Hamed Jalali Kashani was also a victim of an inefficient system that had dragged human social life to the brink of destruction and caused people to stand mercilessly against each other

For my first court appearance, I put on my best suit and had a shave before heading to court. Mr Raisian had gone over the case with me twice so I could better defend myself. I had a grasp of the main points of the case, but I didn't know what they would base the indictment on and whether they would stick to Article 508 and the charge of collaborating with a hostile government or add other charges to it. Salavati had not accepted Mr Raisian as my lawyer. I had three options: to proceed without a lawyer, to protest or to ask the judge himself to accept Mr Raisian as my lawyer. Mr Raisian wasn't going to charge me for this work and had taken on the case chivalrously and free of charge. He generally handled political cases pro bono, explaining that he earned his living through his other cases. I didn't want him to do it for free, and it was important to me that he should be my lawyer. He was well-versed in the case, had been informed of my interrogations, and had been present at my interrogation-review sessions.

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Image 418: Tweets and opinions of the media and media figures of IRGC Intelligence during and after the detention period (1 of 2) calling me an spy and a supporter of free sexual relations whose researches are in line with the objectives of the UN goals.

Mohammad Reza Bourouni @rezamehr1369:
He [Kameel] considers Islamic laws to be for 1,400 years ago, believes in free sexual relations, has obtained 50 bachelor's and master's degrees from England, has no job other than research in

line with the goals of the United Nations, and more importantly, despite all these descriptions, he is one of the main advisors of the Women's Faction of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis).

I am not a bodyguard, @badigard_nistam, 14 April 2019:
Another British spy has been arrested. Kameel Ahmady, an Iranian citizen of British nationality, who in the field of social change had connections with the British intelligence service and had strong ties with social organisations in Iran, was arrested as soon as he entered the country.

Hamed Jelaki Kashani;
Playing with religious authority; to raise the age of marriage
Opinion and Report, Family and Health, 17 September 2019 (26 Shahrivar 1398) – Latest News
A fatwa from Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi regarding the prohibition of marriages under the age of 13 is being circulated in the media. Where did this fatwa come from, and what is the reason for its issuance?
In October 2016 (Mehr 1395), a research study titled _The Echo of Silence_ criticising early marriage was unveiled by Shirazeh Publishing. In this study, Kameel Ahmady presents a report on the critical situation of so-called child marriage, highlighting: high divorce rates, high school dropout rates, high maternal mortality during childbirth, sexual dissatisfaction, and more.

I entered Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court to stand before a judge who was a nightmare for prisoners and defendants. After carrying out the necessary arrangements, they gave me permission to enter, and I passed through three interconnected rooms, each with two armed guards. After getting past the solid wall of escorts and going through decontamination several times, I entered Salavati's office. The clerk introduced me, and Salavati said, 'I just saw you in the lift.' I was so stressed that I hadn't noticed his presence or that of the three other men who were his bodyguards. He was a burly, broad-shouldered man with dark skin, although I had heard he was originally from Kermanshah. He sized me up for a moment and said mockingly, 'You've dolled yourself up so much I

thought you were one of the lawyers for these billionaire fraudsters. You don't look like a defendant. Have you come to a party?'



Image 419: Tweets and opinions of the media and media figures of IRGC Intelligence during and after the detention period (2 of 2).

@Jense_Aval

The Society for the Protection of Children's Rights or the Society for Sexual Education to Children!

A society that believes that conveying news about war in the world to children causes them psychological problems, yet

teaching sexual issues to children is more necessary than [their] evening bread!
This society had previously been made controversial by someone accused of espionage (Kameel Ahmady).

@Yeganeh_110
At present, within 18 hours, then we will be ashamed to execute him, because the spirit of Amir al-Mu'minin (Imam Ali) has incarnated into his body and has become a virgin, compassionate, and institutionless heart, and for this reason, the news letter became "Hamid Imam Ali past"!
The other programmes of this organisation are mostly political goals under the guise of charity!
Among the actions of this organisation, the establishment of sexual education sessions for children is mentioned.

@Yeganeh_110
In the southern areas of Tehran and deprived regions of the country, under the pretext of helping vulnerable children (in line with the implementation of the 2020 document),
another programme was raising the age of marriage, and in this regard, they cooperated with individuals such as Kameel Ahmady, who was arrested on charges of espionage!

H.Soleimani @H_Soleimani
Kameel Ahmady, the dual-nationality "anthropologist" who was arrested several years ago by a security institution and had also established good relations with several members of parliament, believes that temporary marriage (mut'ah) is "like sex" and prostitution, and his solution is legal protection for "white marriage" (cohabitation without official religious marriage), and that children resulting from such relationships should also be protected by law.
Seyyed Razi @SaeedRao
18 First 2019 (probably means 18 January 2019)
Political insurance reports one and on the plans of chok, spouse, in France, women with the opinions of people such as Mrs.

Morteza Khoei (owner of the theory of losing good and bad) and Kazem Ahmadi, the Iranian-British ambassador who was arrested in the past. It asks, should we continue another Gandovi in France women? @TayebehShavash

Mashregh (Headline)
Who is Kameel Ahmady and what project was he pursuing in Iran? Silence / Shutdown (or possibly a surname: Khamoushi)

Mohammad Razi Bourouni, @rezamehr1369
The lady who is sitting in the left side of the photo next to him. #Tabie_Siasi#
(a member of parliament) and yesterday also #Parvaneh_Salsalouri (a member of parliament) attended the book unveiling ceremony.
Moreover, he is one of the main advisors of the plan to raise the age of marriage in the country. A plan whose goal is to declare marriage under 18 years illegal.

He continued to mock me, but I tried to ignore it. I said, 'Please allow Mr Raisian to be my lawyer. I can't afford to hire another lawyer, and I can't be present in your court without a lawyer. It is my legal right to have legal representation.'

He pretended not to understand and said, 'Didn't Mr Qana'atkar ask you questions in the interrogation-review session?' I said yes. He continued, 'And you've been interrogated, too. The interrogation review has been done; the interrogations are over. In my court, I'll ask a few questions, and you have to answer. You don't need a lawyer.'

I said, 'Throughout all stages of interrogation, I was denied the right to a lawyer, and during the interrogation-review period, my lawyer was not allowed to read the case file or intervene in it. The fact that I have been interrogated and my interrogation reviews have been done has nothing to do with not having a lawyer at this important stage. Isn't it otherwise according to such-and-such article of the Procedural Law?'

He said, 'No, it isn't otherwise. I'm not saying you can't have a lawyer, but the person who has taken on your case wants to become famous

through this. After the court session is over, he'll contact the BBC and talk about the court. Do you know how much this upsets me? Do you know how badly it could affect your case? In my opinion, choose someone from Kurdistan itself.'

I said, 'Amir Raisian has been my lawyer from the beginning, he knows my case and has complete command of it, and if you don't allow him to be my lawyer, I consider it my right to not answer your questions without legal representation.'

He got the point and started talking to his entourage. He wasn't looking at me, but his words were directed at me: 'They choose people who are political, they take on political lawyers and it ends up being to their detriment and their case, and then they say Salavati is a bad man.' After he had spoken and saw that my opinion hadn't changed, he said, 'Tell your lawyer to come and see me— What was his name? Raisian?'

He behaved as if he didn't really know Raisian, but he did know him and, based on this knowledge, had banned him from entering Branch 15 for some time. Reluctantly, he said, 'Tell your lawyer to come and see me. He has to accept my conditions, and if he doesn't accept them, you have to introduce someone else – although you really don't need a lawyer, anyway!'

He practically kicked me out, but I had only gone a few steps from his office when they called me back. I froze. Surely something bad like the other prisoners had experienced was about to happen to me. Perhaps my bail would be increased from five hundred million tomans to, say, four billion, and by the time my family could provide it, office hours would be over and I would have to go back to prison again. When I stood in front of him again, I saw myself just one step away from prison.

He said, with irony, 'We've talked so much about lawyers that we've neglected your civil rights. So that Mr Rouhani doesn't get upset and civil rights are observed, the prosecutor must read out the indictment for you.' Then he gestured, and the prosecutor's representative began to read. All the while, several other lawyers, bodyguards and his clerk were milling around. I didn't dare say that the indictment was completely private and that no one except the prosecutor's representative, the judge, the defendant and his lawyer should read or hear it.

The text that the prosecutor's representative read out had my interrogator's sentence structure and prose style, not the prosecutor's, and it was written so unfairly that I was shocked.

شعبه ۱۵ دادگاه انقلاب اسلامی تهران به تصدی امضاء کننده ذیل که بر اساس حکم ویژه شماره

[redacted] مورخ 96/6/26 ریاست محترم قوه قضائیه اینجانب با حفظ سمت دادرس دادگاه عمومی تهران نیز هستم مستند به ماده ۳۷۴ قانون آئین دادرسی کیفری در مورخ 99/8/24 جهت رسیدگی به پرونده کلاسه [redacted] اتهامی کامیل احمدی فرزند کریم تشکیل است . با عنایت به تحقیقات بعمل آمده و اخذ آخرین دفاع از متهم و ملاحظه لایحه دفاعیه وکیل مدافع ختم دادرسی را اعلام و با استعانت از خداوند متعال و با تکیه بر شرف و وجدان به شرح ذیل مبادرت به صدور رأی می نماید .

«رأی دادگاه»

در خصوص اتهام کامیل احمدی فرزند کریم با کد ملی [redacted] و شماره شناسنامه [redacted] صادره از نقده ، متولد [redacted] دارای تابعیت مضاعف ایرانی انگلیسی، فاقد سابقه، متأهل، پژوهشگر، آزاد به قید وثیقه حسب کیفرخواست صادره دائر بر: الف- همکاری با دولت متخاصم آمریکا علیه جمهوری اسلامی ایران. ب- نگهداری یک عدد افشانه گاز اشک آور.

پ- نگهداری یک لیتر مشروبات الکلی خارجی .

ت- نگهداری یک عدد شوکر

«گردشکار»

کامیل احمدی یکی از افرادی است که علی الظاهر تحت عنوان کارشناس ارشد جامعه شناسی و مردم شناسی اقداماتی را در راستای ترویج مبانی غربی و تضعیف قوانین و مبانی شرعی در حوزه خانواده، ازدواج و از طرفی لزوم اقتباس از مبانی غربی و اومانیستی انجام می داد تحت رصد و اشراف اطلاعاتی سازمان اطلاعات سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی قرار گرفت .

محمد احمدی معروف به کامیل فرزند کریم متولد شهر نقده از توابع استان آذربایجان غربی، از قومیت کرد و اهل سنت می باشد. او در خانواده ای متمول متولد شده و پدر وی کریم احمدی از افراد و بازاریان مشهور استان بوده و حتی در سطح کشور و خارج از کشور داد و ستدهای مالی و تجاری داشته است ، کامیل احمدی به چندین زبان مسلط می باشد و تجربه زندگی در چندین کشور را دارا می باشد؛ او در این باره می گوید:

Image 420: Text of special verdict and workflow of the court and IRGC Intelligence.

Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran, under the stewardship of the undersigned, acting pursuant to Special Decree No. [Redacted] dated 17 September 2017 [1396/06/26] issued by the Honourable Head of the Judiciary, while concurrently holding the position of Judge of the General Court of Tehran, and in accordance with Article 374 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, convened on 14 November 2020 [1399/08/24] to examine case file registration number [Redacted] concerning the charges against Kameel Ahmady, son of Karim. Following the completion of investigations, the recording of the final defence of the Defendant, and due consideration of the defence brief submitted by the Defence Counsel, the conclusion of the trial is

hereby declared. Relying upon Almighty God and guided by conscience, the Court hereby proceeds to render its judgment as set forth below.

«Judicial Ruling / Verdict»

Regarding the charges preferred against Kameel Ahmady, son of Karim, bearing National ID Number [Redacted] and Identity Certificate (Shenasnameh) Number [Redacted], issued in [Redacted], born in Naqadeh, resident of [Redacted], holding dual Iranian-British nationality, having no prior criminal record, married, researcher, currently at liberty on bail, pursuant to the indictment issued on the following counts:

A. Collaboration with a hostile state (the United States of America against the Islamic Republic of Iran).
B. Possession of one tear gas canister.
C. Possession of one litre of foreign alcoholic beverages.
D. Possession of one electroshock weapon (stun gun).

«Procedural History»

Kameel Ahmady is ostensibly one of those individuals who, under the guise of an expert holding a Master's degree in Sociology and Anthropology, took measures aligned with the promotion of Western paradigms, the subversion of laws and the Islamic foundations of the family, marriage, and the asserted necessity of adopting Western and humanistic principles. Consequently, he was placed under surveillance and intelligence monitoring by the Intelligence Organisation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Mohammad Ahmady, known as Kameel, son of Karim, was born in the city of Naqadeh within the West Azerbaijan Province, belonging to the Kurdish ethnic group and the Sunni denomination. He was born into an affluent family; his father, Karim Ahmady, was among the prominent individuals and well-known merchants of the province, with financial and commercial dealings spanning both domestic and international markets.

Kameel Ahmady is fluent in several languages and possesses experience living in multiple countries; regarding this, he states:

Apparently, from adolescence, I'd be sent to England to be trained in subversion techniques and then employed by British Government institutions! Even my volunteer work for Oxfam and other charities during my student years was twisted into incriminating evidence, despite the fact that Oxfam volunteers are unpaid. Volunteering is commonplace in Europe, and, like many others, I freely gave my time to Oxfam, even travelling to Africa twice to assist with projects like irrigation, school construction and other building work. Now, all these charitable actions were being presented as clandestine, dangerous training grounds designed to undermine the Islamic Republic!

I didn't have the strength to stand on my feet, but I tried to appear resilient. In my case file, they claimed that IRGC Intelligence forces had bravely stopped Mr Kameel Ahmady and nipped the great sedition of infiltration into the Government in the bud. From the security system's point of view, Kameel Ahmady had returned to Iran in 2009 to deepen social divisions and change Islamic views. They said, 'You have come to carry out your mission, and the death of your brother and supporting your family were not the reasons for your return to Iran.' In short, everything had been turned into a crime and an attempt at subversion, especially receiving funding from the HIVOS Foundation, participating in a Christmas celebration at a European Embassy and so on.

The security system had deemed all my work criminal and provided a reason for each point. In its view, I had done research on white marriage to normalise relations between men and women; in the sigheh project, I had sought to change the Islamic sexual lifestyles of young people; the LGBTQ+ project was intended to promote homosexuality in Iran. The issue of child marriage also had a special place in the indictment text, and, following an article published in the *Keyhan* newspaper, they said I was assigned to implement Kissinger's theory in Iran to reduce the population of Iran and Islam in favour of Israel by raising the marriage age and reducing the birth rate.[1]

1 Darvishi, 2019.

At the end of the indictment, in addition to the charge under Article 508, reference was made to half a bottle of alcohol, pepper spray and a stun gun that had been found in my home storage, and these items were added to the list of charges against me. The pepper spray was old. I had bought it for Shafagh nine years earlier to keep in her bag sometimes. It had never been used and, in my opinion, was probably past its expiry date. The stun gun was broken, and I had only kept it as a souvenir from my father's shop. The half-bottle of alcohol was mine, but I hadn't imagined it would be used as a new charge against me in court.

After reading out the indictment, Salavati said, 'Come and sign it.'

Annoyed and angry, I replied, 'Why should I sign it?'

He said, 'You can object in the court sessions and defend yourself, but now you have to sign the indictment.'

I didn't back down. 'What kind of story is this? I don't accept this scenario, and what if I sign it and you try me based on this indictment? My lawyer isn't here. My signature would also be an endorsement of the baseless accusations they have announced.'

Several lawyers who were there said, 'You have no choice but to sign the indictment. Mr Salavati is a fair and impartial judge; you can defend yourself in the court sessions and prove these things wrong.' Each time I went to court, these lawyers were hanging around Salavati. They were also very well-dressed, and I later heard that they were fixers for Salavati and handled big economic cases.

I had no choice. I signed the indictment and came out. I hadn't taken my mobile with me, so that, if they arrested me again, my phone wouldn't fall into the IRGC's hands. My family was very worried that I might be sent back to prison. I could have handed my phone in to the court security, but something that had happened to Shafagh earlier prevented me from doing so. Once, when she had gone to the prosecutor's office to follow up on my situation, she had handed in her phone to the security desk. When she got it back, she noticed that her phone was constantly cutting in and out and had static. She regularly complained about her phone's reception problem. When I was released, I showed the phone to a mobile phone specialist, but it only got worse. Finally, we decided to go to the manufacturer's representative. After examining it, they said that a very small microphone for eavesdropping had been installed behind the battery! We were in shock for a long time. According to the senior engineer at that company, it was

very likely that all our conversations, both in person and on our calls, were being bugged. I had experienced this feeling before with the hacking of my emails and the compromising of my mobile phone and laptop, but the complete surveillance of our lives through Shafagh's phone was very upsetting to me.

That day, I returned home, and everyone's worries were allayed. The coronavirus situation was becoming serious, and they were planning to impose travel restrictions. I felt unwell and didn't want to be stuck in Tehran, imprisoned in my own home. We headed to Kurdistan so we could all find some peace. We went to Mahabad and Naqadeh, then Piranshahr, and stayed in our small family unit for about two months. This situation constantly brought back memories of solitary confinement. Overall, it was a strange and difficult experience. The whole city had shut down – strict lockdown was in force.

During this period, a virtual group had been set up with members of NGOs to carry out a joint project on child waste-picking. I also participated in their weekly meetings and filled some of my time with that. However, they were constantly at each other's throats due to their disagreements, and nothing much came of it.



مشرق

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ویژه‌های مشرق

خبرنگار بی بی سی اینجا چه می‌کند!؟ / انصاری:اصلاح طلبان در دولت دوم روحانی حذف شدند

صفحه نخست » اخبار کلی

خبرنگار بی‌بی‌سی در روزنامه‌های وطنی؟!

روزنامه شرق و روزنامه اعتماد روز پنج‌شنبه در صفحه اول دو یادداشت متفاوت را منتشر کردند که نویسنده هر دو یادداشت، شخصی به نام «کامیل احمدی» است.

به نوشته مشرق، «کامیل احمدی» یک دوتابعیتی (ایرانی-انگلیسی) است که در پوشش کارشناس با رسانه‌های معاند از جمله بی بی سی، ایران اینترنشنال، صدای امریکا، من و تو، رادیو فردا و دویچه وله همکاری می‌کند. وی در سال‌های ۲۰۰۵ و ۲۰۰۶ به عنوان خبرنگار با شبکه بی

Image 421: Special headlines in *Mashregh* and *Javan*, newspapers belonging to the IRGC asking why BBC correspondent is active on Iranian newspapers

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News code: 1082462
Date of publication: 11 June 2020 (22 Khordad 1399) – 14:48

Mashregh Specials
What is a BBC journalist doing here?
A BBC journalist in national newspapers?
The newspapers Shargh and Etemad published two different op-eds on their front pages on Thursday, the author of both being a person named Kameel Ahmady.
According to Mashregh, Kameel Ahmady holds dual nationality (Iranian-British) and, under the guise of being an expert, collaborates with hostile media outlets including BBC, Iran

> International, Voice of America, Manoto, Radio Farda, and Deutsche Welle. In 2005 and 2006, he worked as a journalist for the network...

The court summons and the announcement of the court date prompted me to return to Tehran sooner than planned. Salavati had accepted my lawyer, and Mr Raisian and I were reviewing my defence statements. We had a pretty good idea of the questions I was likely to be asked. The pandemic was peaking when I headed to the Revolutionary Court again. It was very crowded, and many prisoners' families had come with bail and wanted to take their children home. The old man who was doing the administrative work was overwhelmed by the crowds and was shouting at some of the visitors to be patient – that it would soon be their turn, too. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, media pressure and the fact that they couldn't quarantine the prisons, they had decided to release on bail prisoners who were not accused of security or political crimes.

I said to the admissions officer that it was my court hearing. He smiled and said, 'What's your case? Economic?'

I said, 'No. They say it's security related.'

He laughed and said, 'You're in luck. Go on.' I asked why. 'Keep it under your hat, but Judge Salavati has got corona!'

The last time, I had seen how careful Salavati was to avoid catching COVID. His entourage were constantly disinfecting the surroundings, but he had caught it, nonetheless. That evening, many people in cyberspace wished death on Salavati, but some time later he returned, hale and hearty, and the next summons, announcing a court date two months later, was issued to us.

I heard that Amir Hussein, the CEO of Avazeh Rice and several of my other wardmates had been released. It was Ramadan, and we were invited to Amir Hussein's house for Iftar (the evening meal to break the fast). On the luxurious rooftop of Amir Hussein's house, I wanted to reminisce about prison memories, but it was as if they had forgotten so much and were only talking about their new economic projects. I realised that the Iftar gathering was actually a business meeting, too. They wanted to discuss their new plans together, and I was the odd one out. That night, I also remembered Taher Ghadirian. He had recently been transferred to the General Ward. We were all outside, but he was still in prison. Prison was

a strange place; for example, you might crave dates, but Taher would say, 'I've been in solitary and communal cells for two years and still haven't had a fried egg. I long to crack an egg into a frying pan and eat it!'

Official news agencies and media outlets were still refusing to interview me, but the *Shargh* and *EtemadOnline* newspapers interviewed me on the occasion of the 12th of June, coinciding with the World Day Against Child Labour. Following the publication of these interviews, IRGC Intelligence immediately reacted, and *Mashregh News* ran the headline: 'What is the BBC Reporter Doing in the Shargh Newspaper?'[1]

In the indictment, I had been accused of being a BBC reporter. When my mother died in 2005, I had come to Iran and taken anthropological photos of nomads, road accidents and so on in Iran. I published these photos on my website, and later I received an email from the BBC offering to publish them. They took the photos from me and published them on the BBC website under my name. These photos are still on the old BBC website,[2] and this, my only connection with this news organisation, had been added to my list of accusations!

Trying to Conduct the Last Research in Iran

When the first court summons arrived, I decided to use the short window of opportunity I had to begin another research project. *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood*,[3] which was in fact a continuation of and a more comprehensive study than *Childhood Yawn*[4] – my previous work on child waste-picking – occupied my mind, and I began to explore it. This work breathed new life into me and helped me to a great extent to emerge from the depression of my prison days.

Child labour in Tehran and its suburbs was diverse, and we came across cases that we had previously been unaware of. Of course, some people said with a hint of mockery that I'd be better off focusing on my court case. I suspected this might be my last fieldwork in Iran and was determined to do it as well as I could. I made the preliminary arrangements for the

1 See Mashregh News, 2020b and Java Online, 2020.

2 For example, see Ahmady and colleagues, 2006c.

3 Ahmady and colleagues, 2021a.

4 Ahmady and colleagues, 2019b.

research and, without delay, went out into the field. I resolved that, even if I went to prison, I would continue this work and bring it to fruition.

I told myself that if my sentence was between one and three years, I would endure prison, as ultimately only a third of it would be served, and then I could get parole. The sentence for Article 508 was one to ten years in prison. If I received a ten-year sentence, it would be impossible for me to go to prison. By the time I was released, Alan would be fifteen years old, and I would have been deprived of being with my child, without having committed any crime. I gradually came to accept the reality that I might have to say goodbye to Iran. In those difficult days of uncertainty, not knowing what was going to happen to me, I had various plans in mind to be less caught off guard. But the most important determining factor in all these plans was my child. Like any other child, he had the right to grow up with his family and benefit equally from the presence of both father and mother. I couldn't sacrifice an innocent child for my own idealism. I couldn't allow my boy's childhood to be filled with anxiety and the pain of his father's absence. Like any other boy, he had the right to play football with his father and go swimming. My wrong decision would affect not only my son's life but also my wife's. They had already endured a great deal of anxiety and hardship because of me. Perhaps if I hadn't been a father and a husband, I might have acted differently.

With Salavati contracting COVID, I had even more time to work on this project, and I started fieldwork in Tehran. In my initial investigations, I had concluded that I would do a limited research project on child labour in underground and hidden workshops, but in the initial scan I came across a multitude of hidden occupations that were for children, from prohibited and clandestine jobs to working in production and packaging workshops and even homeworking. I realised that I had to change the idea of the work from being limited to underground workshops to all forms of child labour.

Although many businesses had closed down or were semi-closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many children were still working. I knew that investigating all forms of child labour in Tehran and its outskirts was a huge undertaking – a real uphill struggle. Given the sheer variety of jobs, this project could take a long time, and a lot of budget and energy. I wondered if I could manage to shoulder this burden. A rough calculation told me that there were about fifteen major forms of child labour in Tehran.

These jobs were scattered across different areas of Tehran and its suburbs, but the forms of child labour were not limited to this number.

I thought about the research model for the work. I discussed and answered almost all these questions with myself. Finally, I took the plunge and said to myself, 'Kameel, it looks like this is going to be your last fieldwork in Iran. Salavati and his cronies won't let you stay and work.' I found a good and enthusiastic field team, and the work began.

Before starting the work, we divided the forms of child labour into three categories: hard labour, semi-hard labour and hazardous hard labour. Based on these classifications, I could see that my knowledge and awareness of all forms of child labour were not sufficient, and I needed to gain more insight and awareness about some jobs. For example, I was more familiar with waste-picking due to my previous research, but I had also become acquainted with other occupations such as work in car washes, car repair shops, scrap yards and domestic service, and I had to increase my knowledge of all these areas. Ultimately, after identifying and investigating twenty-three types of child labour, we ventured out into the field. Some of these jobs, such as street vending at crossroads, waste-picking and working in brick kilns, were familiar, but others, despite being very common, were less visible. Some jobs were also done clandestinely,



Image 422: Fieldwork. Yaftabad, Tehran.

such as work in crystal and glass factories, which few people have seen up close.

Children work long hours in factories on the outskirts of Tehran, engaged in some of the hardest jobs imaginable. From morning, when we started, until night we were searching, interviewing and identifying types of child labour. We moved from one area to another and from one neighbourhood to another. In some places, we acted randomly and in a snowballing manner. Our working method varied depending on the type of child labour in each neighbourhood, because each of these children came from a specific class, society, culture and ethnicity, and we had to implement specific methods to establish contact with each of them. In addition to the difficulties, this also meant we had to try to innovate in our work.

I am deeply indebted to my fieldwork team, who came out into the field every day in the summer heat, wearing masks and gloves, to conduct interviews. Seeing the suffering and labour of the children made me very sad, but from the depths of my being I was also glad that we were doing

something for the benefit of these suffering children. I thought this research was the least we could do for them.

Although the focus of the research was on the forms of child labour in Tehran and its suburbs, due to the similarity of the types of child labour in and around all major cities, the findings can be generalised to other cities, to a limited extent, apart from the exceptional cases, as some jobs may exist in one city and not in another.

Apart from the heaviness and difficulties of the fieldwork, the forms of child labour, due to our confrontations with the bitter and painful accounts of the children's lives and work, were very distressing. I could see that, despite all their playfulness, a great sadness lay hidden deep within them, and you could read this in the depths of their eyes. These children had been humiliated, and almost all of them had many family problems. My colleagues and I witnessed the suffering of child labourers firsthand during the fieldwork for this project, and I was constantly faced with situations where a child had either been forced to come by their family or had been forced to work due to poverty and misery. Some had also entered the cycle of work through a mafia-like framework.

The most heartbreaking part of the story was that 80–90% of the research's statistical population were Afghan migrants. These were almost the most defenceless, voiceless and deprived groups of children. Of course, the environmental and living conditions of that cohort of migrants who had been born and raised in Iran were ultimately better than the rest. But even they were considered second- or third-class citizens.

Something that particularly affected me was the children who worked in flower shops. In the gentle environment, full of flowers and birdsong, constantly filled with the scent of flowers and plants, the children seemed more cheerful. These were children who I felt had gentler spirits than other children, and it was even interesting that they themselves said their employers' behaviour was very different from other places and that they treated the children better. These children came to work from three or four in the morning, but they had better spirits than other child labourers.

Of course, when I say that the children working in flower shops or children in 'flower work' had better spirits, I mean in comparison to children who were in scrap work or children who, for example, worked with metals. They usually had rougher spirits. They spoke less and got angry more quickly. Many of them suffered serious injuries in

woodworking shops, car-repair shops, metal workshops and crystal making, and their bodies were either burnt or wounded. Most of them had rough hands that didn't look like children's hands. Even their spirits had become like those of adults: they were less childlike.

Among the children engaged in scrap-metal and waste work, we couldn't find any who were mischievous and playful like the children you see larking around at traffic lights, chasing each other. They rarely even smiled. They lacked any of the behaviours of childhood. Life had forged them into hardened beings who spoke very little. Earlier, in *Childhood Yawn* project, I had seen that child waste-pickers existed like wandering ghosts throughout the city, yet they remained invisible to the public and officials. Many of these children face violence in the workplace, in their families and in wider society.

Too often, members of the public treat child labourers as nuisances, verbally abusing them. These humiliated children become alienated from people, and bleak futures await them. Many of these children, despite doing hard work, receive the lowest wages, and some employers even deny these children their already meagre earnings. The children are unable to defend their rights or claim what is due to them. What is stolen from these children is their childhoods. To truly understand them and to grasp the depth of this tragedy, you have to witness firsthand the various types of children who experience premature labour.

I have a childhood history of limited work in brick kilns, street vending, agriculture and shepherding. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, as a member of my family, I had a duty to participate in work, but the type of work these child-labourers were doing was very different. It wasn't about contributing to family affairs; rather, they had to work out of extreme poverty and deprivation, in what was essentially absolute exploitation. For this reason, in consultation, we named the book *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood*, because it is often the case that no rights are recognised for these children.

Now, despite all the similarities, the different jobs that children had also presented some differences. For example, children who worked in the market and carried loads with handcarts had different spirits compared to other children, as did female child labourers who faced sexual abuse. Violence against child labourers was prominent in workshops. In Tehran's Grand Bazaar, ethnicity also became important. Many children from

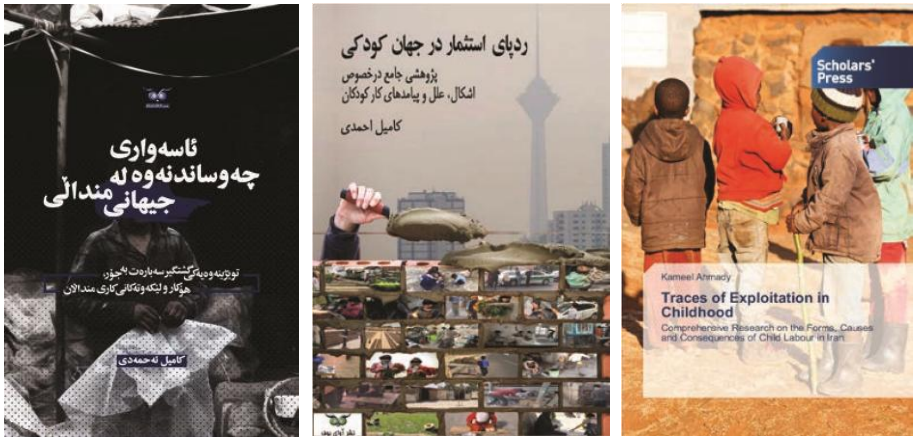


Image 423: *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood* in three languages.

different cities in Iran were frequently seen, and there were more of them compared to Afghan migrant children. This led to turf wars among them. This issue had led to the formation of gangs of children, each working for themselves in a somewhat organised manner.

Even as I write the initial draft of this section of my life memoirs, coinciding with the World Day Against Child Labour, the Farsi version of my book *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood* has been officially published and launched by Avaye Buf Publications in Denmark and made available to readers free of charge. Shortly after, the English and Kurdish versions were also printed and published. If Judge Salavati had given me the opportunity to stay in Iran, what other forms of child labour could we have identified? Identifying forms of child labour can certainly help to identify ways to reduce this social harm, and many children who were involved in this project played roles in shaping and carrying it out.

I often reflect on how, were I in a position of influence and executive power, I could have leveraged the strategies outlined in Chapter Four of *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood* to achieve even better outcomes for working children. Sadly, there seems to be little systemic will to address and alleviate the problem.

Researching the various forms of child labour, as documented in *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood*, was an invaluable and deeply enriching experience. I believe NGOs and government agencies working with child labourers, particularly those lacking comprehensive data, will find this

field research, conducted collaboratively, a valuable resource. I've always felt a profound responsibility to working children – my target demographic – and longed to fulfil this obligation. While I acknowledge that this research began under less-than-ideal circumstances, I poured my heart and soul into it, dedicating significant time and personal resources to its completion.

During our fieldwork, we repeatedly encountered new forms of child labour, discovering a surprising number of children engaged in them. These discoveries were both encouraging and alarming. We began with a short list, but by the project's end we had compiled a lengthy one, painting a bleak picture of the future for our society, especially for its working children.

Part Seven: From the Injustice of Judge Salavati to the Travesty of Bidarzarni

Introduction

The tale of this chapter in my life is one of bleak and exhausting days and months. Fresh from the harsh period of imprisonment and an unjust trial, anxious about a future far from certain as I awaited the judgement of Judge Salavati, I needed peace, empathy, understanding and immersion in my social and professional lives more than ever.

Against this backdrop erupted accusations of sexual assault in Iran. I was targeted as one of the accused. It was a harrowing situation that made the atmosphere of my life as repellent and unbearable as the cramped and dark confines of my solitary cell in Evin Prison.

An accusation like that, regardless of its veracity, can seriously challenge anyone's professional, personal and family situations. When such an accusation is levelled against a researcher who has worked for years in the field of social harms, gender and child labour, accepting the threats and limitations of this domain, and who, at the same time, is awaiting a judicial verdict for the crime of research and activism in the same fields, it becomes doubly difficult and devastating. On the one hand, I saw myself as defenceless prey in the clutches of ideological security and judicial systems that are inhuman to the core, brutal and indifferent to the law and the rights of the accused. On the other hand, this public sphere – in which for many years I had strived as a member of a minority to raise awareness and advocate for the rights of the deprived and disadvantaged – was now the stage for my unfair, undefended and tyrannical trial based on an unfounded charge.

Alas, in the clamour of this campaign against me, many who knew the truth and could have stepped forward to calm the atmosphere and clarify matters took the opposite path or chose silence. But despite all these hardships, my covenant with living and standing firm remained steadfast. Inevitably, however excruciating it was, I stood my ground and carried on.

In other words, this chapter relates to my connection with a movement called '#MeToo', but the Iranian version. I refer to moments in my life that passed with difficulty and bitterness. Although a person usually tries, after unpleasant events occur, to reduce the bitterness of what has happened to them through thought and analysis of reality, they can never escape the

traces left on their soul and body by those events. I too have tried, through my words, thoughts and analyses, to reduce the impact of these bitter events somewhat and to focus more on the whys and wherefores – more importantly, to critique the injustices that have been inflicted on me, intentionally or unintentionally, while acknowledging my shortcomings and mistakes and turning them into an opportunity to improve and to learn never to remain silent in any arena in the face of falsehood, injustice and the concealment of truth.

Undoubtedly, as one of the individuals accused in this affair, I have not been immune to it. My spirit and psyche have been affected, and perhaps the bitterness and pain stemming from it have remained with me. Nevertheless, I have strived to confront it in both my personal and public spheres. Personally, as an accused individual (while acknowledging the sensationalism and emotionally charged atmosphere that these movements create in the public arena, in which distinguishing truth from slander and accurately recounting events becomes difficult) I endeavoured to patiently await a bitter and stinging understanding of all dimensions of the matter. I considered it my undeniable right, bound by honesty and transparency as I was, to fully defend myself as someone whose personal, familial, professional and social standing was at risk.

Beyond my personal involvement, as a researcher of public culture and social issues, particularly sexual and gender matters, I found the overt and covert dimensions of the #MeToo campaign to be significant and sensitive, in terms of understanding feminist/gender discourse in Iran, its manifestation in mass media and social networks, and its interaction and connection with other social and legal discourses – even its intended and unintended alignment or misalignment with the wishes of official power structures. Therefore, key and important questions have occupied my mind, and with these questions, I begin the next chapter:

> Why does Iranian society, in the face of a global movement like #MeToo, stray from the goals that were present at the movement's inception? Instead of harnessing the movement's positive and transformative functions, why does Iranian society unwittingly and naively accelerate a portion of it toward personal and organisational vendettas?

A movement that was supposed to empower and raise awareness of victimised women, in Iran it largely became a stage for attacks by educated women on men who were in some way more recognisable in their professional lives. The fervour of these accounts escalated so much during that time that the voices of women who were victims in relationships with non-celebrities were hardly heard, if heard at all.

A movement that, globally, seeks to establish justice, resolve issues or alleviate suffering, in Iranian society becomes a portal for the birth of other problems. Far broader and more diverse issues emerge, prompting questions like those that arose in my mind due to my difficult experience, which I will recount.

As my mind has been constantly trained and occupied with research, I have always sought realistic answers based on documentation and evidence. This time, too, I decided to approach this subject, however personal, as a researcher, to find realistic answers based on evidence.

Beyond that, I will in this chapter address the interests of individuals, systems and organisations that benefit from this lucrative field of gender and a new, radical way of thinking (which doesn't just belong to the left; liberals champion it even more than leftists). As in previous chapters of my autobiography, I have tried to share my experiences with you honestly, and I will do so in this section, as well.

I will also address the performative and superficial process of my first trial with Judge Salavati, which took place a few days after the publication of the sexual allegations against me, and I will talk about my last work and travels in Iran.

It is hardly admirable to condemn the work and efforts of women; instead, we must strive to prevent capitalist systems from confiscating women's ideas (and, consequently, their movements) and directing them toward their own interests. In this regard, the human liberation of women from social inequalities has been a concern of modern society – a society that has always stood against binary divisions or discriminatory dichotomies such as male and female, worker and capitalist, superior and inferior, and so on. The female gender in the age of civilisation, after passing through the decline of matriarchy, patriarchy and male

domination,[1] which I deliberately sometimes call male-centredness, has been humiliated in other ways. The only difference between this era and the previous one is that the mechanisms of discrimination and differentiation against a woman as the 'second sex' no longer manifest themselves so obviously in explicit structures. Instead, they are applied to her in a vague way and through hidden, and of course mental, structures. Interestingly, the result of these mechanisms, which is discrimination against women, targets and, in a way, punishes male society even more than it punishes women.

More than three centuries have passed since the beginning of women's-liberation movements. During this time, despite the sporadic struggles of

1 Three terms – patriarchy, masculism and androcentrism – are concepts that, due to their shared meaning of attitudes based on difference and discrimination against women, are sometimes treated as synonymous in gender discussions. However, despite their semantic overlap, each has a distinct connotation, semantic range and instance of use. Paying attention to these differences can illuminate some misunderstandings and incorrect interpretations in the field of gender studies. The concept of patriarchy is the most common in this field. It has broad semantic application in political science and sociology. In political science, 'patriarchy' refers to a type of political system in which a male individual replicates a father-like relationship with family members at the level of governance (ruler) with society. Under the shadow of the exercise of power and authoritarian domination, members of society, in the position of minors, are obliged to unconditionally follow and obey him (Aghabakhsh & Afsharirad 2004, p.494). From a sociological and anthropological perspective, patriarchy is a social system in which the office of authority is under the command of the eldest male of the family, group, tribe or lineage, and the rest are obliged to obey his unilateral orders (Josias English cited in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). According to these definitions, patriarchy is a form of male-gender domination under which, in addition to women, many men are forced to obey and accept the orders, rules and principles of the governing power. 'Masculism' refers to beliefs, tendencies, ideologies and social and even political movements that seek to preserve and promote the position and rights of men and eliminate gender discrimination against them. Therefore, masculism is specifically in opposition to feminism (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 253). Androcentrism is a kind of attitude and worldview that consciously or unconsciously considers the male sex and masculinity to be the axis of its history, culture, art, industry and society, and indirectly marginalises women and the concept of femininity. In other words, androcentrism is the evaluation of individuals and cultures based on masculine viewpoints, criteria and values. This term refers to a male-centred worldview that doesn't necessarily present explicitly negative views of women and girls, but positions men and boys as representatives of the human condition or experience, and women and girls as a deviation from that human condition. Androcentrism exists in all areas of study and cultural expression, including art, science, medicine, law, fine arts and media (Hibbs in Teo, 2014, pp.94–101).

women around the world to achieve their rights, progress in gaining those rights was not rapid, and achievements have varied from country to country.

Amid certain movements, what can prove more effective than mere theorising or campaigning in realising women's demands for equality is a pragmatism or, rather, the practical application of targeted, appropriate and, most importantly, realistic actions.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Successive Sexual Allegations on the Feminist Bidarzani Page

In the first week of August 2020, I was busy with the final coding phase of *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood*. The fieldwork for my latest research in Iran was nearing completion, and I was settling accounts with the field team. I would have liked some of the team members to assist with the editing, but I realised they were unwilling, and the additional salary requested by one or two of them for continuing the work was beyond my means. Several were final-year doctoral students who needed to write their dissertations. The rest preferred to end their collaboration sooner rather than later, perhaps fearing my situation would cause them trouble.

My financial resources were also dwindling, and with the thought that I would probably be heading to prison very soon, I was calculating things more prudently. I was almost finished settling accounts with the last few people when I received a message on Instagram. A friend from the city sent me a post from the Bidarzani page. I read the text again, hoping to be sure they weren't referring to me.

I was somewhat familiar with Bidarzani. I knew they were a relatively radical feminist group, with organisers based inside and outside Iran, working on issues of women, equality and gender. They had republished my interviews with other media outlets twice and interviewed me once. I was settling accounts with my team members, and it seemed they were settling accounts with me!

Following the emergence of the global #MeToo movement, some women in Iran also began making disclosures and allegations against men they claimed had assaulted or harassed them. I don't intend to question all

the accounts, but, frankly, after what happened to me and what became clear about many others, I wonder how the veracity of these claims can be accurately assessed and how a distinction can be made between reality and the settling of scores, especially when almost all narrators didn't reveal their identities and the accused didn't even have opportunities to defend themselves. This is the biggest legal flaw of this movement, which severely challenges the presumption of innocence.[1]

Of course, I know that we don't have much of a system for discovering the truth here, and it seems that in most of the world, the general public only pays attention to the story that's presented. Fact-checking it isn't particularly important to them.

The #MeToo movement was an internet movement and hashtag that gained momentum in October 2017 and was shared extensively. This hashtag was used to highlight the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment, especially in the workplace, and to condemn it. It began with accusations of sexual assault and harassment against American producer Harvey Weinstein, and its reach extended to other countries, eventually including Iran.

A post related to me, 'A Tale of Rape', dated 3 Shahrivar 1399 (24 August 2020), suggested two things. Firstly, before anything else had even happened, the feminist activists and jurists behind the Bidarzani page, who had little experience or expertise in this area, had hauled me into their own court and, acting as chief justices, not only deemed me guilty, but also sentenced me as a rapist. Secondly, by saying, 'A Tale of . . .', they implied that this story was ongoing. In this post, a girl recounted,

> Five years ago, I was in my early twenties. I was living in Isfahan and had strict parents. A man who claimed to defend the rights of women and children and whose interviews were broadcast on the BBC, went to the United Nations and conducted research on female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage, temporary marriage (sigheh), etc. . . .

1 The principle of innocence, or presumption of innocence, is based on Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, 'Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.'

All the keywords and signs matched me, and it was clear that by referring to the initials of my first and last names, 'KA', she intended to tell the reader that she meant 'Kameel Ahmady'. I looked at a few of her previous posts and saw that this page, following the example of the foreign #MeToo movement, had started an Iranian #Me Too. Interestingly, she had also published several posts about work relationships and employers.

I slowly read the entire text and went to the comments. Some people thought it referred to someone else – Keyvan Emami – whose first and last names were also abbreviated as KA in Farsi and about whom many stories had already been published before his recent arrest. The widespread dissemination of these posts turned the hashtag #KeyvanEmam into a Twitter trend, generating over 6,000 tweets. He had been sentenced to death for rape, but some of the complainants requested a commutation, asking that he not be executed, and that was under consideration.

In response to this ambiguity, some people wrote that this story concerned Kameel Ahmady. Even more interesting, anonymous and sometimes fake accounts kept mentioning my name under this post and the other posts. An account called 'ba man motla kon' hash-tagged my name more than anyone else and attacked people who questioned or doubted the authenticity of the accounts. Later, after consulting with a cyber expert, I realised that some of these pages had been set up in the space of a day or two, didn't belong to any particular people, and their sole purpose was to name me a rapist.

I thought about the first account for a moment. At the launch of my book *In the Name of Tradition*, in Isfahan, a young woman had suggested working with us on future projects. I explained about this acquaintance in the fieldwork section on child marriage. During the interrogations, I had also been questioned about her and her activity as a homosexual (from the interrogators' perspective and in their terms) and as the manager of a channel about LGBTQ+ issues. I will explain the truth of the matter in the fact-checking section of this Part Seven.

That day, I pulled myself together to settle accounts with my colleagues and put the matter to rest, but, naturally, my mind wouldn't calm down. I'd known for a few weeks that the #MeToo movement had started in Iran and that stories were being published here and there, but, because of my fieldwork commitments and concerns about my court case, I hadn't followed it closely. A few days before the first account about me was

published, I had a meeting with a friend to whom I was going to give some work advice. He said, 'Kameel, have you heard about the #MeToo movement in Iran? It's a total mess, and someone's name is being added to the list of rapists every hour. How reliable do you think these accounts are? Because our society doesn't have a history of freedom and transparent expression, especially in these areas, and it's not possible to analyse the accounts easily and quickly.'

After my colleagues left, I felt dazed, and I read the first account again with a lump in my throat. My name had also been added to the long list of 'rapist men'.



Image 424: Screenshots of chats.

'Hi, how are you? About this post you wrote on Bidarzani, we need to talk about it right away, and I need to know how and under what circumstances you wrote this narrative and attributed this to me. But, aside from that, what really worries me, and I'm not sure about, is whether you wrote this distorted and incomplete story yourself or under pressure? I don't know if you know, but I have a hearing with Judge Salavati tomorrow, and this

> could be very sensitive and affect the course of my case. After I got out, I couldn't bring myself to tell you that you were one of the people I was questioned about during my arrest, regarding your activities with me and your own ones, your homosexual tendencies, and running a channel about LGBTQ+ issues. Before anything else, I'm so sorry if you felt and feel bad, and I deeply apologise, but right now I'm in a very difficult position to respond or not respond, and if I'm going to respond, I have to defend myself, and in such a difficult situation, which could have much greater consequences, and you know the details between us.
> 'And what happened, and even after that, is very different from what you said, and I have evidence for all those connections, and that's why I'm so surprised. I'm asking you to immediately remove this post, and if you think it's best, I'll definitely give you a full answer after my court hearing, either to you or in any other way. Please, before this gets more widespread and someone's rights are violated and legal problems arise, delete this post, and if you want, let's talk this morning. Thank you.'

In the days that followed, the number of real and fake pages kept increasing. I felt a strange anxiety that the matter would affect my case. I contacted my media consultant, and he didn't know where the matter was coming from, either. When I told him that the woman had also been mentioned in the interrogations, my consultant became suspicious and thought that the Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence service was probably involved, but it wasn't possible to say for sure. I was thinking that, in a few days, I had a court hearing with Judge Salavati, and this account might change the course of my case. I thought that this person had probably been forced to 'confess'.

According to my interrogator, she was the admin of a Telegram channel for LGBTQ+ individuals, and, according to her, the Government was monitoring her. That day, out of sheer anxiety and haste, I sent this woman a message, which I'm including with the translated text.

She didn't reply to my message. I thought to myself, 'She must be in prison, and they've forced her to write this account.' I repeated my mistake and sent a message to the Bidarzani page as well. I attached a photo of my court summons and explained that I was in a sensitive situation. I asked

them to remove the account and that we could talk about it after my court hearing. After a day, they replied that as a page active in women's rights, they publish accounts without judgement. The saddest part of this response was the use of phrases like 'only the account of the person harmed' and 'judgement', and I was left wondering how I could possibly classify the title they'd given to their first account, which read, 'An Account of a #Rape'!



Image 425: Chat with Bidarzani admin and attached court summons.

Note: The following is a translation of private text messages exchanged between the feminist platform Bidarzani and Kameel

Ahmady, in response to a social media post. Messages are presented in chronological order.
Kameel: 'Hello, thank you for responding. Given the details and references in the narrative – even though the accounts are anonymous – people are assuming it's about me, and I'm being judged in a one-sided way. I'm very worried that the issue has gone beyond this. Please help and guide me.'
Kameel: 'And this is the message that they sent me.'
Kameel: 'Hi, how are you? Regarding this post that you wrote on Bidarzani, we need to talk about it immediately. I need to know how and under what circumstances you wrote this narrative and attributed it to me. What worries me most, however, is whether you wrote this distorted and incomplete narrative yourself or under pressure?'
Bidarzani: 'Hello. We did not mention your name in the published narrative, nor did we mention names elsewhere. Other people and individuals are publishing your name. This narrative and other narratives cannot be removed solely through Bidarzani, since it is only the account of an injured individual, without naming either party from our side.'

I was certain that more accounts were on their way and that the matter wouldn't end any time soon. This account had also been published on Bidarzani's Twitter feed.

Ms Samaneh Savadi, who describes herself as a feminist active in women's rights and is a regular contributor to Iran International television, tagged me and asked, 'Is this you?' We had known each other virtually beforehand, and, on that basis, I messaged her and told her the story. Then, I sent her the message I had sent to the woman claiming the assault. To my astonishment, she said I had threatened her, and she made several Tweets against me, saying that I had harmed someone in the past and, now that she had broken her silence, I had threatened her. I later realised that the author of the first account had described the matter to Savadi before publication, and Savadi had given the account to Bidarzani for publication. Apparently, every accused person in the Iranian #MeToo project had a feminist or a feminist group dedicated to them, but in any case, Savadi

went on to become a sworn enemy who spared no effort in posting multiple threads, messages and so on.



Image 426: Screenshot of chats with Samaneh Savadi.

Samaneh Savadi's Tweet: 'He sent a message [saying,] "You know that I have an open case and it will be bad for me! Delete it!" [He is] officially threatening the injured party.'
Context: Savadi is claiming that Kameel Ahmady sent a threatening message to the 'injured party' (the person who made the initial accusation), implying that, if certain content was not deleted, it would negatively affect his ongoing court case. She interprets this as an official threat toward the 'injured party'.
Text message exchange (right side, bottom message): 'Hello, I don't receive anything but a threat from your message. They probably thought about all aspects and made such a decision.'
Scanned document (in the text message exchange): The document is another copy of the 'Summons Notice'. It contains the same information about the court hearing, the parties involved, and the reason for the summons.

I was sitting in a café near my house and didn't feel like going home. Shafagh's family were our guests, and I was worried that they had been

following the events. I didn't know how I could face them. The situation was complicated, and everything had been arranged in such a way that I didn't know what to do. Denying my relationship with the woman who gave the account would be wrong and a lie, but I had never raped her. At one point, I had been a friend and to some extent a confidant to her, even giving her advice and guidance on how to reconcile with her partner. I suspected it was the work of the security forces, who wanted me completely destroyed one or two days before my court date, but all the obvious and hidden aspects of this matter, and indeed this entire movement, were not clear to me.

That night, I returned home and played the part of a hospitable host. Fortunately, the family still didn't know anything about what had happened.

I reread the sarcastic comments beneath the post and, a few hours later, saw that another post about me had been published. At the beginning of the account, Bidarzani had written,

> Following yesterday's account, similar accounts have reached Bidarzani, which are being published without names at the narrators' request.

The crucial part of the story wasn't the anonymity of the narrators, but the lack of transparency and the blatant lies they were telling – that they had received not just the first account, but also similar accounts with speed, on the very same day, immediately after the first account was published. However, these accounts had been written, developed and edited beforehand, and had been discussed and debated in a virtual group to devise a strategy for their publication. I only realised this later, over time, from individuals involved in this endeavour – from the statements of these very people, who seemed to have forgotten not to publicly mention such mechanisms!

How strange! Two accounts in less than twenty-four hours! I didn't recognise the second narrator, but she claimed that, years ago, during my research on female genital mutilation/cutting, I had booked a room for her in a guesthouse in Tehran. She alleged that I had forced my way into her room and assaulted her all night.

I racked my brain. I had never booked a room in Tehran for any Kurdish girl, let alone a girl in her early twenties who had been circumcised and traumatised, and who had worked with me on the FGM/C project. I was now certain that this person didn't exist, but she had made a claim that would rivet the audience and inflame their emotions: that Kameel Ahmady, the self-proclaimed champion of the rights of circumcised women and supporter of vulnerable groups, was himself a monster who had dealt a fatal blow to a traumatised woman, a compatriot and a Kurd.

The design of such content was tantamount to character assassination and an attempt to eliminate me from the field of research. That second account was like pouring petrol on the fire, and everyone cursed me with wounded feelings. The number of anonymous accounts increased. The circle of insults expanded from the #KameelAhmady hashtag to my family, and, like all quarrels inside Iran, things descended into swearing and foul language.

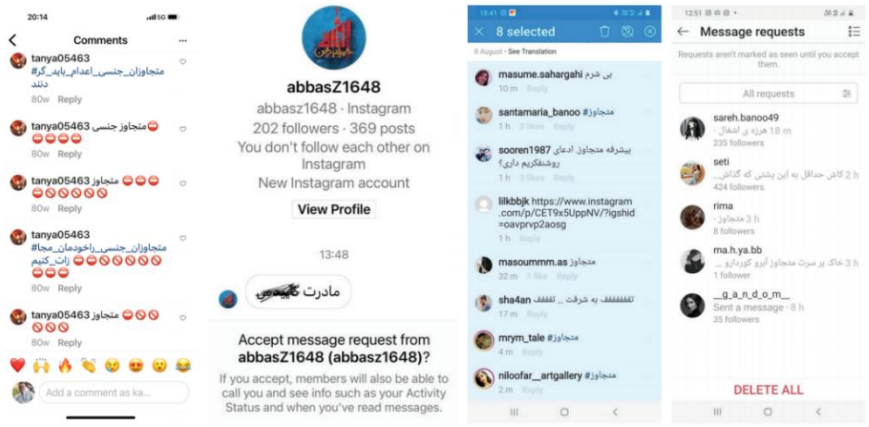


Image 427: Screenshots of some of the abusive language.

Left: Comments on an Instagram post, many using the word 'rapist'.
Middle: Selected Instagram messages, many also using the word 'rapist'.
Right: Instagram message requests.
Left screenshot (Instagram comments):
Key phrase: 'Sexual rapists should be executed.'
Key phrase: 'We ourselves should punish the sexual rapist.'

Middle screenshot (selected Instagram messages) – key phrase: 'rapist'
Right screenshot (Instagram message requests): The screenshot shows numerous message requests from unknown accounts. This suggests a coordinated effort to contact and potentially harass the individual.

Gradually, calls and messages started coming in from some of my close friends and colleagues, asking if these two accounts about me were true. I didn't know how to explain it in a way that they would believe. Some of my friends insisted that it was the work of the Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence, while others blamed my colleagues and rivals. Some criticised the narrator in the second account, while others pointed out the amateurish nature of the narrative. Some people also pointed out that obtaining a hotel or guesthouse room in Iran required documentation. Back then, it was even more difficult, and given the obstacles to accepting young women, the story wasn't realistic.

I also contacted my lawyer and told him everything. I told him that I knew the first narrator, although her account differed greatly from the truth and was presented unfairly and unrealistically. But I didn't know the second narrator at all and had never had such an acquaintance or colleague in my life.

He said he didn't know what was going on or where these things were coming from. I was worried that the Judiciary, in its role as public prosecutor, would seize upon these narratives, making my case even heavier, and that Salavati from the court would arrest me and send me to prison. Even more disastrous, my lawyer didn't rule out this possibility, and I lost what little hope I had.

I had to tell Shafagh about these events, too. It was a very difficult task, and I rehearsed many times how to say it. I felt an odd sense of loneliness. I wanted her to believe me, but I knew she had every right to be heartbroken and angry. She is the daughter of a Kurdish family, with all the parameters of a traditional society that cannot ignore rumours. In a traditional society, honour and reputation are important and losing them can cause trouble for not only the individual, but also a family for a long time.

It was hard, but I told her everything. She was shocked and, after a few minutes of silence, said, 'Kameel, could this be the work of the security forces?'

I said I didn't know. I didn't deny having a sort of initial relationship with the first person. I confessed my mistake and said I shouldn't have initiated it and entered into that relationship, but I didn't accept her accusation, and what happened between us was very different from the account that had come out.

We didn't have much to say that night and were silent together. I wanted to think that the blow that had to be struck had been struck and everything was over, but the publication of a third narrative on the same day, 3 September 2020 (13 Shahrivar 1399), showed that this process was not only continuing, but that every effort was being made to release the narratives in a barrage, one after another, causing more shock and creating a bigger news bomb.

How could Bidarzani's explanation that 'following yesterday's narrative, similar narratives have reached Bidarzani, which are published without the names of the narrators at their request' be correct when in only two days, three narratives about me had come out?

It was as if all these narratives had been prepared in advance and were waiting to be published. Each one completed the other and provided more clues about me. I saw a continuous flow in which all the parts were in meaningful relationship with each other and were arranged in a completely thought-out manner.

The third narrative, in some ways, had differences from the previous two and had a greater impact on readers, creating a sense of empathy in them.

I will fully discuss this narrative, like the others, but its narrator was Ms RM and was related to my brief professional contact with her, about which I had given answers during the interrogations. She followed me throughout my eleven years of working in Iran and tried to destroy me in every way.



Image 428: Objection of some users to Bidarzani's method of storytelling.

> ghaderi.bayan1986: You yourself have had these unprofessional behaviours[. I]t's true that you didn't mention this person's name in your caption, but you quoted words that anyone who read them would know who you meant? And you didn't delete the comments of those who had mentioned his name, while you claim to defend rights, and this itself is the biggest example of trampling on rights [–] someone who is still only accused and not guilty[. Y]ou are dragging them to your emotional court, and becoming the judge and issuing a verdict.
> ghaderi.bayan1986: Anyway, I said my opinion[.] I don't have experience and it's not necessary to have experience to understand an issue. Unfortunately, it's always the habit that when you're in a climate that exists, if your opinion is against that climate and the group, you get labels, now whether it's being a patriarchal man or anything else. I hope this issue becomes clear as soon as possible.

I'd thought she'd had security problems before and been interrogated, but I never imagined she'd stoop to lying to discredit me.

The third narrative gave the previous two the legitimacy they needed and further branded me as a disturbed and abusive person. Later, through several people and evidence from the private investigator I'd employed, I discovered that Ms RM – with whom I had had a private relationship for a

time when I was single – was one of the main orchestrators of the project to accuse me.

Ms RM even contacted some of my colleagues and assistants, asking them to write narratives or testify against me. One of the people who was in the brainstorming group (or 'think tank'), called Bidarzani and later left that group, told me how and by whom the narratives had been collected and edited to align with their intended goals. Ms RM and several of her friends in Iran and abroad played significant roles in pressuring the Sociological Association to revoke my membership. She, a recent student in England who now presents herself in the media as an LGBTQ+ activist, and another person who graduated in sociology and lives in Sweden, played roles in writing correspondence about me.

After this narrative was published, my wife and family's support for me increased. They knew her and knew the history of what had happened between us. My friends said that, with the publication of these narratives, two groups were rubbing their hands with glee: my interrogators and those who were in professional competition with me.

I wasn't feeling well. I spoke to my counsellor in the mornings and sometimes with friends who were kind enough not to leave me alone during those days. After a few days, the atmosphere at home became a little tense. My family knew something suspicious was going on, but they were stuck in the face of the onslaught and questions.

The day before the publication of the second and third narratives, on 5 Shahrivar, 1399 (26 August 2020), my first court hearing was held. In those two days, my reputation had been so targeted that I wasn't particularly afraid of Judge Salavati. I'd also forgotten most of the details of the case, and the day before, Raisian had gone over everything with me until late. In those two or three days, the names of several other well-known people had also been published as 'abusers', and it was the height of the #MeToo movement in Iran. I asked Raisian if these three narratives were likely to have a negative impact on my trial. I'd asked this question before, but I wanted to ask again, hoping he'd say no. Again, he said he hoped they wouldn't, but it was possible. Lawyers don't tend to speak definitively. They always say something that covers two or three possibilities.

I said, 'I haven't slept well these last few nights, and I don't know if I have enough strength to stand up to Salavati or not. My mind isn't coherent, and one wrong answer could change the course of my life.'

Mr Raisian gave me a pill and said with a laugh, 'If you take this, even a ram would collapse. Sleep, so you can be on your feet in the morning. I hope it all goes well.'



Image 429: Some opposing views.

> nahidehsani584: Be a rebellious and defiant feminist, not a fearful person who bows down to patriarchy. Studies have shown that those who have been raped never get better, and then you support the rapist[.] I am truly grateful for your unconscious action.
> arefe2: I think it's more honest to say that you don't have the ability to face the legal consequences. It doesn't matter. We know where we are living. The whole point of this campaign has been that many people have named their abusers even without using their real names and broken this barrier. Your approach is very conservative and in favour of the abusers and if feminism wanted to be conservative it would not get anywhere.'

When I got home, the atmosphere was heavy, and the dread of tomorrow had arrived sooner than tomorrow itself. After putting my son to bed at around 9:30 pm, I studied the case file a little, took notes and swallowed the pill.

I was hiding my mobile under the sofa and the bed mattress so I wouldn't go back to the narratives and comments, but I went back to them until the pill sent me into a deep sleep.

I woke up in a panic at the thought of facing Judge Salavati and the subject of the narratives. I felt nauseated and couldn't eat breakfast. I hugged and kissed Alan before he went to nursery. After the incident of the IRGC Intelligence planting a microphone in Shafagh's mobile phone, she was forced to leave her phone at the security booth whenever she went to court for her work. I also wouldn't take my mobile phone to government centres, prosecutor's offices or courts under any circumstances, so I left my mobile on the table and headed to court.

My First Trial with Iran's Hanging Judge

We arrived at the courthouse on time, but Salavati kept us waiting for ages. Then, after handing over our national IDs and being body-searched, we passed through his bodyguards. My prayers hadn't been answered. Salavati was healthy and cheerful there in front of us, and there was no sign of him having contracted COVID, apart from his bodyguards spraying us with disinfectant and rubbing gel on our heads and faces.

He didn't pay much attention to me, but after a brief greeting with my lawyer, he said, 'Well, Mr Ahmady, your court date has finally arrived. It was postponed for a few sessions because of COVID, but today you have to answer for yourself.' He turned to the prosecutor to read out the indictment. It was that same spurious and ridiculous indictment again, the gist of which I've given below.

Salavati said, 'You must answer my questions on the court papers. Answer each question I ask in writing, briefly and concisely.'

I calmly protested, saying that every defendant has the right to state their reasons and evidence in an oral discussion with the judge, and that persuasion is an important part of the trial. He had taken this right away from me by asking me to give short, written answers to his questions. I had no doubt that the scenario had been written in advance and that these questions and answers would have no bearing on the outcome of the verdict, but I didn't want to lose my chance to defend myself.

در خصوص اتهام کامیل احمدی فرزند کریم با کد ملی [redacted] و شماره شناسنامه [redacted] صادره از نقده ، متولد [redacted] دارای تابعیت مضاعف ایرانی انگلیسی، فاقد سابقه، متأهل، پژوهشگر، آزاد به قید وثیقه حسب کیفرخواست صادره دائر بر: الف- همکاری با دولت متخاصم آمریکا علیه جمهوری اسلامی ایران. ب- نگهداری یک عدد افشانه گاز اشک آور.

پ- نگهداری یک لیتر مشروبات الکلی خارجی .

ت- نگهداری یک عدد شوکر

«گردشکار»

کامیل احمدی یکی از افرادی است که علی الظاهر تحت عنوان کارشناس ارشد جامعه شناسی و مردم شناسی اقداماتی را در راستای ترویج مبانی غربی و تضعیف قوانین و مبانی شرعی در حوزه خانواده، ازدواج و از طرفی لزوم اقتباس از مبانی غربی و اومانیستی انجام می داد تحت رصد و اشراف اطلاعاتی سازمان اطلاعات سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی قرار گرفت .

محمد احمدی معروف به کامیل فرزند کریم متولد شهر نقده از توابع استان آذربایجان غربی، از قومیت کرد و اهل سنت می باشد. او در خانواده ای متمول متولد شده و پدر وی کریم احمدی از افراد و بازاریان مشهور استان بوده و حتی در سطح کشور و خارج از کشور داد و ستدهای مالی و تجاری داشته است ، کامیل احمدی به چندین زبان مسلط می باشد و تجربه زندگی در چندین کشور را دارا می باشد؛ او در این باره می گوید:

Image 430: Indictment.

Image description: The image shows a document, an official indictment, detailing accusations and background information related to Kameel Ahmady:
Regarding the accusations against Kameel Ahmady, son of Karim, with National ID code [xxxxxx] and Identity Card number [xxxxxx], issued from [xxxxxx], born in Naqadeh, holding dual Iranian-English citizenship, previously married, a researcher, released on bail according to the warrant, the charges against him are as follows:
A - Collaborating with the hostile Government of America against the Islamic Republic of Iran.
B - Possession of one can of tear gas.
C - Possession of one litre of foreign alcoholic beverages.
D - Possession of one shocker device.
Background Check
Kameel Ahmady is one of the individuals who, ostensibly under the title of expert and holding a Master's degree in Sociology and Anthropology, is taking actions to promote Western-based social science and anthropology and weaken religious laws and principles in the area of family, marriage and Islamic

> jurisprudence. His actions, based on Western principles and humanism, are monitored and overseen by the Intelligence organisation of the Revolutionary Guards, due to the necessity of confronting the Western cultural appropriation and secularisation of the Islamic Revolution.
> Mohammad Ahmady, known as Kameel Ahmady, son of Karim, was born in the city of Naqadeh in West Azerbaijan province, and is of Kurdish ethnicity and of Sunni faith. He comes from a wealthy family, and his father, Karim Ahmady, was one of the famous and well-known merchants and businessmen in the province and even at the national and international level. Kameel Ahmady is fluent in several languages and has experience living in several countries! Or, as he himself puts it: 'I have experienced life in several countries!'

In response to my protest, Salavati said that I could also explain verbally, but what was written down was important. Then he added that this was the Iranian Court, not like the Hollywood films where doctors or lawyers simply resolve everything with dramatic flair. In a mocking tone, he continued, 'Aren't you a Kurd? A valiant Kurd shouldn't be afraid!'

I had heard that he was also a Kurd from around Kermanshah, and his wife, Parvin Shiri, who had recently passed away, was from Kermanshah herself.

During the court sessions, he mentioned that he had served in the Jaldian garrison of Piranshahr-Naqadeh in the early days of the Revolution and spoke highly of the Kurds in that region, saying they were good people. He even expressed some sympathy for the army, which I found odd, saying that they had come by helicopter during one operation and saved them; otherwise they would have been massacred by the cursed Democratic Peshmerga. Suddenly, he started talking on the phone on his desk, or perhaps he was pretending to talk to someone. He was explaining about an accusation of rape and sexual assault against someone. He said, 'Haji, I sent you this case. This man is a university professor and a lawyer, from Kermanshah. Yes. Yes . . . I know him. He took sixteen female students to his room for dissertations and consultations and then raped them . . . This is an immoral case. It carries a Ḥadd punishment. Yes, sixteen rapes in his file.'

My head swam. I looked at my lawyer, who was analysing the situation with surprise, and the bearded representative of the prosecutor had a grimy smile on his face. His mocking behaviour made me even more suspicious; was this a staged call to frighten me? I worried again: 'God, I came to court on a political charge. Could they imprison me this time on a charge of sexual harassment? What will become of me?' I wondered what it could mean to talk about a university professor with sixteen charges of sexual harassment in the middle of my court session. After we came out, I asked my lawyer, and he didn't know what it meant, either. We were both shocked.

After this charade, my court session began, and Salavati, like Qana'atkar, the interrogator in Evin Prison, asked about female genital mutilation/cutting and listened carefully to my explanations, which gave me a little hope that perhaps a fair verdict awaited me. The next questions were very short. I am sure he paid no attention to my oral answers and just said quickly, 'Write. Write. Hurry up. It's getting late!' And when I wrote, he said, 'Don't write too long.'

Of course, my lawyer had warned me earlier that I should write short answers, because the next questions would come from the long answers, and that might not be in my favour.

Abolqasem Salavati (Persian: ابوالقاسم صلواتی) (born 16 July 1967)[1] is an Iranian judge and former head of the 15th branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran, Iran. In recent years, he had been the judge of numerous controversial cases.[2] He has been sanctioned by the United States and the European Union.

He is one of the judges whom human rights organizations have highlighted as being the instruments of a crackdown on journalists and political activists under the influence of Iran's intelligence and security apparatus. Besides Salavati, the other revolutionary court judges include Mohammad Moghiseh, former justices Yahya Pirabbasi and Hassan Zare Dehnavi (known as judge Haddad), judge of Court of Media, Bijan Ghasemzadeh, and appeal judges Hassan Babaee, Ahmad Zargar and Qazi Sadat. These judges are accused of overseeing miscarriages of justice in trials in which journalists, lawyers, political activists, and members of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities have been condemned to lengthy prison terms, lashes, and even execution.[3][4][5][6][7][8]

Abolqasem Salavati



Head of the 15th branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court

Incumbent

Image 431: Salavati on Wikipedia.

His most important questions were about the funding of the study on female genital mutilation/cutting and the reason for the child-marriage project, and he went through the same process that the interrogator and investigator had gone through with me. When he got to the subject of child marriage, even the tone of his voice changed, and he said angrily, 'You

lobbied the Members of Parliament to raise the age of marriage. Did you think we didn't have intelligence on you? You and your colleagues have been under surveillance all this time. We said maybe you would turn away from the wrong path, but we saw that your relationships and goals were much bigger than that, and you intended to strike at the regime and carry out a soft overthrow. Do you know how many infiltrators I have tried in my life? You're all cut from the same cloth and act in the same way.'

Then he began to name other individuals and cases: 'Do you think your case is any different from Nazanin Zaghari, who, under the guise of training journalists, was actually training young people for your country, Britain? Do you think Ms Zaghari's situation is any better than Siamak Namazi and his father, who, through espionage and medicine sanctions, have made our lives a misery? They've made such a song and dance about the environmentalists, and no one says how they sold our nuclear sites and information. You're all tarred with the same brush and funded by the same source and school of thought.'

He spoke incessantly, boasting about how he was giving all traitors what we deserved! It was more like a compulsory briefing of charges than a trial, and I wasn't allowed to speak.

He turned away from me angrily and said to Raisian, 'Why do they say Salavati is the "hanging judge"? Why do they give me these labels? In my years as a judge, hundreds and hundreds of cases have passed through my hands. How many of them have resulted in death sentences, that the media and your friends have turned me into the "hanging judge" and opened a Wikipedia page for me? Why don't you talk about the cases where I acquitted people? Why don't you talk about those who benefited from Islamic clemency?'

He turned back to me and said, 'What has this human-rights agenda that you've brought from abroad, this women's-rights agenda that you talk about, achieved? Look at this saga and these stories that are now unfolding! This anthropologist who claims to have shown moderation in his work! Am I just the "hanging judge"? No. I'm not just the "hanging judge"!'

If a psychiatrist had been sitting in the courtroom instead of me, they would have been better able to analyse how much damage the verdicts Salavati had handed down had done to his own mind and soul.

From his words, I was certain that their only legal sticking point was that I had received funding from the NGO, HIFOS, although this objection

was not even lawful, as collaboration with this organisation had only been criminalised long after my involvement. Of course, they didn't even need a legal sticking point. They behaved as they pleased. I was caught in a situation in which the interrogator, the investigator, the judge – in short, everyone involved – said that I had entered Iran with a predetermined and specific goal and a mission to bring about changes. My latest missions were apparently to promote homosexuality and the disintegration of Iran, which I had addressed in the form of two research projects.

On the counter of his desk, Salavati had all my research. All the research and documents in my file had been printed in colour, amounting to four thick files and a number of books, pamphlets and articles.

Salavati was intelligent and had a good grasp of my case. His general knowledge was also good, and I saw firsthand how he tried to corner the accused with flimsy reasoning. That day's session lasted three hours, and he didn't allow me much opportunity to speak. He just kept mocking me and making sarcastic remarks. Regarding female genital mutilation/cutting, although he couldn't defend it, he stated bluntly, 'What business is it of yours if people circumcise their daughters according to their traditions?' And when I spoke about child marriage, it was as if my interrogator was Seyyed, or the interrogator-researcher Sina Kalhor: 'What business is it of yours to enter into the sexual and private sphere of individuals regarding when they marry? The religious authorities and legislators have determined the child's best interests. What concern is it of yours when a parent marries off their child? A parent's joy is to see their child go to their marital home.'

Of course, he was right about this part: religious pronouncements, in collusion with the legal structure, had legitimised child marriage, and the dominant view of families and society was that this harm was a positive and normal phenomenon.

Then, with even more anger, he said, 'Why did you go for topics such as cohabitation and homosexuals[1] that are a disgrace to our society? No religion has a positive approach to these behaviours, and in the Quran, we even have a *surah* condemning this issue. At least out of respect for the Quran and the Ahl al-Bayt, you shouldn't have gone for these topics!'

1 As I mentioned earlier all the interrogators, investigators and judges used the term 'homosexual' instead of LGBTQ+.

The gist of what he was saying was that I should have done the same thing that the religious community and the Government had done in the years after the Iranian Revolution: ignored these individuals. He didn't let me speak and say that the research for *The Forbidden Tale* about LGBTQ+ individuals wasn't aimed at confirming, denying or promoting anything. He insisted that the very basis of this research was not befitting an Islamic society in Iran and that research of this kind would become the basis for periodic reports by the UN rapporteur and turn into a tool for condemning and criticising Iran. Our views on the topics were different; in Salavati's mind, ideology decided, and he didn't understand that I mainly approached some of the problems in Iranian society from an anthropological perspective.

Basically, that trial was just for appearances, and although my lawyer and I were fighting hopefully, the reality was that the judge wasn't there to listen to our defence. He claimed that the United Nations represented America and said, 'In this organisation, whoever spends more money has more influence.' Of course, I agreed with this part of his view; the influence and dominance of a few Western countries in the United Nations and their possession of the right to veto is a clear and undeniable discrimination, but I wasn't a representative of the United Nations, nor was I conducting research for them.

That day, I was mostly a listener, and the judge mocked my occasional and short answers. Did this behaviour not have a psychological effect on me and prevent me from defending myself well? Of course it did. I gradually realised that this method was his tactic for lowering the defendant's confidence.

He usually began by raising a general issue and then moved on to the matter concerning me, employing a reverse-engineering approach, much like an interrogator. Once he had said everything he wanted to, he announced, 'That's enough for today. I have several court sessions for economic offenders, and this session is over, but I will schedule another session soon.'

Salavati's conduct toward me in court amounted to white torture.

During the session, his office manager twice informed him, 'You have a court session in the assembly hall, and the broadcasting services are already set up.' It was planned that, after my court session, the defendants in the Sarmayeh Bank case would be tried in the grand hall of the

Revolutionary Court. Finally, the inmates of Ward 4 of Evin Prison would have their day in court.

Salavati left, and my lawyer and I came outside. I asked Mr Raisian for his opinion on the session, and he said that, as he had suspected, the case was heading toward Article 508 and the charge of collaborating with hostile governments. The offences of possessing alcohol and tear gas had also been added because, if you have one conviction, naturally a third of it is served, but adding those three items to the conviction meant I would be deprived of acquittal and having my prison time shortened. In regard to the sexual accusations, he suggested that Salavati intended to give us a 'code', but everything was just a possibility, and we had no choice but to wait.

Tales that Never Ended!

When I returned home, my family were somewhat relieved that I hadn't been sent to prison again. I talked a little about the atmosphere in court, but the subject was soon forgotten.

The publication of a fourth account on the Bidarzani page the following day worsened my mental state. This account concerned a student who had wanted to consult me about choosing FGM/C as her doctoral thesis topic. She claimed that I had drawn pictures of female genitals on the breakfast table in the presence of her friend and asked her, without preamble, what hers looked like. Although the narrator had been kind enough to write that this was not rape, the comments proceeded with the same words and hashtags as before.

In those days, any account that was published, regardless of its nature, was called 'rape', and even sexual and verbal assault and harassment were addressed and reprimanded with the same title. There was not even relative knowledge about this, and it seemed that the groups and pages that dealt with these issues didn't mind if all the individuals accused in their accounts were known by the name 'rapist'. The language of these accounts showed that, not only was there a lack of knowledge in this area, but bias was used to destroy individuals, and they always tried to make the most of this language without worrying about accuracy.



Image 432: Comments from a former colleague.

> 'Before you get angry, let me say that my intention is not that if someone hasn't harassed me or made a suggestion, he can't be like that with others. Me and my group worked with Mr Ahmady several times over the course of two years, doing interviews and video conversations. Throughout this time he was in contact with me and my colleagues for his work, but not even once did he ask to see me, nor did he speak intimately and familiarly in his phone conversations, nor did he invite me to a coffee shop or for a drive. I emphasise that my intention is not that if someone doesn't want to be in a relationship with me, he won't want to be with others, either, but the fact that someone wrote that in our first meeting, even in the presence of another lady, he drew a picture of a vagina and asked what yours looks like, is a bit strange, because even the most inexperienced rapists probably don't make themselves so obvious in the first meeting.'

Everything proceeded in an unprofessional and subjective manner. As a friend, an anthropologist, said, although violence and harassment are to some extent relative and cultural concepts, it's not as if anyone can accuse others at will without stating the background to the matter. These concepts also have definitions, and it's not possible to judge subjectively based on fragmented narratives. But in this arena, it was stated, and in the emotional

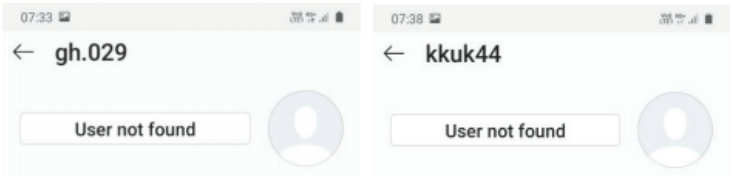


Image 433: Fake trolling accounts

and passionate atmosphere that was created and constantly amplified, the quality of the narratives was determined not by logical assessment, documentation or reason, but by the level of emotion and the ability of the story or the storyteller to evoke pity and empathy.

I will publish some of the comments later, so you can see how anonymous accounts targeted my identity and carried out their missions to discredit me successfully. Some of these accounts didn't even have followers and were deactivated after completing their missions. What was happening was not only completely unethical, but also it reduced the #MeToo movement to personal score-settling. How many genuine voices were lost in that clamour?

However, their process did influence some, and without investigation or thought, they assumed these accusations were proven. In those few days, I had dozens of messages on Instagram and Twitter that bombarded me with abuse. They threatened me, my wife and even my four-year-old child, writing, 'We'll come to Kurdistan and cut off your head!'[1]

The psychological attacks took their toll, and I was worried about the threats against my family. The instigators of all these events are now known to me, and I would like them to answer how they could trample on their consciences to such an extent and cause such harm to my life and the lives of those around me that it will be hard to forget. These individuals, including an Iranian sociologist residing in Malmö, Sweden[2] and their

1 I constantly reported these instances to Twitter and Instagram, and a month or two later I received a message stating that some of these accounts had violated their rules, but the damage had already been done. Besides, they couldn't do anything about accounts that were anonymous and deactivated.

2 Demonising those who have erred is a defence mechanism some people use to escape the reality of their own behaviours. One can point to an explanation of the behaviours and actions of some attackers as them using this psychological mechanism to project their own behaviours, which I will examine in future writings. This mechanism is a way to exonerate oneself after committing a reprehensible act, whereby the individual judges

gang, continued in the same vein and were only concerned with increasing the number of narratives and the social outrage. Of course, I will discuss the ethical and virtuous lives of some of these individuals later.

Apart from Shafagh and a few close friends, I didn't speak to anyone, and it seemed that some of those around me had also believed these narratives and distanced themselves from me. My heart was in turmoil, and I felt awful. Most of my friends told me to respond to each and every narrative and reaction, but I insisted on remaining silent until the matter became clearer. With all my care, however, I made a mistake: I spoke to a lawyer who was a friend of a close acquaintance. Before I was imprisoned, he was supposed to take on my case if any problems arose, but in my absence, my family had chosen Raisian.

Of course, given Mr Raisian's background and level of work, he was a more appropriate choice in my situation. When I contacted him and asked for legal advice, I didn't know that he was the lawyer for some of the women in the KA case and involved in the #Me Too movement in Iran, which, of course, brought him no small amount of fame. In his office, right behind him, I saw a sign that I don't think had been there before – or I hadn't noticed it. The sign read, 'I am a feminist.' While I didn't understand why someone would put up a sign in their office stating what their views were, it didn't take long for me to realise that I wasn't going to get impartial

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others more harshly for the same slip-up. Researchers call this method 'moral disengagement', or as we say in Farsi, 'the pot calling the kettle black'.

One vivid example is the Iranian sociologist based in Malmö, Sweden, who has also conducted research on the sexual harassment of students by university professors. I and some of my colleagues have in our possession documents and correspondence of his with at least three young women, one of whom was married, which show that this sociologist and social assessor sexually abused his research subjects and invited almost all of them to travel and meet him in Turkey. Meanwhile, his Telegram channel is full of material fighting, prohibiting and condemning violence against children and women, and numerous articles have been written by him lamenting the rights of abused women and victims of sexual harassment, as well as defending children's rights. He played an influential and guiding role with some of the narrators in the accusations against me. It is worth mentioning here the psychological principle of projection, whereby one throws a spotlight on another to avoid being seen oneself. As another example, researchers point to a university director who was particularly hard on applicants who had lied about their qualifications, only for it to come out that he himself had grossly exaggerated his own qualifications. Other examples include politicians who emphasise strictness toward certain types of crime, while being involved in those crimes themselves.

advice. I was there, though, and I had to say something. He knew about the case, and it was quite clear that he was taking a stance against me.

He stated very plainly that he always sided with the person claiming to have been harmed and who was the victim. This in itself was a remarkable claim, especially coming from a lawyer, although it was one echoed by many ordinary people at the time. No logic allows us to defend someone simply because they make a claim and present themselves as a victim. Our conversation ended quickly, and we said our goodbyes. Like the judge, the judiciary and those running the #MeToo cases in Iran, he had already made up his mind and passed his verdict.

The atmosphere in the house had become oppressive, so much so that Kani came from Mahabad to stay with me and Shafagh for a few days to offer psychological support. I suggested we go on a trip to clear our heads. I wasn't really in the mood for travelling, but we hit the road, unsure where we were going. Seeing the sign for Alamut Castle, I suggested, 'Shall we go to Alamut?', and when they agreed, I headed toward the Qazvin motorway.

I felt ashamed and humiliated, like I was a disgrace to my family. I would glance at Kani in the car mirror, but whenever we made eye contact I would look away. I didn't look at Shafagh, and we didn't even speak. We all only talked to Alan, and he was the only one who held the attentions of all three of us. The rest of the time, Shafagh and Kani would talk to each other, and I felt truly alone. I was isolated in that group, and I realised the true and fundamental power of shame, especially in its traditional context – a terrifying weapon that was tormenting me.

During my adolescence, I had read many stories about Hassan-i Sabbah and had always wanted to see Alamut Castle. It wasn't a good time for touring historical sites, but I needed to get away from Tehran. As we passed through mountainous villages, the internet would cut out in places, and I thought how good it would be if cyberspace didn't exist. Until just a few years ago, we had had such a peaceful life, and there was so much more trust and affection than there is now. For all its positive features, cyberspace is ruthless and brutally inhumane. Although I myself had often used this desirable tool, at that moment I only saw its negative aspects. When we were somewhere with internet access, Shafagh and Kani would anxiously check Instagram. Seeing this was more painful for me than the ordeal I was going through myself. I was powerless to soothe their worries,

and I had unwittingly and innocently become the cause of a pain that was gnawing away at them.

I didn't know what to do, and, strangely, everyone I consulted had a different opinion. One person said, 'Keep quiet.' Another said, 'Your silence means you accept the accusations.' Yet another said, 'Silence is a good strategy for now. It's pointless talking in these circumstances.' I was in a battlefield, being shot at, but I didn't know who the enemy was or where the attack was coming from.

Of the four accounts that had been published, I recognised three of the women. Two of them had written accounts that were untrue or selective, but I didn't deny having had a relationship with them. I didn't recognise the other woman at all, and I'd almost figured out that everything stemmed from a single source. At the time, however, I didn't know where that source led, how many people were behind the affair, or what their objective was.

Our trip finished, but my state had worsened. Under the forty-degree sunshine, I felt a strange coldness. Everything had turned cold, even my wife's words and gaze. Toward the end of the trip, I noticed Shafagh speaking to her family on the phone. Her elder brother had been severely incited by our mutual friends. People who knew the details of my private life, and whose lifestyles I knew inside out, had now become staunch defenders of women's rights and were raining down judgement on me. The rest of the story concerned my wife and me, and I didn't know what right others, like them, had to comment on and judge my private life.

Part of this mistreatment stemmed from a lack of sufficient understanding of our marital relationship, its customs, and its dos and don'ts. My wife's mental state was fragile, and she was constantly under pressure from her brother. After my meeting with that feminist solicitor and the furore caused by our Kermanshahi friends, the level of tension was rising in the house. I suggested to Shafagh that she go to her father's house for a while to improve her mental state. The second court hearing was also approaching, and we still suspected that all these events were connected, so my suggestion was that we sit down calmly and think about a solution.

I said to Shafagh, 'I can't imagine how I would manage and tolerate this situation if I were in your place. I know how hard it is, and I'm terribly sorry for what's happened, but don't let this situation drive you toward being irrational and unreasonable, and don't rush into anything. You're

not that kind of person, but I can see people in your family, rightly or wrongly, making this situation more critical.'

It was decided that she would go to her father's house in Tehran for a short time, and her sister would come to her. I thought it was a good idea, and I could visit her and my son every day. This departure, however, felt like a sulk, and our relationship was cut off for a short time. My loneliness grew.

My media advisor and several other friends suggested that I speak in a video message. They believed that a video had more impact than a written text, and there was a possibility that ill-wishers and rabble-rousers would extract something from a written text and use it against me. As always, I chose to write, and, of course, the consequences were significant. I prepared a statement that my solicitor, my media advisor and several close friends read before it was published.

I wasn't clear on all aspects of this affair, and with the sword of Judge Salavati's court and the Revolutionary Guard hanging over me, I faced many restrictions and sensitivities in writing a statement. I really couldn't express myself fully, and I couldn't even mention the important fact that three accounts about me had been published just two days before the start of my first trial. Nevertheless, I wrote my statement with feeling, honour and conscience, as follows:

> I think we can all agree, more or less, that social media works wonders. This miracle of the new millennium is often the only available, and sometimes effective, way for many of the denied, forgotten, and oppressed to be seen and heard. I imagine many of you, my friends and supporters, have seen various names published by groups and pages – some well-known, some newly established – as alleged perpetrators. You've probably seen my name mentioned too, mainly on one particular page. I know it's been a difficult time, especially for those who have always been kind to me and my work, some of which deals with social harms. Why is it that this researcher is suddenly seen, not in the trenches alongside the women and disadvantaged groups he has worked and paid dearly for over the years, but in a different position, actually at odds with his research and articles?

Dear friends, even in the most unfair courts, the plaintiff's identity is known, and the accused is allowed to speak and defend himself before a verdict is issued and the crime is attributed to him. What kind of destructive judgement is it when some people accuse someone of committing assault, using hearsay and behavioural analysis, in the form of distorted accounts and selective details, and others confirm and spread it without any evidence? I have been a conduit for the voices of vulnerable groups, whose basic rights have been ignored by patriarchal society, through my love and belief in my work and in not-so-easy circumstances because of years of research on harmful and taboo traditions in the field. Part of my aim has been to ensure that my work reflects the hidden voice of these groups, and I am proud that this has been achieved to some extent. Naturally, I will fully defend the positive aspects of such a movement, which is to defend this very target community, because the least it achieves is raising awareness and social security, and perhaps even changing men's behaviour and leading to further reform.

And another key point: we are all human, and we all make mistakes. The often opaque and undefined human relationships in this society, which is also very complex, cannot and should not absolve either women or men of responsibility for our choices, behaviours, and mistakes.

Looking back now, I can fairly criticise myself for sometimes, due to a lack of awareness of the requirements of relationships within this culture, failing to properly observe the hierarchies of power and dominance at work, and for not considering social conventions because of my relaxed behaviour and different approach to relationships. I may have inadvertently created the conditions for mistakes to occur, and perhaps offended some people, for which I have the courage to apologise to all of them. Here and now, I apologise to anyone who has been offended by me for any reason, even unintentionally or inadvertently! And in the same vein, I apologise to all those who have been offended by reading these accounts, especially my family and friends who stood by me empathetically and didn't judge me.

> However, my point concerns potential offence, and causing offence, whether legally, inherently or linguistically, is profoundly different from acts of assault, aggression, intentional harassment, or non-consensual relationships. Here, I must emphatically and resolutely state that I am not an assailant or aggressor, and I strongly disavow these accusations, which have been presented in this way for whatever reason or intention. At the same time, I reserve the right to bring legal action. To all those who have judged me, and to shed light on the other side of the revelations on social media and to reduce the harm caused, and to reassure all those who have been kind to me but whose kindness has been clouded by doubt due to the atmosphere and the wave created, I propose and invite the following mechanism: firstly, I will welcome legal action taken against me in court by anyone who has a claim. Secondly, even if there are doubts about the realisation of justice in the legal courts, as a member of civil society, I propose the formation of a jury of prominent civil activists, and I will willingly commit myself to being accountable to it. Dear friends, let us remember that I, like many other men, am a victim of aspects of patriarchal culture. In these bitter and difficult moments, amidst an atmosphere that was sometimes intensely emotional and even unkind, I learned a great deal. Although I know it will not be a short process, I will certainly turn this into an opportunity to continue learning more about social relations and to raise my level of knowledge and awareness regarding such important issues.
> Yours sincerely,
> Kameel Ahmady
> 2nd September 2020 (12 Shahrivar 1399)

In this statement, I exonerated myself from the accusations made in the narratives. However, when the statement came out, to my utter surprise, some of the so-called virtual feminist activists – in reality, the ringleaders – excerpted parts of it and said that Kameel Ahmady had admitted to being a harasser. Some others ridiculed me, and still others swore at me, saying that I was wrong to talk about cultural differences and relaxed behaviour.

It was as if I'd handed new ammunition to those already looking for an excuse to shoot me down. They launched another wave of attacks, implying to the public that living in Europe and holding different views gave me licence to do whatever I pleased. Their interpretation of my statements was incredibly unfair. It was as if they'd shut up shop on conscience and had no ear for listening.

The Intelligence arm of the Revolutionary Guard and their cronies were quick to get involved, rushing out a headline on the *Mashregh News* website and the *Reyhaneh* website, affiliated with the women's section of the Supreme Leader's office: 'Opponent of Child Marriage Confesses to Sexual Assault.'

They say even in war there are rules, but in this virtual onslaught, no ethical or legal principles held sway.


مشرق

خانه | سیاست | ورزش | تحولات سرزمین‌های اشغالی | جهان | شبکه‌های اجتماعی | دفاع و امنیت | جهاد و مقاومت | فرهنگ و هنر

کد خبر 1114028 تاریخ انتشار: ۱۳ شهریور ۱۳۹۹ - ۲۳:۰۰ ۱۳ نظر چاپ

جامعه

مخالف کودک همسری، تجاوز جنسی‌اش را تایید کرد

به گزارش مشرق، کانال تلگرامی درباره زنان واکنش کامیل احمدی به روایت های تجاوزش به پژوهشگران و فعالین حوزه زنان: «همه اشتباه می‌کنیم» را منتشر کرد:

کامیل احمدی جنتلمن تحصیلکرده انگلیس، فعال سینه سوخته حوزه کودک و زنان در واکنش به 10 روایت از تجاوزش به پژوهش گران و فعالین حوزه زنان با تایید ضمنی روایت ها در کمال نایسی و خونسردی گفت: «همه اشتباه می‌کنیم»

قیمت

- قیمت طلا و سکه امروز ۱۷ آبان
- خبر مهم برای خریداران ربع سکه ۱۴۰۳
- سقوط آزاد یورو
- سر به زیری طلای جهانی با افزایش دلار بعد از انتخابات آمریکا
- افزایش قیمت نفت پس از انتخابات آمریکا
- قیمت پژو پارس در بازار +جدول
- قیمت کوییک کارکرده +جدول
- قیمت تولیدات سایپا امروز ۱۶ آبان +جدول
- قیمت تولیدات ایران‌خودرو امروز ۱۶آبان+جدول

Image 434: Headline of the *Mashregh* media outlet affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence.

'Opponent of Child Marriage Confesses to Sexual Assault
'According to *Mashregh News*, a Telegram channel about women has confirmed Kameel Ahmady's reaction to the narratives of sexual assault against researchers and activists in the field of women: "Everyone is mistaken."

'Kameel Ahmady, a gentleman educated in England, an ardent activist in the field of children and women, in reaction to ten narratives of sexual assault against researchers and activists in the field of women, while confirming the narratives, said with complete naivety and insensitivity: "Everyone is mistaken."'

Chapter Twenty-Six: Discrimination and Crossing the Boundaries of Ethics and Professional Mission

The hasty and unprofessional response of the Iranian Sociological Association was even stranger than the behaviours of my accusers. This Association, which concerns itself with enlightening society, seeing its mission as raising public awareness and the social consciousness, and promoting the development and institutionalisation of critique and analysis of social issues instead of judgement, behaved far worse and more unprofessionally than ordinary people who make no such claims, but who, when they read something, process it and ask logical questions about it. In relation to the narratives surrounding me, an institution that claims to nurture the country's current and future elites and its intellectuals acted in an subjective, conservative manner, influenced by feminist thinking and the media. It even went further, exhibiting illogical and unsubstantiated judgements. An institution whose motto had been that victims should not be treated like suspects or criminals, and which had discussed the process of exclusion and critiqued the mechanisms that create it, acted contrarily. It also revealed that the pragmatic approach, which has always been linked to the sociology it claimed to espouse, was only evident in its rhetoric, not in its confrontation of issues occurring in the real world and the social landscape of Iranian society.

In the aftermath of my case, with the protest movements of 1398 (2019) and more recently in 1401 (2022) in Iranian society, the passive, conservative and frankly unpragmatic approach of the Iranian Sociological Association was once again exposed, given how it appeared and acted during those events. Furthermore, it became clear that the structure of this

association, which includes many specialist working groups as its subsidiaries, is, except for select parts, not overseen and managed by ethical and committed sociologists. It is largely for show and passive, rather than functional as it has always claimed.

Although we all know that within the Association the faint and meagre voices of dissenting and critical members are rarely heard and its undemocratic structure has always been criticised and protested by longstanding members, particularly the younger ones, to what extent can an institution that claims to nurture elites and intellectuals act independently yet be influenced by radical left-wing, conservative and even security-minded thinking? With what credibility and confidence, and with what vision, have most members of such an association relied on their positions and statuses, while remaining silent about the injustices before their eyes?

Becoming the Scapegoat

The pressure increased from within and without, and a female Iranian reporter from the *New York Times* sought to write a report on the narratives that had been published about me. This newspaper, which considers itself one of the leading supporters of the #MeToo movement in the world, had published a report about an Iranian artist involved in the movement, and the female reporter, who is strangely disliked by some Iranians, intended to write a report about me as well. She, who is accused of holding positions close to the Government and being in contact with NIAC,[1] tried to write a report about these events.



Image 435: Logo of the Iranian Sociological Association.

1 The National Iranian-American Council, often abbreviated to NIAC, is a non-profit advocacy organisation based in Washington, DC.

I had only recently joined the Sociological Association – in 1398 (2019) – and a year later I was one of the five members of the Childhood Sociology Group. Later, I briefly served as the secretary of this group, but, overall, we weren't very active. My presence was mainly due to an acquaintance; my shared language, intellectual and professional common ground had brought Dr Payam Roshanfekr and I closer, and I trusted him. My relationship with the Association was neither bad nor good, and in truth I didn't know many people.

I held no managerial position nor organisational role within the Association. After my time in prison, I was simply pleased to be working in the field of child labour, and my efforts to steer clear of sensitive issues had a formal definition within the Association.

Before the statement was released, I spoke twice on the phone with a fellow Kurd who had recently joined the board of directors. I couldn't believe that the Association would later falsely claim in their statement that these calls were formal and that they had 'spoken to Mr Ahmady about the decision and cancellation of his membership during the drafting of the statement'. All this, when I knew nothing about their actions in advance, and when, as the onslaught of criticism intensified, a virtual meeting was held for the Childhood Sociology Group at my suggestion, a recording of which exists. In that short meeting, I resigned from the group's secretariat and said it would be better for Dr Alireza Kermani, who had held the secretariat while I was in prison, to continue his work. Three members of the group believed that I should wait and not rush to resign from my position, but I said it was better that I had no position in the Association until clarification of the events that had befallen me. We approved all the words and decisions of this meeting in the form of a Minutes of Meeting, and the documents are also available. I was unaware that this voluntary resignation from the secretariat paved the way for the cancellation of my membership in the Association. I didn't know that other things were happening behind the scenes of the Association and that a completely undemocratic and illegal decision would be made on this issue.

It later became clear that several people, including Ms RM and several expatriates, had pressured the Association to issue a statement against me. They even focused on my awards, saying that all of these, especially the Peace Foundation award I received at George Washington University, should be taken back and that the Sociological Association and the

Association for the Protection of Children's Rights should expel me in written letters. The group that wanted to remove me Tweeted that organisations that had worked with Kameel Ahmady should take a stand against him. They did not stop at this, but put pressure on these centres to take public stances. Apparently, a group had been organised and was proceeding with a plan. They were learning from the experiences of the global #MeToo movement, and some of them had unfair reasons for removing certain people, including me.

A few days after my arrest, IRCG Intelligence agents went to the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights, showed my arrest warrant and, on the pretext of my joint work with this association on child waste-pickers, seized some documents of their cases, along with several mobile phones of employees.

Of course, my membership of this society had lapsed some time ago, and, due to the sensitivity surrounding me, I had had no contact with them whatsoever. However, under pressure from the group, the society issued a statement to this effect:

> Following the research on Childhood Yawn, we have [had] no contact with Mr Kameel Ahmady. He is not present in the aforementioned society due to violations of children's-rights laws, and we, in unison with the movement that has begun in this society, request that if anyone has a complaint against anyone in the society and its members, they should report it.

The statement was written so vaguely that if someone didn't know the story, they would imagine I had trampled on children's rights and abused them! Earlier in this autobiography, I mentioned that disagreements and misunderstandings had arisen during Childhood Yawn project. Three people present in the office and the research team of this society were waiting for revenge, and, in the form of this unprofessional and unethical statement, they settled accounts with me.

The saga continued. After the publication of the ambiguous statement by the Society for the Protection of Children's Rights, it was the turn of the Sociological Association to rid itself of the potential controversies arising from my presence, and of course, in the present commotion, to adopt a progressive and forward-thinking pose!

On the advice of my friends, I recorded all my telephone calls in those days, and when I once called Dr Roshanfekr for advice, I recorded and kept the entire twenty-six minutes of our conversation. One day before the Association issued its statement, he called me and took the username and password for the Childhood Sociology Group's Instagram page. As a member of the board of directors of the Association, he falsely testified that, before the statement was issued, he had spoken to me by telephone officially and on behalf of the Association and asked for an explanation, which meant that I was fully aware and involved in the process! He knew about the statement because he was both one of the voters for it and one of its writers. He even conveyed my call to the board of directors in a different way, and, further on, the Association's statement claimed that 'Kameel Ahmady was aware of the publication of the statement' – that there had been both official contact with the Association and that they had spoken to me.

His deceitful and hypocritical behaviour was more painful than the treatment by others, because, based on his lie, Seyyed Hussein Serajzadeh, then-head of the Sociological Association, in response to protests by some of the Association's members to the unfair vote regarding the cancellation of my membership, said:

> In a three-week investigation, which included talking to the accused and gathering information from those claiming to have been harmed, we came to the conclusion that forms of sexual harassment had occurred in professional research relationships and a kind of abuse of research-management power and research position and credibility in this matter. For this reason, we came to the conclusion that the membership of that person in the Association should be suspended, and in a way cancelled, so that the matter could be dealt with in official channels.
>
> Of course, this decision was made after reports of abuse of power or the credibility of academic-research positions for sexual gain. Clearly, the level and extent of this abuse require more thorough investigation and examination.

Why did this very association, which took such positions after the announcement of unconfirmed accusations against me on social media, not issue a statement when security forces arrested and imprisoned me for conducting realistic research? Why did they write a statement that only twenty-one people signed and then hide it away in a drawer? Why was my membership revoked without allowing me to defend myself and speak about the accusations? With this hasty decision, they not only called into question their own academic prestige, but also created a sense of insecurity and lack of support among their colleagues and, indeed, prospective colleagues.

Defendants in some of the most corrupt courts in the world have the opportunity to speak, but I did not even have the opportunity to speak before a so-called scientific, civil and independent association, and, worse, they falsely claimed to have been in contact with me. Serajzadeh said in an interview with Etemad newspaper, 'The Association issued a statement about the accused after a three-week process.' This process took place hastily and without my knowledge.

Dr Ahmad Bokharaei, the director of two groups in the Iranian Sociological Association, namely the Social Issues and Harms Group and the Philosophy of Social Sciences Group, said in protest against the vote by the Sociological Association's board of directors, 'This vote was issued in a much shorter time than three weeks and hastily, but Serajzadeh again, in an interview with Etemad newspaper, called the process of issuing it three weeks and claims to have spoken with the accused and the plaintiffs and seen the evidence.' Bokharaei wrote the following in a letter of protest to the Association, which he also published on his website.[1]

1 Bokharaei, A. (2021) Reflection; For Kameel Ahmady [Blog post], 12 February. Available at: https://blog.dr-bokharaei.com/2021/02/blog-post_10.html (Accessed: 5 September 2022).



درنگ | برای کامیل احمدی

۲۰ شهریور ۹۹* بود که با اطلاعیه‌ی انجمن جامعه‌شناسی ایران در خصوص لغو* عضویت آقای کامیل احمدی، با تعجب مواجه شدیم. ایشان را قبل از آن ندیده بودم. این ابهام در حرکت سریع هیأت مدیره‌ی انجمن جامعه‌شناسی، چند مدیر و من که مدیر دو گروه علمی ـ تخصصی در انجمن هستیم را به کنکاش واداشت. طی دو روز گفت‌وگو با اکثر اعضای هیأت مدیره متوجه شدیم که «همه‌ی» مستندات انجمن، عمدتاً عبارت از چند پست در فضای مجازی بوده است. قصد خاک‌پاشیدن روی تعدیاتی که مردان علیه زنان داشته‌اند نیست اما این‌جا دقت ویژه‌ای می‌طلبد!

متأسفانه طی کم‌تر از دو هفته که پست‌های مربوطه در فضای مجازی منتشر شده بود تا زمان تصمیم‌گیری، هیأت مدیره در یک حرکت عجولانه و هیجانی و بدون مشورت با مدیران گروه‌ها و حتی بدون مشورت با مدیر گروه جامعه‌شناسی کودکی (که آقای کامیل احمدی دبیر مستعفی آن گروه بود) تصمیم به لغو عضویت ایشان گرفتند که همان زمان پس از اطلاع از مبانی و مستندات سست، به اعضای هیأت مدیره گفتم که این تصمیم، هم غیر قانونی و هم غیر حرفه‌ای و هم غیر اخلاقی است زیرا با توجه به شایعاتی که نظام‌مند طی چند روز به طور فشرده و ظاهراً سازمان‌دهی‌شده از سوی چند زن به صورت گم‌نام در فضای مجازی مطرح شده بود نمی‌توانست عامل لغو عضویت یکی از پژوهش‌گران کم‌نظیری شود که هم‌زمان گردنش زیر تیغ دادگاه انقلاب، به اتهام انجام پژوهش‌های اصیل مردم‌شناختی بود و هم او ۱۰۰ روز زندان انفرادی را تحمل کرده بود و منتظر دادگاه دوباره بود. به رغم آن‌که آقای کامیل احمدی پس از انتشار برخی پست‌ها در فضای مجازی علیه او، برای صیانت از هویت انجمن جامعه‌شناسی، داوطلبانه خود را تعلیق عضویت کرده بود تا در زمان مناسب، به این حرف‌های مبهم رسیدگی شود اما ظاهراً عمل‌کرد انجمن جامعه‌شناسی بسان مین‌گذاری در مسیر عقب‌گرد داوطلبانه‌ی ایشان بود و این، شایسته نبود. این موضوع را تاکنون مطرح نکرده بودم زیرا منتظر ماندم تا نتیجه‌ی دادگاه و مواجهه‌ی آقای احمدی با رأی نهایی را ببینیم. اینک که دوباره ایشان به بیش از ۹ سال حبس به جرم انجام پژوهش‌های مردم‌شناختی، محکوم و متعاقباً مجبور به ترک وطن شده لازم دیدم بنویسم و آن‌چه گذشت را ثبت کنم و قضاوت را به شما واگذارم.

Image 436: Screenshot of Dr Ahmad Bokharaei's website.

Hesitation | For Kameel Ahmady

'It was 10 September 2020 (20 Shahrivar 1399) that we were surprised by the announcement of the Iranian Sociological Association regarding the cancellation of Mr Kameel Ahmady's membership. I had not seen him before that. This ambiguity in the rapid movement of the board of directors of the Sociological Association led several directors, including myself, who is the director of two scientific and specialised groups in the Association, to investigate. During two days of conversation with most of the members of the board of directors, we realised that 'all' the Association's documents mainly consisted of a few posts on social media. I do not intend to belittle the transgressions that men have committed against women, but up to this point, special attention is required.

'Unfortunately, less than two weeks after the relevant posts were published online, the board, in a hasty and emotional move, and

without consulting the group leaders, or even the leader of the Childhood Sociology Group (of which Kameel Ahmady was the resigning secretary), decided to revoke his membership. Upon learning of the flimsy basis and documentation at the time, I told the board members that this decision was both illegal, unprofessional and unethical. This was because, given the systematic rumours, intensely spread and apparently organised by a few anonymous women online over several days, it could not be grounds for revoking the membership of a unique researcher who was simultaneously facing trial in the Revolutionary Court on charges of conducting original anthropological research, and who had endured 100 days of solitary confinement and was awaiting a retrial.

'Despite the fact that, after the publication of some posts against him online, Kameel Ahmady had voluntarily suspended his membership to protect the identity of the Sociological Association, so that this important professional matter could be addressed at the appropriate time, the Sociological Association's actions appeared to be laying mines in the path of his voluntary retreat, and this was not befitting.

'I hadn't raised this issue until now because I was waiting to see the outcome of the trial and Mr Ahmady's reaction to the final verdict. Now that he has again been sentenced to more than nine years in prison for conducting anthropological research, and consequently forced to leave the country, I felt it necessary to write and record what happened, and leave the judgement to you.

'22 Bahman 1399 (February 10, 2021)

'Ahmad Bokharaei,

'Sociologist

'Head of the Social Issues and Harms Group and the Social Sciences Philosophy Group

'www.dr-bokharaei.com'

It should be noted that this post was published on 26 Bahman (14 February) in two subjects: the date of publication of the Association's announcement and the 'cancellation' of his membership and his expulsion, which he had previously written as 'suspension'.

In response to Dr Bokharaei's protest, the head of the Association published an article in the group and, insisting on his positions, said that he had made efforts to publish a statement at the time of my arrest. That claim of supporting me (at the time of my arrest and the formation of the political/security case that led to my imprisonment) is unfounded. As I mentioned before, the Association's action in this regard only led to the collection of a small number of signatures, which did not lead to serious follow-up. It is unclear why this strong sense of responsibility has not been acted on in response to the written report and presentation of accounts of harassment by some sociology professors at the University of Tehran, who, incidentally, are also known as 'legends'.

What does it feel like to lose influence against the powerful – to pick your moments carefully, only to be ignored and silenced? Especially when it comes from an Association that has always claimed to advocate for victims, yet never questions those in positions of authority or wealth about how they gained and maintain their power. In my case, this very Association – which presents itself as an advocate – did exactly what it has always criticised: it abandoned those in academic and influential positions who had been accused, while judging and punishing me unilaterally with actions that were both illogical and harsh.

In all governmental and non-governmental organisations around the world, the cancellation of a membership in such circumstances also has a specific mechanism. A person can speak in a formal framework, and a decision can be made about the issue based on the statements of both sides. In my case, though, such a mechanism did not exist, and I still do not know on what basis I was expelled from the Association – according to what part of the rules. Even stranger, I found out about the matter through the BBC. They wrote that my membership and secretaryship in the Childhood Sociology Group had been cancelled. Of course, I was also unaware of the publication of the statement.[1] I was behind the wheel, driving home, when

1 Announcement of the Iranian Sociological Association Regarding the Cancellation of Mr Kameel Ahmady's Membership:

The ethical charter is a fundamental and inviolable principle of the scientific association, civil institution, and the whole of society in general. Observing and fulfilling ethical principles, the most important of which is preserving and protecting human dignity and security, is also a fundamental duty, which is beyond all other social duties, and

Shafagh called and said with sorrow: 'Kameel, the Sociological Association has expelled you.'

I called my friend, Dr Alireza Kermani, and found that he was also completely unaware of everything. He said that they had learned about it from a BBC news ticker and were shocked and uninformed in the Childhood Group. Then I called Dr Afsaneh Kamali, the head of the

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adherence to it is necessary for every member of society; for this reason, deviation from it causes a social reaction to the violators of ethical rules.

Recently, allegations of sexual harassment against female colleagues during social research projects have been made in cyberspace against Mr Kameel Ahmady, a member of the Iranian Sociological Association and secretary of the Childhood Sociology Group of the Association. From the very beginning of these accusations, the board of directors of the Iranian Sociological Association, as a scientific and civil organisation that has always been sensitive to upholding the standards of scientific and professional ethics, has carefully followed the matter and, at its meeting on Sunday, 6 September 2020 (16th Shahrivar 1399), reached the following conclusion:

Judgment on the allegations requires a thorough judicial or civil investigation. Nevertheless, the evidence presented (accounts of those who have been harmed, the explanation published by Mr Ahmady, and ancillary information from a number of colleagues) indicates that at least some forms of abuse of authority in research management positions and trust-based relationships have occurred, which is ethically highly reprehensible. This has caused sexual harassment to a number of young research colleagues and violated ethical standards in scientific research activities. Therefore, given the importance of safeguarding the security of all members of society against all types of aggression and harassment, as well as keeping scientific research collaboration environments free from all types of abuse of power and authority, including sexual abuse, the Association considers it its duty not to be indifferent to this matter. Consequently, until a systematic legal or civil judgment – which Mr Ahmady has also welcomed – his membership in the Iranian Sociological Association will be suspended, and he will consequently be removed from the position of secretary of the Childhood Sociology Group. It is essential that the scientific and academic community show sensitivity to the issue of sexual harassment and initiate studies and research to identify the dimensions of the issue in various social environments and how to prevent them. Furthermore, based on social responsibility, it should provide programmes to raise awareness in society, educate and empower children and women, and support those who have been harmed. Most importantly, it is necessary to help make scientific and research environments safer by developing a charter of scientific and research professional ethics, specifying the norms and abnormalities related to professional relationships and examples of abuse and sexual harassment, and to deal decisively with violations.

The Iranian Sociological Association welcomes any cooperation with other scientific associations, public domain associations, and legal institutions to achieve these goals.

Iranian Sociological Association, 9 September 2020 (20th Shahrivar 1399).

Childhood Group, who is a cultured woman, and she also said that she was not aware and that this decision had been made behind closed doors.

She said, 'We also object. What was the point of that, especially after you'd suspended yourself and I was waiting for things to become clearer? What need was there for such a decision, issuing a statement and making it public?'

The Sociological Association, an institution that should approach specialist subjects fairly, referenced my own statement in a distorted and targeted manner in its announcement. Yet, in my statement, I had said I welcomed a fair trial with the presence of socially conscious individuals. It was regrettable that they had ignored this part, and other parts of my statement, and, in effect, used my statement against me.

The Association issued this announcement more to strike a pose as an institution that was aligned and in solidarity with female victims. However, the members, directors and officials of this Association, and many other academics, were aware of the numerous reports that had reached the Association alleging assaults by some of the universities' senior professors[1] at various times. Later, I realised, strangely, that one or two of those same members had themselves been accused in previous years of harassing and having sexual relations with students and their assistants, and a formal complaint had even been lodged against one of the prominent professors at the University of Tehran. The news about these individuals was not only not publicised and their memberships maintained, but statues had even been made for a few of them and commemorations held. Isn't it the case that some in the Association, to deter corruption and harassment of this kind and to quell potential noise, were looking for a less-risky scapegoat, which they had found thanks to the reporting of a few feminist Instagram pages? They could then play the

1 Some other reports of sexual harassment of students by professors in Iranian universities:
https://iranwire.com/fa/features/53979
https://t.me/alitayefi1/1214
https://t.me/feminismeveryday/6942
https://t.me/alitayefi1/2175
https://t.me/alitayefi1/2735
https://t.me/feminismeveryday/5136
https://t.me/alitayefi1/1215

role of saviour and guardian of the rights of female victims. An opportunity had arisen to be seen and to legitimise the Association's mechanisms and activities, which they used in an instrumental and unprofessional manner.



Image 437: Screenshot of chat with Dr Kamali, Childhood Group.

'Hello Mr Doctor, I have done my best for your human-rights case. Unfortunately, another personal matter has come up that I must attend to. Over the past two weeks, I have expressed my objection to your case in writing to the organisation, both in person and virtually. Of course, the human rights of colleagues have always been important to me, and there is no obligation. I wish you well and hope that you will be acquitted. I am honoured to have worked with you for a short time. With respect.'

Message 2 (Kamali):

'Hello dear respected, thank you for the message, and I am also very pleased with the cooperation and assistance with you. This last one was a very difficult process, but it made the issues and people clearer for us. Thank you.'

As I said earlier, the stranger and more regrettable part of the story was when, after some time, reports and accounts of sexual abuse and immoral relations by some of these same members with their students, in the form of screenshots of their chats, reached me, plunging all the acquaintances and colleagues who had been aware of the accusations against me from the outset into shock and astonishment at this depravity and shameless projection. All this, while one of the main members of the board of directors of the Iranian Sociological Association, Mr Siamak Zand Razavi, before the publication of the statement, wrote an open letter addressed to me, against all prevailing laws and customs, and even addressed my wife in a brazen manner!

In the wake of these shameless reactions, two members of the board, including one from the Childhood Sociology Group, drawing on the unstable and fluid concept of *gheirat*, stated, 'We have daughters ourselves and must protect them!' Meanwhile, the prominent and influential roles of two Association board members (also known as 'government sociologists') in the unfair vote against me was hardly a secret.

Weren't all these reactions – taking place in a so-called academic and professional setting – really attempts to intimidate me, so that my parallel research areas, such as cohabitation and child marriage (areas which at least two board members themselves claimed as their own), could be taken from me or my activities threatened? More importantly, didn't my honest and courageous statement, in which I acknowledged some mistakes and offered an apology, become the very pretext for the Association's public statement – a statement that, in a clumsy and unprofessional way, used my own position and words as justification for legitimising their actions against me?

Now, about two years after the events, the Association has designed a protocol on sexual harassment in the university environment, which is certainly a cause for celebration and hope. However, at the time of the accusations against me, lacking such a document, they accused me and revoked my membership based on emotional biases, haste and unfounded arguments. With such a protocol now in place, how can they answer to their consciences and to justice-seekers regarding their unprofessional and conservative treatment of me?

Later, when the media focused on the revocation of my membership from the Association, disagreements among some group managers about

the Association's illegal decision against me escalated, and after my prison sentence of nine years and three months was issued – which led to my leaving Iran – Dr Bokharaei wrote a lengthy letter describing the events, as follows.

> To the Name of Truth
>
> The Esteemed President of the Iranian Sociological Association, Dr Hussein Serajzadeh
>
> Greetings and Respect,
>
> We are aware that the ups and downs related to the story of Kameel Ahmady in recent days have caused misunderstandings and misinterpretations that I will try to address in three areas:
>
> First: General Principles
>
> 1. The 'Me Too' movement is valuable. It is an opportunity to restore women's rights. Greetings to the courageous and tormented women who know they can protest but respect ethical boundaries, and to the women who have risen to defend women's rights but do not resort to tricks and deceptions in defending the oppressed to violate a right. They have listening ears and hear that some men also say: 'Me Too Also' or 'Me Too To You!'
>
> 2. Our concern isn't about the 'individual'; it's about the need to adopt a scholarly approach, free from biases. On one hand, allegations have been made, and on the other, we don't have access to the counter-arguments. According to principles of reason and science, we shouldn't assume criminal conduct until an accusation is proven.
>
> 3. The concept of 'gender' is now a trump card in both real and virtual spaces, and few dare to engage with it dialectically, as they'll face a barrage of zealots or rabble-rousers. Consequently, many opinions remain hidden for fear of being ruthlessly labelled by 'sick feminists'. But isn't this approach open to criticism?

4. My students are witnesses to the fact that I've always been a proponent of radical feminism, believing in 'positive discrimination'. Furthermore, I've claimed in my classes that, 'existentially', a woman's rank is superior to a man's. This statement has often been met with doubt, even from women, but I still firmly believe that the difference between men and women is fundamental, and the female gender is superior to the male gender because its human qualities are more pronounced! Therefore, when I mention 'sick feminism', please read it within this 'context'. The subject of my doctoral thesis revolves around gender inequality, and my books, lectures, and activities, both domestically and abroad, within the Association, speak truthfully to my claim.

Second: The Performance of the Iranian Sociological Association

1. On 23 August 2020 (2nd Shahrivar 1399), for the first time in recent months in cyberspace, a person named 'Parnian Yeganeh' posted a very short Tweet stating that someone had recounted instances of sexual harassment by Mr Kameel Ahmady to her, which she was relaying. So, she herself was not the victim. On 24th August, the following day, these messages and some similar ones were republished on the Bidarzani website. On 26 August, a person named 'Nasim' spoke vaguely, unclearly, and very briefly about being harassed. Some other Tweets, for which links are available, have been removed from the page, which is thought-provoking in itself.

2. From behind the scenes, these messages were quickly brought to the public attention of the Iranian Sociological Association's board of directors. In less than two weeks, on 6 September 2020 (16th Shahrivar 1399), the board of directors unanimously agreed to issue a statement on 9 September (20th Shahrivar), resulting in the 'cancellation of Mr Kameel Ahmady's membership' (read: expulsion).

3. The statement cited three reasons for this decision: a) the accounts of the victims, b) the explanation published by Mr Kameel Ahmady, and c) background information from a number of colleagues. I reviewed the first reason above. The degree of weakness or doubt in them is evident. Regarding the second reason, the statement refers to a declaration issued by Mr Kameel Ahmady on 4 September (14th Shahrivar), in which he stated that, like any human being, he could have made a mistake.

Subsequently, he voluntarily suspended himself from the secretariat of the Sociology of Childhood Group, a decision that was ratified to allow sufficient time to address these rumours and safeguard the Sociological Association. Yet, this honour and courage became one of the reasons for his expulsion! You could have sanctioned the same suspension (no, expulsion). Is it not true that we all, men and women alike, have made mistakes in our lives? Hadn't rumours previously circulated about certain male and female members of the board of directors of the Association? Does this then license them to accept every accusation? Does this license anyone to hurl any accusation at them? Regarding the third reason, it was stated: 'A number of colleagues'. Firstly, weren't these esteemed individuals the same hidden representatives of a movement that, in a rushed and obscure manner in cyberspace (as previously mentioned), knowingly or unknowingly (I have arguments and examples for both options) had approached the board of directors? Isn't one of them present on the board? Does the fact that another member of the board writes an open letter to Kameel Ahmady, posting it on the populist sociology channel, and even addressing his wife, align with any ethical or sociological standards?! Isn't this a violation of people's privacy? Doesn't she know what immense mental, psychological and social consequences this will have for Mr Ahmady's family, both now and in the future? Weren't other academic colleagues, other members of the Association, and

managers of scientific and specialised groups within the Association (including the manager of the Childhood Sociology Group, or even other managers, and this humble servant who is among the managers of the Association's active groups) available for consultation?

4. Usually, everywhere and always, the 'accused' person is invited to a discussion. Why didn't you extend even one invitation for a face-to-face discussion to Mr Kameel Ahmady, who was accessible to you? Why, after the announcement was published and you faced objections from some quarters, was it repeatedly and falsely stated that one of the board members had spoken to Mr Kameel Ahmady by telephone in those same days? The very member you emphasise explicitly stated to me (in the presence of another person) during a telephone call that they had not had any specific discussion on behalf of the board of directors regarding the issues attributed to Mr Kameel Ahmady by several women, and that they had only reached the conclusion in the management council of the Childhood Sociology Group (in which this board member also sits) that Mr Ahmady had voluntarily suspended himself, and nothing more!

5. Furthermore, beyond the absence of any academically sound or convincing evidence in the aforementioned three justifications, the statement declares: 'Judgement regarding the allegations requires meticulous judicial and civil investigation.' Yet, it then proceeds to pronounce judgement, stating: 'Instances of abuse of authority inherent in the role of research management and trust-based relationships have occurred (!) which are morally reprehensible (!). This has led to the sexual harassment of a number of young research colleagues and the violation of ethical standards in scientific and research activities (!).' You engage in 'judgement' not once, but three times within a single paragraph. How can you assert beforehand that you will not judge? Are you aware that, legally, you have levelled an accusation that, had

anyone other than Kameel Ahmady been the accused, would have landed you in court? However, as he was embroiled in a security case and facing the mercilessness of the Revolutionary Court for conducting his anthropological research, he preferred to remain silent. If a previous claim is contradicted three times within a single paragraph, does this not suggest weak reasoning and a lack of precision in other matters? If so, how can one trust the validity of the board's earlier reasoning regarding their decision to dismiss him?

6. You know that I spoke with most of the board members at the time (the two members who, despite repeated attempts, refused to speak with me committed an act contrary to the collective goals of the Sociological Association), and I eventually reached a conclusion and pointed out at the time that you had acted hastily and unscientifically. My aim is to critique the 'method' of an Association to which we feel a sense of belonging, not the person of 'Kameel Ahmady'.

7. Six months later, The Guardian newspaper, in its 12 February 2021 (24th Bahman 1399) issue, analyses Kameel Ahmady's performance in 'three places', referring to his dismissal (mistakenly using 'suspended') in the Association's statement, and engages in judgement. Is it right that a member of the Sociological Association should be treated with such lack of support, or even worse, be subjected to such an onslaught and suffer irreparable damage to his personal, social and academic life because of a flawed statement?

8. This saga continued at that time, and on the very day the Association's statement was published on 10 September, a detailed interview attributed to one of the female victims of sexual harassment was also published on the Meydan website, archive number 73220, which I believe had first appeared two days earlier on the Dideban Azar website, where the speaker was unidentified, and claims were made that sometimes seemed bizarre. Leaving aside the content of that text, is it conceivable that this 'coincidence' was without

coordination? Did this interview happen to coincide with the publication of the Association's statement by chance? Why had we not seen any detailed interviews before, and how did the Association's statement pave the way for the publication of that interview? Of course, there are theories suggesting a connection to one of the board members! I will likely have much to say about this clause later.

9. Mr Chairman, had the Association not received reports of sexual harassment of esteemed women by predatory men before, in the months and years prior? Why only react here and in this manner? Were those women somehow different from the women now claiming abuse? Why had the structures within and outside the Association allowed our wronged women to remain silent, or, if they did speak out, why was nothing done?

Three: Behind the Scenes of the Present Days

1. I posted some unspoken truths in a very short note called 'Pause' on my Telegram channel on 10 February 2021 (22nd Bahman 1399).

https://blog.dr-bokharaei.com/2021/02/blog-post10.html

2. On 12 February, I received a WhatsApp message from a woman who called herself a 'victim', and I later realised was the organiser of the posts related to the harassment of Kameel Ahmady on the Meydan website and the Bidarzani space (the same person mentioned in point 8 of Part B above). She introduced herself, and I realised who she was. I knew her! About ten years previously, we had invited her to speak on a topic for the group on social issues and harms. Both in writing and by telephone, over two days until 13 February, conversations were exchanged in over 100 posts, all of which are available. No matter how much I tried and pleaded for us to speak face-to-face in a meeting, it came to nothing. Her words were accompanied by disrespect and threats towards me. She demanded that I remove 'Pause' from my Telegram channel or provide explanations to show

that I had retracted my previous analysis. In the same WhatsApp conversation, I wrote to her that her method seemed 'dictatorial' and reminded me of SAVAK, the secret service of the former regime and the intelligence of the current regime, and that it was not worthy of her! It is said that she also had a contract with the same foreign institution that Kameel Ahmady had, for a campaign and publicity, and that Mr Ahmady was mainly sentenced to nine years in prison for this reason! And it was also heard that there were witnesses that their first meeting where she mentioned and recounted the rape was a completely personal and tourist trip and this relationship was long-lasting, and more importantly, she signed a contract and only continued for a few weeks and then left the project by agreement. It seems that this woman was still involved in a research project with Kameel Ahmady after the date she claims she was raped! In that WhatsApp conversation, I tried to proceed with respect until the end and sometimes imagined I was talking to my own sister or daughter. My last post, referring to her claim in the same conversation six months earlier with the Meydan website (archive 73220), was a question that I raised but remained unanswered, and the conversation ended. My post was exactly this: 'Ms [RM], I was thinking about the subject of water pipes and weed . . . One question is occupying my mind. It's usually the done thing, when someone's to be done in, to slip a pill into their drink (alcoholic or not). Easy and common! How did a category 3 narcotic get used? Didn't it smell? If it did, didn't you notice? If you did and you smoked it, then you were setting things up, you were initially aware; and if not, how did you not notice the pungent smell of hashish or weed?'

I had five main questions regarding her claims, which I wasn't allowed to ask until later. It seems to me that a content analysis of this written WhatsApp exchange by any impartial analyst could reveal new truths that have remained hidden and would greatly help in understanding

the real issue. I hope she, or the law, will give me permission to express myself more clearly, so that all those who suffer in the field of women's rights can better understand what is the main path is to reclaim their lost rights from men in this patriarchal cultural-political system.

3. She immediately had one of the members of the 'WhatsApp Group of Managers and Secretaries of the Sociological Association' send this message through Dr Nayereh Tavakoli:

'A message from one of the victims to the Sociological Association and me (Nayereh Tavakoli): Dr Serajzadeh and Dr Tavakoli, as a narrator and someone who directly tried to explain the story to Dr Bokharaei personally and remove the veil of my identity, and as someone who was the victim of a rape, the meaning of which I understand very well, and the pain I have been suffering alongside my family for several months after the revelations, it is very important to clarify a few things: First, I would like to express my sincere thanks on behalf of all the victims to the Sociological Association and the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights. The step the Association took in listening to the voices of the narrators was unprecedented in Iranian history. If it were not for the support of the Association, the voices of Iranian women, who are condemned to suffocation by views like those of Dr Bokharaei, would never be heard more clearly. Doubt in the narratives only comes from the hearts of people who have no experience in dealing with injured people, or who have never even encountered this in their lives.

'In the hearts of each and every one of us who have been hurt, there is much pain and sorrow, and we never imagined that the support and empathy of a large number of kind people like the Sociological Association could reveal the other side of the coin; to identify those who only remain in theory in the form of supporting women and do not take a step forward.

'Second, the timing of the narratives and his security case had nothing to do with each other. Mr Ahmady had been involved in this case for nearly two and a half years, and it is clear that the disclosure of the narratives only goes back to the #MeToo movement, and any marginal issues or labels are not fair to the narrators. All these explanations were also given to Mr Bokharaei, and it is strange that he still likes to stand by the accused by showing impartiality and sophistry, and to cast doubt on the honesty of the narratives with words such as academic or civil rights.

'The breaking of women's silence and their resistance against media pressure to remain silent ("because Ahmady's case will become more serious"), and the pressure of public opinion and judgements, is a successful example of the "Me Too" movement's difficult test. This will not only be reflected in the great movement that women began by breaking their silence, but will also pave the way for future generations and ensure the safety of all women.

'Dr Serajzadeh and Dr Tavakoli, we are grateful for your support of fairness. Undoubtedly, our culture is not yet receptive to phenomena that it suddenly encounters. The best decision is to stand by the victim, something that has been happening in global cultural circles for years. Mr Ahmady has had enough opportunity to adopt a more appropriate position by addressing the accounts, rather than labelling each individual involved. *The Guardian* did not allow any of the narrators to disclose their names or make them available to Mr Ahmady. How, then, did he guess that the names of two of *The Guardian's* narrators were in his interrogations? Isn't it that everything the female narrators described transported his mind back to that very day and date of the event? And, ultimately, by claiming that the narrators' names were in the interrogations, he directs people's minds to the idea that confessions must have been made under pressure, and each time in each statement, they grasp at a new rope to escape the predicament, while only

making the matter more difficult for themselves and revealing their hand. If these accounts were made under pressure, then why, in the time after "Me Too" until his departure, did the narrators decide and prefer to remain silent so as not to aggravate his legal-security case?

'I say these things to those of you who do not know us but stood by us and defended us . . . You didn't rub salt into the wound, but were healing . . . Thank you again.

On behalf of the narrators of case "KA".'

It is observed that Kameel Ahmady possesses a high degree of verbal and written ability in a short period of time, and remains as alert, capable and managerial as we saw him ten years ago at the Sociological Association meeting. I was left wondering how someone of his abilities could have been deceived or misled in this situation.

4. Immediately, a Tweet under the name of 'Cosette' is spread in cyberspace, republishing the unsubstantiated and false judgement of Elnaz Mohammadi (the same person who is the reporter on item 8 in Axis B and a close and longstanding acquaintance of the 'victim', and these three are proceeding in full coordination with five other people, mainly abroad, and I will provide further analysis if necessary) stating: Ahmad Bokharaei is a supporter of the culture of rape.

5. Almost immediately, just hours after that Tweet – supposedly from a lesbian woman and a previous accuser of Ahmady – another Tweet was released by Samaneh Savadi, the Twitter arm of this campaign. It named four Association managers (under the title 'Supporters of Kameel Ahmady: Serial Abuser'), who had requested in an internal Association letter to the board of directors that action be taken regarding the recent treatment of researchers by the judiciary. The letter also mentioned Kameel Ahmady's research record. How was this letter leaked outside the Association? Did the letter mention abuse? Doesn't it reek of

spite? Don't you feel that the actions of these Twitter spreaders are aligned with the internal security establishment's agenda to isolate researchers at a time when the Association wants to defend their rights (and Kameel Ahmady is one of hundreds, solely on the strength of his unique research)?

What do you think about that threat on WhatsApp, for which there is documented proof, and these Twitter postings, and that intrusion into the WhatsApp group of the managers and secretaries of the Sociological Association's groups! (The sentence I said referring to the student and Reuters is exactly in the WhatsApp correspondence between me and the woman called 'victim', and, if she allows it, we will publish and analyse the written conversations anonymously. It will become clear how much is fact, how much ambiguity, and how much exaggeration there is in this matter over the past ten years!)

6. Would you allow me to take these documents to court and analyse and seek redress regarding the statements of the woman who calls herself a 'victim' and had a WhatsApp conversation with me? She then published the letter in the WhatsApp group of managers and secretaries (an internal Association group solely for information and exchange of views between the managers and secretaries of the Sociological Association's groups), passing judgement (read: making accusations) against me. She immediately passed the message to Elnaz Mohammadi, who published the initial Tweet, and then 'Cosette' herself, who is perhaps the same woman who called herself a 'victim', reposted it with my name at the top of the Tweet, both to frighten me and to prepare the ground for future attacks against me on the Meydan and Bidarzani websites, and so on, so that future attacks can be prevented?

I think enough has been said. Of course, you (Dr Serajzadeh) also spoke to me in that same WhatsApp group in a way that seemed to show support for this movement. Please note that

> any past or present criticisms I have of the Sociological Association's performance are separate from the issue now being exploited. All of us members of the Sociological Association are concerned with raising the level of the Association's activities, and it is on this basis that we work voluntarily and passionately in the Association's groups.
>
> Our criticisms perhaps stem from higher expectations of the Association, nothing more – nothing that you termed 'biased'. Of course, you were correct about the date I mentioned in the 'Pause' [a publication of the Association], and I made a mistake in recording the publication date of the announcement, which I have corrected, but this formal error doesn't affect the content, and the gist remains evident in that 'Pause'. I had optimistically assumed in the previous 'Pause' that Kameel's membership was 'suspended', but I realised that, unfortunately, it was 'revoked' and expulsion from the Association was approved, which I have also corrected in three places in the aforementioned 'Pause'.
>
> Thank you and regards,
>
> 28 Bahman 1399
>
> Ahmad Bokharai
> Director of the Department of Social Issues and Harms

Dr Ahmad Bokharaei, who later realised my intention to write an autobiography and address the issue of sexual harassment and the Association's actions in that regard, asked me to publish this letter verbatim. When I asked him why he hadn't publicised this letter at the time, his brief response was, 'Look, in a situation where a climate of accusation prevails and a kind of media quasi-dictatorship is forming, many ears are no longer listening, and weren't. I saw that publishing this letter would be of no use, and might even increase the attacks, so I waited to give it to you today.'

A day after the Association's statement was published, BBC Persian contacted me and requested an interview or a response to the statement. Because of my sensitive situation in Iran, I hadn't given an interview to a

place like the BBC for years, and now that my case was with Salavati, accepting this offer was more illogical than ever. But what was logical in those days that I should act according to logic? I had no choice but to seize the opportunity and speak my mind. After consulting with my media advisor, I accepted their offer and said in my interview that I considered the action of the Iranian Sociological Association unfair and unusual without my knowledge, adding that the accusations of sexual harassment against me were made by anonymous individuals on a page, some of which contain many contradictions and are in a distorted form, which is a clear example of going to the judge one-sidedly.[1]





کامیل احمدی در گفت‌وگو با بی‌بی‌سی اقدام انجمن جامعه‌شناسی ایران را بدون اطلاع خود "غیرمنصفانه و غیر معمول" دانست و با رد اتهامات مطرح شده گفت "حرکت صحیح این انجمن می‌توانست به جای رویکرد حذفی و قهری لغو، تعلیق عضویت داوطلبانه او باشد تا زمانی که زوایای پنهان این اتهامات روشن شود."

کامیل احمدی می‌گوید همانطور که قبلا در بیانیه‌اش پیشنهاد کرده بود، انجمن جامعه‌شناسی به عنوان یک نهاد علمی و مطرح می‌توانست تسهیلگر تشکیل یک هیات منصفه از افراد مجرب باشد و ادعاها و توضیحات طرفین را ارزیابی تخصصی کند؛ چون به اعتقاد او انجمن جامعه‌شناسی ایران "قضاوت قبل از حکمیت کرده و این در حق کسی که خودش آماده پاسخگویی است، کاری منصفانه نیست."

او گفت: "اتهام‌های آزارجنسی علیه او توسط افراد ناشناس و در یک صفحه مطرح شده است که برخی از آنان دارای تناقضات بسیار است و شکلی مخدوش دارد که فقط یکطرفه به قاضی رفتن را نشان می‌دهد. اینکه فرد و یا افرادی به شکل هدفمند اقدام به انتشار اتهاماتی علیه یک فرد بکنند و اکانت‌های ناشناس و دیگران نیز بدون اینکه توضیحات فرد را بشنوند او را متهم و محکوم کنند، منصفانه نیست."

این پژوهشگر درباره اتهام‌های آزار جنسی مطرح شده علیه خود گفت: "بنده در کنار حمایت از جوانب مثبت هر حرکتی که منجر به شکستن صدای قربانیان شود به قطع و یقین هرگونه آزار و تجاوز را از سوی خودم قویا رد می‌کنم. و همچنان که در بیانیه‌ام گفته‌ام، من از معدود افرادی بودم که با توضیح و حتی انتقاد از بخش‌هایی از عملکرد کاری‌ام در گذشته برآمده‌ام و در حین حال نه تنها از هر گونه طرح دعوای حقوقی استقبال کردم؛ بلکه تاکید کردم اگر تردیدی هم در احقاق حق شاکیان وجود داشته باشد، یک هیات منصفه مدنی برای قضاوت تشکیل شود که منتهی به آموزش و عدالت ترمیمی شود."

Image 438: Part of my interview with the BBC and a comment from a colleague.

On the picture 'Membership of Kameel Ahmady in the Iranian Sociological Association was cancelled':
'Two weeks ago, many things like this about Mr Ahmady were sent to me! Did you see? Even this guy! Anyone who knows him knows how he thinks about women and children! So don't talk about it anymore! I have known Mr Ahmady for years and many times I have worked with him, both in Iran and here. I have spoken and helped him, and I have never seen any behaviour, words or anything from him that would make me believe these

1 BBC Persian, 2020a.

> accusations. Secondly, it is obvious to everyone that whoever is against the Government is definitely a calculating and correct person who is doing good work. As a researcher, he is trying to solve the problems of women and children in Iran, and it is not easy to destroy a person in cyberspace. Let us think a little. And if we are wrong, woe to us.'
> Second screenshot:
> 'Kameel Ahmady, in conversation with BBC Persian, stated that the Iranian Sociological Association acted "unfairly and unreasonably" and rejected the accusations, saying that the Association could have "suspended or revoked his membership instead of publicly and forcefully concealing these accusations."
> 'Kameel Ahmady also stated that, as previously suggested, he proposed to the scientific institution to form an impartial panel to assess the claims and explanations of both sides, because he believes that "judgement before hearing both sides and this person being judged is not fair".
> 'He said, "The accusations of sexual harassment against me by unknown individuals are very contradictory and have a distorted form that only shows that individuals are purposefully acting to publish accusations against one person and unknown accounts are not listening to the person's explanations."
> 'The researcher, regarding the accusations of sexual harassment made against him, said, "I will definitely support the victims of any movement that leads to breaking the silence of those who have been subjected to assault, and I have always been one of the people who have condemned assault, and I have always explained and criticised the actions of some, but I only support the legal pursuit of rights; rather, I emphasise that if there is any doubt, a fair panel should be formed to provide training and amend the process."'

I stated that it wasn't fair for an individual or individuals to purposefully disseminate accusations against someone, and for anonymous accounts and others to accuse and condemn him without hearing his side of the story: 'The correct course of action for the Association would have been to voluntarily suspend my membership,

rather than take the drastic and coercive approach of revoking it, until the hidden aspects of these accusations were clarified.'

I suggested that, as I had previously proposed in my statement, the Sociological Association, as a prominent academic institution, could have facilitated the formation of a jury of experienced individuals to professionally evaluate the claims and explanations of both parties – because, in my opinion, the Iranian Sociological Association 'passed judgement before arbitration, which is unfair to someone who is ready to respond'.

Finally, I said, 'While supporting the positive aspects of any movement that leads to the voices of victims being heard, I deny any abuse or assault on my part. As I stated in my declaration, I was one of the few people who, by explaining and even criticising aspects of my past work performance, not only welcomed any legal action, but also emphasised that if there was any doubt about the vindication of the plaintiffs, a civil jury should be formed to judge and lead to education and restorative justice.'

After the publication of this interview, I felt a little lighter, as if I had been able to release some of the sorrow within me and my words, and as if, finally, someone was listening to me.

The Final Arrows

I was on my way to Kurdistan and Mahabad when the fifth account was published. This account did not explain the details of the story, nor did it say in which project or in what year this happened, or in what capacity the narrator had collaborated with me.

I was pondering the content of this account when, two days later, the sixth account was published. This one was even more vague and anonymous than the previous one and spoke of deception. It said that I had persuaded her, but she couldn't remember whether she had consented or not – whether she wanted to be there or not! This one had even more keywords: my views on virginity, scaring her with my powerful friends, helping her get a visa and sending her abroad . . . and, in the end, it was she who challenged me to remember her through the keywords, sentences and events she mentioned.

When these two accounts were published, I could not make sense of them. I tried very hard to identify the narrators, but my search yielded no

answers. Unlike the previous two accounts, these offered no signs, dates, or keywords that could provide clarity – they only emphasised the dynamics of domination and power and systematically presented and targeted the alleged incidents of assault and harassment involving my colleagues.

A few days later, the seventh account about me came out, but with the title 'Account Fourteenth!' As I mentioned, Bidarzani was publishing stories related to others alongside those concerning me, giving the audience the impression that all these accounts were about one person. Of course, the virtual arms on Twitter and elsewhere weren't slacking either, Tweeting things like 'Fourteen stories about Kameel Ahmady have been published!'

The narrator of the seventh story wasn't a field-research colleague, but a freelance editor on one of my projects. She was also involved in proofreading another piece of research concurrently, and I address the fact-checking of the stories in full later on. After reading the seventh story several times, paying attention to the writing style, the words used and its focus on feminism, I gradually realised, not at the time, but later, that it couldn't be anyone other than Ms ZP. Around the same time, she had written on her own Twitter account, using her own name, 'An abuser can be a researcher in the field of women.' I couldn't believe she had joined this game, too.



Image 439: Screenshots of a Twitter post by

> 'It's been exactly four days that I've been reading narratives of #assault. I'm terrified. I'm afraid to narrate my own experience. But it's imperative to say that the abuser can be a defender of

> women's rights and minorities, and be famous in the world because of this. Tell me how brave you are to be able to say it.'

The seventh story triggered another round of attacks against me, but it also exposed the instigators to some extent, especially Ms ZP. Even some of her friends commented, accusing her of lying. Our mutual friend, 'Susan V', who had been her roommate for a long time, wrote on the same post, 'I know Kameel Ahmady closely. I have met him in different places. He is open to dialogue and his behaviour towards others is always respectful.' Her sister and friends commented under the same post that doing something with calculation is not abuse; it is a transaction. Entering into a relationship with the aim of achieving benefits is not abuse, but profiteering.

Of course, it goes without saying that all these comments were answered with the worst insults. In that space, any dissenting voice was met with the most ruthless accusations and insults. Some attempted to suggest that women should also accept responsibility in relationships and emphasised the anonymity of the accounts, but, in radical circles, suggestions of such egalitarian approaches went unheard.

Later, one of the participants even said to ZP, 'Weren't you the one in Gachsaran after my brother's wedding party who wanted to go see KA, and on your day off you were looking for a beauty salon for waxing and we couldn't find one for you? Didn't you willingly enter into the relationship, and weren't you the one who said you were proud that you had previously drunk your first alcoholic drink with him in public in Mashhad, in the park next to the shrine, and broken the Islamic Republic's restrictions and . . .?'



Image 440: Screenshots of comments.

rezaee.yasaman: 'I believe this fabricated narrative is also deeply deplorable for two further reasons. Firstly, bringing up the reason for the marriage of the victim in this narrative, which causes significant harm to the wife and child of this victim, essentially amounts to revealing secrets from the time of their friendship. Secondly, it undermines the impact of the genuine disclosures that courageous individuals, identifying themselves, have made over the past few days.

rezaee.yasaman: 'However, the third reprehensible aspect is the attempt to elicit sympathy from ethnic minorities in order to absolve themselves. From my perspective, the purpose behind presenting this narrative is solely to satisfy some activist urge and notion of civic engagement, and nothing more. This is because the pseudo-victim, in an effort to escape the label of villager, has effectively downplayed the alleged brief sexual harassment. Taking offence at the term villager is, in itself, the greatest insult and humiliation to us ethnic minorities whose origins lie in villages and rural areas. As someone who is part of an ethnic minority, a researcher of ethnic minority issues, a survivor of assault, and someone who has repeatedly experienced sexual harassment, I object to this narrative.

rezaee.yasaman: 'Speaking humbly on behalf of all four groups I represent, my plea to all those feigning victimhood is that they refrain from using us to absolve themselves, answer to their own conscience, or satisfy their activist impulses.'

Since the narratives followed a similar pattern of thought, it became clear, given the mechanisms used in content and lexical semiotics for syntactic decoding, that the narratives had passed through a single intellectual network and were produced and presented in a managed working group. Later, I wondered if ZP, by virtue of her profession as an editor, also played a role in the narratives about me! Were she or the other narrators members of a working group formed for me, and, more importantly, to what extent, with what quality and experience, did these narrators play a role in the so-called 'fact-checking' working group of Bidarzani? How were the mutual influence and actions between them and the site's operators organised and progressed? We will come to these points later.

Grappling with My Own Thoughts

It was mid-September (Shahrivar) 2020, and my friends and colleagues wanted to know the truth. There was me and seven narratives, in four of which I was accused of unwanted relationships and assault, and in the other three of which I was portrayed as a verbal and behavioural abuser. In those moments, I knew that I could no longer bear this suffering alone, so I sought refuge with my psychologist.

He, who knew me well from the period after my imprisonment, listened to me and said, 'Kameel, this world, and especially this culture, is a place where very often if you fall, no one will pick you up. Many of us, despite claiming to be kind, are ruthless. You, unlike others, openly and clearly accepted your share of involvement and guilt, but this is Iran, and concealment, lack of transparency and denial are ingrained in people and rooted in social upbringing and socialisation. People in such a society, when they enter society, organisations and social institutions, must wear a mask of hypocrisy and display other faces of themselves. So, honesty in such a society means self-assassination and self-sacrifice. It is an atomised society where the majority consider denial, concealment and hypocrisy to be norms that protect their interests and about which they have a secret agreement; that is, an agreement on counter-values.

'When you're committed and bound to social capital like honesty and trust, especially because you were socialised in another society, then you become a minority, and you're the one who gets ostracised in that society,

or they don't allow you to integrate because you haven't behaved in line with the majority. You're like someone who's swimming against the tide. Lots of people are happy to see you get hurt; your rivals and the security forces are celebrating now that they've managed to bring you down, but know this: these days will pass, too.'



Image 441: Hard days of loneliness.

I told him that even the days in prison and solitary confinement hadn't been this devastating. I said my very existence and professional integrity were being questioned, and I didn't know what to do. Even the statement I wrote honestly was used against me. The psychologist, in the few sessions I had, helped me calm down.

I also saw a psychiatrist, who prescribed some medication to help me sleep better at night. The medication made me feel worse. It was precisely at this point that I realised I was at the end of my tether. The moment a person's existence and pride are shattered, they might conclude they don't have much left to lose. Had I reached a stage where it would be better to commit suicide or something?

How was I even contemplating such a thing? I, who in all my life, through all its ups and downs, all the defeats I'd suffered, all the shocks I'd experienced, and the deaths of loved ones I'd witnessed, had never even considered such a thing. I, who had never stopped working since childhood and adolescence, and who had striven in most moments of my life to get closer to the concept of completion, of being 'Kameel', tirelessly pursuing my goals one after another. In my childhood, I had lived with the harsh conditions of war and displacement, but I had faced them energetically and with motivation. Immediately after adolescence, I had resolved to migrate alone, enduring all the hardships that came with it. After that, by doing various jobs in another country, I had never lost my motivation and hope for independence, personal and social development, and living and building a better life. Now I, Kameel, had reached a point where life in this world had become unbearable, and its ugly, hideous face

had revealed itself to me so fully that I couldn't bear to see it any more, or perhaps believe.

I realised how painful and difficult a person's life, their efforts and their ultimate end can become. I had seen most aspects of human life. At that time, I felt and understood with all my being, with every single cell in my body, why the philosopher Popper said, 'Life is a big joke.'

When I wanted to take action on my thoughts, a voice from within rebuked me. Perhaps it was the child within me, or a part of my being that hadn't yet lost its power of perception.

I came to my senses, realising that, if I stayed home alone, I might not be able to cope with myself. This Kameel wasn't the Kameel he used to be; he needed help. To avoid being alone at home, I booked a ride-hailing service and chose the furthest route to the east of Tehran, hoping to escape my solitude. The driver was a young man. I asked him how long his shift was.

He replied, 'Why?' I said that our journey might take a while. He thought I might be a drug dealer or something and said nervously, 'Sir, I swear to God, I can't be bothered with any trouble.'

I reassured him that I wasn't involved in anything illegal and just wanted to visit a few places together.

He was too astute not to notice my desperation. He didn't ask any more questions, nor did he even show any curiosity. He just kept reminding me to record the waiting time in the app every now and then. Sometimes he would say a word, and sometimes I would.

I was searching for my part in everything – trying to understand if I was paying for a mistake. I had taken myself to the court of my own conscience. In my solitude, I believed that, despite some shortcomings and lack of consideration, I didn't deserve such a fate, so I asked myself, 'Kameel! What are you going to do now? How are you going to get out from under these accusations? How are you going to clear your name and reputation? What will become of your wife and your only son?' Countless questions, filled with pain and unknowing, swirled through my mind, never leaving me alone for a moment.

I scoffed at my thoughts from only a short while ago, when I'd considered concepts like respect, honour and reputation to be products of tradition and culture. I told myself, 'Until yesterday, you thought these were all moral values created by cultures. Well, you were wrong. You had

made a mistake somewhere. There was a flaw in your work ethic, but what they have cooked up for you is a hundred times greater and further removed from your mistakes – or, as my lawyer said, "The security forces can make a vat of *doogh*[1] from a pot of yoghurt." And now, another group has made it even worse! How similar their methods and tactics are!'

Again, I thought of my son and reminded myself of the duty I had to him. The onslaught of thoughts disarmed me, casting shadows on everything I had created and achieved. Those who had wounded me – some of them were insiders, not strangers, and their being insiders made the pain and bitterness of the situation unbearable. It was a terrifying situation. I was truly grappling with myself, with every nuance of my being.

I'm Not a Feminist, But I Am an Egalitarian

I've never been a feminist and haven't claimed to be. I've said it jokingly and seriously, and I still say it, but I like feminists, especially the egalitarian, scientific and moderate ones. Throughout my career, I've had relatively good relationships with some feminists and defended them where appropriate, because I certainly accepted important aspects of the movement. I believe that, with all my shortcomings, I have tried more than anything else to be an egalitarian.

Although before these accusations I was perceived as something of a feminist, I had always maintained that the very nature of an independent researcher prevents one from adopting an ideology. Therefore, I couldn't embrace an ideology, or any '–ism' for that matter, and declare myself its defender. Although I see that it's common, how can a researcher, whose work is based on science, operate under the banner of an ideology and maintain their impartiality?

However, after my recent experience, shaped by a radical left intensely seeking fame and power, I changed some of my views on feminism, on finer points that I couldn't previously differentiate. I observed unhealthy, even morbid, veins within it, confirming my belief that some feminists, or feminist imposters, are intensely misandrist, and some of their approaches even validated actions against women's interests.

1 A savoury, yoghurt-based beverage.

Recently, a colleague said to me, 'Kameel, this part of the feminist movement, which you've directly and indirectly assisted through your research into this field, giving more credence to some of the harm done to women in a scientific framework, is turning you into the enemy. If anyone else were in your shoes, they would have already drawn their swords. With your experience and expertise in eliciting details and conducting field research, you could have already exposed the unhealthy and harmful aspects, and the funding corruption, that several individuals and organisations have accused them of for years, in the form of a research project. I'm amazed you haven't done this before and won't start soon.'

Despite all this, I can understand and empathise with the pain and roots of this excess, this deviation, by looking at the bigger picture of women's historical anger at the current situation and inequalities throughout history. I know that most people in this particular group are influenced by a discourse stemming from the suffering and bitter experiences of discrimination, and forms of physical or sexual abuse in their families and backgrounds. Sometimes, they even react and rage intensely against women who, through different experiences – for example, with the men in their families or in emotional relationships – have different views from their harsh and extremist ones.

Now I had fallen into a whirlpool, and it was as if I possessed the characteristics of the classic American/Western #MeToo perpetrator – as if I were a perfect example for modelling this movement in Iran. In this instance, I wasn't just an individual; I was a subject who could amplify the newsworthy dimensions of the movement.

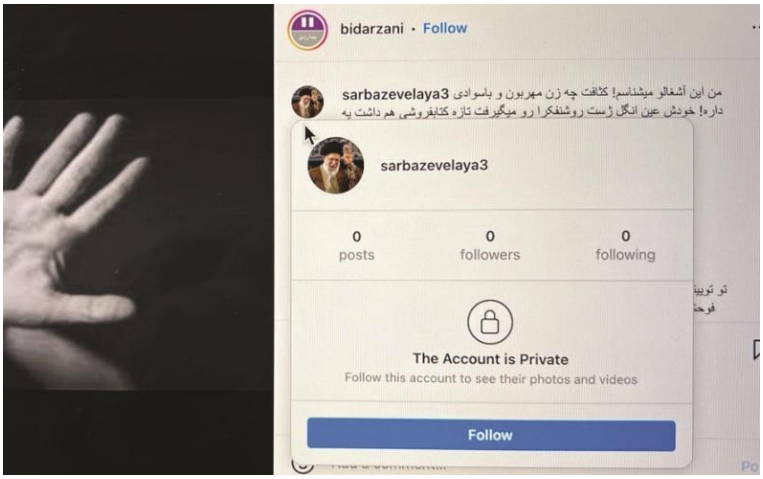


Image 442: Comment by 'Zero Kilometres, Soldier of Velayat (Leader)' and his knowledge of me and my wife.

> 'I know this rubbish! Filth! What a kind and educated woman they are! They themselves were like parasites living off intellectuals. What's more, they even had a bookstore . . .'

They really made hay with the fact that this foreign-educated individual, who, ironically, worked in the field of women and gender, was now 'revealed' to be an abuser. In reality, it was an approach that was both explicitly ideological and destructive, painting a black picture and revealing deep-rooted, large-scale score-settling, for which I had become a tool.

In those moments, reading the comments and posts, the hideous face of my interrogator, Seyyed, kept appearing before my eyes, mocking me or, as my lawyer would say, clicking his fingers. In fact, the security system exploited this situation well. *Mashregh News*, the media arm of the Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence, joined forces with other pages and groups. Even the Reyhaneh website, belonging to the Supreme Leader's sisters, capitalised on this news, claiming that 'this individual', meaning me, had been a defender of women's rights and had sexually assaulted his female colleagues. The headline read, 'Opponent of Child Marriage Confirms Sexual Assault' (13th Shahrivar 1399/3 September 2020). Another headline blared: 'Passionate Women's Activist: Kameel Ahmady'.

Clearly and unequivocally, the entanglement and collaboration of cultural and social networks – in the guise of cultural industries or social movements claiming to confront social and cultural discrimination (like #MeToo) – with the military and security structure of society was revealing itself. In my case, this collaboration and these entanglements were becoming increasingly apparent. It was a case of the media and cultural industries scratching the back of the security and military structure of society, and vice versa. It was as if the cultural and media structure was serving the interests of the security and military structure and legitimising what it was pursuing in my case. If my interrogator had even a hand in sharing private messages obtained from hacking my phone or accessing



Image 443: Wholesale republishing of the clip made against me as a "sanctimonious defender of women's rights" by pro-regime accounts.

my laptop and phone after my arrest, he would certainly have congratulated himself on succeeding in taking the women's sector, or part of civil society, away from me.

Even if I want to be fair and not say that this whole affair was 100 per cent organised by the Revolutionary Guard's Intelligence, I have no doubt that they directed part of it. They had complete access to my private life. They had hacked my emails several times, and, during the interrogation, they were fully aware of all my contacts. That's why they were providing all the necessary raw materials to those who were fanning the flames.

I knew very well which colleagues and individuals had been interrogated before me and had been made to sign pledges. They truly rode the wave of the situation. I have no doubt that, like many other truths of these times, this too will eventually be revealed, and the sun of truth will shine on it. Those who changed their colours here should really fear that day.

In those days, many were accused of sexual assault, but it was myself and a few others who took hits from both domestic and foreign media. Why? From the perspective of Intelligence and the security services, I was a security prisoner. Because my area of work, as they themselves put it, was the 'women's sphere' – although it wasn't; most of my work concerned children. They hit me harder, wanting to call into question all activities in the women's sphere and have a tool for a Sharia-centric, violent and misogynistic approach. It's laughable, but as a friend said, perhaps in the history of the Islamic Republic, this was the first time that celebrity feminist 'sisters' and Intelligence 'brothers' from the Revolutionary Guard shared a consensus in crushing an individual, and that individual was me.

The screenshots on the following page show the renewed pressure being put on a former friend and colleague by the Revolutionary Guard, demanding she provide a written statement that I had raped and sexually assaulted her.

As I said before, at that time, I hired a private investigator. Before that, I had also sought advice from two IT experts, one of whom was from a European company, to identify the anonymous IDs that were using hashtags against me and to file a complaint against the Bidarzani page. It became clear that neither the main operators nor the domain and registration of Bidarzani were located in Iran. (Now, after some disagreements, some of the older members have left Bidarzani.) Therefore,

no action could be taken internally. Bidarzani, while focusing on me, pretended to be impartial and only published narratives without individuals' full names. Of course, the game was clear and simple: as I said before, after posting each narrative, anonymous IDs would complete the work and come and hashtag my name in the comments on Twitter and Instagram. This method allowed Bidarzani, the Iranian version, to find a way out of the existing rules of the movement, to maintain a chic, impartial appearance, to be the undisputed champion of aggrieved women's rights, and to legitimise its work and the concerns it always claimed to have.

To achieve this goal, it used women themselves, mainly young and perhaps bereaved girls, as tools. In other words, the structure of the movement that had been formed to achieve women's rights and expose the abuse of women was using women themselves as tools, thus exploiting them in another way. This time, it was as if the women themselves were exercising power over themselves.



Image 444: Pressure from IRGC Intelligence to obtain testimony.

Part 1 (Top-Left Screenshot)
Right (Sender in Blue): Hello, how are you?
Left (Sender in Grey): Hello. Thanks, I'm not bad. Are you well?
Right: Thanks, all well.
Right: You well?
Left: What can I say, they pushed me out.
Right: God help you.
Left: Why?
Right: I told you a thousand times to leave on time.
Left: You don't listen.
Right: You acted stubbornly.
Left: [Emojis: Two women facepalming, one grinning face]
Left: I fought until the last bullet.

Part 2 (Top-Right Screenshot)
Left: After my release, I didn't have anything to do with you?
Left: These people also.
Right: Yes.
Left: Said I should give a message of testimony against you.
Right: Those same ones?
Left: The people didn't change.
Right: Who?
Left: About two months ago, I don't know the exact date.
Right: Testimony about what?
Left: They are crazy.
Left: That you tricked me.
Right: Did you leave?
Part 3 (Bottom-Left Screenshot)
Right: I don't know, ask yourself.
Left: Okay, I am asking. Maybe they forced them?
Right: Pressure is always there.
Right: I didn't accept this anymore. That was nonsense.
Left: That you would deceive me under the guise of knowledge and arrange things.
Right: What do you mean I tricked you?
Left: What kind of talk is that?
Left: Meaning you felt enlightened.
Left: And you wanted to attract me under the guise of supporting women.
Right: And then yes.
Left: [Emojis: Three women facepalming]
Left: It's embarrassing.
Part 4 (Bottom-Right Screenshot)
Right: I'm really sorry.
Right: Were you scared?
Left: Not any more.
Left: I had seen it once.
Left: This time I was more in control of myself.
Right: You would defend my ideas?! What does that mean?
Left: It means the things you say against the regime's ideas. Especially this child marriage.

> Left: And your last project about the conditions included in the marriage contract.
> Left: Look, it was so much nonsense and bullshit, I just looked.
> Left: That man was [Name Redacted].
> Left: He was obsessed with three pages [Name Redacted].
> Right: It's good you were in control. I got very upset. I'm truly sorry, but you yourself are a witness to what they are doing and that they are using every means to attack me and defame me.

The investigator I hired sent one of his colleagues to Shiraz, as one of the important locations for me was Shiraz because of the presence of Ms RM. The private investigator clarified some issues for me. The connections those individuals had, the backgrounds and information of the people who were mainly claiming in these narratives that it was their first relationship (and, interestingly, they focused a lot on the issue of virginity, which was also their common and important point) revealed a conflict and contradiction in my case. This was despite the importance of these issues and the way they and their publishers highlighted them, coupled with the lenient positions some feminist approaches took regarding any form of virginity.

They saw virginity as a means of preserving ancient order and traditions, a form of surrender to a patriarchal structure stemming from men's monopolistic and possessive behaviour. They were constantly making sustained efforts to encourage young girls, directly and indirectly, to experiment and enter into multiple sexual relationships by theorising, producing content and even manipulating and distorting the results of biological sciences and the history of social evolution.

What was most interesting was that, throughout my collaboration with people, most of them claimed equality and always spoke of ownership of their own bodies. These weren't people who were unaware of these categories and the boundaries of relationships between men and women.



Image 445: Bidarzani's explanation regarding the principles of publishing narratives.

> User: Bidarzani @Bidarzani
> 3- Narratives where the name of the abuser or other individuals are mentioned cannot be published.
> 4- Bidarzani is in no rush or haste when it comes to verifying and publishing the narratives.
> It is obvious that Bidarzani media cannot publish narratives that violate the principles mentioned.
> User: firoozeh mohajer @F...
> Replying to @Bidarzani
> Otherwise, one possibility is that you will be accused of defamation and the matter will go to court.

Alongside these issues, we realised that almost all the social media accounts had the same IP address and were created on the mobile lines of a few specific people. It was then that I understood the role of Ms RM and that of the first narrator, who had opened several accounts, with and without identities, to create hashtags against me, and even brazenly wrote

against me from one of these accounts – an account that reviewed and introduced books – and responded to comments. I will go into the details of these cases in the fact-checking section below.

On the night I went out with the ride-sharing service, I returned home as morning arrived. It was a home where, in the absence of my son and wife, it was unbearable to breathe. I endured it for a few hours and went out again. This time I walked aimlessly through the coronavirus-ridden streets of Tehran, and when I returned at night, I managed to fall asleep with great difficulty. When I woke up in the morning, without any hesitation, I went to the carpark of my house, started the car and drove out of Tehran.

I, who always plan my trips, had taken two impromptu journeys in less than a month. This time, too, my destination was not specific – so much so, I ran out of petrol on the Tehran-Karaj motorway and had to buy a few litres in the middle of the highway for several times the normal price.

One of the people who showed me a lot of sympathy in those days was a friend named Fatemeh, who we called Baran. She had a security file and taught at a university in Arak before her dismissal. She was also one of the people who criticised the action and cancellation of my membership in the Sociological Association and objected to their procedure. When she realised I was aimlessly on the road, she became worried and asked me to be her guest in Ardabil for a few days. I was embarrassed. I felt afraid of most women. I had, in a way, lost my confidence around women, feeling like a naked, mismatched creature in their presence. I would jokingly ask her how she dared let me, the alleged assailant and harasser, into her house!

She was a truly enlightened soul. It was through her that I was introduced to Dr Ahmad Bokharaei around that time. I'll never forget how kindly and chivalrously Dr Bokharaei listened to my story on the phone, and later in my friend Dr Alireza Kermani's garden in Karaj. Bokharaei, himself a longstanding member of the Sociological Association and head of the Department of Social Issues and Harms and the Department of Philosophy of Social Sciences, knew the entire structure and workings of the Association inside and out. He quickly noticed serious flaws in the process of issuing the Association's statement and said he would challenge the Association, which he did before too long, as you read earlier.

I stayed in Ardabil for four days, and the virtue of that four-day trip was thanks to the presence of a sympathetic friend who distracted me a little from what had happened to me. Baran had just lost her father and was not in a good emotional state herself, yet she tried to be a good listener to my words and pains. When I left her house, I felt better.

From Ardabil, I headed north toward the Heyran Pass and from there onto the rural roads. I wanted to get away from the city and its people. I tried to minimise my access to my phone, to read and see less. I ended up in Turkmen Sahra, and there, following consultation and help from my friend and spiritual acquaintance, Mamoosta Seyyed Jamal Vazhi, I went to the village of Qara Bolagh near the city of Aqqala,[1] about twelve miles north of Gorgan. Coincidentally, there was to be a graduation ceremony for Sunni students who had completed several years of theological studies.

The programme was scheduled to last three days. Through an acquaintance with another friend who had recently been introduced to me, I became involved in the ceremony, which was interesting and worth seeing in its own right. Like a lost soul, I spent a few days there. If anyone had asked me the simple question of why I had come there, I would have had no answer. I stayed in and around Aqqala for a few days, in areas where the ruins of a recent flood were still visible. Until then, despite having visited all the provinces of Iran, I had seen very little of Turkmen Sahra. After leaving there, I turned the car toward Yazd and reached the vast Lut Desert.

Somehow, deep down, I knew it would be the last time I saw Iran. At the suggestion of my other friend, Alireza Kermani, who was very supportive during that period – even protesting the Sociology Association's actions by not only refusing the position of secretary of Childhood Sociology, but also by leaving the group – I travelled from Yazd to Kerman and then to Isfahan. I have very good friends there. My other friends in Kerman, and especially in Isfahan, were following my situation closely throughout that time and insisted that I come to them.

1 Aqqala, or Agh Ghaleh, is a very small, cosy town in Turkmen Sahra that, in addition to wheat, barley, rice and legumes, also produces handicrafts such as Turkmen carpets that are popular and valuable. Due to its rich and ancient background, Aqqala has many ancient sites that attract enthusiasts of historical monuments.

I felt a little better in Isfahan. The onslaught was subsiding, and I had a bit of a chance to recover, but many things were still not back to normal, and amid this confused, disorganised and unsettling situation, I received the summons for the second session of my trial.



Image 446: Graduation ceremony for theology students. Qara Bolagh village, September 2020 (Shahrivar 1399).

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Other Side of The Story Is Mine

A universal proverb says, 'Every story has two sides.' The first side of the story has been told, and I hope its narrators have the patience and intellectual maturity to understand that I also have the right to recount what happened from my perspective and, just as I read their writings, to have them read my writings.

It's easy to say in a simple sentence: I am not the person described in the Bidarzani Instagram page and the published sexual narratives. Like everyone else, I make mistakes, and I take responsibility for them, but many parts of the published narratives are not only untrue but completely contrary to reality, and I must state the realities that were lost in the dust of those days.

I wrestled with myself a great deal about whether or not to go into the details of the truth, and, if so, to what extent, in what context and with what logic. Some believed, and still believe, that such matters should be left alone so that time can cover them with the dust of oblivion, or they insist that, the less said about this, the better. Others say that if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear from scrutiny. I know that some will criticise me for implicitly and indirectly referring to the names and identities of some of the narrators, thus violating ethics, although I did exactly the same thing and adopted the same approach that they did.

However, if those same individuals were in my position, they would likely want to speak clearly and transparently about what happened. Human decency dictates that identity and reputation should be viewed equally and bilaterally, regardless of gender. But when the finger is

pointed at a woman, some people sensationalise and genderise the situation, and, whether intentionally or not, normalise the violence.

Addressing these narratives isn't easy, but I experienced the most psychological and social damage when they were published. I found myself in a bizarre situation where neither speaking nor remaining silent offered help. A particular faction was meticulously and systematically completing a jigsaw of fabricated accusations against Kameel Ahmady, striving with all their might to portray him as an even more aggressive and abusive figure. If I remained silent, they would declare it confirmation. If I spoke, they would seek signs to refute my statements and insist on the false content of the narratives. The goal was to prevent me from continuing my activities, but writing this autobiography is testament to the fact that I am still continuing my work. I had hoped, though, that these individuals would emerge from behind their fake accounts and IDs and narrate with their real identities, even dragging me to any court and geographical location in this vast world so that everything could be clarified publicly with documents and evidence. As a close friend kept saying, 'Kameel, did they really not think that, as a researcher, the most important thing you've learned in your life is to split hairs and not let go of a matter until you get to the bottom of it? Why did they trap themselves so recklessly? If they knew you well, they would have guessed that you wouldn't sit quietly but would pursue them!'

Over the past two years, I have tried to participate more than before in meetings and forums related to peace and gender and to critically examine myself and my past. I cannot change anything in the past, and even proving what I did versus what I have been accused of is difficult. Of course, I must emphasise that in addressing these narratives, I am not simply trying to exonerate myself but striving to present at least an accurate picture of what happened, so that a discerning audience can establish a connection between the two accounts and distinguish the real and unreal for themselves. I am providing a small portion of the documents, including my emails and chats with the relevant individuals, and I have kept the remaining documents and evidence, which are more private and much clearer, and if there is a need to present them in the public or legal sphere, I will definitely publish them. I am openly and eagerly ready to answer questions about my actions and behaviour, and I have voluntarily spoken about my mistakes.

Now, I feel it's my right to address the contradictions in the narratives published about me, but I won't forget to apologise again, before discussing the accounts, to those I may have hurt in any way. Perhaps one day I can forgive those who falsely accused me of the most heinous charge possible! I also offer my apologies to those who followed my research and were shocked by the publication of these accounts.

Despite all the injustice I've suffered, I see the #MeToo movement in Iran as a positive development. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that human movements and trends also entail issues and consequences that can be unpleasant. My life was harmed by such circumstances, and my human identity and professional standing were attacked by the unfair publication of sexual narratives. Many who followed the saga have probably forgotten it, or, after the recent decline and scandals involving some #MeToo cases and the public disputes and disagreements of its organisers in Iran, it no longer holds the same importance for them. But as someone who is constantly examining social problems, I believe it's necessary, now that the intense emotions of those days have subsided, to share my own account, which is the right of us all!

Apology and Motivation for Reviewing Sexual Harassment Allegations

Here, before discussing the accounts and accusations levelled against me, this time more transparently, clearly and explicitly than in the statement I published, I will first address those who accused me of harassment.

The accounts of sexual harassment attributed to me, influenced by a feminist movement, attacked my human identity and my professional and social standing. These sexual allegations not only questioned my individual character and identity in an unethical manner, but also damaged my position as a researcher of social issues and harms, to which I have dedicated years of my life. Therefore, based on both ethical and social necessity, and to defend the position I worked so hard for, I rose to defend myself, to follow a logical and rational process by discussing these narratives.

Addressing these accounts and recalling them is not easy, as I felt the greatest amount of psychological and social distress and harm when they were published. However, I am a graduate of qualitative and field

research, and my professional mission requires me to state this matter transparently and with documentation. I also consider transparency to be the right of my audience and those who have followed my research concerns throughout the years. That's why I have submitted to reviewing and scrutinising those accusatory sexual narratives. I still believe that one of the reasons for expressing these distorted and fabricated accounts, at least from several people, was to discredit my personal and academic reputations.

But before clarifying and stating my motives for reviewing the unjust accusations of sexual harassment, I seek forgiveness from all those who have felt hurt by my behaviour. My first apology is dedicated to the narrators and claimants who have accused me. It is fair and humane for me to try to see the world from their perspectives – to walk in their shoes. I concede that some of my actions have caused them distress. I hope that now they have recounted their stories to everyone and accused me of harassment, they will be patient and hear the same story from my side, but with some evidence and documentation. I hope that one day, in their own quiet moments, they will fairly review and judge what has passed between us.

My second apology is to those who have followed my academic work and group research, who have always inspired my respect. I know that reading untrue and unrealistic accounts has damaged their trust, beliefs and perceptions. I apologise for this damage and the adverse impact on all those who read or followed these matters.

I also apologise to all the individuals and colleagues involved in my projects who have been affected and perhaps disheartened by the events that have transpired. I understand them, and I invite them to read my evidence and proofs in the fact-checking section below and to judge again.



Image 447: Apologies

Finally, I apologise to civil society, activists involved in social issues and reducing

harms, activists for women's and gender issues, and those who, with sincerity and humanistic and anti-oppression approaches, have spent years of their lives on important and risky projects of this kind, enduring the hardships and ups and downs of rocky roads, and continuing to move forward despite all the difficulties and limitations of such work. Naturally, this group will also have different opinions, after reading the fact-checks.

I must admit that my contribution to this turmoil stems from shortcomings, some of which arose from my poor decisions, and I am by no means proud of all the actions and behaviours I have displayed. Some of these behaviours, of course, originate from different cultures and communication methods. But others have been because of negligence, carelessness and perhaps even excesses that I have indulged in. I accept that, in the realm of work, especially in close and sometimes uninhibited communication with people who collaborated in my research, both men and women, I behaved intimately and, so to speak, outside the defined rules and customs of work in a country like Iran. This is devoid of any justification or interpretation, and I will certainly move forward from now on in line with the existing and prevalent standards of the surrounding culture, although I have always criticised parts of it and do not necessarily have a habit of rejecting restrictive frameworks.

Although it might seem that my scope of work and my expertise in the fields of sociology and anthropology should have made me more aware and vigilant, preventing such oversights, if we look at the issue fairly, we cannot ignore the hegemony of upbringing and culture, the lack of sufficient awareness and education, and the absence of performance-monitoring and evaluation in the occurrence of such events, which facilitate mistakes of this kind.

Now, as I look back, I think to myself that perhaps the reason for some of my familiarities with people who later referred to them as 'violence' and 'harassment' was that I did not have complete understandings of those individuals. I didn't imagine that people who had entered into relationships willingly would later interpret them differently. I didn't imagine that, when a relationship ended for whatever reason, the two sides would become enemies. And I didn't imagine that these people, most of whom defined themselves as progressive, courageous, avant-garde women, equal to men, would see themselves in an unequal relationship and remain silent.

Even if my childhood history of sexual abuse – which I spoke about transparently in Part Three of this autobiography and which some might unscrupulously use against me now and in the future – is considered with scrutiny, it becomes clear that someone like me has a much higher level of empathy for such traumas and crises in relationships with others, because I myself have tasted its devastating poison. Through various processes of socialisation and having supervised several research projects on it, I know what damage it inflicts on the human soul and psyche.

As someone whose life experiences have been the foundation of my work and most of my research, I have fought against oppressive dominance and harmful traditions. I have conducted group research on the violation of children's rights from various perspectives, such as female and male genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage, LGBTQ+ individuals, child labour, and sexual abuse of children, and I have always tried to reconstruct the traumas inflicted on myself and others.

I have strived for years to get to know myself better and to rehabilitate the traumas and harms I have suffered, facing my fears bravely. Naturally, I don't want to see anyone else in this position, and I try to make at least the world around me a better place for people to live, grow and flourish, if I can't change the whole world.

We know that most people who abuse their children have been subjected to violence and abuse in their own childhoods, but it is not the case that most people who have been abused in childhood abuse their own children. The main reason for this is that most people who were abused as children have learned two lessons in life: one, to try to identify with the abuser, and, two, not to repeat what they have experienced. If this were not the case, every family, small and large, would be fundamentally made up of abusers and victims.

In the countless studies conducted on this subject, and from my own life and research, I know many people who have lived through horrific experiences, suffering sexual and emotional trauma beyond comprehension. Yet, these individuals are now among the finest people I know. Enduring hardship in life doesn't preclude us from becoming good people. If each of us were just a little more responsible, wiser, more ethical and more appreciative than the people we have come in contact with, we could be confident that society was progressing. The things that happened to us would be less likely to happen to others in the future.

Considering the bad experiences and abuse I have endured, I could have become a psychological abuser, perhaps justifying my behaviour by leaning on my past. Not only did I *not* do this, but also, like many survivors of abuse, I was pushed to re-evaluate and reassess myself to my core. This was my choice, a choice that became the backbone of my research, with childhood, child-rearing, child sexual abuse and social harms becoming the central focus of much of it. With the birth of my son, this attention and importance given to children's education and providing them with safe havens intensified even further.

I hope that, for the thoughtful and fair-minded readers of this autobiography, these revelations are not interpreted as a justification for the actions and behaviours attributed to me. I have always been generous in learning, and now, with all my cultural knowledge, I stand here to share the product of my experiences and learnings with everyone, and to fulfil my role, however small, in the process of awareness-raising and enlightenment, and to keep alive this longstanding tradition of learning and imparting knowledge.

In this regard, I must take a positive view of this whole incident, as it has transformed all those threats into opportunities, making me stronger and even more determined to speak about my past and to advance my studies of women, gender and minorities in a more comprehensive and clearer way. Through this study, my perspective was refined and purified, and I became more aware of the weaknesses and shortcomings in my views on women and gender issues. It even helped me to better understand the critical perspective on this field and to delve into it more deeply.

Despite the events and incidents that have recently befallen me, I've not lost my belief, motivation, desire and commitment to my field of work. I'm determined to pursue this path anew with unwavering resolve and a human and ethical commitment, enriched by experience and having addressed past shortcomings and flaws. Although I focused my activism and research years ago on other areas, such as children, identity and ethnicity – and addressing them is part of my working life and academic existence – I will continue this new path alongside my other research. Now, more than ever, I believe that there's a dire need for research that focuses solely on sexual desire and an analysis of sexual relationships and their complexities, and perhaps at some point I'll undertake it, drawing on my

sexual experiences and the details of my relationships, as well as my worldview on gender and sexuality.

In the current situation, the community of women and men, especially in Iran, needs convergence, unity and consensus more than ever to confront conservative and reactionary structures, and to act in solidarity with the rejected and excluded, who comprise an ever-widening circle. Now, more than ever, we need mutual understanding to achieve egalitarianism and democracy, and it goes without saying that the role of men in creating and facilitating this process, and their presence shoulder to shoulder with women at the forefront of the struggle, is fundamental. Without calling them to this arena of combat and battle, achieving gender equality will not progress beyond the mirage and the slogan. Therefore, I will continue this transfer of experience, this arena of interaction, and this path of dialogue, because, with the wealth of experience that I have gained from these attacks on my thinking, I have re-examined myself. I will not turn away from the responsibilities I bear; rather, by accepting mistakes and confronting fears, I can act more effectively than before.

I've always believed that nothing and, I repeat, *nothing* in the intellectual world of an independent researcher should be so sacred that it cannot be criticised – not even freedom and human rights. Not even women's rights. Because I know full well that sanctification and the lack of courage to critique some of the negative and populist aspects of any idea or thought are very damaging to the researcher. Where there is an accumulation of power, the researcher cannot be afraid to criticise and question parts of any idea or thoughts that can be misused. This is how those same ideas, in the long run, become monsters that mercilessly turn against their subjects and devour any critical voices, such that no one else has the strength to speak out against them.

I am always ready, with an open face and an eager heart, to answer for my actions and deeds in any field.

The documents presented here, and the reasons explained, represent only a small fraction of all the material shared between me, the narrators and others involved in these events. These exist as emails, text messages and audio and written messages from platforms such as Yahoo Chat, Viber, Telegram and WhatsApp. There simply isn't space to include more here. However, I am ready and willing to provide the relevant documents and engage in discussions with activists, stakeholders, media outlets, the court,

the narrators themselves and those associated with them, whenever needed, to shed light on other facets of the truth.

As I said at the outset, the investigation of these accounts is not solely to exonerate myself or to insult or denigrate individuals, or to question the principal and legitimate aims of the #MeToo movement. Rather, while gaining empathy, revealing the truth and learning from our mistakes are vital, the authenticity of the accusations levelled against me and the motives of those behind them must also be scrutinised. More importantly, readers should be able to hear the whole story, or the other side of the story. Only then will those who have judged me, or who wish to sit in judgement, have the necessary tools to do so rightly. In other words, by hearing the arguments and evidence from the other side of the relationship – in this case, me – they can make a more balanced and fairer judgement.

The Difficulties of Examination

They say that a fascist appears in the guise of the most innocent of people. In my case, too, the devil revealed itself in the guise of the most progressive movement in the field of women's rights of the last decade. In this process, some with personal agendas and, of course, under the direction of others, entered the arena and targeted individuals who had caused no harm, damaging society and people's perceptions.

Although this experience was bitter and painful, it prompted me to review my weaknesses and strengths and to conduct complete overhauls of my personal and professional lives.

Ms RM and one or two others did everything they could to bring me down, and the narratives were published at an accelerated pace to cause me greater harm. Until recently, she was still speaking in various Telegram groups and elsewhere, under her real name, saying that I had raped her and, in fact, had taken her virginity, but that she had said nothing for her own safety. This excuse is more laughable than anything.

I generally worked on what the Government viewed as sensitive subjects, and she could have filed a complaint in Iran itself. Considering my position, and especially the blood ties her paternal family had with one of the country's most influential religious authorities, she could have secured legal support far more easily than others. But I had not assaulted her, and she had no evidence. Even her account would have been

challenged in court, and she herself knew I had committed no crime. So, to settle scores with me – believing I had stood in her way with my research – she was better off waiting for a good opportunity, which arose with my arrest and the launch of the #MeToo movement in Iran.



Image 448: Iranian #MeToo movement logo.

Writing this autobiography, and especially this particular section, gives me the chance to speak my mind without fear and present some of my evidence – evidence that, had a fair court been established and had I been questioned at the time instead of being subjected to the shameful behaviour of the Sociological Association, I could have presented and used to defend myself. Under such circumstances, I have no qualms about addressing certain private matters and breaking the sanctity of sensitive and conflict-ridden sexual and gender issues.

I've become increasingly aware that many people, under the guise of human rights and women's rights, use their gender and the sensitive issues surrounding women to undermine others' standings, damage reputations, seek revenge, obtain funding and privileges, compete to climb the ladder of modern identity, and so on. In reality, these actions often lack a genuine, transparent foundation, which itself threatens to weaken and violate women's rights and has a destructive, even disastrous, effect on liberation movements of this kind.

In the case of the sexual harassment allegations, accusations were levelled against me by several anonymous women, with complete freedom and under the protective umbrella of a few individuals, in collaboration with one or two funded feminist groups and notoriety-seeking influencer types, who had their own specific goals, approaches and activities. The published accusations, according to them, were nurtured and directed within a working group and then presented in the public sphere. The individuals involved, without sufficient experience and with a clumsy and slipshod application of the global #MeToo movement outside Iran, edited, arranged and published pre-prepared narratives by analysing and

accessing my work information and personal life, and by having insight into certain aspects of my personality.

Using psychological manipulation and carefully constructed narratives to persuade their audience, they worked systematically to ensure their names and efforts were recorded as pioneers of Iran's women's movement. To some extent, they succeeded in turning me into one of their cases, although that unity and solidarity soon crumbled. The ensuing reports, riddled with inaccuracies from various individuals, and the accusations of favouritism and backstabbing, dealt a severe blow to public trust, especially for genuine victims in this situation.

Bidarzani was the sole platform relentlessly churning out content, sometimes even two stories a day, accusing me of sexual harassment under the hashtag #rape. Ironically, its foray into the #MeToo movement began with stories about me. From a certain point onward, verifying the stories became secondary to simply 'proving' my 'pattern of abusive behaviour' by increasing the number of accusers. Their project operated under the assumption that I was a serial abuser who had, at the very least, offended many people through a repeated pattern of behaviour.

However, the formation of the Bidarzani front, or so-called battlefield, was quite obvious, even amateurish. The day before it published its first story against me, a note titled 'Do not silence rape victims by accusing them' was posted. The day after the first story was published, an article about the #MeToo movement titled 'Breaking the silence is the first step' was posted by the page's administrators, indicating that they were preparing readers for this story and subsequent ones. Analysing the publication process and the speed at which these stories were released, one after the other in quick succession, suggests that these stories had been prepared in advance within a targeted framework, each covering the unsaid parts of the others. Amid this movement, virtual influencers and two popular feminist pages played significant roles, and some journalists joined them.

Although I know that the intentions and goals of some of these people were purer than others (whose true faces were later revealed to everyone), I leave these individuals to their consciences. I attribute the responsibility for this to those who led and directed the matter with their intentions and goals, whatever they were.

In these stories, the individuals who accused me did not disclose their identities. In the spirit of truth-seeking, just as they have referred to me using my first name and surname, I will mention three of them by name here. Regarding the first account, I will corroborate a portion of what was written and, understanding the particular, difficult emotional circumstances and fluid gender identity of the narrator, will speak about them without mentioning their first initial. However, they and their friends were audaciously and consistently present in the comments under all the accounts attributed to me, using their own social media accounts, and spoke here and there in various groups using their real names, for which they were even praised. This indicates that they are seemingly not at all averse to revealing their name. Even to this day, they occasionally create X posts against me, and I have strangely become someone they believe will be the cause of all their life's problems, for eternity.

I include links to the original accounts in this section. As some comments and anonymous accounts that hash-tagged my name were later deleted, and in case these accounts are changed in the future, I have preserved videos and screenshots of all of them, including the comments below each one, as part of my legal documentation.

Subsequently, I will recount the details of each case from my perspective, based on the manner and date of acquaintance, and the nature of the relationship and its outcome. I will provide evidence and documentation. I have tried to ensure that these details and documents do not test the reader's patience, so what is presented in this section is a small portion of the personal communications I had during my acquaintance with these individuals, and I have archived all the information in case it is later needed.

In this process, I have striven to scrutinise each story, taking into account legal considerations, by following logical and meaningful sequential steps. In the first stage, I presented the narrator's claims in the text of their conversations with Bidarzani, and then I moved forward with the second part, namely the scrutiny. In line with each claim, I tried to bring and refer to the documents and data I had from my communications with that narrator.

In the third section, I reveal the false or fabricated parts of the claims by analysing and pointing out the meaningful relationship or meaningful contradictions between the first two sections, namely the narrator's claims

and the documents I possess. Of course, sometimes these contradictions are also clearly present in the text of the narrator's claims themselves.

My aim has been to avoid judgmental, advisory or emotional language in this chapter. Sometimes I have succeeded, and sometimes, due to the hardships I have endured, I may not have been able to do so.

First Account[1]

This lady was from Isfahan. I mentioned meeting her in the Chapter Seventeen and my memoirs about the unveiling of the book *In the Name of Tradition*. She was keen and interested in my work and, at that time, intended to work for a local newspaper.

At the beginning of our acquaintance, we only had telephone and Telegram contact, and she would tell me almost everything that happened in Isfahan. My friends in Isfahan were mostly middle-aged, but, according to them, this woman frequented gatherings of environmental enthusiasts, most of whom were older than her. Later, on a business trip to Isfahan, I saw her in a gathering of my friends. She was eager and insistent on attending gatherings and research meetings. I was working on a child-marriage project, and when I went to Isfahan for initial identification I



Image 449: Unveiling of research entitled *In the Name of Tradition* (a study on FGM). Children's House, Isfahan, February 2017.

1 Bidarzani (2020a) [Instagram post]. 24 August. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEQyTBtJaqo/ (Accessed: 21 August 2022).

discussed the matter with her, as well. At the very beginning of our acquaintance, at a book launch, she had expressed interest in collaborating on our projects and said she would like to join us in future research.

For a limited time, we had some remote collaboration on two field-based research projects. I never imagined that one day she would publish an account claiming that, on the first day of a work assignment, I made reckless sexual jokes with her, and that, on the second day, under the pretext of work analysis, I deceitfully lured her to a secluded house, locked the door, and, while we were both drunk, did what I wanted with her and then abandoned her.

After the initial period, she continued working with me, but throughout our year and a half of collaboration, she claims, I constantly threatened her not to talk to anyone about the incident. But she ultimately saw the #MeToo movement as an opportunity to say what had happened to her, so that at least others who worked with me would be less at risk. In the article, she emphasised that she was not sure anyone would believe her, because the abuser was a well-known person who had been on the BBC and had also been recognised by the United Nations.

From the clues in her story, I easily realised who the writer was. Her account of what happened between us is not honest nor fundamentally complete, but rather selective.

The day I went to Isfahan for her to help with the first field-survey session, my friend Jamileh was with us. She and her uncle are family friends, and they told me, 'Don't bring your car from Naqadeh city; let's go in our car.'

This woman, who was interested in research, had previously coordinated with me to accompany us during the initial scan of several villages around Isfahan. In fact, she was supposed to see more of the work environment, and, if she then still wanted to cooperate, I would write a work contract with her and officially start her activity alongside the rest of the team members.

I had arranged to meet her in the Atashgah area. When we arrived, she was arguing with her father. On the pavement, she was screaming at her father, saying, 'Why don't you let me go? I'll be back by noon!'

Her father replied, 'You want to ditch me, as always. You're lying again and causing trouble for us!'

Jamileh quietly said, 'Kameel, forget it! This girl will only bring you trouble and grief. Give up on her and let's go do your work ourselves.'

Jamileh whispered, 'You can see their situation is unusual!' But I'd given her my word, and I asked Jamileh to speak to her father, too, to gain his trust.

We went together to see her father, and he said he was afraid we'd be arrested and his daughter would be taken away. We talked and reassured him that such a thing wouldn't happen, and we gave him our details and phone numbers. Eventually, he agreed, but it was clear that the family didn't have proper communication and their relationships were turbulent.

When this woman got into the car, she started complaining about her family's traditional behaviour, her father, who is a Seyyed,[1] and his rigid beliefs. She said she was fed up with her family.

For several years, she's been using an anonymous Twitter/X account to comment on my alleged rape of her, and also occasionally to 'stroke' me (i.e. give attention or emotional reinforcement), which actually reveals interesting aspects of her perspective and contradictions.



Image 450: A Tweet by the first narrator on the social media account attributed to her.

> 'I deeply want my dad and brother to die because apparently that's the only time I might be able to breathe a sigh of relief from their useless existence.'

I'd seen her before at a launch event, but this was our first face-to-face meeting. Although we'd spoken on Telegram and become a little more familiar with each other, she was very uninhibited. She immediately and

1 A seyyed is a person who is a descendent of the prophet Mohammad.

repeatedly talked about her sexual views, her lifestyle and sexual encounters, and those of her peers. Overall, she pretended to be much more experienced and assertive than her age suggested, and I later realised that some of her words and behaviours were just for show.

That day, we went to three villages and did some initial interviews, or initial 'scans' of the field. Since it was her first experience, I taught her a little about how to deal with research subjects and how to ask questions. I sent my friend with her, and I went to see the men and young people of the village. That day, we just wanted to collect several sample cases, and, in the end, we conducted six interviews to begin with.

On the way back, she kept talking about her connections with various groups, about tricking her father and going to cool parties in Isfahan, and her words had the flavour of attention seeking.

Jamileh was really surprised that day. Because her field of work was different from mine, it was the first time she'd encountered the things this girl was describing.

This girl spoke frankly and openly about sexual relationships and her circle of friends, and my friend and I joined in with jokes, although I joked more than my friend. Although she not only didn't have a problem with the discussion, but also was the leader of it, I tried to toe the line. Complex human relationships and the ways people interact are like the speed limits on a motorway. Sometimes you could go faster than the allowed speed and nothing unusual would happen, but, whatever the outcome, the right thing to do is to observe the speed limit. I should have controlled my speed and not joined in joking with her.

These discussions led me to tell her that I'd always wanted to conduct research on different groups, including these emerging categories belonging to the new generation in cities, and she enthusiastically agreed that, if I started this work, she would cooperate and introduce me to active groups herself.

I spent two half-days scoping out my subject in Isfahan. On Jamileh's recommendation, we didn't take the new recruit with us on the last morning. The new recruit explained her reasons, reiterating the points she'd made on the first day, and because her advice was logical, I accepted it. During those two days, the new recruit constantly messaged me on Telegram, and we were in communication.

Before my return to Tehran, we had arranged to meet for breakfast. I arrived early to Poshtkooh and, after finishing our work there, I said goodbye to Jamileh and her uncle. I intended to fly back to Tehran later, in the evening.

Our breakfast arrangement was not work-related. She had no work experience at all, so she could not have helped me categorise field data, contrary to her account. Furthermore, at this stage of the work, data categorisation does not happen. People familiar with my work, as well as others involved in my projects, know this well and understand that you cannot categorise data with six short interviews and an initial field scan.

We had a date that day, and we both knew it wasn't work-related. It would have had an atmosphere similar to the conversations we'd had on the previous days, and perhaps even more so. Moreover, the archived content of our conversations on Telegram proves my point and shows that we both knew what kind of date we were having.

When I read her account, I was deeply upset and re-examined the twenty-one text and voice messages from those two days, and especially from that day. Why would she lie? Wasn't it she who had come wearing almost formal attire, a floral headscarf and perfume? She had noticeable makeup, and nothing about her appearance suggested someone heading to a so-called data-processing work meeting.

In her account, this woman claimed that I took her to a quiet and secluded area. This is also untrue. I gave her the address of my friend's house, which is in a very well-known area of Isfahan. She called three times along the way, and I guided the driver on how to get there. The address I sent her and her messages constantly asking, 'Where is it?' and 'How many more minutes?' are still available on my Telegram.

On the way back from my friend's house, I took a taxi to the airport, and I dropped her off at Darvazeh Shiraz in Isfahan, where we said a warm goodbye. She wrote that I locked the door on her; why would I do that when the key was always on the door? She even claims that I was drunk and that she was in a secluded area on the fourth floor of a house where the door was locked – but none of this is true. I had told her that I was at my friend's house and that I was alone. She came of her own volition and very comfortably sat in the hall and living room, drinking alcohol and talking to me about her experiences. The day before, she had told me and

my friend Jamileh that she drank alcohol at parties and that it was completely normal for her.

In her account, she uses the expression, 'He did whatever he wanted with me,' but she says it vaguely and ambiguously. Do you know why? I have never talked about my personal matters, but now I have to tell the details of this and other accounts. If I don't explain what happened, it will create more questions and ambiguities, and my intention to verify the truth and tell my version of the story will not be achieved. As the English say, 'The devil is always in the details', and here it is the details that, in my opinion, help to falsify these distorted and selective accounts.

Our connection was a sexual relationship based on mutual consent. There was no ambiguity in it, neither in form, nor in intention, nor in execution. In this relationship, important issues such as age and experience differences and job titles were transgressed, but the work process only paved the way to our acquaintance. However, if we want to deal with it in a formal or legal framework, at that time we had not even entered into a formal, contractual work relationship, so our relationship could not fit into the category of 'domination and abuse at work' – but I completely agree that this relationship should not have happened. We only went out working together one morning, for a few hours. We talked mostly about ourselves, and I taught her the dos and don'ts of conducting a field interview, but, if you ask me if this relationship was right, my answer is definitely no, and that's why it was the only time it happened between us. Her reason for not repeating it was completely different, and I know readers will be interested to learn about it.

That day, we began sexual relations to a point and, when she said she was a virgin, we stopped. Her statement meant that continuing the sexual relationship was not possible, and I distanced myself. There was no sexual assault or unwanted relations. What took shape was a mutually consensual relationship that did not even lead to complete sexual intercourse/penetration. That type of relationship was cut off between us and never happened again.

We all know that, in the prevailing sexual culture in Iran, when a woman says, 'I am a virgin', there are only two options: either the sexual relationship continues in non-penetrative ways or it ends – because, in a conservative context where premarital virginity is highly valued, intercourse is often avoided but other sexual practices may occur. I know

this well, not only from lived experience, but also from the findings of research on current sexual mores in Iran – because I have repeatedly and on a large scale, through field data on temporary marriage, white marriage and the sexual activity and experimentation of LGBTQ+ groups, found this to be the reality.

She and I both know well where that relationship ended and how it ended. There was no compulsion at the start, nor in its continuation. Even if she'd asked to stop, there would have been no resistance from me, although she hasn't claimed she wanted to stop. That's exactly what happened. She knows – as (presumably) does her first female partner, and the man with whom she later had her first full sexual encounter – that she was a virgin and when she lost her virginity. She even announced losing her virginity in a Tweet afterward, a screenshot of which exists.

After that, we kept in touch by phone and Telegram, until one day she clearly and openly announced that she had lesbian tendencies, which is contrary to what she claims – that I knew about her sexual orientation from the day we met. Afterward, she always said, 'Kameel, I'm grateful to you, because it was because of that experience that I realised I wasn't attracted to men.' I have this confession in writing, in Telegram and WhatsApp messages from her.

She never, ever expressed dissatisfaction or even complained about the relationship we had. We even talked about it and joked about it twice, as evidenced by the Telegram messages that are still in my account backup, and I'm ready to make them public at any time. She says that this was repeated many times in our conversations because in reality she was a lesbian – although she has recently identified as bisexual. It should be mentioned that in recent years, she has mentioned these changes and the fluidity in her sexual orientation several times on her Twitter/X account.

Why doesn't it occur to anyone that this person used me as a tool, without my knowledge, to test her sexual inclinations and try to understand her sexuality? Perhaps if I had known from the beginning, clearly, that she wasn't sure of her sexual orientation, I would have behaved differently. She even hid her virginity from me at first. I had the right to know she was a virgin before starting a physical relationship, and that's a given in any relationship, by any standard.

Someone knowingly enters into a relationship for a while, pursues it as they wish, but when by chance or accident they find a suitable set of

circumstances, they use those circumstances to burden the other person with their problems – because of their personal struggle and need for self-expression, or because of an imagined rivalry. They achieve several goals: defeating a professional rival, delegitimising them for the short and long term, and creating obstacles in their professional and personal lives. Are such actions morally and humanely acceptable to any degree?

At no point did this woman tell me she had a bad memory of our encounter. After a while, she entered into relationships with several other men before returned to her previous orientation – attraction to women. Some time later she began to identify as bisexual (according to the Tweet below and other statements).

At one point, I even became involved with a woman living in Karaj, and, as I've mentioned before, when she had problems with a partner, she would consult me late at night, seeking my advice. What sane person would seek guidance from someone who had previously imprisoned them and done whatever they pleased to them?

In her account, and later in several other places, she claims I threatened her for eighteen months to prevent her from speaking out. This is a brazen lie, fabricated as architectural material for the #MeToo movement, either woven by herself or taught to her by that Twitter influencer who, she claims, first revealed this 'secret' to her. In all the correspondence we had, why is there not even a hint of coldness? Why is there nothing exchanged between us but a normal, friendly and empathetic tone? How inhumane is it to make such claims without any shame and, sadly, without even a shred of remorse, knowing full well that she has no evidence to support her accusations? If she can produce even a single word or even a hint of a threat from me at any time, then here's my challenge. There are dozens of text and voice messages on Telegram and WhatsApp from her that will prove the contrary.



Image 451: Recounting of bisexual experiences and the narrator's opinions on threesomes.

'I myself am interested and supportive, but I haven't been insulted a little by my lover because of this issue.'
'It has happened many times on Tinder/Badoo and HER that people have thought that I am either a prostitute or looking for a sugar daddy!'
'They would tell me, well, break up with your boyfriend and come, this gentleman I'm talking about is only 30 years older than you!'
'#Bisexual'
'Bisexuals, because of being bisexual, are not supportive and in love with threesomes! Maybe someone has this fantasy too, but the fact is that they understand that someone who talks about threesomes in the middle is really disgusting.'

In her narrative, she says, 'I distanced myself from him; I was no longer in contact with him.' How is it possible to distance yourself from someone but still consult them via Telegram late at night about private and sexual issues with your partner? How is it possible to distance yourself from someone, but then sign your first work contract with them the following

month, have your first official work experience with them and become a field operative in Isfahan for a limited study on white marriage and for a study on sexual diversity? She says she continued working because she needed a job, but how much was she paid for working on these research projects (which were funded privately) and what benefits did she receive that made her willing to continue working with a person with such a reputation? Wasn't she working elsewhere, as well, and wasn't she also involved in the Isfahan Municipality project during the holidays and so on? Didn't she always say that her family provided for her financial needs? Every claim she has made is self-defeating.

Now I hope that, with the data and the accurate account that I have provided of my relationship with her, I have enabled readers and audiences to make more logical judgements. The result of this could be a meaningful and, of course, rational connection between all my data and her claims, or, conversely, people may see contradictions and ambiguities resulting from the fabrication of my data or her claims. Which they see as more probable, and which they know to be true, is up to their own analyses and judgements.

Now, I address her directly. How was it that the following year, you dusted yourself off and travelled from Isfahan to Tehran to attend the launch of a research project you'd only briefly participated in? Isn't it true that you attended the launch of An Echo of Silence book at the National Library with a number of your friends? Isn't it true that you took group and individual photos with me, my friends and even my family at the end of that ceremony, all smiles? These photos and the complete video recording of the ceremony are still available on the National Library's website and my personal website. That night, you boarded a bus to return to Isfahan, and, on the way, you messaged me saying what a great launch it had been and how proud you were to be working with me. But before you reached Isfahan, you had an accident, broke your leg and spent several months with your leg in a cast. I felt so guilty after learning about it, thinking it had happened to you because of your attendance at the launch. In *Echo of Silence*, I mentioned you and the friend who was with us that day and thanked you for your voluntary presence.



Image 452: Book-launch ceremony for *An Echo of Silence*: *A Study on Child Marriage*. National Library, Tehran, August 2017.

In your account, you claimed that at the time of the intimate relationship and the 'incident' you were a member of the field team, that we were on a 'work assignment' and that I abused my position of power at work. This accusation is essentially based on a fallacy of your presence at work that afternoon and my position as your supervisor, which is supposed to prove that I exploited you due to professional and financial dominance. But were you a member of my work team at that time? Had you entered into a contract with me at that time, given that I conduct all my work from the beginning with a contract?

You claimed that you avoided me after that relationship. How could you have avoided me when you had field collaboration with me on the sigheh[1] and LGBTQ+ projects, which were after that date? And later, when I went back to the project archives, emails and especially your WhatsApp and Telegram calls to write this piece, I saw that we had exchanged 87 written and audio messages, some of which contained your personal woes about problems with your lover in Karaj. What do you say about those messages?

1 A temporary-marriage contract in Shia Islam.

How do you justify the photos of your presence and your recorded voice in your field work, which are still available in the research archive?

Isn't it true that you've become a tool of that pseudo-feminist influencer who feeds off young girls through their problems and their interests in the field of gender, and off the funds and likes she receives from them through her posts asking for spiritual and financial sustenance?



Image 453: Statements by the first accuser.

'I think for the first time in my life, aspects of my identity and work became understandable.'
'Well, on the occasion of Chaharshanbe Suri (I'll say why :)) I wrote a thread about autism. I hope you like it. What even is autism? Autism is a type of . . .'

> 'What do you expect from a therapist and what unpleasant experiences have you had in the #therapies you have experienced? The messages I personally received a lot were about complaining about being #homophobic or being judged.'

Isn't it the case that, to make your claims fit the mould of 'exploiting academic standing and unequal power to abuse women', you misrepresented your few hours of volunteering as being a project co-worker, so as to play the victim in the eyes of the public, feminist circles and especially of the person to whom you first told your story? By inflaming reactionary emotions, didn't you hope to incite a wave of protest against me? Isn't it the case that you tried to piece together a huge collection of related and unrelated fragments to showcase a 'victim of employer assault' collection, and then proudly declared yourself a brave pioneer and groundbreaking champion of women's struggles, to whom the women of Iran and the world should forever be indebted for your courageous exposé?

During my years living in Iran, I became more acquainted with the conflicts and lack of transparency in human relationships, especially between girls and boys. I saw that individuals, especially girls and women, for many reasons, such as restrictions and pressures, do not show transparency with their families, friends or even partners about what happens in their private lives. This is even more true for the LGBTQ+ community, due to the intensification of such restrictions and the existence of a controlling structure, especially on the fluidity of their sexual orientations. In your narrative, you offered no explanation of yourself, your nature, your inclinations or your lifestyle, and you portray yourself entirely unilaterally, mostly as a victim. You wrote,

> We were supposed to go and categorise the previous day's data and collect new data. He kept insisting we have breakfast together. I couldn't be ready at the time he wanted. I thought, since it was nearly time for him to leave and he had a flight in an hour, we'd go and do the data categorisation work, but he tricked me into going to a house in an area of the city where not a soul was to be seen. I only realised there was no escape from that situation when it was

> too late. I didn't struggle or resist. He was drunk and I was in a deserted area, on the fourth floor of a house locked from the inside. I had to let him do whatever he wanted to me . . .

What a weak and ridiculous justification you offer for being 'forced' to accept the meeting! How cunningly you tried to portray me as drunk and yourself as conscious but helpless and speechless! You didn't even mention drinking your own booze – cocktails, vodka and Red Bull. What data, fundamentally, could have been categorised, and what data could have been collected, and from where could we have collected it, that justified you accepting the meeting?

Interestingly, you write that I said we would go and collect newer data after categorising existing data, yet a little later you say that, since it was nearly time for me to leave on my flight, you went to do the data categorisation only with me. How could we have gone together to collect more data when you knew I was planning to leave? And if you knew I was about to depart, how could you have come to, as you put it, 'share the data files with me'? This is a term that has never existed in our field or style of work. Those who have worked with me are well aware that no such process exists in my work. What sometimes happens in the middle, but usually at the end, of qualitative, data-driven field projects is a process called 'coding', which is always done as a group and over many days.

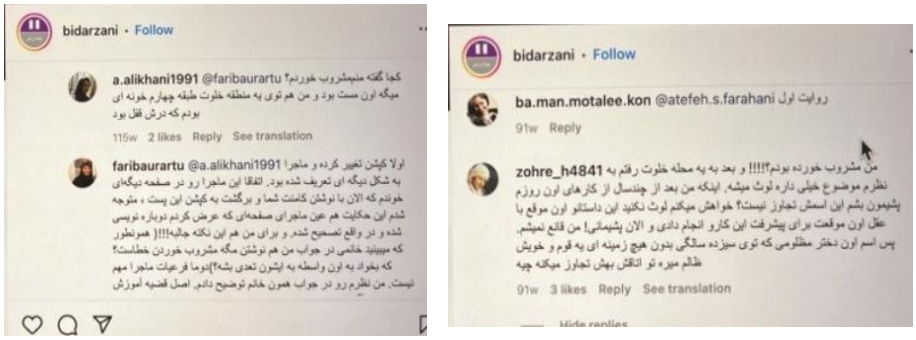


Image 454: The narrator's account challenged by users.

> *Top left:* 'Where did she say I drank alcohol? She says he was drunk and I was also in a secluded area on the fourth floor of a house where the door was locked.'

Bottom left: 'First of all, the caption has changed and the incident was described differently. Actually, I read this incident on another page, and now by writing your comment and returning to the caption of this post, I realised this story has also been rewritten exactly like the incident on the page I mentioned. And this point is also interesting to me!!!! As you can see, a lady in response to me also wrote, is drinking alcohol a mistake? that due to that, she should be assaulted? Secondly, the details of the incident are not important. I explained my opinion in response to that same lady. The main issue is education.'
Top right: 'the first narrative'
Bottom right: 'Did I drink alcohol?!!!!! And then went to a secluded area? In my opinion, the issue is getting very exploited/misused. That I should regret my actions of that day after several years, isn't that itself a violation? Please don't exploit this story. You did that work at that time with the understanding of that time for the progress of this work, and now you regret it! I am not convinced. So what is the name of that innocent girl who at thirteen years old, without any prior arrangement, goes to her cruel relative's room and he rapes her?'

How is it possible that you carried the wound of assault, with the depth and impact you claim it had on your soul and psyche, all this time, yet continued to collaborate with me? You became directly involved in projects concerning temporary marriage (sigheh) and the LGBTQ+ community. My field team interviewed people you introduced to us. You and one of your friends transcribed some of the interviews. You introduced me to some members of the LGBTQ+ community in Isfahan. You communicated and spoke with me about each and every one of these individuals via email, Telegram and telephone. How can you say you avoided me? Why did you portray a completely different picture of our continued relationship and collaboration in your account? You, who had a rebellious and defiant personality even in the face of your family, your father and cultural and social structures – how did you not show this defiance in the face of my alleged dominance? And you, who screamed at your father in front of me and my friend and lied to your father, and whom your father constantly accused of lying and a lack of transparency – how do you expect us to

believe you? You, who have an articulate voice and an extroverted spirit to express your thoughts and beliefs – how did you not express your opinion during this time, but instead sat and waited to enter the fray at a critical juncture in my security issues, handing over ammunition to the security forces by presenting a distorted narrative? What animosity was there between us, and what purpose did you pursue by acting in this way?



Image 455: Message regarding the narrator's withdrawal from continuing work.

> *Left (15:03):* I cannot take such a risk.
> Right (15:04): 🙏
> *Right (15:11):* [Audio message – 1:18]
> *Left (15:19):* I am willing to cooperate but in the area of [redacted] LGBT, I am forced to distance myself.
> Now I will wait and see about the elections.

This accuser messaged me some time later, while we were working on the LGBTQ+ project, saying she had been interrogated, that it was not advisable for her to cooperate with us for the time being, and that it was in

everyone's best interests for her to distance herself from the group for a while. We respected her decision and wishes.

A while later, she messaged again, saying the problem had been resolved and she wanted to continue her collaboration. Was this arrest and questioning also a lie? Or was it that her doctoral adviser had told her to stay away from me and she lied to us?

Without a shadow of doubt in my heart, despite the advice of my other colleagues, who had security concerns about her being interrogated, I accepted and brought her back into the work. Even some time before my arrest, I entrusted her with the final version of the LGBTQ+ research for proofreading, and she returned it to me with comments and opinions regarding the field interviews and names.



Image 456: WhatsApp conversation between me and the narrator before my arrest. July/August 2019.

'Hello

> 'Doctorate of Iranian Citizenship Legal Studies Comprehensive research on LGBTQ+ people in Iran: An analysis of existing laws and legal solutions for LGBTQ+ people in Iran
> 'Article_LGBTQ+_Iran_Citizens.pdf
> 'Third Gender: A comprehensive anthropological analysis of the lives of sexual minorities in Iran'
> 'How good! Congratulations. I will definitely read them.'

After my release, when I sent her a copy of an article on LGBTQ+ individuals on Telegram, she sent a few flower and heart stickers, expressing her happiness at the project's completion. Later, we spoke privately.

Not long after our last conversation and call, I read her account about me and was shocked. How could such duplicitous and contradictory behaviours exist within one person? Which of these dual or multiple personas was her true self: the one who expressed happiness at our work's successes, or the one who published a distorted account of harassment against me?!

My first feeling was that perhaps she had written this account under pressure, two or three days before my trial began. So, I messaged her, inviting her to talk and explain further. I sent the same message that I had sent to the Bidarzani page and Samaneh Savadi, who seemed to be her mentor at the time, which they unfairly and unethically exploited.

In her claims, which I touched upon earlier, there was a hint of denial and a lack of transparency, a playing of the victim, attempts to elicit pity, a desire to be seen and other contradictory elements. The roots of these elements lie in the macro-cultural and historical structure of Iranian society, and in the fabric of social institutions and organisations – most importantly the family, as the dominant behavioural mechanism, which can be analysed and critiqued. Even the narrator, in the ideological goals behind her claims, demonstrates an understanding of her audience as Iranians in terms of socio-psychology, revealing that its dominant emotional aspects are guilt, shame, fear, denial, projection, humiliation, playing the victim and so on. She focuses on and intelligently tries to provoke and incite these emotions to convince her audience. But which of these elements each audience member picks up on undoubtedly depends on their own level of analysis and logical reasoning.

I consider it my right to fact-check and critique her account, and I must honestly say that I give her account more legitimacy than the other stories told about me! I empathise with her, and I fully understand her and her feelings about some of the things that are true. Therefore, I apologise to her again, and I hope she accepts it.

In closing, I feel it necessary, taking a self-critical approach, to accept the truth that I was negligent in dealing with this situation. Considering the factors of a future working relationship and the age difference – although for those who believe in certain gender approaches, age is not a limiting factor in sexual and emotional relationships, except in cases of child marriage – I should not have begun this relationship, even with the other party's enthusiasm. This was the blunder that I made.

Second Account[1]

Account number two concerns a woman who claims to be Kurdish and from the cities around Mahabad. According to her words, she underwent female genital cutting as a child, which, coupled with the concerns and thoughts she shared with me, led her to join the female genital mutilation/cutting project and collaborate with me.

Her account goes that, a few months after our collaboration, she went to Tehran to take an exam. I allegedly booked her a room in a guest house, claiming to be her father, deceiving both the owners of the guest house and her, inflicting severe mental and physical harm and so on.

As I mentioned in previous pages, I have no recollection of such a person existing in my personal or professional life. However, this account plays a relatively important role in advancing the other accounts because it touches on a sensitive issue and declares that the researcher who investigated FGM/C and claimed to defend women's rights is an abuser – worse, has abused a twenty-three- or twenty-four-year-old girl who is herself a victim of FGM! Reading this account evokes pity in the audience and, in a gendered and analytical sense, conveys the feeling that the narrator has been abused twice: the first time when she was cut in her

1 Bidarzani (2020b) [Instagram post]. 25 August. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CETtdtQpxjk/ (Accessed: 21 August 2022).

childhood, and the second time by the employer who was working on the subject of FGM/C.

This account has details that I will mention, and I again leave judgement about them to the reader.

I started the FGM/C research in the Kurdistan Region for the first time in 2005 and completed it in 2009. During this period, I spent a short time in Piranshahr, where my family lived, but soon moved to Sanandaj to have better access to all Kurdish cities. During this period, I hired local people, but, at that time, I did not have any continuous collaboration with anyone from Mahabad and its surroundings. I also met my wife, Shafagh, while working on this project, and she knows all the people who collaborated with us. Shafagh and I reviewed all the former members of the team together, and she said with certainty that we did not have anyone in the group of that age who was from Mahabad and its surrounding area.

Throughout the entire period of conducting this research, two women among the group members had experienced being cut in their childhoods. One of them bravely stood in front of the camera in the first version of my documentary, *In the Name of Tradition* (before 2009), and the other was a woman from Kermanshah province who spoke boldly about her experience.

In 2017, I prepared the second and improved report on FGM/C, and I hired three people for field work in the Mokrian region: one of my acquaintances from my home town, one of my family members who lived in Kurdistan province, and one of Shafagh's relatives, who was a teacher and with whom we had a history of friendship and collaboration.

Even then, we didn't have a girl matching that description and age on our records. At that time, I had an assistant named F(D)A, who was from Bukan, but she never worked in the field on this project, either. We worked together for about two years, starting in early 1395 (2016) on the child-marriage project. Roughly a year after that collaboration began, she contributed remotely to the analysis and translation of the initial draft of the FGM/C report, but she wasn't present in the field for even an hour, and she didn't conduct any interviews. This doesn't align at all with the story that my accuser collaborated on the FGM/C project and went to Tehran some time later for an exam.

However, there was an interesting point of connection between the fourth story and this one: in the fourth story, the narrator refers to a

colleague who is a close friend and to whom I supposedly paid more attention . . . but that colleague had never experienced FGM/C and neither the description of the collaboration, nor the years, nor the location matches the reality of the fieldwork.

I'm baffled as to what F(D)A's position is in relation to the fourth story, given that she was her friend, and why she never said or commented on anything about it. After all, she had worked with me for some time, and we knew each other well. She could have been a good witness, actually!

This storyteller appears in a completely humane, vulnerable, simple and provincial manner, and, of course, as a university graduate claims that I took her to a guesthouse in Tehran and deceived her. The question is: on what date did I take this lady to which hotel or guesthouse? We all know that most girls who are university students from provincial towns, or who come to Tehran for exams or administrative work, don't go to hotels. They often go to relatives' houses or girls' dormitories where they have friends.

Let's pretend that this did happen – that I took this lady to a hotel and got her a room: how could I possibly pass myself off as her father in Iran, in a guesthouse? With what ID card or birth certificate? How would our identification documents be assessed and accepted by the manager there? Especially since she describes it as a 'guesthouse-like' place, where security would be even tighter than in hotels, and, in those years, booking a room for a single woman required a referral from the Public Morality Police.

Perhaps things have changed a bit now, but almost everyone knows how much scrutiny there is in Iranian hotels in relation to the accommodation and identification papers of unmarried women, especially young ones. How would the hotel reception allow me into her room simply because I claimed to be her father? She says I pretended to be her father. With a quick calculation, I realised I would have to have married and had a child at around the age of thirteen to have had a twenty-two- or twenty-three-year-old daughter at that time!



Image 457: Document related to an experience from a year ago by a women's rights activist.

Handwritten Note:
To: Police Intelligence, Public Security – Locations/Places
Ref: Esteemed Head of Hotel [redacted]
Subject: Accommodation of Passenger
Greetings. Respectfully, regarding the accommodation of the esteemed passenger Ms [redacted] in Hotel [redacted], City of [redacted], Province of [redacted]. Please take action within one day (24 hours).
Instagram post caption: 'If you are a woman and wish to stay in a hotel, you must take a letter from the Police Intelligence and

> Public Security, locations/places of that city to the hotel so they will allow you in. It's even possible that your age doesn't matter (like when you were a child); they might contact your parents to ensure where you are. Women can marry at the age of nine or fourteen, but do not have dozens of fundamental rights and the right to reside/stay on their own.'

How could I have looked like a man with a twenty-two-year-old student daughter all those years ago? How would I have been allowed to handle her belongings and go straight into her room? With all the cameras and strict controls imposed by the Public Morality Police on accommodations, how could I have squeezed myself in and stayed there all night?

She claimed we were there that night; couldn't she have come out of the room at any point during the night? Couldn't she have screamed and asked for help? At least when I was supposedly asleep, or in the loo, or somewhere else, she could have asked for help – unless, like in some films, her hands and feet were handcuffed to the bedposts all night and her mouth was taped shut! Didn't the innkeeper wonder why I went to put a bag in my daughter's room and never came out again? If I did come out the next day, didn't anyone ask who I was and why I had stayed in the room free of charge that night?

Later, through my private investigator, I found out that, before the latest directive for hotels, which was issued in recent years, hotels and similar businesses couldn't rent rooms to single women without a letter from the Public Morality Police. Usually, in the case of young women, to make sure the family knew about her presence in that city and place, they would contact her home to get confirmation from her parents. Assuming I took this woman to a hotel, how did she get the letter from the Public Morality Police? And if she had obtained it, how did I justify my presence as her father?

At the beginning of her story, she says that she 'realised I was unsafe' from the very beginning, and elsewhere she says,

> I was starting to doubt things here; I felt like this behaviour wasn't normal. Why did he need to come upstairs? But I suppressed myself . . . I didn't know that you didn't need

> him to come upstairs to get a room in an inn or hotel; I was helpless and desperate . . .

Even more interestingly, a line after that, she writes that I humiliated her: 'He said, "Look what kind of backwater hotel you've come to! Don't embarrass us[;] don't you know where to go and where not to go[?]"'

When I read some of the readers' comments, I couldn't help but laugh. They were asking her, 'In the end, we didn't understand whether KA took you to a hotel or an inn? Everyone knows what an inn is and what level it is!'

It seems that either the narrator of the story has been away from Iran for years and has no knowledge of the culture of Iranian hotels, or she has tailored the narrative more under the influence of her knowledge of the rules of hotels outside Iran.

At one point, by evading the issue, she avoids the trouble of explaining the details and takes refuge in the myth of the 'first sexual encounter' with a primitive and traditional way of thinking that is fundamentally unrelated to my beliefs and approach and was probably derived from the narrator's own view of relationship issues.

She wrote, 'When he was done, he swore at me and said, "Is this all you do?"' Then she continued,

> I don't want to write about the details of his rape. Even after all these years, the memory still sets me ablaze. He raped me that night, and it was my first sexual experience. When he was done, he swore at me and said that this was what I did, that it wasn't my first time . . . For years afterwards, I felt humiliated and worthless. How could I have been so clueless? How could I have believed him . . . ?

It is important to me to understand how the administrators of Bidarzani verified this narrative. Was it like the infamous Golzar ice cream story[1] –

1 Samaneh Savadi's Twitter/X account, which presents her as an activist for gender equality, entered the arena, publishing stories of harassment with the rise of the #MeToo movement. On 28 August 2020 (7 Shahrivar 1399), she wrote on her Twitter: 'Yesterday I received a bitter and extremely painful story. The story of #rape of a sixteen-year-old girl by #Mohammadreza_Golzar. Please contact me if you have a similar experience.

the one disseminated by a Bidarzani colleague, the feminist and women's-rights activist Ms Samaneh Savadi, which resulted in such a huge scandal and later became a national joke? Or was it like the allegations of harassment that were published by Bidarzani? This person sent a story they had fabricated via a fake Twitter account to a colleague of Bidarzani, Samaneh Savadi – a story that was posted on Bidarzani's Instagram page an hour later. It quickly became known as a widely discussed *Shargh* newspaper story and spread rapidly. Did either party apologise afterward when it became clear that they had been duped?

My accuser writes something to make me seem powerful and terrifying that is clumsily copied in subsequent narratives. She refers to my relationships with influential people and portrays this part of my life as

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Although I cannot confirm or deny the authenticity of the story, it has been verified by several women's-rights activists in Iran.'

She continued in a series of Tweets, 'In 2007, he came to our city to film a movie. They had a problem with the hotel, and since my brother was a well-known and cool kid in the city who threw the best parties, he was able to contact them and bring them to the top floor of our house to stay there. The whole city knew that Mohammadreza Golzar was at our house, and I, as a 16-year-old teenager, was very proud of this. They had ordered pizza, and when it arrived I said I would take the pizzas upstairs to see them. I went upstairs, and as soon as Mohammadreza Golzar saw me, he said, "So-and-so has such a sister and is hiding her from us? You're so cute. You're so beautiful, baby", and then he wanted my number. My brother's friends, who were adult women, were there, and I was very happy that he had seen me among them and complimented me. The next day, he called me and said, "Come to me." I went, and from the moment I entered until he was lying naked on top of me and raping me, only two minutes passed. He was violent, I said let me go several times, but he didn't care until I looked him in the eyes and said, "You're such a bastard." It was as if he was offended; he got up and said, "If you don't like it, get up and leave!" I left. In the toilet, when I wiped myself, there was blood on the tissue. At that time, my virginity was important to me, and I cried, but I didn't tell anyone anything.

'The next day at school, everyone was saying Mohammad Reza Golzar had arrived outside the school, and some said he was looking for me. I went to him, still very happy and proud that Mohammad Reza Golzar had come for me. He said, "Let's go for an ice cream." He went to a quiet street, opened his trouser zip and said, "Here's your ice cream; eat it!" He held my head tightly, ejaculated in my mouth, and forced my head down so I had to swallow. This happened several more times while he was in our town. He even taught me and my friends Arabic and kissed me in the middle of my private lesson. For three years afterwards, even when I'd left the country and he came to where I was staying, I'd go to him when he called. I didn't understand if he liked me or was exploiting me. He'd play his instrument all night and force me to perform oral sex, so much that my lips would be bruised. This story continued until I was 20, until I finally managed to pull myself out of that situation. I know I'm not the only one this has happened to.'

'mafia-like'. More than anything, this made those who knew me and my characteristics and connections ridicule the story.

> I cried all the way back to my city. I couldn't tell anyone what happened because I was afraid. Because he talked day and night about his acquaintances and powerful friends. I was sure that if I did or said anything, something bad would happen to me, my reputation would be ruined, and ultimately I would be accused.



Image 458: Bidarzani's explanation regarding the publication of a false narrative.

> 'Explanations from the Bidarzani group regarding the thirty-second narrative
> 'With the start of the "MeToo" movement in Iran, based on the goals and mission that the Bidarzani group has defined in the field of [the] struggle for the realisation of women's rights, we have taken action to publish narratives and also analyses about sexual

harassment. In this regard, our constant effort has been to publish the narratives sent by women to this group on our social networks, taking into account the element of honesty and trust, as well as avoiding judgement and placing ourselves in the position of a jury, which most of these narratives have been sent directly to Bidarzani by the victims themselves, and in a few cases also by some activists in this field for us.

'About two weeks ago, narratives about the harassment of the former secretary of one of the media outlets began to be sent to the Bidarzani group, and we started publishing these narratives in the form of the thirtieth and thirty-first narratives, after reviewing the narratives and trying to verify their authenticity as much as possible. However, the thirtieth narrative was deleted from the Bidarzani Twitter page a minute after its publication, due to the request of the victim herself and the pressure from a person who was mentioned as the harasser. On the same day, the group took action to publish another narrative that referred to the same person mentioned in the thirtieth narrative. After the publication of these two narratives, a significant number of female journalists confirmed what was published in these narratives by sending messages and described similar narratives that will be published by Bidarzani in the future, based on the reviews that are carried out.

'Given this volume of narratives sent by Bidarzani's audience and female journalists from various perspectives, one of the female activists sent us a narrative that we took action to publish; a narrative that seems to be distorted and with the intention of destroying the "MeToo" movement with a fake account to a person who sent this narrative to Bidarzani. After a few hours, a video of the content of the person's internet conversation was published in another anonymous account as research (!).

'Having become aware of this scenario, we announce that the thirty-second narrative is distorted and, while apologising to all our audience, we are taking action to delete this narrative from Bidarzani's social networks. But this action does not indicate that other narratives are distorted, and we will continue to publish

> narratives and analyses in this area based on our own views and analyses, as in the past.
> '#Bidarzani
> '#Sexual_Harassment'

The common thread in most of the narratives is that the victims are approximately twenty years old and virgins. Their first and only sexual relationships allegedly occurred with me; I entertained them with alcohol and hookah, made them unconscious and then accused them of not being virgins. My assault and rape were like those of a melancholic, psychotic and sadistic person, and I often left the scene with curses! People who know me and read this text can judge what the relationship is between the fictional rapist character of these narrators and my character and behaviour.

What could be the reason for this amount of ugliness, exaggeration and tastelessness in the narratives – all this spite and malice? What target were they aiming for? How much hostility and hypocrisy would compel a person to fabricate such a lie in such a brutal, amateurish and hasty manner? Perhaps time and quantity were the key elements in the production of the narratives.

The noteworthy comments written beneath this narrative indicate a weakness in the story's development and haste in its construction, which has made it difficult to believe, leading the audience to mock and laugh instead of expressing sympathy and compassion for the so-called victim.

What's more interesting is that, unlike several other accounts, this particular narrative was never repeated in the media, and its narrator completely disappeared. Undoubtedly, the orchestrators and those in the know about this movement, after verifying the facts, realised they had to answer a serious question: why did this narrator, unlike the other three – that is, the first narrator, RM and ZP – who pursued me, testified against me in two news reports, and gave interviews, only appear once and then quickly vanish? This account was so unrealistic, ludicrous and childish that the publisher not only failed to verify it, but also clumsily highlighted its ideological goals.



Image 459: Comments from former colleagues under Bidarzani's narratives.

> 'So far ten narratives have been published.'
> 'I worked with Mr Ahmady for three months and did not see any moral issues from him. At the moment, I cannot reject or confirm the case; I can only wait until they can defend themselves in court.'

This episode highlights the weaknesses in societal oversight and control when it comes to evaluating information circulated online. Mechanisms for checking facts and assessing the credibility of content in new media and social movements, such as #MeToo, are often inadequate or absent. As a result, unverified stories can spread quickly, creating confusion, misunderstandings and reputational harm.

I hope one day I will know who the narrator is, what their motivation was, and how they could do such a thing. There is no doubt that day will come.

Third Account[1]

In the third account, the details, storytelling and explanations and, consequently, the attacks and the sparking of empathy were more

1 Bidarzani (2020c) [Instagram post]. 26 August. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEUZ_UwJktB/ (Accessed: 21 August 2022).

pronounced. It attracted a lot of attention and gave more legitimacy to the previous accounts. The person behind this account claims to be a women's-rights activist and one of the founders and experts of work on FGM/C, child marriage and other issues in Iran. Interestingly, she says that right after her marriage vows were recited in a taxi on the way back from the registry office, she saw people writing about my alleged rapes and decided to write her own story. Her husband was also aware of my alleged rape and knows that this woman is not a virgin because of my supposed assault. In her account, she also makes other serious accusations that go beyond the issue of rape. She claims that very prominent Iranian feminists knew about my alleged rapes and did nothing. She even said she reported the matter to people in the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs, but they did not take it seriously and did not respond.



Image 460: Users noting the narrative's contradictions.

'I didn't understand what the aim of your final move was.'
'My intention is absolutely not to upset you. But they exceeded (their bounds) and continued this hellish journey until their research bore fruit...!!!? And again, you put yourselves in similar situations with this sick man..? Perhaps my understanding is flawed. 😔 😔'

After publishing this account, she was attacked by some readers who accused her of nonsense and pointed out contradictions in her story. Other people also pressured her to reveal the names of the female activists who did not support her, because her work was undermining feminists and she had to be able to prove her claims.

For this reason, on 10 September 2020 (20 Shahrivar 1399), she gave an interview to defend herself on a news website called Harassment Watch[1], which had become prominent at that time. There, she published more details of her account.[2] Strangely, unlike the other narrators, she did not settle for one account and a detailed interview; some time later, she recorded another anonymous video interview with the same reporter, in which she sat with her back to the camera, and, again, making several blunders, expanded the scope of her tale.

The narrator of the third account is Ms RM.



Image 461: Users challenging the hotel account.

> 'Did you see the previous part? In my opinion, is it possible to let a man into the hotel without identification? Maybe if it's for a lady?'
> 'That hotel is very strange. I went to the hotel with my aunt, the reception gave us trouble. Then we explained the situation as

1 The 'Street Harassment Watch' group had designed a website where individuals could report areas where they had experienced harassment and share them with others. Previously, this group had also put up posters to raise awareness about the street harassment of women in various parts of the city, including metro stations, which garnered significant attention and support.

2 Harassment Watch (2020) We aren't obliged to convince everyone, 19 September. Available at: https://harasswatch.com/news/1552 (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

> three people (me, my mother and my aunt) and they accepted. They absolutely don't let strangers into the room area . . .'
> 'Exactly, some parts are suspicious. It's as if they were like husband and wife in a house for a few months. What's she saying? He went naked to the bathroom. I don't understand the story at all.'

In the third account, the narrator claimed to have been in a work contract with me, engaged in fieldwork, but that I deceived her during a professional trip. In Sanandaj, when her relative was present, I allegedly put hashish in her hookah, took her to the bedroom, locked the door and, disregarding her refusals, raped her during her period, destroying her virginity. Afterward, I allegedly insulted her and offered to pay for a hymenoplasty. She then provided further details about me and my work and, like the first narrator, stated that going to the BBC was unsafe. Like the previous two narrators, she claimed that, because she needed the job and was passionate about the research succeeding, she continued to work with me while avoiding me. She considered the results of my research and work to be a violation of others like herself and invited everyone to testify against me!

In her account and later anonymous interview, Ms RM used keywords and codes from my interviews with foreign media; mentioned having extensive knowledge of my work, my connection with the United Nations, my works and my working methods; and explained her reasons for leaving the job.

I investigated her account, knowing that she was one of the main organisers of the accusations against me and a key member of the think tank that orchestrated and published the narratives during this period. According to some former colleagues, she contacted members of my research field and work teams and suggested they testify about me or at least support the existing narratives. In several cases, she even pressured and threatened those who spoke out in my defence. One of the reasons for this obsession and persistence becomes clear in her interviews:

> When narratives become collective, they influence the belief of the people closest to the victim of sexual assault. On the other hand, victims are more likely to start talking about

> their experiences when they see others speaking out and therefore find the courage to speak.

So, on the one hand, to inject the narrative into the public consciousness and among activists fighting against rape and harassment, the quantity of the narratives and the victims must be increased by any means necessary. On the other hand, the credulity of the victim's partner also becomes possible with a high volume of narratives. A passage from her interview with Harassment Watch, which she and a journalist directed, illustrates this point:

> - When you told your husband, what was his reaction?
>
> - He said, 'How is that possible? Someone in such a situation uses hashish and then says they were raped.' He said, 'You must have wanted it yourself.'
>
> - Does he still think that way?
>
> - Now that the atmosphere has opened up and similar narratives have been published about the person who raped me, his opinion has changed, and he says we need to talk more about this and disgrace this person. Now he believes me.
>
> - So, you mean, when narratives become collective, they influence the belief of the people closest to the victim of sexual assault.
>
> - That's right.

But what about the other side of the story? As I mentioned in Part Five and the section on the FGM/C project, Ms RM, in a consistent and unusual manner, always followed up on my work after our brief collaboration ended in mid-1389 (2010). During our collaboration, and especially afterward, she tried to sow seeds of discord and animosity between me and my colleagues, and harmed me and my work by spreading rumours and alienating people involved in the project. She was one of the first people to act with the sexual-assault allegations against me, and even led the charge, in a way. This woman played a key role in coordinating and disseminating

the narratives, kept the rumour mill running, worked hard to connect people to each other and played a role in revoking my membership in the Sociological Association. It even got to the point where she contacted some individuals and professors and asked them to stop supporting me, such as Dr Bokharaei, who had objected to the way my membership was revoked by the Sociological Association and challenged the biased and illegal actions of the Association. A full account of her contact with Dr Bokharaei was provided by him in the sections above related to the Sociological Association. These provocations intensified, especially after my conviction and departure from Iran.

As I explained in the FGM/C section, my relationship with Ms RM dates back to when she was doing her master's thesis on FGM/C on Qeshm Island. After our initial meeting in March 2010 (Esfand 1388) in Bandar Abbas and Qeshm, we were introduced to a number of local cutters in the villages of Qeshm. Her presence and our collaboration continued on two further field trips – which was stipulated in her work contract**.** I also mentioned that at the end of our work trip, on 3 March (13 Esfand), one of my colleagues and I stopped in Shiraz on our return and spent a night at RM's grandmother's house.

Gradually, I realised we were becoming fond of each other. Part of this attraction was because we talked for hours during the trip and got to know each other's thoughts and approaches, to some extent; another part was perhaps because that night we drank her home-made booze in her room until late, watched a film and became close emotionally. In the days and hours afterward, we were in almost daily contact via Yahoo Messenger, text messages and long phone calls. A large part was due to the joint projects we had decided to undertake together.

It wasn't long before we clashed over how to use the fieldwork statistics I had and my concerns about publicising the issue of FGM/C, which over time turned into a kind of power struggle. I believed that, for the sake of the project's security, we had to proceed cautiously until it was completed, but she was ambitious and eager to quickly climb the ladder of promotion and fame. She wanted a field of work, funding and a budget for her dissertation statistics and also for working on the same topic in parallel.

The concern of being seen is always an important one, and I addressed this aspect of the matter in my analysis of the first narrative. Such views have cultural and historical roots in Iranian society. In the case of RM, this

concern was even more pronounced. She wanted to gain fame quickly through the media coverage of her study. I've told you about her before in other contexts: all the behaviours, the grudges and the pursuit, or rather spying, that she has constantly carried out on my work over the years has been more for the sake of gaining power, fame and recognition. Now, the #MeToo arena had created a greater opportunity for her to both be seen and to settle accounts with me.

When I had just returned to Iran, all of Iran, and especially the people with whom I shared intellectual and professional ground, were attractive to me, which also helped us to form a bond. During the time we were together, we exchanged many books and films, and when I returned to Sanandaj to work in the region, we would talk on the phone for hours. 142 text messages, dozens of emails, short personal notes and about 126 Yahoo messages and chats, some of which contained very private correspondence, were exchanged during our acquaintance, backups of which exist. These indicate a private, deep and undeniable connection between us, and she has not even hinted at them in her account.

Sexual Assault at Work: The Buzzwords for Rape Scenarios

In Part Five I told you that, when this emotional connection was established, we were both looking for an excuse to meet again. I invited her to Sanandaj for the Newruz holidays, but she said that, after my trip to Turkey in mid-May (Ordibehesht), there was a celebration called *Komsay* that she would like to see. This ceremony is held every year on the last Friday before mid-May (Ordibehesht) in the large village of Uraman Takht. It is also known as 'the breaking of the sacred stone'. The ceremony starts early in the morning at the shrine of Pirshalya and involves reciting the Fatiha, playing the *daf*, chanting the Talila, and breaking the stone.

I wasn't very familiar with the Uraman region, having only recently moved to Kurdistan province, but the Uraman Takht ceremony had become accessible online due to its media and tourist appeal. Interestingly, it wasn't that well known even to the Kurds living in that region.

This ceremony, which was held on 16 May 2010 (26 Ordibehesht 1389), became an excuse for her to come to Sanandaj. She said that she had practically cut ties with her father and had to get permission from her mother, who was cautious about her coming as it was her first trip to the

Kurdistan Region. Historically, travelling to the mountainous region of Kurdistan was considered a trip to a remote area for residents of central Iran, and it usually caused parental anxiety, so she had to come with her cousin. I welcomed the idea, saying, 'Come and be my guests for a few days. We'll plan a trip in Kurdistan and Kermanshah and go to different places together.' The two of them came to Sanandaj by bus, and from there they went straight to my house.

Nothing special happened the first day we were together. We drank alcohol, smoked a hookah, walked to Mount Abidar, returned home in the evening, and I slept in my usual bedroom, while they slept in another room. We became closer the following night.

I felt like her cousin had been tasked with watching over us, because she kept interrupting our conversations and wouldn't let us be alone together for long. Her relative was constantly talking on the phone with a friend, and we used those opportunities for some private time together.

As evening approached, we spread a blanket in the reception hall before dinner and, like the night before, we lit a hookah. Ms RM liked hookah and was also a skilled hookah smoker. We drank alcohol together, smoked hookah and even watched on her laptop the rest of a film of which we had only seen half the previous night. Then, without any pressure or coercion, while her relative was sitting on the sofa in the reception hall, laughing at our jokes, we went to my bedroom together. We were a man and a woman, single, sane and mature, and we both knew what was going to happen. After weeks of talking, conversing and flirting about private matters, the ground was completely prepared, and we had relations in that room.

Throughout this relationship, there was no coercion, pressure or force. I perceived it as a cordial and mature connection, consistently intertwined with RM's characteristic coyness and flirtation. In her account, she claims to have pleaded with me to stop and asserts she was menstruating. However, she had previously recounted to me, in detail, at least two long-

term

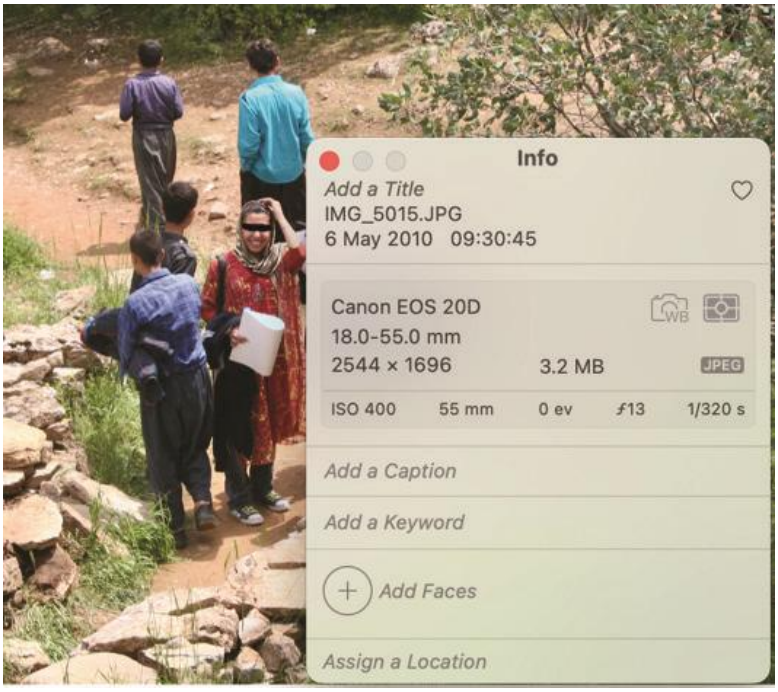


Image 462: Komsay ceremony. Uraman Takht, 6 May 2010.

relationships, one of which was a passionate love affair, and, indeed, she took pride in her experiences of modern relationships and how she differed from other girls.

Her cousin, who was constantly in conversation with her, would occasionally come to the door, saying, 'Come on out! Enough already! I'm bored.' We would laugh and joke with her. When we came out of the bedroom, we talked until the early hours and spent a peaceful night.

The following day, we got into my car and went to the Pirshalya ceremony in the village of Uraman Takht, which is about three hours from Sanandaj. During our trip, aside from taking photographs, I was also filming, because at that time, while working on my research on FGM/C, I was making a documentary on the same subject and intended to depict parts of this ceremony in the film. For this reason, I went everywhere with a camera during that period. Nowhere in the photos and films of that trip, nor in the laughter and messages after our return, is there any sign of a virgin girl who had recently been raped while menstruating.

After the accusation was made, I revisited the film and photos several times. In the 49 minutes of film and 76 photos that exist from that multi-

day trip, I saw no sign of any bad feeling, disgust or aversion toward me on the part of this woman.

I posted her a picture to prove her presence at the ceremony and their leisure trip, is, according to the details of her account, from the day after the rape. According to her, I had deceived her and lured her there under the pretext of work. I will later further attach photos, along with the time and date they were taken and their file numbers, as proof of the accuracy and consistency of the dates. All the photos were taken with a professional camera, and the authenticity of the photographic sequence can easily be traced from the IMG file of the photos.

It is strange that, after all these events, she published the following account:

> The issue for me and the other victims in this case is a little different. The submission happened before the rape. He gave us drugs, and therefore we basically had no ability to resist. I was so shocked at that moment, and because I had consumed drugs by force of the abuser, I was listless and inactive. I couldn't react in any way, and my cousin, who kept knocking on the door, after a while, when she didn't hear a sound from me, thought that I was also consenting.

How is it possible to force-feed drugs to a woman of that age, a final-year master's student in Shiraz, who is herself a regular consumer of marijuana, hashish, water-pipe tobacco and alcohol?

Everyone knows that hashish and marijuana have strong smells, and, after consumption, the odour lingers for hours – let alone if you put it in a hookah. How could I possibly have put hashish in her hookah without her noticing? How did her cousin not notice and allow her – who, according to her account, was shocked, listless and incapacitated – to be dragged or carried in front of her eyes to the bedroom, where I shut the door and carried out my sinister plan?! (A cousin who was, in fact, there to monitor

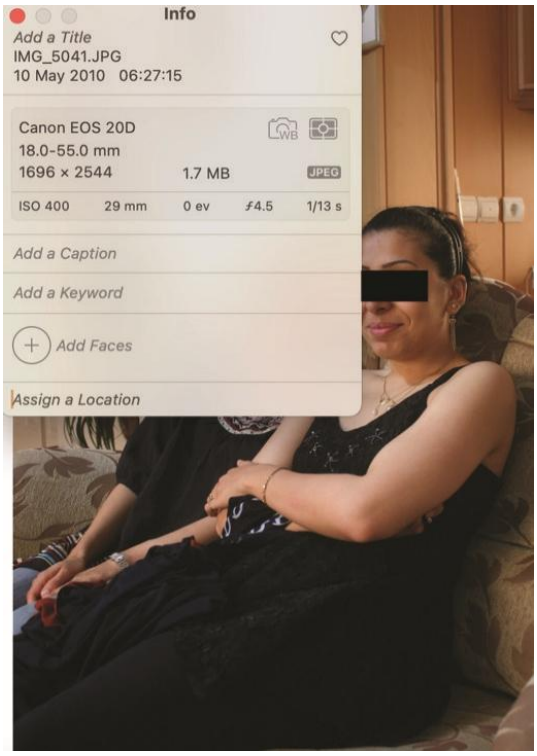


Image 463: Last days of the trip. Takyeh and Chaman, Sanandaj, 10 May 2019.

our actions – essentially for that very reason.) If she became unwell, didn't her cousin notice and prevent the continuation of the event? If she doesn't remember the details of the incident due to drug use, how did she know about her cousin knocking on the door and deciding not to pursue the sexual encounter after a while because she assumed that RM was staying there willingly? From which behaviour of Ms RM might her cousin have reached the understanding that knocking would be a nuisance? How was understanding all this possible in that state of unconsciousness and intoxication, but the rest of the story was forgotten?

Ms RM has a long history of consuming hashish and marijuana. Only a few weeks after this meeting, she invited me to Shiraz, where she bought marijuana from her supplier, through her friend Mr A, in the well-known village of Qalat, near the village mosque. All her friends, and the people I have recently been in contact with because of this incident, know that she has been using it for years, but in her narrative she accused me of putting hashish in her hookah, making her intoxicated, and said she doesn't remember much from that night. I hope that, by reading these points and the following, she will remember a little more about the details of that night and our subsequent meetings!

The legal and publicly inflammatory point, and the one that outraged women's-rights activists on this accusation, as in the others, is deception and abuse of a professional position and a superior status, and, more

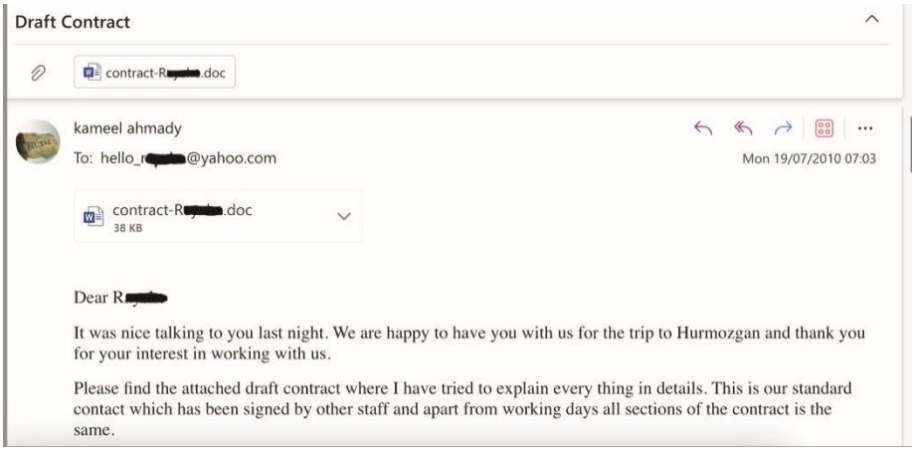


Image 464: Sending the contract to RM on 19 July 2010.

importantly, the occurrence of this event during professional collaboration. This both legitimises the accusation itself and confronts me, as an employer, with violations and breaches of ethics in research and work. People who have worked with me know very well how sensitive I am to documenting and writing down agreements, especially contracts, fulfilling financial obligations and being disciplined in this regard. To further clarify the matter, I am publishing here a copy of my emails with Ms RM regarding our contract, which was signed by both parties on 21 July 2010 (30 Tir 1389). These show the duration of our collaboration, which in total does not even amount to three full working weeks, along with proof of settlement with her.

These documents should, in fact, invalidate the core claim that I raped her during a work assignment. The originals are still preserved in the project archive and can be presented at any time and in any court.

In addition to the rape accusation, she accuses me of a blatant violation of the employer-employee relationship, which many readers and those who disseminated her claims accepted without evidence.

A day after returning from Pirshalyar, my colleague Fatimah Karimi, with whom I'd spent the night at RM's grandmother's house and who knew about RM's visit to Kurdistan, invited us to Paveh for lunch. She was aware of the period when I started working with Ms RM, as well as the fact that her trip to Sanandaj was purely for leisure. I also vividly recall her saying to my wife, whom I'd only recently met, 'I feel sorry for Kameel!



Image 466: RM sending the settlement document and the text of her email.

He's getting involved with people who he doesn't realise will hurt him, are using him and can't be trusted.'

From Paveh, we went to a village called Mansour Aqaee, which was on our way and had the highest rate of FGM/C at the time in the provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshah. It was here that RM first became acquainted with our fieldwork on FGM/C in Kurdistan. Fatimah asked, in Kurdish, two women standing on the street about the age at which FGM/C was performed, and we translated it into Farsi for her. Our stop in this village, for which photos and videos exist, lasted less than five minutes. At no other time or on any other day of this leisure trip did we work together, whether



Image 465: Field researchers in Kurdish dress. Mansour Aqaee Village, Kermanshah 2011.

on research, writing or fieldwork. In fact, absolutely no work took place apart from that.

Another part of the distortion of this narrative comes from this:

> For some time, I had also become acquainted with other girls, and it was never possible for me to be alone with him anywhere. But on one of the trips, he deliberately planned for us to be alone, and I brought along one of the girls from my family . . .

At that time, she wasn't acquainted with anyone other than the three of us: Fatimah Karimi, the late Bahareh Alavi and me. We didn't have any trips other than our first trip, during which we got to know each other. Firstly, according to her statements, she was apparently aware of my intentions and writes, 'He deliberately planned for us to be alone.' Why, knowing how 'dangerous' I was, did she agree to this trip? Secondly, on a work trip, one doesn't bring along a family member. No employer would accept such a thing, and, more importantly, one doesn't stay at the employer's house for several nights and go sightseeing and shopping in the local markets. Thirdly, everyone knows how sensitive I am to anthropological issues and details, and to ensuring that the conditions are appropriate for fieldwork and that the interviewers are appropriately dressed and speak the language. Everyone knows that, apart from Qeshm, and even then only at the beginning, when we always went into the field wearing local clothes, I used local personnel. Over the years, in the Kurdistan Region, I never took a non-Kurdish interviewer or colleague into the field, not even for an hour. So, what role could Ms RM, who didn't even know a word of Kurdish, have possibly played in the villages?



Image 467: User comments.

> 'I know that after writing this article, a series of false and horrible attacks will be made against me, but considering the type of narrative, I have a few basic questions for this narrator that I hope will be considered calmly and without emotional bias. 1. It has happened to me personally that I have been exposed to assault, but I reacted strongly. What kind of aware and assault-hating victim is it who supposedly meets the same assailant again, alone in the bathroom or by the sea? I ask: was this project really so essential that you would stay in the same group and continue working with this person despite what happened? And now, after several years, the same person comes forward claiming it is the 'right time' to reveal what happened? If your account today reflected your current self, then don't say you would have acted differently years ago – why didn't you act then?'

In one instance, she claims that, after that incident, she never went anywhere alone with me. Yet, she later forgets this and says in her interview that whenever she was alone with me, I would touch her face or go into the bathroom and leave the door open! Given her awareness in this account of the alleged risks, what essential matter compelled her to meet with me? And why did she omit mentioning our late-night swim together on the beach in the village of Salakh, during another leisure trip that occurred early in our relationship?

Her employment contract with me to work on Qeshm Island was signed one month and twenty days after her trip to Sanandaj. I formally introduced her to the other team members in a memo dated 19 July 2010 (28 Tir 1389), welcoming her aboard. As you can see from her temporary

contract, the start date was 27 June 2010 (6 Tir 1389) for a period of nineteen days, after which she signed another temporary contract for fieldwork and attendance at a health-statistics section meeting, and then she left the job.

After that trip, while our relationship had taken shape and we were both seeking another opportunity to be alone together, we went to the south of Iran together. This trip occurred seventeen days after she came to Sanandaj. If her account of my assault and rape were true, how could we have gone on a trip for two, just two weeks later? I drove from Sanandaj to Shiraz to pick her up, and from there we set off. Via Laristan, we first went to Bandar Abbas, and the next day we took a ferry to Qeshm. Taking my car, aside from making travel easier on the island, also provided her with a good opportunity, as she could collect a series of questionnaires about FGM/C that had been given to health clinics, using this as a pretext to get travel permission from her family. It was perfectly clear to both of us that this trip was a continuation of the relationship that had begun in Sanandaj.

We arrived in Bandar Abbas and, naturally, we couldn't go to a hotel, so we pitched a tent in the coastal park in Bandar Abbas, a little way away from the other travellers. The weather was hot and humid, so, after being intimate, we came into the park in the middle of the night, happy and laughing, and poured water over our heads from the tap to cool down. We slept there for the night. The question is, that night in the public park, was

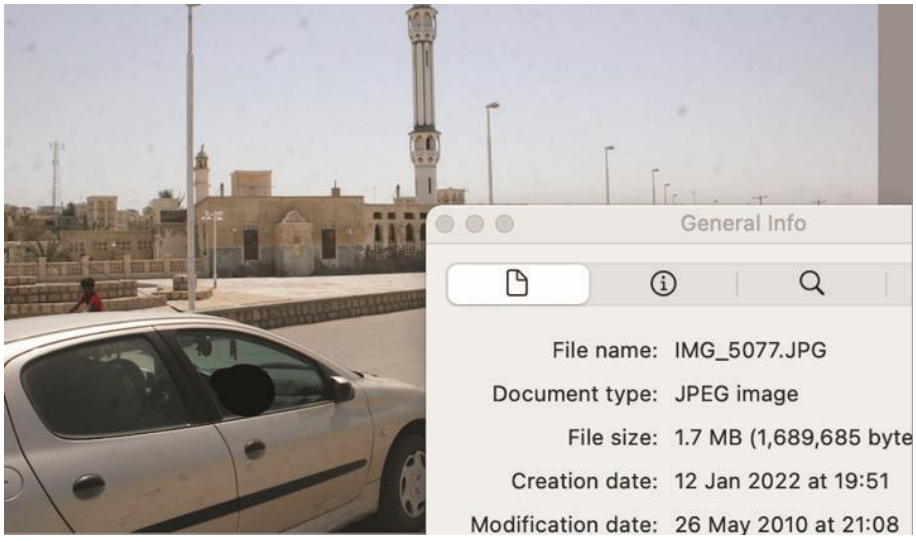


Image 468: Touring Qeshm Island. Laft Village, 29 May 2010.

she also drunk? Had I put hashish in her hookah so that she was dazed and again entered into a relationship with me by force or involuntarily?

Her mother was in contact with us by phone and knew this was our second trip. In Iranian culture, it isn't very common, or at least it was less common back then, for a young man and woman to travel together or go to each other's homes. I think anyone could guess what was happening, given our meetings over the previous few weeks.

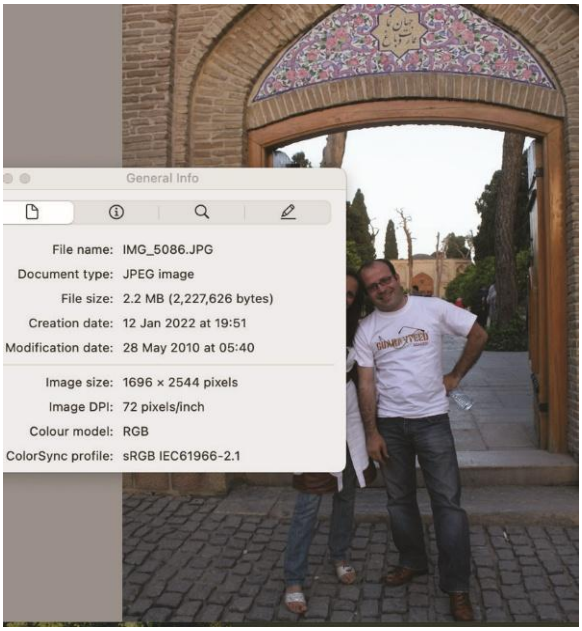


Image 469: Inside Jahan Nama Garden. Shiraz, 28 May 2010.

The next day, we went to Qeshm and rented a house behind the hospital district. After two days of staying in the centre of Qeshm and sightseeing, we went to the village of Salakh, and we went swimming together in the sea at night. We were intimate during the trip. I even sent her copies of the photos from our swim in the sea and other pictures from that trip, including those from a local wedding in Souza village that we attended together.

After a four-day trip, we returned to Shiraz, and I was invited to her aunt and uncle's house. I spent that afternoon with her cousin visiting the sights, including the Jahan Nama Garden in Shiraz. I spent the night in a suite below their house, and she stayed with me until late. We smoked a hookah together and shared a brief intimate moment.

About two weeks later, I returned to Shiraz. RM was attending a conference on FGM/C at Shiraz University on 3 June 2019 (13 Khordad 1398), and she invited me to speak at it as well, so that we could present our topic together. After that, I went to Shiraz at least two more times. Her uncle jokingly said something on the phone along the lines of a proverb:

'You pickle something; it takes two days to mature. You've come back too soon to reclaim your guest.'

One trip was on the return from Karran Field in the south, and we met at the student house of her friend, Mr A, who was also a drinking companion and smoked hashish or marijuana in areas near the university. During that period, aside from our personal relationship, we were supposed to collaborate on a report for the university conference and a joint article on FGM/C to be submitted to the First Biennial Conference on Social Harms in Iran: Prevention, Intervention and Empowerment, which, of course, never came to fruition.

A long time had passed since RM's trip to Kurdistan. We were constantly in touch, and sometimes we exchanged emails. The following is an example of emails exchanged in late August, about four months after her trip to Sanandaj and when I was in Turkey for a short trip. In this email, she asks with flirtatious language about my move from Sanandaj to Tehran and about finding a place, and she asks me to bring her a gift. She signs her email with a kiss. These emails are also markedly different from what she described in her account of the alleged rape. However you read and

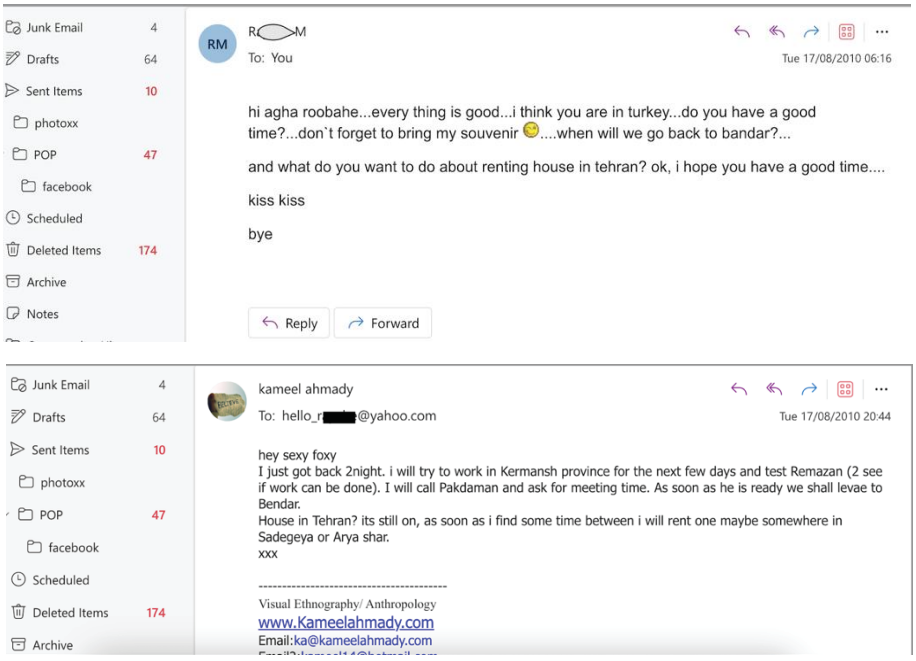


Image 470: Text of an email exchange with RM. August 2010.

analyse them, they have the flavour of two people in a close and completely relaxed relationship, one jokingly calling the other 'foxy' and one asking about renting a house and the area. If a person has been raped, it is logical for them to avoid continuous contact and facing their abuser.

As I mentioned, apart from our initial meeting, which started at Bandar, she accompanied the team on research fieldwork in Qeshm for a total of two periods, each lasting three to five days, and met newer people who had joined us at that time.

Those who know her know that Ms RM has a very strong ego, and because of this strong ego, a sense of superiority and insistence on claiming that, supposedly, she was the first one on the island and more familiar with the subject of FGM/C and other research areas, within a very short period tensions arose between her and members of the group, and later with me. Gradually, the scope of these disagreements reached whispered conversations, rumour-mongering and poisoning the research atmosphere.

I tried to calm things down and offered friendly reminders. She, who didn't hide her closeness and connection with me much, and in fact drew power from it, didn't care about the opinions of others. Perhaps I didn't manage the situation well, either. Two of the interviewers were upset with her and complained to me that she treated them like subordinates and as if the other students were inferior and amateurs.

She joined the project on 6 Tir 1389 (27 June 2010) and her first day of training, by me and the head of the field team, also started that morning. It continued for three days. According to my work habits and principles, I take videos and photos of the training stages of each of the interviewers, and the photo below is related to the training of RM in Giyahdan village. A 34-minute video of her training, which includes the method and principles of questioning, explanation and reading of the questionnaire, is still in the project archive.

I knew that this was almost everyone's first experience of group work and that people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds were present. I was stuck on what to do with this situation. When the disagreements became a little more serious and our relationship was naturally affected by the prevailing atmosphere, I asked her verbally and later in writing to interact more with me and others. I also asked her to be committed and not to use project information and data obtained from it



Image 471: Training course and start of RM's work (first person from the right). Giyahdan Village, Qeshm.

without permission, which would have been contrary to the terms of the contract she had signed, but I learned through one of my colleagues, who was also a student at Shiraz University, that she had spoken to several people about it and presented information in her own name and within the framework of her thesis. She was no longer working within the agreed framework and was not committed to her obligations. It seemed that she had connected with an organisation that I represented and, as they say, was undermining me.

Not giving her the field-research statistics and giving supervision to my other colleague, Bahareh, had upset her. It is at this point that she says,

> I'm talking about ten years ago now; when someone who raped me and others didn't believe his actions were rape . . . There are concepts in society that still haven't been openly discussed, and people simply don't have the necessary awareness about them. We construct concepts through interaction with the global community; concepts aren't built instantaneously, but are perfected in the lived experiences of human beings . . .

If the perpetrator didn't perceive his actions as assault, and the victim was aware, why didn't she show a reaction indicative of the act? If concepts are built within a temporal context, how is it possible to separate a portion of a concept from its historical context and impose it on a later time, judging based on a concept and action outside of its own context? How can someone familiar with the concept of anachronism themselves accuse others of being perpetrators and abusers by resorting to its mechanisms to feather their own nest? Furthermore, doesn't this very argument contradict

the claims of Ms RM and her cohorts? In one instance, they claim I assaulted them knowing full well these concepts, and in another, they claim that, from a patriarchal perspective, those actions weren't assault.

Even before signing the settlement agreement, we agreed to finish the tasks, mostly personal ones, that we had already started together and that I would provide her with some of Behrouz's statistics for her thesis – which she was extremely eager to obtain – under the condition of attribution, despite my policy of working entirely under the radar and the data not yet being published anywhere else. I assured her of this in writing at the end of December 2010 (Jalali: Azar 1389) and even wrote a good letter of recommendation for her university, but, strangely, in the following months, she became a source of harassment, spreading rumours and poisoning the minds of those around me. I asked her, on at least three occasions and in at least two written communications in February 2011 (Jalali: Bahman 1389) and March 2011 (Jalali: Farvardin 1390) to stop her behaviour. I invited her to collaborate in other capacities, and, of course, I was very angry with her. I didn't hide this anger.

She consistently seized every opportunity to sabotage and halt my work, despite being well aware of the security situation and the intense anxieties of myself and all my colleagues, who were working unprotected in the villages, particularly in those perilous conditions of 2009 (Jalali: 1388) to 2013 (Jalali: 1392). In her own words, to reclaim the southern territory – which she considered her own, justifying it by claiming she had been there before us and she was the one who had discovered the topic – she made the research field unsafe for us.

Perhaps one of her reasons for this machination and for resorting to this discourse of unequal employment opportunities for women can be found in a passage from her interview:

> He was constantly progressing, and I was seething with envy in my solitude. I saw that, as a woman, I was working twice as hard as him, but he was the one progressing and his name was being mentioned. On the other hand, he was signing projects with various departments and centres and getting work, and when I reported my experiences to them, they didn't pay attention.

With the support she was receiving, RM tried to establish parallel contact with individuals and officials, later launching a media campaign – albeit a one-person one – about FGM/C in Kurdistan.

Meanwhile, we were in the field, mainly in villages, using an indirect method based on global scientific experience, trying to raise face-to-face awareness, change the views of mothers and families, lobby religious and social leaders, and persuade cutters to stop performing the procedure on children. I never signed any contracts with any governmental or non-governmental organisation in Iran, and, in fact, never managed to do so. Interestingly, in her account, RM, much like my interrogators in prison, speaks of contracts between me and various departments and centres, of which I am completely unaware.

A few years later, when the atmosphere had eased somewhat, the publication permit for the book *In the Name of Tradition* was issued and the results of that period of research on FGM/C were published, creating a functional reflection both abroad and within Iran. At a meeting organised by a board member of the National Child Authority to discuss and find localised solutions for FGM/C, we were both invited at their insistence. She also insisted on attending the meeting to raise issues about which she disagreed with me. However, before the meeting, the then-head of the Authority warned me that a woman named RM was very keen to attend the meeting and apparently intended to present claims and disagreements with my work.

She had announced that several people would be present to give evidence. On the day of the meeting, she steered it toward the idea that she had a major stake in this work in Iran. The attendees were the head of the National Authority, two people from the legal unit of the Women's Affairs Department, two members of the Authority's board, me, and three of my colleagues, who had been invited to testify about her presence and the duration of her work on the research. I heard her professional claims for the first time from her directly, to my utter astonishment. Her witnesses never arrived, and she offered no explanation regarding her signature on the contract and her settlement sheet, which clearly stated her brief period of collaboration with me.

I presented them at that meeting and said, 'If you don't provide evidence, I'll take you to court. What is your motive for stalking and slandering me everywhere like a shadow?'

The person in charge of the National Child Authority at the time said, half-jokingly, 'It seems like this is a personal quarrel and we haven't gained anything. We gathered to see what the agencies responsible for this issue should do.' Ultimately, at the end of the meeting, he whispered to me, 'Look, Ahmady, it's as if a student has surpassed their master and set up shop for themselves. I don't think this woman is going to let this go, and she has a personal problem with you. Be careful and, if you can, reach an agreement with her and get rid of her.'

His point was entirely valid, as the continuation of the issues she is still striving to bring to fruition demonstrate.

Perhaps the question arises as to whether I am delving into details out of animosity and revenge, but, as I said before, she hasn't made much effort to conceal her identity, especially in specialist circles or where she is challenged. Ms RM still participates in online groups and chat rooms, as well as in-person meetings, and organises sessions to badmouth and slander me and my work. Recently, she sent emails to some academics – my friends, colleagues and professional networks – forwarding news links and published accounts concerning me. Some of them sent me copies of her explicit conversations and statements. Some are astonished by the sheer volume of Ms RM's spite and animosity. For some, even those who strongly supported the first wave of #MeToo, it has become clear that Ms RM's intention is not only to accuse me of sexual abuse, but also, far beyond that, she has a firm determination to eliminate me and take over a position she believes is rightfully hers! This is despite the fact that many research areas of this kind can no longer be examined, and the drivers and problems have already been identified, tracked and assessed.

'I Am Not Obliged to Provide Evidence'

RM constantly fretted and envied my invitations to conferences and seminars, corresponded directly with the organisers using fake emails and accounts, slandered me and demanded to be substituted in my place. She recklessly contacted individuals and organisations in the Global FGM/C Network, Qeshm Welfare, members of my clinic on Qeshm Island, and other activists in this field, with the intention of destroying me. Most of these propaganda actions were shared with me by the individuals, and

most of my colleagues and even my wife were aware of these sabotage attempts and were surprised and sometimes angered by my patience.

When sexual allegations were made against me, the third, most detailed and most unreal accusations were related to her, and to increase credibility and in response to audiences who described her accusations as an immature story, as I said, she arranged an interview with Harassment Watch to repair the contradictions in her narrative with the intelligence and systematic assistance of some media outlets. She then orchestrated a large part of the chain narratives and waited to reap the rewards. Then, displaying magnanimity and generosity, she stated in her interview that, 'I am not seeking revenge!':

> For the past few days, I was constantly searching the hashtag of his name every hour to read everything. Then I realised my situation was bad. I gave up and thought, it doesn't matter what others say. What matters is that this person has gained public acceptance. I never intended to take revenge on him.
>
> I have my own thoughts on the matter too, thinking that he has a wife and children, and so I convinced myself not to seek revenge . . . We should look at these narratives as a form of education; we become a case study for the future . . . We are the injured, and speaking about the perpetrator won't heal us; what helps us is providing a platform for future generations, having a role in a safer future . . . That I broke my silence was a responsibility I felt toward the bravery of the first narrator. I didn't have that courage at first, because I hadn't been educated either. It's only now that I think, why did I remain silent? And what really happened to me? This is a step for the future, and now I'm educating myself. We must narrate when our courage is complete . . . My ten years of silence harmed many because it led to repetition, but now these narratives validate me. In our society, it isn't right for unrelated men and women to be under one roof, but in a civilised society, men and women are taught that if they are alone and have been drinking, they shouldn't violate each other's boundaries. That's the difference. The narrator might

> not want to mention details and only talk about the assault they experienced. Therefore, we aren't having a qualitative discussion here, so we shouldn't expect a particular quality. This is about forming a collective discourse, not the quality of the narrative. The narrator isn't obliged to satisfy and convince everyone; the issue is at the level of storytelling, and they aren't obliged to provide court-worthy evidence . . .

But I have a question for everyone involved in this movement and those who witnessed my professional and personal relationship with Ms RM: hasn't it occurred to you that such a relationship, which happened repeatedly in different times and places, has been limited to one night and a recreational trip to Sanandaj and labelled 'assault'? What reason was there for her not to mention the continuation of that relationship anywhere in her narrative and interviews? She could have accused me of assault or repeated assault in that same recreational trip or in Shiraz, Qeshm or Bandar Abbas – in at least four other geographical locations!

Couldn't the reason be that, upon learning of the existence and aims of the #MeToo movement and its spread to Iranian society, she saw the moment as opportune to exact her revenge on me and register her name as the vanguard of a revolutionary act? In that opportune moment, who better and more suitable than Kameel Ahmady, who both has a history of professional rivalry with her and is under the pressure of the Intelligence services, the Revolutionary Guard and Judge Salavati? Ahmady has a history of a relationship with her, which colleagues have witnessed, and the challenges and tensions over his protected area are known to most relevant agencies. His name and relationship with her were the subject of his interrogator's sessions during his initial detention, and the thirst to confiscate the subject of his work has driven him mad . . . ! What better moment than now to deliver the final blow, branding him – primed and ready – with the label of 'aggressor' – a man ripe for absorbing any allegations that will elevate a security and political scenario to a moral one.

It's not far-fetched to suggest that Ms RM, quite cleverly, released her account after the first and second narratives specifically to emphasise her susceptibility to the influence of the #MeToo movement. As she writes, 'Breaking my silence was a responsibility I felt toward the courage of the

first narrator.' This was, ostensibly, to absolve herself of any suspicion of directing or orchestrating the entire scenario.

However, the numerous pieces of evidence, highlighted throughout this chapter, that openly expose her motives, demonstrate that Ms RM, even if not the instigator of this campaign against me personally, upon its commencement employed various tactics, disregarding any ethical or professional considerations, to play a significant role in creating an atmosphere and campaigning against me.

To guarantee the perceived legitimacy of the narratives, RM had to frame them within a defined and specific structure of assault and transgression. One such framework was the employer-employee relationship. Therefore, each assault had to occur during a business trip, and it had to appear that the trip was with the employer (me), and that the employer abused his position of power. The key point was achieved – 'abuse of power and dominance' – which had to be emphasised to appeal to some and, at the same time, align with the feminist discourse.

With a little attention to documents such as our employment contract, which I have included here, and using the simplest tools of assessment/verification and minimal knowledge and understanding, hasn't enough ambiguity arisen for anyone to ask where the other, more important, parts of this story have gone?

Why, in the face of assault, oppression, transgression and dominance – especially for a counter-cultural personality who cannot tolerate orders, let alone constructive and transcendent criticism, not even from family, friends or those around them – would she agree to continue this unequal relationship? Can the necessity and the need to achieve quantitative research results and benefit from them truly quench the thirst for so-called anti-oppression and justice, and cover up the failure to disclose the abuser in a timely manner? If so, doesn't it invalidate her other claim that this self-sacrifice and disclosure was done to help women harmed by abuse and the stigma of assault, and to empower them to disclose abuse?

Immediately following RM's account, and as the onslaught intensified, the hash-tagging of my name under these stories accelerated. It reached a point where even many of Bidarzani's readers protested, accusing them of unethical behaviour and manipulation. They were saying, 'You feign professionalism, and while you mention abusers by pseudonyms in all your past narratives, you maliciously and persistently hashtag their full

names underneath, or write the stories in such a way that everyone knows who you're talking about.'

The next day, Bidarzani's page published a statement titled 'Explanation from the Editorial Board of Bidarzani Regarding the Publication of Recent Sexual Harassment Accounts'.[1] It cited concerns about legal repercussions, struck a neutral pose and positioned Bidarzani as progressive within Iran's #MeToo movement. The organisation wrote,

> In previous days, we witnessed a surge of individuals sharing their experiences of sexual harassment by others on online social networks, including Twitter and Instagram. Bidarzani, in line with its policy and defence of the rights of those who have been abused, and in an effort to reform society's and the law's view of these individuals, initially republished some of the published accounts. Alongside this, we have published, and will continue to publish, some analyses and expert opinions regarding the necessity of breaking the silence about these experiences and the need for legal and social support for victims of abuse, in a productive format. After a while, some of Bidarzani's audience members began sending their own accounts relating to this issue via email or Bidarzani's social networks. Considering that we believe we must first trust and support the words of the abused, we have so far published some of the submitted accounts that have reached us with the real names of the abused, without any judgement, a process that we will continue in the coming days. However, we believe that we must respect the rights of the accused. Therefore, in publishing these accounts, based on a legal and humanitarian perspective, we refrain from publishing the full names of individuals who have been identified as abusers. As a media outlet, we cannot put ourselves in the position of judge and jury, and we also recognise the right of

1 Bidarzani (2020d) 'We are seeking a collective solution: Explanation from the Editorial Board of Bidarzani Regarding the Publication of Recent Sexual Harassment Accounts' [Instagram post]. 26 August. Available at: www.instagram.com/p/CEWKEeEpyJz (Accessed.

> individuals who have been indirectly mentioned in these accounts to defend themselves if they wish. Furthermore, we believe that every individual, even if guilty, has the potential to change. For this reason, when receiving submitted accounts, we have emphasised that we are unable to publish the names of individuals accused of abuse, and our audience has agreed to this principle when submitting their accounts.
>
> With the publication of these narratives, some readers, based on the content of the submissions, mentioned the names of certain individuals as abusers in their comments – which are purely their personal opinions. Ultimately, we are seeking a collective solution to overcome this social issue. We hope that with collective wisdom, we can arrive at solutions that will reduce the likelihood of witnessing such events in the future.

In that atmosphere, this post was seen by some as an insult to their intelligence, and by others as cowardice and a retreat by this Instagram page. Some comments are shown in pictures bellow.



Image 472: Screenshot of Instagram comments.

Nahidehsani548: @bidarzani 'Be a rebellious and defiant feminist, not a fearful person who bows down to patriarchy. Studies have shown that those who have been raped never get better, and then you support the rapist. I am truly grateful for your unconscious action.'
Arefe2: 'I think it's more honest to say that you don't have the ability to face the legal consequences. It doesn't matter; we know where we are living. The whole point of this campaign has been

> that many people have named their abusers even without using their real names and broke this barrier. Your approach is very conservative and in favour of the abusers and if feminism wanted to be conservative it would not get anywhere.'
> ghaderi.bayan1986: 'You yourself have had these unprofessional behaviours. It's true that you didn't mention this person's name in your caption, but you quoted words that anyone who read them would know who you meant. And you didn't delete the comments of those who had mentioned his name, while you claim to defend rights, and this itself is the biggest example of trampling on rights. Someone who is still only accused and not guilty – you are dragging them to your emotional court, and becoming the judge and issuing a verdict.'
> ghaderi.bayan1986: 'Anyway, I said my opinion, I don't have experience and it's not necessary to have experience to understand an issue. Unfortunately, it's always the habit that when you're in a climate that exists, if your opinion is against that climate and the group, you get labels, now, whether it's being a patriarchal man or anything else. I hope this issue becomes clear as soon as possible.'

Ms RM stated that she was a virgin at the time of our first meeting![1] In this claim, my private investigator showed me, from evidence and interviews with two people, that Ms RM had been in free and lengthy sexual relationships with at least two people before me. She herself had written and spoken to me about one of the love affairs she had previously had. She also informed me, referring to these two people, in what year and how she had contracted HPV and transmitted the disease to at least two others. My investigator even met one of them in person and spoke to the other via video call. Not to mention that, at the beginning of her relationship with me, she told stories, especially about one of them and their broken love and travels.

1 The conflict and contradiction in some people who instrumentally claim to support feminist views becomes apparent when they raise the right to one's body, to vote against the legitimacy of virginity, to call it a myth from the outset, and to deny its physical and biological existence, but here and in other narratives, virginity suddenly becomes an important and vital matter, the loss of which endangers the life and family of the victim.

In my last contact and email to her, I complained that she had not informed me about having genital warts (HPV) and called it unethical because the other person also claimed to have contracted it from her. I found her denial and justification – that she 'had swum in the sea and caught a fungal infection' – unacceptable, because she had not informed me about still having genital warts at the beginning of our relationship.

The third narrative also attracted the attention of some specific audiences because it claimed that the issue of rape had been raised with women's-rights activists and women's organisations, and no action had been taken. Informed audiences demanded the names of the accused be revealed to pursue the demands and rights of the victims, saying that they should be exposed, but Ms RM never named anyone. During the period when we were working on the issue of FGM/C and later on the amendment of the child-marriage law, RM had gone to the legal department of the Vice Presidency for Women's Affairs and spoken badly of me. They informed me and jokingly said in the legal unit that this woman had a deep animosity toward me and would shoot my shadow with an arrow!

After her account was published, I contacted one of those individuals and asked, 'Did this woman really approach you years ago, as she claims, and accuse me of rape or assault?'

He said, 'I'm sorry to be reading these things about you. Why is this woman ruining everyone's reputations? Why is she ruining our reputations?' He said that RM had never spoken to him about the subject. 'I've always advised her to stop her animosity toward Mr Ahmady; you both work in the same field. Now, I don't know if the sex allegation is true or not – that's your business – but why are you dragging us into it?

'A journalist, who I think was from abroad, contacted me. I explained that this woman had never spoken to me [about it], and I wasn't in a position to interfere. The matter raised was a personal issue, and if she was telling the truth, why didn't she file a complaint? It's not like the country is completely lawless, to the point where someone like her couldn't file a complaint! She has the strength and the gift of the gab, and her family carries some weight in the system.'[1]

1 I was reminded of a friend who called me and said, 'I saw Ms RM at a meeting about female genital mutilation that I organised at the university. She's not someone you could

A commotion had erupted; so-called activists and media outlets were attacking me with this narrative on one side and condemning the women's institutions on the other. At one point, Twitter users were grabbing the United Nations in Tehran by the collar, even though I never held a position at the United Nations and had only done one or two seminars there on child marriage and FGM/C, which any researcher might have the opportunity to do.



Image 473: Users questioning RM.

> 'If this lady would be so kind as to state in her written message how many feminists have reported this incident, then also announce the names of these individuals so that all female activists are not questioned.'

At this stage in her life, RM managed, by deceiving her husband and lying about her past, to gain his support. That epic story – that suddenly and very coincidentally, on her wedding day, supposedly on her way back from the registry office in a taxi, someone sent her the first account, and even her spirit had no prior knowledge – tore at the readers' hearts. By

have forced or raped; it's unbelievable! She'd take several like you and me to the spring and bring them back thirsty!'

appealing to her gender to achieve her ambitious goals and desires, she exploited herself and me instrumentally, accusing others and creating a spectacle, posing as the vanguard of a modern movement to try once again to portray herself as a pioneering and unique figure in the field of women's struggles and activism, and at the same time remain a 'rape celebrity' – of course, hidden from the public, but, as they say, public to the feminist elite. But will the rebellious, self-centred, arrogant, power-hungry spirit be satisfied even here?

Now that I am finalising this text for publication, some time has passed since the start of the popular protests in Iran, which have been unprecedented in their nature. The presence of young women and men in the streets, which began with the issue of hijab and gender and now demands the overthrow of the system, continues. Almost all women's-rights activists consider this period a women's revolution, and all of them have taken personal, professional and ideological stances on it, reacting at various levels, participating in protests or being imprisoned. As a friend asked me, why haven't my accusers, especially Ms RM (almost all of whom are claimants and pioneers of women's rights and reflect, in their narratives, their history, interests and thirst for broad engagement) reacted, even to the extent of a story, post or analysis, during these fateful days, which have a very direct relationship to these individuals' core identities and beliefs? This is very surprising and thought-provoking, and this is where they say history is the best judge.

Fourth Account[1]

Narrative Four was short, targeted and contained an allegation of inappropriate behaviour toward a woman who had requested advice on immigrating from Iran. According to the narrative, I had made providing advice conditional on her joining the field team.

She begins her narrative like this:

> My narrative is not a narrative of rape. But I also saw KA up close and witnessed these behaviours of his. Maybe raising

1 Bidarzani (2020e) [Instagram post]. 27 August. Available at: www.instagram.com/p/CEYsWNKJX4d (Accessed: 22 August 2022).

> my experience will help to better identify this abuser. Now that these innocent girls are bravely telling the story of their lives, my conscience compelled me to write down this one memory I have of him. He didn't rape me. But very easily, I could have been one of these girls . . .

But what was the real story? I had met Ms SA through one of my colleagues in 1395 (2016). My colleague F(D)A was a research assistant and field-team leader for two years and then immigrated to Canada to continue her studies. Contrary to SA's narrative, I met her in Bukan. Later, she was in regular contact with me on Telegram and Twitter for doctoral studies and received advice from me.

SA was looking for a good idea, and I suggested one to her, saying that medical-restoration methods such as nanotechnology after FGM/C could increase her chances of being accepted into that field. We met with F(D)A present, and, during the conversation and continuation of this topic, I explained the three degrees of FGM/C – i.e., Types 1, 2 and 3 – to her from a standard and customary chart so that she would understand what I meant by 'restoration', and how modern science and nanotechnology could somehow repair flesh and even nerve tissues in the clitoral area. Those who are knowledgeable and aware of the issue of FGM/C are well acquainted with this part of the United Nations' standard sexual-biology chart and use it in all meetings and discussions related to the topic. Throughout the years working on this subject, my specialist colleagues and I have used this very chart in all our academic, university and even governmental meetings, although it may not have been to the taste of some attendees, or women with non-expert or traditional/religious viewpoints.

This account paints a picture of me insisting that she work with me before I would help her. According to this narrative, I project and exaggerate strangely about my connections with a university I left years ago, and about taking her on foreign trips, and, more importantly, about having extraordinary power and influence to get her to London within a year. She describes my words like this:

> If I work for him, he can take me on foreign trips with him. He said he could make it so I'd be in England this time next year . . . I turned down his job offer. He ordered a hookah and, while smoking it, he stared into my eyes and blew the smoke toward me and continued with his promises! That he knows plenty of professors at the University of Kent who he can introduce me to, and in return I can go on one or two field trips with him.

According to this account, my discourteous behaviour was so repulsive that I made the meeting unbearable, and, despite my insistence, even in the presence of my colleague, she refused my offer of foreign trips and all those attractive promises, repeatedly turning me down.

Now, how believable is it that, in the presence of another colleague, I would draw several circumcised and uncircumcised vaginas while giving

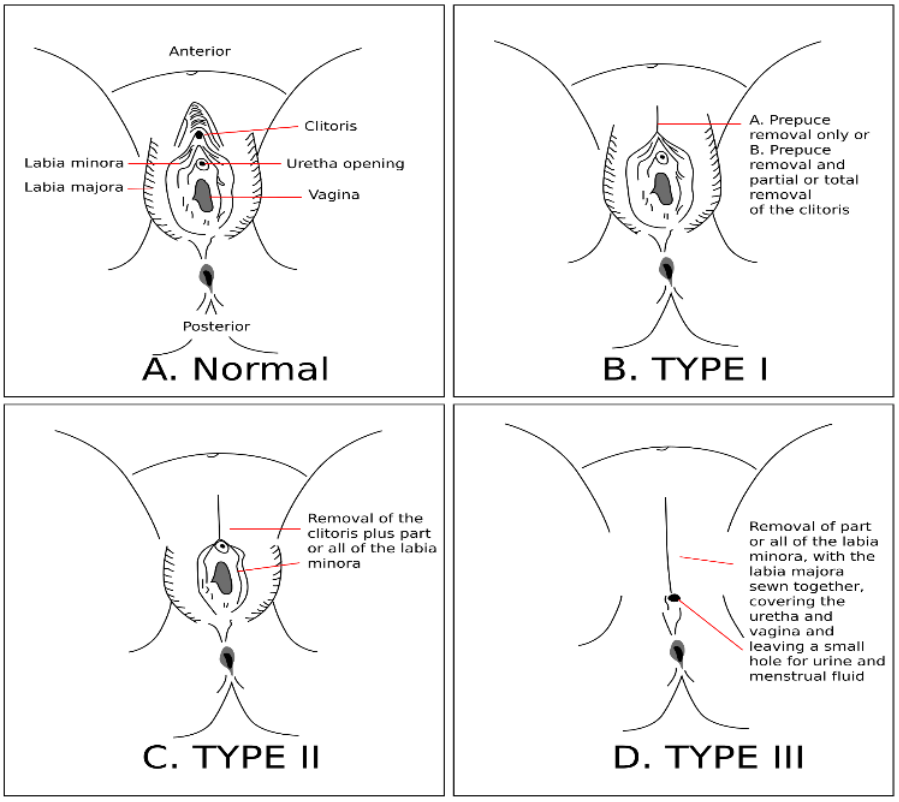


Image 474: Types of FGM/C.

academic advice, and then ask which picture resembled theirs? That I would smoke a hookah and blow the smoke in her face? These are like scenes from surreal Hollywood films – scenes I can't place myself in.

I'm still amazed at the clumsiness and haste with which this account was written – how it insults the reader's intelligence to this extent. I ask how true this claim could be, that I or anyone else, in the presence of a colleague who is alive and well and sitting next to me, would clearly and repeatedly ask her to come on a foreign trip with me, making it a condition for arranging her trip to England possible, within a year at that?



Image 475: Retweet of the London bombing news. July 2017.

In fact, Ms SA is from a relatively well-known family in Bukan. A few days after that (in her words) 'offensive and pathetic meeting', they sent me their initial proposal for consultation, and again a week later they sent me a plan on which they had made changes. Some time later they asked me about the process of applying and getting a visa from the British Embassy in Tehran. Later again, via Telegram messages, they inquired about the legal way to convert tomans to pounds, which they needed for the embassy and the university.

During the period when she received her acceptance from Birkbeck University of London, she was in contact with me. At no point did she express any objection to my behaviour – according to the account, of course – during that meeting. On the contrary, we treated each other with complete respect and courtesy throughout. Eventually, she went to London, and even while she was there, she kept in touch, even retweeting some of my posts.

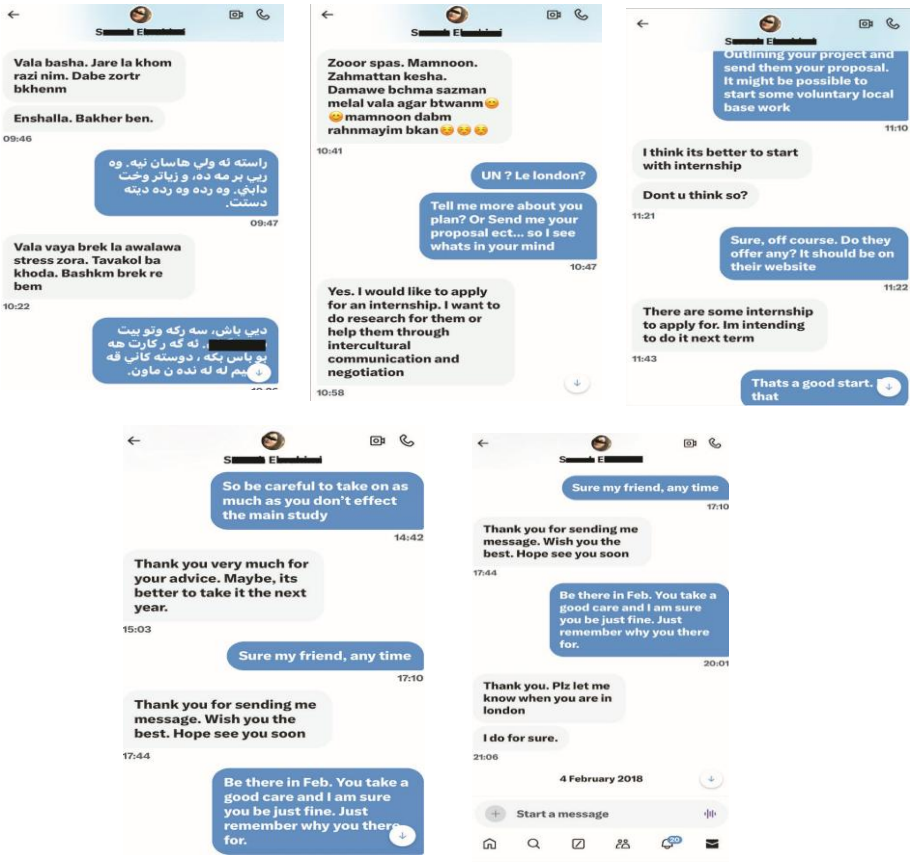


Image 476: Messages in English and Kurdish. February 2018.

(9:46 AM) SA: Well, it's good, but I'm not very satisfied with myself right now. I need to study more. God willing, welcome.
(9:47 AM) Me: That's right. it's not easy at first. Put in more time; you'll get the hang of it gradually.
(10:22 AM) SA: That's right. There's more stress at the beginning. God willing, maybe I'll find my way.
(10:? AM) Me: OK, good luck. Let me know if you need anything. Some of my old friends are still in London.

- -

(10:41 AM) SA: Thank you very much. Thank you. You went to a lot of trouble. Well, I wanted to go to the UN if I could, I pray for the children. I would be grateful if you could guide me. 😊 😊 😊

(10:47 AM) Me: The UN? London? What's your plan? Or send me your proposal, etc. so I see [what you have in] mind.
(10:58 AM) SA: Yes. I would like to apply for an internship. I want to research for them or help them through intercultural communication and negotiation
- -
(11:10 AM) Me: [Outline] your project and send them your proposal. It might be possible to start some voluntary local base work
(11:21 AM) SA: I think it's better to start with internship
Don't u think so?
(11:22 AM) Me: Sure, [of] course. Do they offer any? It should be on their website
(11:43 AM) SA: There are some internship[s] to apply for. [I'm] intending to do it next term
- -
(2:42 PM) Me: That's a good start . . . So be careful to take on as [only as] much [that] you don't affect the main study
(3:03 PM) SA: Thank you very much for your advice. Maybe, it's better to take it the next year.
(5:10 PM) Me: Sure, my friend, any time
(5:44 PM) SA: Thank you for sending me [a] message. Wish you the best. Hope [to] see you soon.
(8:01 PM) Me: Be there in Feb. You take . . . good care and I am sure you['ll] be just fine. Just remember why [you're there].
(21:06) SA: Thank you. [Please] let me know when you are in london.
I do for sure.

Comparing the above details with her story reveals the distortion of her narrative. The narrator must be asked: why, with such impudence and behaviour as you supposedly witnessed from me, did you continue to communicate and seek friendly advice for almost two years? Why are the tone and content of these messages and the twenty-three Telegram and Twitter messages between us so different from the disgusting behaviour you mentioned in your narrative? What accounts for this change, contradiction and fabrication? How could you accept such audacity from

me, yet continue your communications and not prevent your very close friend from collaborating with me? My question is, did your friend and former colleague, F(D)A, who read the account, not rebuke you and your conscience regarding it? Wasn't this commissioned narrative reproduced to lend weight, coherence, coordination and aid to the credibility of other narratives? Isn't it a back-up to the narrative of an unknown figure? Whatever this connection was and is, there's no doubt that sooner or later it will become clear.

Now, naturally, more questions arise: why didn't you mention the rest of our connection and the conversations we had? Why don't you speak of the times when you went to university and were happy and constantly thanking me? As you can see in the screenshots of the messages above, when you came to University College London, you were in contact with me, liking and retweeting my posts, sending me messages, telling me about the university situation, New Year's Eve and the bombing in London. Where did this narrative come from, and what was the hidden intention behind it? What goal were you pursuing by designing a false narrative and portraying a character to the liking of rabble-rousers and clumsy imitators? What need did legitimising fabricated narratives of rape fulfil? Why did you need to share a delusion just to add to the number of narratives? You had already received university acceptance; if I were such a dangerous person, why were you in contact with me?



Image 477: SA's last like on my Tweet.

> 'One must accept this bitter truth that, in this case and this time, too, the level of state suppression and violence in Kurdistan and marginal and less-privileged cities is considerably more than in other regions of Iran, but for many reasons, less media attention has been focused on it.'

On what reasoning or evidence did the Experienced Vigilant Women Working Group stamp your narrative with approval and deem it acceptable for publication? On one side of the story are the wealth, power, status, promises, abuse, intimidation, deception, seduction and domination by me, the aggressor, over the victims, and on the other side are young, poor, simple, voiceless, desperate girls, looking for work, rejected by their families, all virgins, without any prior relationship with the opposite sex . . . all caught in my trap!

How gratifying that you were so sharp and aware – that single, brief encounter was enough for you to miraculously and intuitively grasp my intentions, saving yourself from my clutches.

It's fascinating that, after all this time spent publicly denouncing me, you still 'like' and even 'retweet' my posts! You might find it interesting, but the last 'like' you bestowed upon my posts was quite recent, in October 2022 (Mehr 1401) during the Jina (Mahsa) Amini uprising.

I remain bewildered by this sheer contradiction. Where, as they say nowadays, am I supposed to file this one?

Fifth[1] and Sixth[2] Accounts

It seems that these two accounts were copies of each other and followed a similar path to the one the fourth account had taken. Certain keywords, arrangements, enticement and discussions about virginity and sexual freedom were all prominent in these two accounts.

In account five, the narrator claimed she had not experienced any abuse from me; I had merely propositioned her, but from my words and jokes, she realised I was not a good person. After this account, the comments and attacks on me began again, followed by the strong presence of anonymous accounts.

This one, in line with the previous account, focused more on the issue of power and dominance in the workplace and the abuse of it. It concentrated on me supposedly being insistent and enticing someone into a relationship. Like Ms SA, she too hadn't 'taken the bait' but had finally plucked up the courage to speak out.

By focusing on the well-known claim of 'lack of job security and professorship', she tried to challenge my work ethic. Despite all this, she was also forced to continue working with me for some time and tolerate the situation.

This account, like the second, was short and concise, lacking time, place and other indicators. It had no connection to any specific piece of research.

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1 Bidarzani (2020f) [Instagram post]. 30 August. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEgb55zJMMs/ (Accessed: 22 August 2022).

2 Bidarzani (2020g) [Instagram post]. 2 September. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEoFPokJsbT/ (Accessed: 22 August 2022).

She and her story remain a mystery to me. It seems that, for the experienced members of this working group, paying attention to time and place was of little importance or necessity!

In accounts five and six, apart from the usual keywords favoured by the so-called anti-rape claimants, there was also a dig at my approach to free sexual relations and even an intrusion into my family life. This was new and astonishing and showed an effort to converge the accounts and provide a false picture of aspects of my personality.

Account six is, in some ways, similar to accounts two and five. The narrator claims that, after working with me for some time without anything specific happening, on a business trip – for which no time or place is given – I separated her from the other members and dragged her to a house. She claims I took her from behind while offering hospitality, and the narrative ends there. She thought, confused, about whether my action was rape or consensual. She says,

> We got home and she said they'd be joining us soon. Nothing happened for an hour. I was anxious but slowly calmed down, thinking to myself, if this man wanted to do something, he would have done it already. There's nothing to worry about. Suddenly, there was no sound and I got worried. I went to the hall and called him, and he grabbed me from behind. Was it forced? Was it rape? I still don't know, even after all these years. But he calmly persuaded me. I was scared. I was both uncomfortable and anxious. I don't remember the details[.] I feel like I've consciously forgotten them.

This narrative, unlike the previous one, which was written in a hasty manner, had interesting sequential points – before it reduced my behaviour to aggression and claimed that I attacked recklessly and without preamble. The most important things are that I 'calmly persuaded' her and that she doesn't remember any details at all – in fact, has 'consciously forgotten' them.

Those who do fieldwork, especially in my field of work, have witnessed that I rarely send a researcher or interviewer into the field alone, unless the person is experienced, or I consider the urban environment and space to be

safe, or they are local to that place. In Iran, people were generally in teams or at least couples, and sometimes I would send a male colleague with them. In his absence, the women always went into the field together so that their safety was somewhat ensured, and they could support each other and help each other intellectually, find the interviewees better and more easily, and make better decisions together through participation and consultation. Even though such a process might sometimes be uneconomical, because if two people are in the field, one usually remains idle while the other conducts the interview, these considerations were taken in fieldwork for the safety of the interviewers.

I racked my brains trying to recognise her, but I couldn't. The narrative is so vague that I don't have much to go by. This narrative cleverly throws the ball into my court without giving any indication of the date, place or even the title of the work or project. She says that she doesn't remember any details, either, and pretends in a way that I have countless relationships. Thus it is possible that, among these countless people, I might not recognise her, so she had shown intelligence and guided me to remember her by giving symbols and signs: 'I wish he would read it too. Maybe he doesn't recognise the cases now. But he remembers the keywords, the sentences, the events.'

When I decided to respond to these narratives in my autobiography, I resolved to respond to all the claims in detail. If I knew the identity of the narrators, or if I could guess who they were, I would go into the details of the matter. Given that defending myself and shedding light on my side of the story could work in my favour, I mention this because the question

invariably arises: why didn't I respond to these two accounts, nor attribute them to anyone?



Image 478: Challenging the narratives and comments, and the support for them by some users.

rezaee.yasaman: 'Whenever you dare to talk in your real identity, you can talk to me about the rot inside you. My name and identity are clear. Please do your victim-playing somewhere else.'
rezaee.yasaman: 'You didn't even have the sense to create an account in less than twenty-four hours and put pictures of reasonable people on it, not anime or cartoons. We ethnic minorities, unlike you who, along with someone close to you, by doing a favour to us, shifted the sexual exploitation of yourself onto another person, dare to speak with our real selves, with courage. The relationships were unequal, so instead of me instrumentalising myself and then acting like an intellectual victim with sighs and moans and feeling like I'm exposing something, learn exposure from the Digikala case. Clear name, clear photo. I am sure you are either the same fool who described

> his post-sex whining here as a porn movie, or one of his relatives. Dare to fight with your real identity. Don't mess with me, you fake chick, I have that much courage . . .'

This account bore almost all the hallmarks of another heart-wrenching tale, painting an ever more villainous picture of a tormentor. She was, allegedly, a woman lacking confidence, forced in utter desperation to continue working with me, which, ironically, she considered an honour. She even rejected her friend's advice to quit, believing that this collaboration might be a stepping stone to success. Alongside this, she supposedly believed my claims of associating with powerful people, actors and celebrities and, indeed, frequently attended important meetings and glamorous parties with me and others as a female companion. It was then, without restraint or preamble, that I supposedly coerced her – you might say assaulted her. I tossed her aside like a dirty tissue, yet, despite this, she stayed until the end of the project to see the results. But now that others had decided to expose me, she, too, wanted to discredit me and make her cries heard by everyone.

Now that I've risen to the challenge of responding to this account, certainly questions arise, particularly regarding the sixth narrative, for me and for others. Some of these questions were even raised by readers at the time of publication and have remained unanswered to this day. If she rejected my advances during our collaboration, how and why did she continue working? Why didn't she discuss it with others or protest? Beyond all these options, she came with me to glamorous parties and used my ladder to climb the ranks? Which parties? Which important people, and where? If she is a person without confidence, why did I, contrary to my usual practice of being sensitive to the personal and professional qualities of individuals, choose her to be my colleague and even take her to places that undoubtedly require people to have the art of eloquence and the ability to shine in company?

During all this time, with all these comings and goings and parties – where it's highly likely that opportunities would arise before and after each event – she wasn't subjected to any mistreatment or harm, nor did she see any signs of it from me. How, with all this prior knowledge and awareness of my intentions, did she enter a derelict house with me from the outset and even stay there for an hour without anything happening? When I

appeared, uninhibited, like a genie, and grabbed her from behind, coercing her into a relationship, why didn't she resist or scream? Was she, as claimed by the second claimant, Ms RM, drunk and using marijuana, or had it been given to her? Was this encounter consensual or not, and if it wasn't, why did she go to the house alone? Why did she stay until the very end of that field phase?

As with all these accounts, the key question is, without evidence, verification or any real credibility, given the sheer volume of contradictions, ambiguities and unknown factors, what made it so essential to publish such a story? Perhaps the narrator thought to herself, 'There have already been five accounts published about Kameel Ahmady, and I know him from near and far, so I might as well add a sixth!'



Image 479: Screenshot of supports

@mahsafooladi: 'I have known #Kameel_Ahmady for years. At a time in my life he was my financial supporter, so that I could get closer to my dreams. He, like any other man, had the right to

> respectfully make any offer to me, and respectfully accept any answer. He was not and is not a rapist, because not only did he help me unreservedly, but also kept the distance of himself respecfully. If we connect any talk to rape in various ways, we will lose the dignity of words. If we want to throw our regrets on the soulders of others, we are just changing the meaning of words. Kameel Ahamdy is a respectful man in a 7 years of proximity.'

My question is, what worldview allows you to be judge, jury and executioner in the name of supporting women's rights, and then refuse to accept responsibility for your mistakes? Why do you disregard your own agency and involvement by presenting such flawed accounts? You were all intelligent, mature and educated individuals. What power did I possibly have to threaten you, as you claim? It was you who were not only threatening me and my family with fake accounts, but also slandering anyone who left a comment in my defence. If you consider yourselves champions of women's rights and are seeking justice, why did you respond to women who raised questions with such vile language?

It seems there was an absolute need for every account, regardless of its quality, to be published, because, riding the wave, the end justified the means – or, according to the claimants, no justification was needed at all.

Seventh Account[1]

Account seven comes from someone I know. Although I didn't fully realise this at first, I pieced together her identity by reviewing the clues and speaking with mutual friends.

This account contains hints and suggestions that would enrage a feminist. According to account seven, the narrator is a die-hard feminist who used to work with me and was very interested in my field of work. Allegedly, she played a key role in my work, and after a meeting I took her to my house for lunch. Suddenly, *en route*, she claims I challenged her feminist viewpoints, steering the conversation toward sexual topics. The

1 Bidarzani (2020h) [Instagram post]. 6 September. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEyNnmjplx6/ (Accessed: 22 August 2022).

anonymous narrator, seemingly informed and articulate, immediately drew a line in the sand, stating,

> First, let me say that I distinguish clearly between sexual harassment and rape. In my experience, rape did not occur; I experienced sexual harassment.

She goes on to say that she didn't drink alcohol at my house.

She claims that I went to the bathroom without warning, and, after a few minutes, I came out stark naked and challenged her, saying that if she were a feminist she wouldn't be afraid of a man's body. After I supposedly exposed myself, she left the house. However, because of her strong interest in the effort to raise the age of marriage for children, she continued to work with me but kept her distance. The account ends with the claim that after I touched her genitals in the street, she ended our collaboration for good.

This seventh account is also full of signs related to my work. It showcases my working methods and strategies and suggests someone who knows my professional style and even my life. Using keywords and so-called quotations of my views on feminism, it creates a more united front of feminists against me, and gives more legitimacy to the publisher of the accounts, which is a feminist page. This account carries more of the components that incite an ideology.

I wondered who she was. I knew this account and story had been cut and pieced together, but I was looking for the missing pieces. I questioned friends and colleagues, but no one knew anything about her, and we couldn't think of such a person who had been a colleague in our research. With three of my former colleagues, we investigated and searched the lists of individuals, assistants and field interviewers from the research she mentioned, but we found no trace of such a person. I extended the circle of this search to a number of other friends, until two of them, one of whom was a mutual friend, said that it was so-and-so – that these words were hers.

Reading some of the comments below the account, written by people familiar with her who were aware of our acquaintance, I became certain. Unanimously, we felt that we recognised the writing style and the specific references. Several messages were also exchanged between these commenters, confirming her identity, which I will present later.

Following up on the clues, I realised that this narrator could be none other than Ms ZP. We had had a friendly relationship, and she was initially a proofreader and then an editor of one of my works. I had entrusted her



Image 480: ZP's Tweet a few days before her narrative in Bidarzani.

with the second proofreading of the text, before the printing of another work, and she never came with us on fieldwork. All her work was remote and editorial, and, in fact, like others, she was not a member of my projects.

> '@Z____ P____
> 'I've been reading the narratives of #assault for exactly 4 days. But I am still afraid to narrate my own experience. But let me say in a veiled way that a sexual abuser can be a defender of women's and minority rights and thus gain worldwide fame.
> 'How courageous you are that you were able to speak up.'

It is unpleasant to speak of the details of a private, unconventional relationship, but I am compelled to do so to present a true account of my acquaintance and friendship with Ms ZP. Our relationship was complex; it was at times professional, at other times a close friendship, and at certain

points it became intimate and sexual. She is now erasing the consensual nature of our interactions to reframe them as abuse.

I first met her in Mashhad, where she lived, while I was working on the subjects of cohabitation and *sigheh* marriage. After that, countless Telegram and WhatsApp conversations on various, mostly political, topics led us toward a kind of friendship. I found her perspective interesting because, according to her, she had family connections to the Government. I later discovered that her father and other men in her family were devout and connected to the system, due to her father's history on the war front, his presence in Lebanon and the various government posts he had held. However, she considered herself part of the Green Movement and a supporter of reform, and she had experience working in the municipality and collaborating with some local officials.

Some time later, she returned to that job, and she later went to Germany to study. She left her studies unfinished at some point. She recently married a man in England and lives between Britain and Germany.

Our relationship initially started via Telegram. We had shared intellectual views and sometimes disagreements, but in general she found my perspectives interesting and unbelievable – that I was hopeful for Iran's political and social futures and that I saw a bright horizon and future for Iran, which I based on my analysis of Iran at that time and my views on nationalities and ethnicities and Iran in transition.

A little later, in January 2018 (Dey 1396), since she was familiar with editing, I suggested that she re-edit the text of the group research project *A House on Water*, which she did entirely remotely, by email. The general work was completed in about three months, and the financial settlement was completed simultaneously.

Our next collaboration was proofreading the text of *The Forbidden Tale* in February 2018 (Esfand 1396) for two months, and, after that, pre-publication proofreading of *A House with Open Door* and an article on the same subject, which, of course, never received a publishing permit in Iran. That work, like the other two pieces, was completed in short time in June 2018 (Khordad 1397).

She voluntarily proofread the final stages of the child waste-pickers research, which I was voluntarily supervising in the absence of sufficient funding for the Child Rights Protection Society, and the pre-publication

text of *Childhood Yawn* for the Society at my request, before my arrest in June 2019 (Khordad 1398).

This is the full extent of the work, or collaboration, that I had with Ms ZP. She never, in any way, performed practical work on any research with me or my colleagues, except for those short-term editing/proofreading cases, when she was always a freelancer and self-employed. For all of this there are contracts and payment invoices, and her name is clearly mentioned in the above research based on the position she held.

In part of her account, she says:

> It was hard to end the collaboration at that moment. I was both interested in the subject of the research and I had put in a lot of effort, and all my professional connections were tied to these projects. The discussions on the approval of the law prohibiting child marriage had just reached a conclusion, and I was hopeful about the role of that research.
>
> I decided to address the matter seriously with him, maintaining a safe distance until the project's completion. I arranged all business meetings in coffee shops.

It might strike the reader that she was deeply and practically involved in producing content for our work. Furthermore, due to her dependencies, professional connections and excessive interest in the field of child marriage, she says, she felt compelled to continue working with me, despite experiencing indecent exposure, or, in her words, sexual harassment.

Of course, Ms ZP omits many details in her account. She consciously avoids mentioning all the personal and friendly encounters and meetings that occurred between us during that time. She refrains from mentioning her several-day stopover in Tehran on her way back from the wedding of our mutual friend, Susan, in Gachsaran. She glosses over Gachsaran, where our mutual German-Greek professor friend was also present, and the fact that she later had a sexual relationship with this same professor in Germany and allegedly, at the height of the #MeToo movement in Iran, filed a complaint with the Iranian police, accusing him of rape, which resulted in him being barred from entering Iran.

Why does Ms ZP, a self-proclaimed feminist, say nothing about her eagerness and her so-called 'brave preparation' for her first sexual experience and losing her virginity, which she proudly and contentedly recounted in detail in private and public gatherings of friends? She doesn't mention how her conscious relationship, frequent private and intimate meetings and non-work-related phone calls with a man like me align with feminist views and the support of women. And she forgets to mention our meetings in Mashhad, especially her first time drinking alcohol near the shrine and the small green space near Chehnowi 5 alleyway, which she wrote and spoke about for ages, famously saying, 'I finally drank alcohol in the street and near the shrine during the Islamic Republic regime.' Transcripts of conversations before and after are still backed up on my Telegram, WhatsApp and Instagram. She forgets to recount memories of subsequent meetings in Mashhad. She neglects to mention how things went when she returned from her trip to Germany and came to visit me at home in Tehran.

It's odd that she doesn't talk about her persistent efforts to get news of me during my arrest and release, and her participation in campaigns and movements for my freedom, especially during that time. She makes no mention of contacting my family and wife directly to get news of my condition, of contacting my lawyer, of communicating with Members of Parliament, or of her weeping and pouring out her heart to our mutual friends during my detention, screenshots of which exist (see the pages ahead).

She omits any mention of our estrangement and my hurt at the way she treated me when I phoned her from the public prison, or the efforts of our friend Susan to reconcile us. Instead, she reduces her account to a biography of a psychologically disturbed exhibitionist, a street harasser and an unparalleled misogynist! But why?

In her narrative, she claims I repeatedly told her I don't believe in the institution of marriage and that my only reason for marrying was to gain social legitimacy. She even goes beyond this cruelty, saying I told her I even had children to gain more social legitimacy, because a father and husband attract less social curiosity.

A question remains for Ms ZP: you, who present yourself as a champion of women's rights, how do you justify entering into a consensual relationship with a married man, only to later label it as abuse when it

suited you? Even assuming your account were accurate, if I held such immoral views, why didn't you challenge me at the time? You considered yourself an independent, educated woman. Why didn't you start reforming society with yourself and your own choices? Does the end justify the means for you? If so, what was your goal, given that as a remote editor, you never needed to meet me in person at all?



Image 481: The authenticity of ZP's narrative being challenged by her acquaintances and their comments on her mentioning my family in her narrative.

'I think this narrative is ugly for two other reasons. First, by bringing up the man's supposed reasons for his marriage, the narrator is betraying his wife and children. This is a form of revealing private secrets from a time when they were friends. Secondly, this kind of story undermines the genuine revelations made by brave people who have recently come forward with their real names.'

'The third vile aspect is her attempt to gain sympathy from ethnic minorities to excuse her own actions. In my opinion, the only goal of this story is to satisfy her own activist ego. She pretends to be a

> victim to escape the consequences of her choices. She claims he called her a "villager" to pressure her, but for us ethnic minorities whose homes are in villages, considering "villager" an insult is itself the biggest insult.'
> 'As an ethnic minority, a researcher on this topic, a victim of assault, and someone who has been sexually harassed, I object to this story. I humbly ask, on behalf of all four groups I represent, that people like this narrator stop using our identities to justify their actions, clear their conscience, and satisfy their activist urges.'

Surely, if I were so psychologically disturbed and problematic, you must have noticed and seen the signs during all this time, in our meetings and interactions! Why didn't you mention other instances, or at least one other instance? You claimed to be intellectual, that you weren't inexperienced or young, you had a political family and you were a political analyst and commentator. Ironically and laughably, you always acted contrary to feminist views and considered those areas radical, impractical, imported, devoid of identity and incompatible with Iranian culture! Is this what a localised, Iranian-identified version of feminism looks like – to knowingly and willingly enter a private relationship with a man and then refer to it as abuse afterward? What was your role in advancing this relationship, and why are you refusing to talk about it? Unless you don't attribute any place to your own reason and will . . . ? Was talk of morality just a fashionable way for you to flaunt your education and studies? Did it have no role in your personal life?

If you were going to feed the audience and publishers your depiction of my behaviour in a private setting, based on that amateurish and ridiculous account of indecent exposure, the expectation is that you would at least come up with a more believable narrative than a clumsy assault on you. To initially claim it happened in front of a cash machine on the pavement, then in the very same sentence place it in the middle of a busy Tehran street, which was heavily monitored by security cameras, and to call all our interactions 'maintaining a safe distance' and 'just meeting in coffee shops' . . . you could have crafted a different story – one that at least wouldn't insult the intelligence of the 'specialised taskforce for reviewing

accounts of abuse', let alone ordinary readers. Was there a reason you didn't?



Image 482: Congratulatory message upon my freedom on 6 December 2019 and expressing joy at the unveiling of the report on garbage-scavenging research by ZP on Instagram a year later.

In Chapter Five, in the prison memoir, I wrote about ZP and how she reacted to my phone call. Here, to shed more light on another aspect of the story, I'll elaborate a bit more on that matter.

When I was in prison, ZP was deeply worried about me and was in contact with people I used to work with and was connected to. She even told our mutual friend in Germany how concerned she was and that she had been crying! When I arrived on the General Ward, after contacting other family members, I asked who had been following up on my case and was worried about me, so I could contact them directly from there to show my respect and gratitude. Ms ZP was someone who had directly inquired about my wellbeing from my wife, by phone and message. I would call my wife, and she would divert me to their numbers (this was a common practice throughout Evin Prison).

The first time I called her, she was very happy and screamed with joy. Phone calls were scheduled in shifts, and I couldn't talk to her much then, so I said I would call her again the next day. But the second time, when I also requested she check the news about my arrest in the media for me, she seemed frightened, as I described in Part Five. She said bluntly over the phone that she didn't want to talk to me any more, because she was afraid the phone was being traced. She said it was bad and asked me to get someone else to do it for me and not to call her again. Although I tried to explain to her that I was on the General Ward and making phone calls was normal for everyone, it seemed like something else was going on – as if I

were a threat to her interests. I was upset. I thought it was during these difficult times that one recognises a true friend.

Later, after I got out of prison, she called me and sent me persistent messages, but I said that I didn't want to talk because I was upset with her, and she knew the reason why.

She had told our mutual friends that she had no choice – that she was scared that the contact would cause her trouble, and a few other things. 'Kameel is upset with me; I know he won't forgive me.'

Read the messages below and judge for yourselves how such a degree of contradiction can exist between her account and the continuation of our relationship and friendship. She says, 'I decided to seriously raise the issue with him and continue with the project while maintaining a safe distance. I arranged all work meetings in cafés.' According to this version of her story, she left me after the project was finished, after I 'harassed her' in broad daylight and in the street, and there was no further contact between us. But do the tone and description of the 'relationship', 'intimacy' and 'friendship' in these messages suggest someone who has been harassed and is running away from me?

Here, I want to pour my heart out to her. Have you ever asked yourself why you did such a thing? Why you took revenge on me in this way, at a time when my neck was under the blade of the Revolutionary Court? Why you fed your story, which had many layers, to the audience in such an exaggerated and distorted way? I think it would have been interesting for your audience if you had also mentioned a few lines about your other sexual assault allegation, which you made at the height of the #MeToo movement, and your complaint to the Iranian police about the professor with whom you had a sexual relationship for a long time outside Iran. How you, as a knowing feminist, once again fell victim to an employer's domination over you, the employee!



Image 483: Messages on WhatsApp.

8 May 2020

ZP (02:10): Kameel, I knew you as someone who valued research, negotiation, and analysis.

ZP (02:10): Based on that, I expected you to at least discuss this topic with me.

ZP (02:14): These weren't just misunderstandings . . . Were you so sure of your judgment of me that you didn't feel the need to talk, or even give me a chance to explain?
ZP (02:16): I thought the depth of our friendship was great enough that you would spend more time on it before closing the case.
ZP (02:19): If you ever feel this friendship is worth explaining your points and listening to me, please let me know. I would be very happy if that happened someday.
30 August 2020
Kameel (15:15): I am still the same person, but I base my analysis on mutual interactions. I have no problem hearing you out (your honest thoughts, not just justifications). Your first message didn't ask for a conversation; it just sounded like you were finally messaging me because you didn't want to be seen as running away.
ZP (15:17): People send messages to start a conversation.
ZP: You are still the same person! But you should consider the possibility . . . that a lack of information has caused your perception to be far from reality. The Kameel I knew was a researcher, and a researcher always re-examines their findings . . .
Kameel: I already said I have no problem listening. Go ahead.
ZP: Well, if you don't tell me your new perceptions of me, how can we talk?
Kameel: ZP, something has happened between us. The situation and intimacy are not like before.
ZP: I know you are upset with me.
Kameel: Or even very upset.
ZP: It's even possible you'll say you're not upset at all and I was never important to you.
Kameel: But you are important to me, and I don't want you to be upset. I think if you talk about why you're hurt and listen to what I have to say, the situation will change.
ZP: The agreement was that you speak and I listen.
Kameel: Well, ZP, it's noticeable that a knot has formed in this relationship.
ZP: And it seems to be from your side.
Kameel: Please talk about it.

ZP: Even briefly.
Kameel: You were the one who asked for this opportunity. So, whenever you're ready.

As can be seen from the screenshots of the comments, ZP was heavily attacked after the publication of this story, not by ordinary readers but by mutual acquaintances and friends who were fully aware of the nature and history of our relationship. Some of her female friends even commented, accusing her of lying. Her own friend wrote that if someone knowingly enters a close relationship with a calculated goal in mind, it's not harassment; it's a transaction.



Image 484: Screenshot of comments.

'As someone who has been sexually harassed, reading this narrative makes me feel like a victim of the manipulative behaviour of a certain type of woman. The "pretend victim" in

this story is essentially confessing to using herself as an instrument to get ahead without effort.'

'This is a shortcut that a percentage of women cleverly exploit. If the person they want to take advantage of is aware and also acts in their own self-interest, they accuse him of sexual harassment. This narrator's behaviour diminishes the meaning of real sexual harassment and betrays true victims. The "pretend victim" further exposes herself by admitting she knew about his relationships and his social position, which to me is laughable.'

'Note that there is no professional reason to go to the private home of someone for a meeting. Her excuse is that he might call her a "villager"? Is that why she went to a strange man's house? Unless there was a very close friendship, in which case bringing up his private reasons for marriage is a betrayal of secrets from that friendship. When someone has supposedly acted inappropriately, yet you still go to his house knowing his wife and children are not there, you have also betrayed that wife and child.

'The third wickedness, however, is the attempt to gain the sympathy of ethnic minorities to clear herself, and in my opinion, the goal of narrating this story is merely to satisfy an activist urge and engage in civic activity. Because the "pretend victim", in order to avoid the "villager" label, has compromised in the face of the so-called "sexual harassment".

'Thinking of the trait "villager" as an insult is itself considered the greatest insult and humiliation to us ethnic minorities whose original home is the village and countryside. As an ethnic minority, a researcher on ethnic minority issues, a victim of rape, and someone who has been sexually harassed numerous times, I object to the narrator of this story. I humbly request on behalf of all four groups that I represent, that they do not use us to clear themselves, answer their own conscience, and satisfy their activist impulse.'



Image 485: Screenshot of comments.

From Bidarzani: If I were the person who was raped and harassed [by someone I recognised], I would have acted honourably and revealed it with my real name. Or at least, if I lacked the courage, I wouldn't have dragged the name of a city and the accused's wife and children through the mud. Alternatively, I would have just kept quiet and not ruined this good and impactful real revelation-movement by describing a few pornographic scenes.
From coki.poki: The victim-blaming comments below this post are truly nauseating.
From [anonymised]: The comments from the fake account @coki.poki, in support of the pretend victim and ruining the rights of the real victim, also reek of rot.

Susan even later told ZP on the phone, 'Weren't you the one in Gachsaran who, after my brother's wedding party, wanted to go and see KA and were looking for a beauty salon for epilation on the holiday and we couldn't find one for you?

'But didn't you enter the relationship willingly, and weren't you the one who said you were proud that you had previously drunk your first alcoholic drink in public with him, in Mashhad, in the park next to the shrine, and broken the restrictions of the Islamic Republic, and . . . ?'

In the following conversation, her friend pressures her as to why she revealed that I 'sexually harassed' her when she had always praised the quality of her relationship with me. ZP admits to having only one sexual encounter. Here, too, she lies easily, without mentioning the continuation of this relationship in other places and cities. She also speaks of her changed approach toward me after the 'harassment', but doesn't say a word about having this relationship, or its nature. She merely portrays it as me exposing myself, even on the first meeting, and her complete distancing from me, and, finally, this painful collaboration ending with my 'sexual assault' in the street.



Image 486: ZP's conversation with our mutual friend.

White boxes: I only told you about these sorts of incidents, and nobody else. I told you about Susan one time, and apart from that time, when else did I tell you about a sexual incident with this person? That one time was the time after Pouya's wedding when I went to Tehran from your house. Here too, I told you the order of events is reversed, meaning first sex, then harassment. After

> that time, he called me from prison. But if you remember, by that time my approach toward this person had changed.
> *Green box:* Quoting: 'Susan, you're going too far.' I'm speaking sharply because you're speaking badly to me, and I feel I have the right to speak sharply because you easily put me on the same side as people who only befriend someone because of their fame. Moreover, I posted the comment for completeness because I believe Bidarzani is a completely 'yellow' [sensationalist/tabloid] page that is working completely deliberately, and I hate that a number of girls approach someone because of their fame, wanting to use their sexuality, and then come and fabricate stories.

Our mutual friend, Susan, initially refused to believe that this post belonged to ZP. Her argument was that she always spoke of me with affection and love, recounting very good and happy memories of our meetings. 'When you were in prison, she tried very hard for you; she was even upset that you had told her not to call you from prison. How could she have changed her position so much in such a short time?' She only believed it when she saw ZP's own Tweet on her real Twitter account. She knew both of us and decided to contact her to make sure that her Twitter account had not been hacked. I, of course, asked her not to do this, and after the experience of contacting Bidarzani, I believed that everything should be done in a transparent and public space, and that these kinds of friendly calls would not have a positive effect.

To ZP: in the messages above, why did you falsely say, 'It was only once after Pouya's wedding when I left your house for Tehran?' Didn't you think a day might come when you would have to answer for your slanders and lies? If you have the courage to face reality, I can reveal the details of our rendezvous conversations at any time, for yourself and for the movements that you probably lied and created scenarios to please.

After my release from prison, you messaged me several more times and asked us to reconcile. I said I preferred to keep my distance for the time being, because I was resentful and upset. Wouldn't it have been more honourable if even a small reference had been made to these matters? Shouldn't you, who have always followed and studied philosophy of ethics and claimed that ethics is your main concern in all your decision-making, have observed ethics in this narrative as well? Instead of playing

the role of a brave victim, shouldn't you have told your audience that you decided to experience a mature sexual relationship with your own consent, as a wise, adult and educated woman, or that you wanted no longer to be a virgin? I wish you had said what happened.

Tweet by Reza Shafakhah (08/09/2023): It was said a long time ago,



Image 487: Recent post by ZP, mentioning me and her defence of #MeToo.

but no one paid attention. I hope now everyone has understood what a betrayal #MeToo_Iran is committing against women's rights in Iran and how it has turned into a tool for settling scores between factions, currents, and individuals . . .

Reply from @Z...P...: Mr Shafakhah, it's unlike you to suddenly pass such a sweeping judgement without argument. Why? Is it because there's a suspicion of harassment involving your colleague? Remember, it was this very #MeToo movement that exposed the filth of [redacted] and Kameel Ahmady and [redacted] . . . and, well, I hope you have no doubt about these people being harassers and rapists, surely?

Which school of ethics opened the way for you to betray a friend during a crisis, riding the wave of the moment? You, who claimed to be a civilised person open to dialogue: why didn't you raise the issue if I had harmed you, and if you did, why didn't you include my response in your account? Wouldn't it have been better to reform yourself before attempting to reform society?

My mistake regarding ZP was trusting the image she had cultivated of herself, believing her to be a reasonable, responsible and analytical person. But, as time passed, it became clear that this was all a façade. She was a person suspended between tradition and modernity, accepting the requirements of neither. If I had agreed to ZP's requests to continue our conversations and friendship, would there have been a seventh narrative? Would she then have written about me (supposedly) indecently exposing myself and groping her in the middle of a street in Tehran? In that case, would she have had the chance to become an anonymous feminist – or, rather, a pseudo-feminist?

The History of the #MeToo Movement Globally and its Entry into Iranian Society

The spark of the #MeToo movement worldwide was ignited in Hollywood in 2017, engulfing a number of celebrities. Its peak was between 2017 and 2018. Its starting point was the action of an African-American woman living in America. It did not initially gain media attention; gradually, however, the media focused on the revelations, engaging public opinion to the extent that street protests, primarily led by feminists, took place in New York and Los Angeles.

Despite the massive wave that occurred in America and Europe at that time, there was still no sign of this movement in the East, the Middle East or Iran, except for Iranians living abroad who were aware of some aspects of the movement through the news. Studies show that the #MeToo movement in Iran was more welcomed by the elite and upper-middle class, which had specific economic, cultural and social reasons for being drawn to it, and the movement differs in Iran compared to countries with democratic structures.

In Europe, the movement resulted in practical actions by institutions. Several people were brought to court. Among them, one or two cases were

proven, resulting in successful convictions. Recently, several men have also won cases against their accusers. The rest remained accusations, and, despite the fact that most of the accused issued statements denying the allegations, they lost their jobs in centres and universities, and film and cinema circles. Their contracts were temporarily cancelled.

The movement's raising of public awareness was positive. It portrayed the issues of harassment and violence in the workplace and the modern world in a different light, focusing on the unequal power dynamic between employer and employee, and placing the abuse of power in the workplace at its centre.

Later, cases of sexual abuse and harassment by women who had exploited their positions of power also surfaced, but they didn't attract much media attention. This showed that gender is often an intervening factor in these abuses. What facilitates such acts is the structures of power and capital, which, through recourse to them, can facilitate every kind of domination.

The *New York Times* was the first to raise this discussion in the major media, and it named many individuals. Those accused of abuse and assault were temporarily removed from their positions. The turning point was rising awareness in the public sphere. The result of this movement was to make institutions, large organisations and universities aware of inappropriate professional relationships and the dynamics of gender and power. #MeToo changed some of the protocols of companies and governments, albeit temporarily, and brought working relationships back into the arena of public discussion and debate.

When the #MeToo movement took shape in the West and Europe, it raged until late 2018, after which it subsided, having claimed its important victims. Some believed that the #MeToo movement and its organisers needed to take it to other parts of the world and globalise the movement. In principle, this was a correct aim and a positive idea, but the (mistaken) expectation was that the movement would act more correctly in each cycle, reduce its mistakes, and adjust and eliminate its shortcomings.

After Europe, the #MeToo movement went to other regions and countries – from Egypt to Tunisia to Qatar, and then to Iran. In small working groups, individuals who had previously gained experience in other countries, mainly America and Europe, shared their experiences in the legal, judicial and media arms, and some feminist organisations funded

the start of some of these movements. Even NGOs grew like mushrooms after receiving funding.

When this movement went to neighbouring countries in the region, it brought with it experiences of America and the Western world. Some of the lawyers who worked on sexual assault cases in those countries advised a few feminist organisations, and the cases raised were reported in the media, mainly American and European, by journalists who were often from the same countries.



Image 488: Screenshot of list of alleged #MeToo aggressors.

From #MeTooIran (@antirape2020): List of those accused of #Sexual_Harassment/#Sexual_Assault.
(The list is updated daily. Please send your accounts/stories and the name of the accused with any evidence you have so I can publish them! Evidence can include your story, message(s), photo(s), police report, etc.)
The subsequent Tweets in the thread from the same account add entries to this list, often giving professions, roles, or locations alongside anonymised names. Examples of entries seen in the thread replies include:
- [Name] Poet
- [Name] Law Professor at University in Gilan
- [Name] Committee Manager, International Book Fair
- [Name] Mohsen Gallery Photographer
- [Name] Photographer
- [Name] Storyteller and Storytelling Instructor

- [Name] Doctor (General Practitioner and Traditional Medicine Specialist)
- [Name] Translator and Theatre Director
- [Name] Literature Professor
- [Name] Graphic Designer in Bandar Abbas
- [Name] Principal of Khwarizmi High School
- [Name] Physics Teacher
- [Name] Editor-in-Chief of Newspaper (Haft Sobh)
- [Name] Professor at University in Gilan
- [Name] Director and Screenwriter
- [Name] Writer
- [Name] University Professor
- [Name] Language Teacher at Girls' Middle School
- [Name] Physics Teacher
- [Name] Music Instructor
- [Name] Biology Teacher
- [Name] Founder of Pulmonology
- [Name] Fellow at Masih Daneshvari Hospital
- [Name] Educational Deputy in , Sirjan
- [Name] Professor
- [Name] Professor at Gilan University
- [Name] Translator at the Refugee Centre in Berlin
- [Name] Graphic Designer in Bandar Abbas
- [Name] Physics Instructor for the University Entrance Exam (Konkoor)

Globally, #MeToo brought cases from the cinema, art, politics, academia and education fields into the news. In the #MeToo movement in Iran, various people were named. Several virtual pages updated the list of names daily, and a large number of people from various fields were on it. The conditions for publishing a narrative were very simple, as you can see in the screenshots.

In Iran, the most significant #MeToo coverage occurred within the artistic community, largely among reformist and dissident circles. Due to security concerns and immediate suppression, it rarely reached the political, governmental or religious spheres, and those instances that did were retracted through enticement and intimidation, silencing individuals.

After the #MeToo movement subsided in Iran, some Iranian individuals and online pages leading the charge sought funding from certain foreign feminist organisations, and even NGOs connected to Western governments, to continue their activities. Several campaigns and NGOs secured funding and are still managed by a few of these individuals. However, due to some egregious errors, and the naming of people based on false narratives and personal grudges, the accusations against whom were later disproven, as well as significant divisions and disagreements in these groups, many of the movement's legitimate goals were tarnished in the public eye, and some of these individuals were marginalised and faced public disapproval.

Critiques of the #MeToo Movement

Individuals analysed the #MeToo movement from various perspectives, suggesting it was a timely wake-up call that the world needed. This civil movement echoed the historical oppression of millennia and the suppression of women in different civilisations. In reality, the movement is still in its early stages, and the gap between the sexes remains vast. Even in the most modern and democratic systems, women lack equal rights with men. The gender ratio of managers in senior-management positions, large corporations, governments and banks is disproportionate. The challenging issue of inherent differences between men and women, which even radical feminist perspectives reject, continues to provoke differing views and opinions. The final perspective of a woman, whether she be Eastern or Western, is dictated by the way she has been raised and the impact the education system had on her thinking. Many thinkers believe that, regardless of gender and the inherent nature of men and women, the differences between them result from the culture of each geographical region, an idea that is subject to much disagreement.

They also assert that, within a more democratic framework, the horizon of the #MeToo movement seems promising. If it improves legal loopholes and ethical and human considerations; if it prevents injustice, the trampling of rights, instrumental abuse, score-settling and the unfair damaging of reputations; and if it employs scientific, accurate and humane mechanisms for evaluation and verification, it can take significant steps in reshaping the human sphere.

Academics also note that, among the cases highlighted by this movement, there were not a few that turned out to be unfounded – narratives that were personal or professional score-settling, sometimes fabricated or not the whole truth, causing some innocent people to be stigmatised and seriously harmed psychologically and socially. But these gaps cannot undermine the legitimacy of the entire movement; this movement, like any other emerging one, cannot be immune to mistakes.

Critics of #MeToo, both male and female, who have studied, critiqued and examined it from various angles, believe that in some respects the movement created a basis for discrimination in the workplace, temporarily, for women and even for men. With the start of this movement, some companies, institutions and even government agencies were so apprehensive that they no longer hired female employees for quite some time. Some female critics in the field of economics and women's empowerment, who also call themselves feminists – and whom more radical feminists do not accept – say that the worst result of the #MeToo movement occurred in the field of work for women. In the capitalist system, employers were deterred from hiring women, as they feared that women's complaints against men at any level for misconduct and similar matters would be taken to court and lead to scandal, damaging the name and brand of that company or institution.

On the other hand, there are critics who address this issue theoretically and believe that the movement is for the elite and upper-middle class of society. The cases of artists and celebrities that are raised provide more media fodder and, of course, income. More often, when people are harassed and abused, it occurs in rural areas and the Third World, or in the general public, within families and in non-governmental workshops. These stories are never heard, because neither side of the story is famous or well-known. Consequently, they do not attract the attention of the media and its readers.

Another criticism is that the focus of #MeToo is on important men who have fame and media appeal, and raising these stories leads to the reproduction of fame and increased competition.

Slavoj Žižek, the writer and philosopher, also believes that this movement does not have a deep perspective for solving this problem. He writes,

> My position in this debate is certainly not a right-wing or conservative critique of #MeToo or the trans movement, but a critique in the direction of progress. My problem is that their moral bigotry and puritanism are really not radical enough. It seems to me that the basics of what political correctness advocates are undoubtedly correct. Women are oppressed, racism exists, and so on . . . But the way they have chosen to approach this issue doesn't work. I am not defending a third space for compromise and reconciliation.
>
> I maintain that the approach chosen for addressing these issues is fundamentally flawed on both sides. We can't solve the sexual problems of the modern age with the fetish of legalism. Making laws more transparent isn't the ultimate solution because sexual relations are a complex realm with ambiguities and implications that you can't reduce to a handful of rules.

Žižek states in another part of his interview,

> We cannot expect to solve the root causes of sexual and ethical issues through media activity and reliance solely on the law, although the legal and rights aspects of this issue must be pursued seriously. Let's take a look at the current situation in the West, several years after the movement began; sexual assault and harassment still exist in Western countries. According to a survey, 80 per cent of working women in Britain are unwilling to report sexual harassment in their workplaces. These women never speak up for fear of losing their jobs and are afraid of the consequences of their words; according to this survey of 2,000 working women and students aged 18 to 30 in Britain, they are reluctant to react to the actions of abusers and remain silent in the face of them; many abusers are in senior management positions. About 15 per cent of the women who participated in the survey had reported harassment, but it was not properly dealt with; 5

per cent of this number also stated that they had to change jobs due to sexual harassment, assault or abuse.[1]

Challenges and Achievements of #MeToo in Iran

In global movements, you can't practically copy a model from one society and culture and implement it completely in another. For effectiveness and the desired outcome, many different components are needed, the most important of which is localisation and familiarisation. Based on much evidence, in the transfer and implementation of the #MeToo movement to predominantly non-Western countries, many of the cultural and traditional subtleties and sensitivities that should have been present were not observed, turning it into an emotional and angry movement on both sides – supporters and opponents.

From the beginning of the #MeToo movement in Iran, it was not unexpected that a number of people who had been emboldened for several years outside Iran to present their modern and taboo-breaking views in the sexual and gender fields, and who also had a hand in the media, would focus on the issue and the cases, along with certain GI feminist groups.

A noteworthy point concerning this period and the movement is that prominent female activists and gender-equality advocates with deep roots did not widely support it or lend it legitimacy. They assessed it as a hasty movement and considered themselves lacking the necessary knowledge and expertise to verify the published accounts. They also viewed the establishment of media trials and appeals to public opinion for judgement and investigation of these cases as detrimental to the women's sphere.

This assessment proved to be somewhat accurate, as it was not long before intra-group disagreements arose over the management and leadership style of the #MeToo movement. Mistakes made at that time, such as the publication of fabricated stories, further exacerbated the situation. Even in several instances, sexual accusations were made against members of these groups from within, and because these individuals were insiders, their reporting was suppressed, leading to severe criticism,

1 Manesh, S. and Baqer, M. (n.d.) 'The METOO Movement in the West and Iran from Beginning to Today / A Cry and Nothing Else?' Tasnim News Agency. Available at: https://tn.ai/2691520 (Accessed: 1 September 2022).

including accusations that the #MeToo movement was acting with bias and tribalism, discriminating between insiders and outsiders.

The movement in Iran faced challenges that cast doubt on its success. Leila Alikarami, a barrister, considers the greatest obstacle to be Iran's judicial system, which lacks the necessary infrastructure to address the 'multifaceted challenge' of sexual abuse. In Iran's Islamic Penal Code, rape and sexual assault do not have precise legal definitions, and most sexual offences stem from *zina*.[1] In effect, a crime under the title of 'rape' is not recognised, and what exists is 'forcible rape'. The line between zina, in which both parties are considered criminals, and forcible zina, in which only the rapist is considered a criminal, is thin, and if the element of force cannot be proven, the victim themself becomes the accused.

Both zina and forcible zina are types of illicit relationships and are proven in the same way, but proving them is difficult. An unproven accusation of zina (*qazf*) is itself considered a crime punishable by eighty lashes. Some consider the overlap between the two to be among the reasons why victims do not refer to judicial authorities, as victims who resort to the law potentially expose themselves to punishment. Furthermore, the law is deficient in the area of marital rape and sexual assault without sexual intercourse. According to Iran's Criminal Procedure Code, 'Offences against morality are directly dealt with in the competent court.' As a result, prosecutors and investigators are generally prohibited from investigating offences against morality. The lack of preliminary investigations in the prosecutor's office means that the evidence and documentation in the case are insufficient, and the accused is more easily acquitted. Zina cases are heard in the Criminal Court One, which consists of three male judges; many female victims refrain from mentioning the details of the incidents due to shame.

In the prosecutor's office and courts, there isn't enough sensitivity to the security and privacy of victims, which makes it even more difficult for them to recount their stories. Ultimately, the punishment for rape in Iran is stoning, execution or flogging, which has led some victims to be unwilling to pursue their cases in the judicial system because they oppose such severe penalties. Shirin Ebadi, a lawyer and human-rights activist, says that one way to prove guilt under Iranian law is the judge's *'ilm*

1 Unlawful sexual relations in Islam.

('knowledge') based on the evidence in the case. If several people, who have no prior friendship or acquaintance with each other, whose words seem trustworthy, and about whom there is no suspicion of collusion or lying, complain about the abuser, the judge can issue a verdict based on their 'ilm.

Beyond the law, fingers have also been pointed at society. Most accounts date back more than a decade, indicating a lack of support for victims. Society, intellectuals and even families have been accused of complicity with abusers because they blame the victims, normalising and concealing sexual abuse, failing to stand up against power dynamics and misogyny, and generally creating a safe space for abusers.

The weakness of civil society in Iran and the absence of a specialised legal group dedicated to working with victims of rape have also been cited as reasons why victims' voices are not heard.

Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, a researcher and women's-rights activist, believes that the movement's origin on the internet, rather than in local communities, the difficulty of verifying stories shared on social media, and its excitable and noisy nature are among the challenges of Iran's #MeToo movement. On the other hand, she considers the movement's focus on the system rather than focusing on individuals, finding ways to verify stories, and teaching storytelling and empathy with the abused, and even restorative justice for the abuser, to be among its achievements. She criticises the movement for remaining confined to the intellectual community, its anger, its inexperience in dealing with empowerment centres and its lack of clinical experience.

The movement's lack of inclusiveness was one of the most frequent criticisms levelled against it. Mahsa Mohebali, a novelist, says that poor women who do not have access to social media are often not aware of the nature of abuse, or, if they are aware, the 'scarecrow of dismissal' is enough to force them into silence – the fear of unemployment and dependence. Otherwise, she argues, the revelations would not be limited to cultural and artistic circles and would also involve government officials and companies. She believes that the Iranian Government has exploited this movement to discredit cultural and artistic circles.

In the heat of the publication of the accusations, many civil activists entered the field and began to analyse and explain the issue. Azadeh Kian, a professor of sociology at the University of Paris, called the movement a

'historic taboo-breaking' in Iran and considered it an action that was taking place for the first time in contemporary Iranian history by women.

The deviation of the #MeToo movement from its original path, and its appropriation by celebrities and certain feminist pages and feminist influencers is among the criticisms levelled at the Iranian version of #MeToo, just as with the global version.

Journalist Sima Rastin sees celebrities' revelations against each other as a cycle of villainy, causing the #MeToo movement, instead of addressing social issues, networking and focusing on the lower and less informed strata of society, to revolve around revelation, revenge, humiliation and individualism, and thus to become distorted.

Many are aware of the fact that the women's movement and activism in Iran's turbulent society lack a unified leadership and a defined organisational structure. For many reasons – differing viewpoints and strategic disagreements, competition for power and monopolisation (appropriating the movement in the name of a specific individual or group), funding and numerous animosities – exist within this high-potential sphere, making consensus by activists on practical goals difficult and sometimes impossible. Of course, there are also activists who have been quietly and modestly carrying out fundamental work in various social areas of Iran for years, who possess a high degree of analytical power and optimal performance, and who recognise many of the obstacles and limitations facing women and those involved in this arena.

Many believe that the #MeToo movement in Iran currently lacks a plan for achieving results. They feel it lacks defined mechanisms for methodical refinement and development, and for dealing with its future course in a useful and expert manner. This is why it bolts off in any direction, like a runaway horse. Currently, the fundamental principle in the Iranian version of this movement is the complete rejection, elimination and annihilation of the accused, and the unquestioning sanctification of anonymous narrators. Any question seeking clarification is immediately and vehemently branded as 'supporting rapists' and 'victim-blaming'.

It is necessary to research and investigate the overt and hidden angles of this movement in Iran; to evaluate the performance of individuals, groups, institutions and organisations; and to assess its negative and positive consequences and make them available to the public. It must be known what the approach to dealing with sexual abuse in Iran is,

according to the founders and those involved in the movement, and how, from the perspective of activists, a way out of this rigid, tenacious and conservative closed circle can be found.

My Experience with the #MeToo Movement

Despite these criticisms, the positive and functional aspects of the movement cannot be ignored or completely discredited. Someone might say that a person who is himself accused of sexual assault is certainly using these criticisms to alleviate the weight on himself. In fact, for many years, because of my field of work and my beliefs, I have concluded that every field, viewpoint, movement and action must also be assessed with an analytical and critical eye.

In true, rational and scholarly thinking and ethics, no position, thought or ideology, and indeed no religion or creed, possesses a sacred dimension. Anything that attains sanctity should not be immune from critical thinking, scrutiny or challenge, for the sake of expediency or justification. When the possibility of critique is denied to human-rights and pro-democracy movements, the potential for their advancement becomes limited and difficult.

Following the publication of the harassment allegations against me, some civil activists, even within the women's sphere, remained by my side, encouraging me to write and clarify the matter and analyse it more deeply. The writings that followed were produced for this very reason. Others did not judge me, basing their stance on the 'right of the accused to be presumed innocent', and suggested that, after the publication of my autobiography, I should definitely research the matter and engage in public and media discussions to better present the issue and foster dialogue.

Months after the onslaught, some individuals who had distanced themselves from the movement sought my forgiveness, saying that a judgemental mindset and the allure of the sphere in the early days had drawn them in. Gradually, others contacted me; two of them even apologised over the phone. One said, 'I misjudged you, and I can't find peace. I wanted to tell you so that my conscience would be eased . . . I gave false testimony about you, and what was coming out of that space and what I was reading had made even our normal, everyday interactions

questionable to me. It seemed like harassment to me, and I spoke about you in one or two places and even had an influence. Forgive me; in that space and excitement, I felt that all of this was right.' She admitted that she had been contacted and urged, 'You, too, narrate something and contribute your share to the movement.'

In the words of my interrogator, I was the 'complete package'. I was a researcher with dual nationality who also came from a Kurdish and Sunni Muslim minority. My areas of work were directly related to sexual and sensitive topics, and most of the people involved in and interested in them were women. Furthermore, I was also a man. For the #MeToo movement in Iran, apart from the points that my interrogator constantly emphasised – such as the fact that I had all the necessary parameters, and even more than they expected – I was also educated outside Iran and well-known in my field, and some feminist groups or those interested in gender issues considered me a feminist in some way. What was attributed to me in the narratives was precisely the opposite of the ethics, beliefs and claims of someone like me – especially in an academic and professional field where one must be fully aware of all these matters and details and not deviate from them.

There were many people who did not know me but came to know me through this issue. As a result, I received many messages, and, amid them, doubts and suspicions began.

At the height of the #MeToo movement, which was rapidly gaining momentum and bringing forth new events, names and narratives daily, there was another angle they were pursuing regarding me: to portray Kameel Ahmady with all his supposed affiliations and incite reactions against him. In particular, a third-party narrator made a concerted effort to link me to the United Nations through storytelling, claiming I was one of their agents, but it came to nothing. They tried to implicate me with the Government, contacting publishers and organisations that had awarded prizes for my research, and even my lawyer, to ask if these accusations had been raised during my trial with Judge Salavati, in order to give my case an international-media dimension.

But you, the readers of this autobiography, have read the anonymous accounts of my accusers in this chapter, and you have also seen my side of the story, with its evidence and documentation. Even if only half of what I have said is true, do these claims not lose their legal, ethical and customary

legitimacy and validity? Are such glaring errors, fuelled by personal motives and amplified by biased individuals far removed from the true situation, not a devastating blow to the fragile body of civil society and the movements for women's rights and social harms, and the awareness campaigns that have emerged from them?

It seems to me that now I have been, intentionally or unintentionally, targeted by groups within society, I can, as a potential resource, share my bitter and difficult experiences and trials with others, especially men, and help raise awareness among female activists in this field. Men, and even many women, often lack a proper and clear understanding of the meaning of 'harassment'. As someone who has bravely acknowledged some of my mistakes, and even gone beyond that, I am ready to share my experiences and guide the conversation on this matter. Isn't it the case that educators who are both survivors and perpetrators have a better understanding of the consequences, conditions and nature of the issue and can convey it in more effective ways?

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Kameel, Don't Talk; Write!

That phrase pretty much summed up my court situation. Judge Salavati was snowed under. He wasn't going to waste his precious time on a trial where the verdict was a foregone conclusion. Did he spend time on other trials? I don't know . . . but probably not. The cases on his desk generally had conditions like mine, and the investigators and officers had already written and submitted the verdict in the form of a so-called workflow.

Salavati didn't have much authority of his own to spend time. With the holding of my last court session, a lot of things became clear to me. Later, I realised that the situation in the courts and prosecutor's office in Iran is generally strange, and 'right' is a common word that has gradually been emptied of meaning. I was even dragged into a family court, which you'll read about, and you'll see that, in Iran, everyone has the right to decide about everything. Tradition and injustice are rooted, from the family to the court!

Time for Reckoning

Shafagh went to her father's house in Kermanshah with Alan for a while, and things changed very quickly. Our relationship had lessened, and I spoke more with Alan. Shafagh was carrying a heavy burden and was worn out. She didn't usually act excitedly and illogically, but this crisis was pushing everyone's patience to the limit. I knew that she and her family were bearing a heavy burden in their traditional environment. I was ashamed in front of Shafagh's parents, and I thanked God many times that my parents were not alive in such a situation.

My wife's elder brother had adopted a harsh and irrational stance toward me, and without warning, I was removed from the family's virtual group by him. However, he wasn't the instigator of all this; rather, he was a tool. Our mutual friends, who, as Hafez, the famous Farsi poet says, 'did other things in private', had become social reformers and women's-rights activists, constantly influencing my brother-in-law's thoughts and causing him to confront me.

The funny thing was, I knew the details of these few individuals' lives and was aware that they were accusing me of things they themselves didn't avoid. These individuals had, and still have, relationships that aren't accepted by the prevailing customs and traditions there. Parallel, group and free relationships were things they sometimes voiced, proudly calling these sexual lifestyles a form of social superiority and egalitarianism in marriage. They openly engaged in comings and goings and made highly sexualised statements that would be classified as harassment. They freely mixed where all kinds of verbal and spoken harassment and sexual insults were rife, but now, to not be left behind, they had joined the movement to defend women's rights, becoming, as they say, more Catholic than the Pope.

One of the members of this group is homosexual. Before he publicly announced his orientation in Europe and became a civil-rights activist in this field, he was in a relationship with one of my colleagues, and, because of that relationship, that girl suffered a great deal of emotional distress. He, who has recently changed his title from 'journalist' to 'human-rights activist' and 'civil-rights activist', and most recently to 'queer feminist activist', was targeting me in his Tweets. Years ago, I disagreed with him on a particular matter, and we had a falling out. Without thinking about the consequences of his actions, he was simply seeking revenge on me. To be fair, when I was in prison, this person and most of our friends were with and supported Shafagh and were helpful in this regard, but it's upsetting to me that these same people didn't even want to talk to me and ask what happened. The saddest thing was that it seemed, during this period, that the group's anti-homosexual views and their differences with the homosexual member, who they constantly humiliated in the worst way because of his sexual identity, had been put aside, and they were pursuing a common goal. Overall, even with the broad definition of 'abuser' that exists, these people apparently weren't abusers because of the way they

treated others, including their spouses, but they criticised me for unproven accusations.

Another person in this group was a friend who had feelings for me when she was single and was upset after my relationship with Shafagh became public. On her last day working with the group, she said to me, 'Fêri meke, fêrt kird têri ke', meaning 'don't teach the newcomers, and if you do teach them, satisfy them completely'. She now calls herself a super-feminist and was instructing other former friends in this group, while occasionally taking digs at me in her posts. These individuals, along with a few so-called friends who were, in reality, rivals, each advanced the issue along their own desired path.

In Family Court

I returned from trips to Ardabil and Isfahan, but the solitude and silence of the house were unsettling. Shafagh was supposed to go to her father's house for only a few days, but she hadn't returned yet, and I missed Alan terribly. I called Shafagh and told her that I, too, had the right to see my son. I even protested that this traditional sulking method didn't align with her feminist and egalitarian slogans. I reminded her that I understood her unhappiness, but she shouldn't forget that we had built our life together based on values different from the conventional ones, and that we had made agreements with each other before our marriage. Although I knew they weren't digestible for many and we would both be blamed for them, she couldn't deny those agreements. I said, 'At least now you should be somewhere where I also have the opportunity to see my son.' What I meant was that, even if she didn't want to return to our own house, her father's house in Tehran should be her place of residence, so that I, too, could have the opportunity to see my son.

She said several times that she would come back but changed her mind the next day. I didn't understand the reason for her behaviour, until my sister called and told me the real story. I realised that Shafagh's older brother, who now seemed to be my sworn enemy, was preventing her from returning. We had always had playful but serious arguments: me pointing out that he didn't have an independent income and was constantly using his father's wealth and he, in turn, voicing his criticisms of me. Aside from the current issue, it seemed like these arguments had also stuck in his

mind. At the same time, I knew that, as a brother, he was worried about his sister and the issue of honour and reputation, and with my knowledge of him and his views on tradition and society in general, his concern was justified. In that context, I gave him and my wife's family more leeway than others.

I was trying to understand Shafagh's family and how they felt, but I wasn't feeling well, either, and I wanted to see Alan. When Shafagh didn't come, I said, 'According to no law can you prevent me from seeing my child. I'm coming to get Alan.' I spoke to Shafagh irrationally and somewhat based on patriarchal laws. I said that if she didn't let me see my child, I would call the police . . . My longing was weighing heavily on me, and I just wanted Alan.

I remembered the campaigns that had been formed in cyberspace in defence of fathers' rights. I think the first campaign in defence of fathers' rights was formed in England,[1] and then it spread to other countries. Their criticism was directed at Western European laws that are in the interests of women, when the father's right to see the child is limited, and sometimes they are deprived of seeing the children at all. For example, some fathers can only see their children for a few hours a week, and this is not fair.

Of course, this doesn't quite ring true for Iran – in some ways, it's the opposite. But, overall, it was a strange paradox: I, who had dedicated some of my work to supporting children's and gender rights, was now thinking about men's rights. My own rights as a father were being trampled, and I wasn't coping well.

I was on my way to Kermanshah when my sister said that Shafagh was under pressure and emphasised, 'Kak Kameel, you know better than anyone that this is a traditional society, and they are, in any case, a

1 The 'fathers for justice' movement, a global movement for addressing men's rights in society, emerged in the early 1970s. Today, it exists in a number of countries worldwide, with many men and women as members. These members are active in social areas (including family law, childbearing and raising, reproduction and domestic violence) and government services (including education, conscription, social security and public-health services) where discrimination against men has occurred. Some consider this movement to be a response to feminism. They argue that feminism has gone far beyond egalitarian slogans, and now men's rights also need attention. The men's-rights movement focuses on various issues, and separate groups have been created for some of them, such as the fathers'-rights movement, which examines legal discrimination against men in matters such as divorce and custody (Maddison, 1999).

traditional family. Shafagh has left, and you need to talk to her family about her return and make your request.' She even challenged me, asking if I wouldn't do the same if I were Shafagh's brother.

I had a duty to explain the crisis I had created, but not within this framework. I needed some time. I expected more support from those around me; they knew me and could at least have waited for the outcome of my trial and for me to recover a little. I didn't think I deserved that much cold violence. Apparently, there was no choice but to submit to the traditional mechanism. I would have to attend a family meeting and talk about the most private part of my married life in public. Then, I'd have to apologise and, in a mock attempt to find a solution, ask them to allow me to take my wife and child. They would probably say, 'We'll think about it and let you know.' This didn't align with any of the standards of our married life, which had different principles and values from theirs. I knew I was going to be humiliated in this farcical meeting, and it was especially an opportunity for my wife's brother to settle scores with me. I knew who was orchestrating this, and my going was even an insult to Shafagh's intellectual independence.

I stood by the side of the road and said to myself, 'Look, Kameel, this path is leading you to a dead end. You've always been one for compromise and dialogue, so, come on, try that approach again. Listen to what they have to say, and take the opportunity to put your professional case forward as best you can.' It was there and then that I even cursed my own field of study, anthropology, a few times, because years of study and work in this field had taught me that even behind the biggest problems there are solutions, and the trick is to be able to extract those solutions. And to do that, you have to understand the contexts, traditions and cultures.

Before going to the family meeting, or court, my wife's cousin called and said, 'Kameel, as you say, a settling of accounts is about to take place, but whatever you hear in one ear, let it go out the other, entirely.' I went to a house where I had always been shown great respect and honour. My father-in-law was proud of me and loved me, but in the space of a few weeks everything had changed. Of course, my father-in-law's view of me hadn't altered that much, and in those days he had said, 'They're trying to stitch Kameel up, or, rather, they've framed him. I wish everyone would take a look around them before they spoke.' He was sticking up for me, and that was making some people jealous.

That day, I didn't receive the same respect as before, and they treated me coldly. I sat with my brother-in-law in the reception room for a while until the others arrived and, supposedly, the meeting began. My wife's brother, who was orchestrating the whole thing, voiced his harsh and incoherent words, or rather his insults, in a loud voice, and it went on for so long that I lost my temper. I yelled at him as he had yelled at me and said, 'I wish I could tell everyone everything about so many people, even about you!'

I had to be patient about it all – from my mother-in-law's superficial and irrelevant remarks to the pointless presence of her intellectual cousin, who was helping to stage-manage things and, in his own words, had only come to find answers to his questions and nothing else. I never understood what answers he was looking for in my private life, and whether there really wasn't any other way for him to find the answers to his questions than by attending that private meeting without my permission.

I didn't say much, and at the end of the meeting I said I wanted to take my wife and child away. The final act of the performance followed the same well-worn pattern of traditional society, and my father-in-law said, 'We'll see what happens. She has to decide for herself.' There were a few more ridiculous side stories that I don't even think are worth recounting.



Image 489: Together with Alan in a hotel. Kermanshah, 2020.

It has always been said that you shouldn't reveal and publicise everything about your family and 'tear down all the curtains'.

After that farcical and brief meeting, I went out with my son. How I had missed him! His presence calmed me down. We spent the whole day in the park and various other places, and in the evening I went with Alan to the same hotel where I had spent my wedding night with my guests. After several years, I was in the same hotel with the fruit of my marriage.



Image 490: Together with Alan. Kish

The next day I returned to Tehran. A few days later, to maintain the family's prestige and project an image of personal independence and non-interference from the family, my wife went to her father's house in Tehran. Alan and I took a short trip to Kish Island. It was a wonderful father-son trip, and I felt much better. Allan still remembers that trip. He recalls most of the details and still occasionally talks about it and the water park and says he misses it.

When we returned from Kish, Shafagh and I talked and decided to sort things out for the sake of our child and his best interests. Our discussion involved both the allegations of sexual assault and the court verdict, which we were getting closer to every moment. I still felt a sense of shame and embarrassment when I was with her, and she felt that way toward me because of that infamous meeting. She had experienced her own weakness and inability and lack of independence in that environment.

In my opinion, after that, she gained a deeper understanding of gender issues and, in her words, 'gave up on feminism altogether'. Of course, all the recent events, from prison to these accusations, had made her more vulnerable, but this didn't stop her from making the right decisions; even at the height of the crisis, she hadn't lost her ability to analyse things. She was pragmatic but, because of family considerations and all the other attachments, we didn't address it much. However, it determined her



Image 491: *Blade of Tradition in the Name of Religion* published in three languages.

approach, her behaviour and specifically her stance and position toward them, at least as far as I could see.

A month and a half later, I started the content-analysis phase of the Forms of Child Labour project. Based on the priority and greater efficiency, I offered the colleagues who were in the coding phase the opportunity to continue working. Three people requested several times their original wages and more information about the recent developments, and two others said they had started other work in response to my question. These words were difficult for me, as people had always expressed interest in collaborating on my projects, and I couldn't afford to pay such amounts. After the FGM/C project, I funded all my research with personal funds and had a limited and specific budget for each of them. So, I offered it to another colleague, who was experienced and familiar with my way of working and had worked closely with me on the child waste-pickers project. He accepted, and I continued with the Forms of Child Labour project until I left Iran.

At the same time, I was working with a colleague from Mashhad on the project of male circumcision/ mutilation/cutting, or cutting of the genitals. The initial idea for this project came to me when I was working on FGM/C, but I hadn't had the opportunity to do it until then. Aside from the fact that the issues of female and male circumcision were thematically related, male circumcision was an issue that had been less researched, and it was important to me to address this issue within the framework of an anthropological field study.

It felt like something inside me was constantly warning that I had only a few more months in Iran, or, if I stayed, I'd be back in prison. So I decided to focus on projects that, unlike my previous work, wouldn't require physical fieldwork and could be conducted using new online questionnaires, given the coronavirus situation in the country. I chose a collaborator in Mashhad who could conduct some of the interviews online, speeding up that part of the fieldwork, although, for this research, we did return to the field. Even after I went back to London we continued it both in Iran and abroad. The good thing about the fieldwork on male circumcision was that, because of its frequency and high prevalence, we didn't have to search for cases in the field. Most Iranian men are circumcised and could participate in interviews and answer our questions. I also focused part of the work on global theories on the subject.

During that time, in addition to the child-labour project, the male circumcision project continued, and the Farsi version was published as a paper, audio and electronic book in January 2023 (Dey 1401) by Avaye Boof Publishing in Denmark, while the Kurdish version was published by Daneshfar Publishing in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. The English text was also published by an English publisher, and the second edition is being prepared by my previous publisher, Uncut Voice, who published my research on FGM/C.

This Isn't the Hague!

Two months after the first hearing, I went to court with my lawyer for the second. The prosecutor's representative and the others were there, as before, but one thing had changed: Salavati's demeanour. He was very serious and stern and kept saying, 'Don't speak. Just write. Why have you written so much? Don't argue. Write briefly and finish it.'

Mr Raisian asked a few questions about the legal process of the case, which went unanswered. Without looking at us, Salavati said, 'Save your words for your final defence.'

He only asked me follow-up questions and spoke more about the book *The Forbidden Tale*. This research was published outside of Iran by Mehri Publishing during my detention, but the interrogators had printed out the final file and given it to Salavati. He kept flipping through the book and reading sections of it aloud. After reviewing the book, he said loudly, 'You



Image 492: Fieldwork on child marriage in Ahvaz outskirts. 2016.

went to Mashhad, Tehran and Isfahan, talking to homosexuals to feed enemy media and the UN rapporteur? With so many social issues, why didn't you work on poverty in Kurdistan or deprivation in Baluchistan? Why did you cling to these deranged mental patients? If you aren't trying to bring about a soft overthrow and change the Iranian-Islamic attitude, and you don't want to change the sexual identity of young people, why did you go after homosexuals? What does *The Forbidden Tale* mean? What does "forbidden" even mean?'

Salavati's behaviour and words indicated that he was moving toward issuing a verdict, intending to try me for opposing the entire Islamic Republic regime and religion.

For years, my colleagues and I strived to draw the attention of society and legislators to vulnerable groups, especially children, but the result was a serious accusation of attempting to antagonise the religious system and undermining its legitimacy. I responded to his words, but he repeated, 'Don't explain. Write it down.'

I couldn't remain silent and said, a little agitated, 'You're making verbal accusations against me, and I need to at least verbally respond. You ask

why I didn't address other social issues. Female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage, which you said last time I did for the enemy, occur due to deprivation and cultural poverty in parts of Kurdistan. You ask why I didn't go to Sistan and Baluchestan? I did go. You see that the statistics for child marriage are higher in deprived provinces, and one of them was Sistan and Baluchestan, but you consider the research a conspiracy and say there are so many social harms; why didn't I address them? I did. Temporary marriage, identity and ethnicity, and so on . . . but whatever area I entered, you considered it a crime, which shows that whatever area I entered would be wrong in your view.'

He seemed disarmed, but unwilling to back down. He said, 'Why should deprivation be justified by marrying off children? Do you want to reduce the Muslim population to benefit Israel?' He delved into the arguments and assessments of the *Keyhan* and *Javan* newspapers and repeated the views of my interrogators.

When he himself realised the contradiction in his words, he said, 'Explain this one case of research on homosexuals. The rest can wait.' Turning to the prosecutor's representative, he added, 'God forgive me! In this job, one has to mention and talk about everything. What even is homosexuality, which this researcher calls same-sex attraction and queerness, that one becomes homosexual and another researches it and provides legal solutions?'

I briefly explained to him that we chose the provinces according to the prevalence of my target community and wrote about a topic that exists in reality. I said, 'You speak as if we fabricated statistics and falsely published something, while these people exist in this society.'

He denied the existence of queer people and homosexuals in Iranian society, and I argued with him based on our findings. I knew it was useless; they knew better than I did how things were, but their ideological interests wouldn't allow them to speak the truth.

Interestingly, the accusation of homosexuality against the director-general of the Guilan Department of Guidance and several other officials has recently been widely publicised, and there are whispers about the homosexuality of some other officials. People close to the Government are silent or say, 'So-and-so has a daughter of marriageable age. Don't say anything!' What about the others who are imprisoned, tortured and sentenced for the same tendencies – don't they have families?

Salavati didn't have the patience to listen, ending the discussion with a few commanding sentences and feigned anger, dedicating his final question to the pepper spray, stun gun and bottle of liquor. I explained that the first two were unused in the house's storage. The pepper spray belonged to my wife and was even past its expiry date. The stun gun was licensed and belonged to my father's shop; also, it was quite old and broken. The half bottle of liquor had no connection to my case and was irrelevant here. I asked him not to include these items in my file. I said that he knew that these days many women carry pepper spray in their bags due to a lack of security, and that this spray was from 2010 and had expired, to which he replied, 'You are a proud Kurd. What do you mean saying it belongs to your wife? It is not befitting a Kurd. Say it is yours and take the blame!' He tainted the issue with ethnic and national pride to tickle my masculinity, so that no legal case would be made against my wife. I gave a frustrated sneer and said that my point wasn't about ownership, but that he had included it in the list of my charges and intended to sentence me for it.

Of course, honour and pride have always been part of the power mechanisms of the system, which consistently profited from them throughout the decades following the 1979 Revolution and denied social realities. How many realities should have been clarified and revealed, but were concealed in Iranian society under the pretext of honour and pride? From the macro level of society – that is, the political and cultural structures – these mechanisms have been used to control the institutions and social organisations of Iranian society, including the family institution.

Toward the end of the session, it was finally Mr Raisian's turn. I thought the final defence would be similar to what I had seen during my translation course at the UK's Justice Department, or in films. The lawyer recites a lengthy statement, walks around the courtroom, explains the details and challenges the charges. Raisian wanted to address the issues from the beginning, but Salavati said, 'This is not the Hague Court! Write down what you have to say briefly.'

Raisian replied that as a lawyer he had the right to defend his client, that Salavati had been trying me in two sessions lasting several hours and that he had been waiting for this moment to defend me.

Salavati said, 'Submit a bill. Why are you taking up the court's time?'

The most important part of the trial, the final defence, was considered by the judge to be a waste of time.

The prosecutor's representative kept looking at his watch, indicating that he was in a hurry, and Salavati's office manager warned that the next case was due. Raisian had only a minute or two and said something along these lines: 'My client's work has been in the field of social harms, and he has lived and worked in Iran for some time. Where were the security brothers and IRCG officers during his ten years of continuous work, the steady publication of works licensed by the Ministry of Guidance, and participation in academic and official seminars? We must accept that Mr Ahmady has not committed any wrongdoing and has only addressed the issue of child marriage in the last year or two, causing displeasure to opponents of this field. Part of the *Keyhan* newspaper's intellectual faction were agitated and sought a crime to pin on him. Another aspect of the matter is that the issue was triggered by his dual nationality and the tanker wars. In both scenarios, my client is innocent of all the crimes you have attributed to him.'

Of course, my lawyer's professional tone wasn't this direct and didn't name individuals so plainly.

He continued, 'Mr Ahmady has presented his entire work and research history transparently and clearly in his CV. What could a researcher possibly have to hide? All of Kameel Ahmady's work is on your desk. When he has worked in the country for ten years, where has the security system been that it now needs an answer, or is there an intention to accuse him because of one or two of his research projects? Legally, I see no trace of those accusations in his file, and we expect you to declare this case closed.'

Salavati, to cut off Raisian, said, 'Right, right' several times in the middle of his sentences. 'Is that it? Submit a bill.' Then, in a stiff and formal manner, he ended the session.



پروژه همجنس گرایان ایران

پروژه شهر ممنوعه یکی از پروژه های کامیل احمدی درباره همجنس باز زن ، همجنس باز مرد و دوجنسگراها LGB در ایران از سال ۲۰۱۷ الی ۲۰۱۸ می باشد .

به گفته کامیل احمدی ، اهداف اصلی این پروژه درک احساسات و باورها حول دگرباشان و بررسی چالش هایی که آنها بر اثر زندگی در جامعه ای مذهبی ، طبقه محور ، سنتی و پدرسالار که دگر باشی را به مثابه هویت رد می کند می باشد در بخشی از کتاب کامیل احمدی (شهر ممنوعه) اهداف پروژه LGB را چنین توصیف می کند:

«این مطالعه می خواهد یخ ها را بشکند و محیط را برای بحث و حل مشکلات روابط موازی ! در جامعه ایران آماده نماید»

یکی از اهداف ساختار شکنانه که این تحقیق دنبال می کند پرداختن به مسائل روابط موازی (Polygamy) در بین خانواده و تلاش برای تابو شکنی در این خصوص می باشد . این پروژه معتقد است که روابط موازی (داشتن چندین شریک جنسی و عاطفی در کنار همسر رسمی و قانونی) در جامعه ایران به شدت مردود است و به ویژه برای زنان محدودیت ها و مشکلات بیشتری دارد و این پروژه قصد دارد تا با مطرح کردن این نوع روابط زمینه عادی سازی و قبح شکنی از روابط خارج از قاعده برای زنان و مردان به ویژه متأهلین را فراهم آورد . نکته جالب دیگر در خصوص این پروژه اینست که این پروژه به افرادی که دارای اختلالات جنسی و جنسیتی یا همان افراد تراجنسیتی Transgender یا Transsexual (که دارای دو جنبه زنانه و مردانه جنسیت هستند و هر دوی این جنبه ها به طور هم زمان فعالند) نپرداخته است و فقط تنها بر گرایش های انحرافی ، نامتعارف و مردود همجنس گرایانه پرداخته است و همین امر نشان دهنده هدف پروژه قبح شکنی و پرداختن به مسائل ساختار شکنانه و غیر متعارف همجون همجنسگرایی می باشد . به گفته وی همجنسگرایی یک موضوع ادامه دار در ایران بوده و بیشترین نگرانی این است که LGBها هر روز با پیش داوری ها ، تبعیضات و محکومیت ها و تهدیدات مجازات قانونی مواجه می شوند .

همچنین از دیگر اهداف آن ، بحث و حل مشکلاتی که زنان در روابط موازی !! در خانه و در جامعه با آنها مواجه می شوند ، از طریق افزایش آگاهی در میان بدنه حکومتی ، اعضای جامعه و مقامات

Image 493: Part of the research report on homosexuals, compiled by IRGC Intelligence for Judge Salavati's court.

'Iran Homosexuals Project: The "Forbidden Tale" project is one of Kameel Ahmady's projects about gay men, gay women and bisexuals in Iran from 2017 to 2018. According to Kameel Ahmady, the main goals of this project are to understand the feelings and beliefs surrounding sexual minorities and to examine the challenges they face as a result of living in a religious, class-based, traditional and patriarchal society that rejects difference as an identity. Ahmady describes the goals of the LGB project as follows: "This study aims to break the ice and prepare the ground for discussing and solving the problems of parallel relationships in Iranian society."

> 'One of the groundbreaking goals that this research pursues is addressing the issues of parallel relationships (polygamy) within the family and trying to break the taboo regarding this. This project believes that parallel emotional relationships (alongside the formal and legal spouse) are strongly rejected in Iranian society, and especially for women, there are more limitations and problems, and this project aims to normalise and break the taboo of relationships outside the norm for both men and women, especially married individuals, by raising the issue of this type of relationship. Another interesting point regarding this project is that it has not addressed individuals with sexual and gender disorders, or rather transgender individuals (transsexual or transgender), who have both male and female sexual aspects and both aspects are active simultaneously), and has only focused on the deviant, unconventional and rejected homosexual orientations, and this matter indicates the project's goal is taboo-breaking and addressing the groundbreaking and unconventional issues of homosexuality. According to him, homosexuality has been an ongoing issue in Iran, and the biggest concern is that LGB individuals face prejudice, discrimination, condemnations and legal threats every day. Also among its other goals are to discuss and solve the problems that women face in parallel relationships !! in the home and in society, by increasing awareness among the governmental body, members of society, and officials.'

I asked Mr Raisian his opinion, and he shook his head despondently, saying, 'God have mercy on us! He didn't even let me defend you. I'll submit a bill, but I doubt a good verdict will come out of this court. It seems to me the discussion is about how many years of imprisonment to give. They have accused you under Article 508, which carries a sentence of one to ten years. I hope they take the middle ground and sentence you to five years. Then we'll break the verdict in the Supreme Court. Although . . . no one else – no other judge – dares to overturn Salavati's verdicts, especially in a case as sensitive as this, which has attracted a lot of international attention.'

I returned home disheartened, and when those around me asked about court, I merely repeated the phrase, 'We must wait.' Deep down, I knew the outcome of this trial wouldn't be good.

At the same time, the arrest and trial of two demographers[1] and several women's- and children's-rights activists, as well as the dissolution of the Imam Ali Society,[2] were top news stories. The Imam Ali Society had also done fieldwork on child marriage, and we had joint research topics in the field of child labour, although we had never worked together. The cases of the two demographers and several people who had worked on marriage-contract clauses were also in Salavati's hands, charged under Article 508.

My Last Work, Trip and Thoughts in Iran

I knew time was short, and during this period I focused as much as I could on the project concerning male circumcision. As I've mentioned, the assistant working on male circumcision was in Mashhad, and I had regular video calls with him. The pandemic was making fieldwork difficult, so we tried to conduct part of the work through online questionnaires and interviews. It wasn't satisfactory, but we had no choice.

I devoted another portion of my time to rebuilding the website and uploading some of the topics I had been working on.

I had also entered a digital war with media outlets linked to the Sepah (IRCG) Intelligence Organisation. They had used search-engine

1 Mohammad-Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi and Meimanat Husseini-Chavoshi, both professors of demography. Meimanat Husseini-Chavoshi, an Iranian-Australian dual-national demographer and professor at the University of Melbourne, was invited to speak at a regional conference on ageing in Iran. In December 2018, she was arrested while leaving the country, and her passport was confiscated. One of their charges is 'colluding against national security through research on reducing birth rates'. Ms Husseini is currently banned from leaving the country and has been released from prison on bail of 350 million tomans. She was imprisoned by the Ministry of Intelligence after the publication of a joint book on Iran's population policies. Previously, this book had won an award in Iran.

2 An Iranian NGO dedicated to helping vulnerable people The Imam Ali Charity was dissolved on 3 March (13 Esfand) by a court of first instance ruling. This was despite the fact that a hearing on the charges against the charity had taken place the day before, on 2 March (12 Esfand), and the lawyers were supposed to present further documents to the court the following day. However, when Arash Keikhosravi, one of the charity's lawyers went to the court to submit the documents, he was told that the verdict had already been issued.

optimisation ('SEO') to boost my name and one of the news stories written about me, paying hefty sums. I didn't agree with some of the SEO tactics, but I had to do something. *Mashregh News*, one of the Intelligence Organisation's media outlets, had written a follow-up report about me: 'Who is Kameel Ahmady and what project is he pursuing in Iran?' I was in interrogation when this report was published, and they had written all my charges in their own version. When people searched my name on Google, this report came up, and the Google engine thought it was the most important news about me. As a result, the first news that audiences saw about me was the version that the Intelligence Organisation was trying to present: 'infiltrator, soft-overthrow advocate, promoter of LGBTQ+ lifestyles, cause of declining marriage and population rates, contact with embassies, and working for the United Nations, etcetera' At that time, this issue was affecting my professional life and creating doubt. I was forced to spend time and money rebuilding my website and making it Google-friendly.


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سیاست

بازنشر/ مشرق گزارش می‌دهد:

«کامیل احمدی» کیست و چه پروژه‌ای را در ایران دنبال می‌کرد؟ +تصاویر

چندی قبل خبر بازداشت یک عنصر دو تابعیتی نفوذی در پوشش "مردم شناس" و "پژوهش‌گر" اجتماعی منتشر شد. در این گزارش با تفکرات و اقدامات این فرد آشنا می‌شوید.

سرویس سیاست مشرق - در ۲۲ مرداد گذشته، اخباری منتشر شد که یک فرد با تابعیت ایرانی-بریتانیایی، با حکم قضایی و توسط نیروهای امنیتی بازداشت شده است. این فرد که **«کامیل احمدی»** نام دارد، در اخبار پوششی رسانه‌های فارسی‌زبان خارج از کشور، به عنوان «مردم‌شناس» و «پژوهش‌گر اجتماعی» معرفی شده است.

Image 494: Headlines from the media related to IRGC Intelligence.

> 'Repost/Mashregh Reports: Who is 'Kameel Ahmady' and what projects is he pursuing in Iran?
> 'Recently, news was published about the arrest of an infiltrating element under the guise of a "sociologist" and "social researcher". In this report, you will become familiar with this individual's thoughts and actions.
> 'Mashregh Politics Service – News was published on 22 Mordad last year (equivalent to 13 August 2019) regarding the arrest of an individual with Iranian-British nationality by judicial order and security forces. This person, named "Kameel Ahmady", has been presented by Farsi-language media outside the country as a "sociologist" and "social researcher" in their coverage.'

After a while, Shafagh, Alan, and I went on a trip together. First, I returned to our region in Kurdistan. I visited my sisters and saw relatives. We were constantly being invited to gatherings, and we visited family both near and far. A fortnight later, we went to Shiraz, just as the second wave of COVID-19 arrived. Travel wasn't restricted or banned, but there wasn't much movement. Hafezieh, Sa'dieh, and many other tourist sites were closed. We went to Qalat-e Shiraz, which had changed a lot and had become a touristy, almost hippy-like area. Iran was heading in a direction in which its younger generation was rapidly bringing about significant changes in urban life.

A week later, we went to Qeshm. I had worked there for several years and had many memories of it. I wondered what impact the rapid transformation of these remote, indigenous areas of southern Iran into commercial hubs was having on the cultural and social fabric of the region and the islanders – or the term 'border resident', which the locals had given to outsiders, and the tension and conflict between the locals and outsiders that remained strong.

I was looking for any excuse to extend the trip and not return to Tehran. We took advantage of any gust of wind that caused the cancellation of boats and ships to Bandar Abbas to delay our return trip. Because of Alan's interest, we were scheduled to return to Tehran by train. In the meantime, I met with locals, acquaintances and southern friends, and for the love of years gone by, I went diving again and ate delicious southern fish, smoked a Qeshmi hookah and saw the islands of Hormuz and other areas and

villages. In short, we seized every moment and made the most of every opportunity.



Image 495: The difficult COVID time and limited fieldwork. 2020–2021.

The next trip was to the north. We spent some time there and again thought about the differences – the different lifestyle that was prevalent there; this diverse and varied society full of national, ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism; and this vast capacity of the masses. I thought about Iran, which is so wealthy from underground resources like oil and gas to things like tourism, which are not properly exploited, and had a system that was incompetent and corrupt. How much could be written and researched about all this, and another Iran could be shown to the world, with all its beauty, capacity and abilities. Why wouldn't they let us? They were seeking to eliminate research and intellectualism. How does this level of contradiction and conflict of interest occur? How could this tension, this disagreement, this hostility end? How could lasting peace be achieved? How could one sit down and talk with this non-dialogical system, and how can we live together but with different viewpoints? If none of these things can be done, then what should be done? Must everything be destroyed and rebuilt from scratch?

In Qeshm and Ramsar, I walked barefoot on the beach, thinking about all the conflicts, disagreements and problems that people had with themselves or with others. I felt like everyone was jumping down each other's throats and arguing with each other.

I could clearly feel this tension even in the streets; I saw it in the way people drove: more aggressively and with shorter fuses. Perhaps as the level of social and economic discontent and the harsh conditions of society intensify, so too does people's anger, driving them to seize every opportunity in the public sphere to vent this pent-up inner rage. At the same time, people's interactions become more tense and fraught with

conflict, rather than constructive and based on empathy. There wasn't much flexibility in Iran, and people were under pressure. The COVID pandemic had exacerbated all of this. The chaotic economic situation, inflation and the soaring dollar exchange rate, shortages of essential consumer goods – one day no eggs, the next no cooking oil – something scarce every week – more negative news every day . . .

It was a strange period. I wanted to see all of Kurdistan and Iran with insatiable eyes, like a camel about to embark on a long journey, drinking water to store up for days and months. I smelled everything and ate all the food, which made those around me laugh. I thought to myself, 'God knows when I'll be able to see everything I'm seeing again.' I lost myself in the local markets, I even smelled the people, the spices and the pickles. I reached a point where, despite all the pressure, I was extravagant, telling myself to enjoy it, as if it were the end of the line . . . like a condemned man with the rope around his neck, making the most of every moment, drawing air into his lungs as if there were no more oxygen left to breathe.

Anxiety wouldn't let me go, and the psychological pressure I was under caused me to deny or postpone everything in my outward behaviour. In fact, we sometimes use external defence mechanisms such as denial and postponement to make the added internal pressures more bearable.

I wanted to be carefree. I had become much kinder, more sensitive and more mystical than before. It was a strange period, very strange – strange and memorable, of course, and filled with days of regret and pain.



Image 496: Daryakenar, Ramsar, 2020.

Part Eight: A Difficult Farewell

Introduction

All the signs pointed to my leaving, yet my heart longed to stay. I wanted to try again, to cling to the futile hope that I could continue to work and live in Iran. But, as everyone expected and as I knew deep down, the delivery of the initial verdict to my lawyer settled everything. I knew then that I didn't have much time. I had to make my decision. On one side was the land, the geography and the culture that, with all its good and bad, I loved. It was the field of my research, my professional life. On the other side, apart from the hardships of enduring several years of a prison sentence and other punishments, my son's future was the greatest concern and challenge, one that never left me for a moment. I didn't want to, and I couldn't bring myself to, let him spend the best years of his life longing to see his father. How could I claim to support children's rights yet ignore the rights of my own child? And so, I chose departure over staying, and set foot on a path along which, from my very first step, the Qandil Mountains awaited me. The mountains I had once, as a teenager, intended to cross to escape, only to be arrested, were waiting for me once more.

The magnificent Qandil had to help me this time – to let me pass through its heart in a cold season and reach the other side of Iran's borders.

It was kind. In the severe cold and heavy snow, I despaired of surviving many times, but I finally managed to reach the other side and, under security measures, safely pass through the dangers that awaited me in the Kurdistan Region.

Qandil is kind and dear, but in this entire world, geography is paramount. Geography determines a person's security, their sphere of life and their freedoms. As a Kurdish British citizen outside Iran, I received protection so that I wouldn't grow old in prison under a pre-determined sentence of long and unjust confinement.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Leaving Iran

I was anxiously awaiting the verdict, constantly contacting my lawyer to ask why there was no news. My whole life hinged on Judge Salavati's ruling, and the ceaseless waiting had left me breathless.

The day Mr Raisian's number flashed up on my phone, my heart trembled. He said sympathetically, 'You've been waiting a long time for your sentence. It's finally here!'

Anxiety and fear had replaced anticipation, and I wanted to hang up. I couldn't bear to hear it. With a nervous laugh, I said, 'Don't tell me! Don't read the verdict . . . I'll come to your office. Tell me in person what's happened. And tell me slowly, so I can digest it.'

That afternoon, I made my way to his office. It was a relatively smart place in Abbasabad, though it always smelt of cigarettes. The windows were open, and, unusually, the noise of the cars and the bustle of the street irritated me. I asked him to close them. He did, and turned on the air conditioning, but the smell of smoke only intensified.

My lawyer was an interesting fellow; though not very old, he knew the ways of the world. He always offered insightful and up-to-date analyses, which meant we could talk about anything. But that day, I wasn't in the mood to hear about what was happening in Iran or what had transpired. I got straight to the point: 'I know my verdict is out, and it's certainly not good. Please, tell me what's happened and what I should do.'

He laughed and said, 'We deal with these sorts of things every day, but your case is a bit complicated . . .'

He showed me two pages of paper bearing the Judiciary's letterhead, which stated, 'Kameel Ahmady has been sentenced to eight years and three months in prison on the charge of Article 508 – cooperation with a hostile government.' The sentence for Article 508 is one to ten years, and His

Honour the Judge had kindly opted for eight years for me – eighty per cent of the maximum!



Image 497: Deutsche Welle News.

Headline: 'Revolutionary Court sentences Kameel Ahmady to 9 years in prison'
Date: 12/12/2020
'Sociologist and researcher Kameel Ahmady has been sentenced by Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Court to 9 years in prison and a fine of 600,000 euros. Among the charges, he is accused of intending to raise the age of marriage in Iran.'

The moment he said 'eight years', I began to analyse the situation. Eight years in prison for conducting research? They themselves knew I had never cooperated with the US Government or any other government, and this law had absolutely nothing to do with me or my work. I couldn't understand how they had issued such a sentence for me. Before the verdict, we had anticipated half this time. This was the height of unfairness.

I hadn't yet recovered from the shock when Raisian read out the subsequent parts of the sentence, making matters even more dire: 'Six months in prison for possession of half a litre of alcoholic beverage, six months for an out-of-date pepper spray, and three months for a stun gun.' This, despite my having explained that the stun gun was from my father's shop days, had its manual and didn't even work.

Raisian tallied it all up and said, 'That makes nine years and three months in prison. So, roughly ten years.' I was dumbfounded as he continued, 'Plus a six hundred thousand euro fine.'

This sum was as shocking to me as the length of the prison sentence. Even if I pooled all my own assets and those of my family, it wouldn't amount to six hundred thousand euros. This amount, on top of nine years and three months in prison, essentially meant: we don't want you to breathe any more; our plan is your annihilation, or we're practically pushing you to pack your bags and never show your face again!'

The charges themselves were also noteworthy. According to the verdict of Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court, my crimes were cooperation with foreign institutions and Article 508 (cooperation with the hostile US Government), promoting homosexuality in Iran, lobbying for the reform of the marriage-age law concerning child marriage, infiltration and conducting research that causes changes in gender lifestyle and Islamic culture, and, of course, attempting to dismember Iran through research on identity and ethnicity among five national and ethnic groups: Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Fars and Baloch!

خبرگزاری تسنیم می‌گوید کامیل احمدی پژوهشگر ایرانی-بریتانیایی با حکم بدوی شعبه ۱۵ دادگاه انقلاب اسلامی تهران به ۹ سال حبس و ششصد هزار یورو جریمه محکوم شده است. مراجع قضایی ایران این خبر را اعلام نکرده‌اند.

دولت بریتانیا با اظهار "نگرانی شدید" خواستار توضیح بیشتر در این باره شده و امیر رئیسیان وکیل آقای احمدی گفته درخواست تجدیدنظر خواهد کرد و به نتیجه آن "امیدوار" است.

آقای احمدی مردم‌شناس و پژوهشگر کرد ایرانی که به گفته شبکه حقوق بشر کردستان سال‌ها بود در ایران زندگی می‌کرد، ۲۰ مرداد پارسال در تهران بازداشت و آبان همان سال با وثیقه آزاد شده بود.

به گزارش تسنیم خبرگزاری نزدیک به سپاه پاسداران، آقای احمدی به "تحصیل مال نامشروع حاصل از همکاری و اجرای پروژه‌های موسسات برانداز" متهم بوده است.

این خبرگزاری اتهام‌های دیگری را هم ذکر کرده است: "همکاری با موسسه هیفوس در مسائل زنان و کودکان، تلاش برای اعمال نفوذ در تهیه و تصویب طرح افزایش سن ازدواج با همراهی دو نماینده زن سابق مجلس و سفارتخانه‌های کشورهای اروپایی، ترویج و حمایت از همجنس‌گرایی، همکاری و ارتباط با رسانه‌های معاند و بیگانه و ارسال گزارش خلاف واقع به گزارشگر حقوق بشر سازمان ملل علیه جمهوری اسلامی ایران" و سفر به اسرائیل "در پوشش خبرنگار بی‌بی‌سی".

آقای احمدی برنده جایزه ادبیات و علوم انسانی بنیاد جهانی صلح در دانشگاه جورج واشنگتن آمریکا بوده و "داستان شهر ممنوعه، پژوهشی جامع بر باب دگرباشان در ایران" از آخرین کارهای اوست.

Image 498: Full news report from BBC Persian website.

'Tasnim News Agency reports that Iranian-British researcher Kameel Ahmady has been sentenced to 9 years in prison and a fine of six hundred thousand euros by a preliminary ruling from Branch 15 of Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Court. Iranian judicial authorities have not officially announced this news.

'The British Government, expressing "deep concern", has requested further clarification on the matter. Mr Ahmady's lawyer, Amir Raisian, has said he will appeal the verdict and is "hopeful" about the outcome.

'Mr Ahmady, a Kurdish-Iranian anthropologist and researcher who, according to the Kurdistan Human Rights Network, had been living in Iran for years, was arrested in Tehran on 11 August of last year and was released on bail in November of the same year.

> 'According to Tasnim, a news agency close to the Pasdaran [IRGC], Mr Ahmady was accused of "acquiring illicit funds derived from cooperation with and implementation of projects for subversive institutions."
> 'The news agency also listed other charges: "Cooperation with the Hivos institute on women's and children's issues; attempting to influence the drafting and approval of the bill to raise the age of marriage, in collaboration with two former female MPs and European embassies; promoting and supporting homosexuality; cooperating and communicating with hostile and foreign media, and sending false reports against the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights" and travelling to Israel "under the guise of a BBC reporter."
> 'Mr Ahmady was the recipient of the Literature and Humanities Award from the World Peace Foundation at George Washington University in the USA, and *The Forbidden Tale: A Comprehensive Study on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexauls (LGB) in Iran* is among his recent works.'

It took me a while to read and digest these charges. Where in the world is appending a researcher's study as a scientific document to a bill by some members of parliament considered an accusation and a crime? Contact with a member of parliament is not a crime anywhere in the world; rather, it's a normal procedure. A member of parliament represents members of society, and communication between them and others for advocacy and facilitating societal demands is legitimate and tangible. This phenomenon in Iranian society, like a historical ailment, is rooted in institutionalised social suspicions and pessimisms.

Where in Iran's current laws is research on child marriage, 'white marriage' (cohabitation), sigheh (temporary marriage) and ethnicity criminalised? On what basis is ethnographic research on LGBTQ+ individuals a crime? Does researching a topic or phenomenon mean promoting it, or using it to dismember Iran? And, most importantly, through what channel did my 'cooperation with the hostile US Government' take place, when I have had and continue to have no contact with any member of its government or even its non-governmental organisations? All these accusations were illogical and cruel labelling. It

was unbelievable, but it further unveiled and exposed the terrifying and inhuman face of the ruling system and regime. Where in the world is research work, for example, in the field of homosexuality, considered the promotion of homosexuality? Or does research on female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage, sigheh mahramiat (temporary marriage for unmarriageable kin), etcetera lead to the promotion of Western culture, as this system had interpreted my work, accusing me of such bizarre things through biased judgement coupled with inhuman approaches?

The verdict stated that, for possessing alcoholic beverages, in addition to three months in prison, a ludicrous fine of 350,000 tomans had been imposed. I also had that six hundred thousand euro fine which, at the euro-to-rial exchange rate in Iran at the time (around 30,000 tomans per euro), amounted to a colossal sum of about 18 billion tomans. With this monetary fine, even if I had resigned myself to going to prison, I wouldn't have been able to get out after serving my sentence. Apparently, that was their intention.

I was so stunned that we asked Mr Raisian's secretary to bring me a cold drink. My throat was dry, and I couldn't speak properly. After drinking it, I said again in bewilderment, 'Mr Raisian, what does this mean?'

He replied, 'I don't know what to say. They're bent on your destruction and have gone off the deep end.' He too was astounded; he hadn't imagined we'd face such a sentence. He said, 'My utmost expectation was half this sentence. We must appeal to the Supreme Court to perhaps get the sentence overturned or reduced, so you might be released after a year or two in prison. But what do we do about the six hundred thousand euro fine? Where will you get that amount?'

We knew that a large portion of the court fine, something around twenty to twenty-five per cent, goes to the *zabet* ('enforcing officer') or, in other words, the interrogator. If a prisoner escapes, the esteemed *zabet* still takes his share from the prisoner's bail. Raisian said that if I accepted the verdict, one-third of it would automatically be reduced. Also, if I didn't cause trouble during my prison term, remained calm and well-behaved, didn't give interviews to the media and, as they put it, remained a polite and well-behaved prisoner, I might receive another twenty per cent reduction. Still, my heart wasn't at ease. By any calculation, I would have

to stay in prison for at least five to six years, and there was no guarantee of getting out even after my sentence ended.

A torrent of different thoughts assailed my mind. On the one hand, I told myself, 'It's all right, Kameel. Go to prison. You can conduct prison ethnography there, see another side of society and so on . . .' But, at the same time, I couldn't bring myself to return to Evin Prison. Even if I stayed for, say, five years in the best-case scenario, the person who went in would be very different from the person who came out. All that aside, what would become of Shafagh and Alan? When you're away from your child for a long time, when their upbringing and schooling proceed in your absence, when your connection with them is severed and, ultimately, you see them for half an hour every two weeks in a crowded prison, unable even to gaze at them to your heart's content – what remains of your own life and your family's? What would become of me? How was I to endure in that confined, terrifyingly anxious space?

I couldn't face going to prison and paying the fine. Supposing I even served my prison term and it was over, how would I pay that fine, which amounted to several billion tomans? And if I couldn't pay the money, I would have to stay in prison for one day for every ten thousand tomans. You can calculate for yourselves how many hundreds of years of imprisonment I would have had to endure to settle it that way! It was as if they had subtly presented me with two options: either find the money and pay the fine or take a life sentence. It just didn't add up. The message from Judge Salavati, and, in essence, from the IRGC Intelligence Organisation, was perfectly clear and unambiguous: we are determined to eliminate you.



Image 499: My lawyer's Tweet.

> 'My client, Mr #Kameel_Ahmady, a researcher and anthropologist, has been sentenced by Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court to eight years' discretionary imprisonment on the charge of "cooperating with a hostile government". We will be appealing this verdict and remain hopeful . . .'

In the midst of my and Raisian's calculations, my wife, sisters and brothers-in-law kept calling, asking what sentence had been issued to me. We kept our phones outside the office lest we were bugged through them, and the secretary would inform us of the constant calls. I had to control myself and answer calmly, saying, 'Wait until I get home.'

When I arrived home, I recounted everything, measuredly – or rather, brokenly. I was in shock, and they too were filled with bewilderment and worry. We were at a loss for any thought or analysis – just looked at each other.

Gradually, we came to our senses, and the questions began: 'Kameel! What are you going to do now? What will happen? How will we raise this

much money? Is there no way out? Can't the sentence be overturned?' Dozens of unanswered questions. I had lost control of my thoughts, and question after question spun in my head – questions, each of which was a life's concern.

I don't know how I fell asleep that night. Strange thoughts wouldn't leave me, and I constantly pondered what I should do. Leave Iran? Where would I go, and how would I start again from scratch? Why should I even have to do this? What had I done?

Legally, I had only one right, and that was to appeal the verdict. But would an appeal change the sentence? Would anyone alter Judge Salavati's ruling? The opinion of those around me was no. Everyone agreed that this sentence would, at best, receive a minor reduction to show that, for example, the case had been reviewed. I was still hopeful – or perhaps, psychologically, I didn't want to accept that the sentence wouldn't change. I knew Judge Salavati wasn't someone who acted on his own authority; like my interrogator, Qana'atkar, he lacked judicial independence, and everything was in the hands of the IRGC agents. But I just thought that perhaps a breakthrough might occur – that in the appeal court, experienced judges with a modicum of fairness and rationality might be present and say that one shouldn't be sent to prison for so many years for research. They might also note that one year and three months of my prison sentence was for matters unrelated to the case. Furthermore, the stun gun hadn't even been mentioned in the case file. Judge Salavati had added it himself by hand at the behest of IRGC Intelligence. My sentence also had legal flaws and errors in its most basic calculations.

Two days after hearing and reading the verdict, I spent my time drafting the appeal, writing it with all my energy and effort. I asked my lawyer if we could review and refine the text together. In less than a week, we wrote the appeal request and submitted it within the legal deadline.

Before submission, we constantly debated whether to publicise the matter or not. We decided it was better to do so, but that I shouldn't give interviews to foreign media. Media pressure could always be effective and might even influence the appeal court. The plan was for Mr Raisian to announce my sentence on Twitter, stating that Judge Salavati had issued such-and-such a sentence for his client, Kameel Ahmady. I would then retweet it with a few lines of explanation. He forgot to write nine years and

three months and only mentioned eight years, or perhaps he only referred to Article 508 and wrote nothing about the other legal penalties.

Our hopes, efforts, and expert analyses had proven wrong, and I had received a heavy sentence. But I was still hopeful about the appeal and that publicising the matter could influence the court's decision. Of course, on that very day, Ruhollah Zam was executed, creating a heavy atmosphere against the Judiciary. Two days before my sentence was publicised, two other women whose cases were proceeding concurrently with mine had received their verdicts, and the outcomes were similar to what I faced.

It wasn't long before the news of my sentence became public, and domestic media covered it as well. Contacts from foreign media, mainly Farsi-language and English-language outlets, started up again. I declined all requests. I received a flood of reactions and messages on Instagram, on Twitter and by email, which showed what a dark record Iran has in human-rights issues and to what extent it fabricates cases against dual nationals. That attracted significant international attention to the matter. Most foreign news agencies, especially English-language ones, covered my sentence, and Farsi-language media outside the country also wrote about it,[1] but domestic media published the news with a day's delay.[2]

1 BBC Persian (2020b) Social issues researcher Kameel Ahmady sentenced to '9 years in prison' in Iran, 13–14 December. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-55296017 (Accessed: 14 July 2022); Euronews Persian (2020) Kameel Ahmady, Iranian-British anthropologist, sentenced to '9 years in prison', 14 December.

2 Rouydad24, 2020.



Image 500: Headline from the official IRGC newspaper.

Source: Tasnim News Agency
Headline: '"Kameel Ahmady" sentenced to 9 years in prison + Photos'
Image Caption: 'Tehran's Revolutionary Court sentenced Kameel Ahmady, an active agent of influence in the field of social issues in Iran, to 9 years in prison.'

The hardliners and media outlets directly controlled by the IRGC covered the issue with great fanfare and justified it.[1] Fars News Agency wrote, 'Kameel Ahmady has been sentenced to nine years in prison for cooperation with foreign institutions and to a fine of 600,000 euros for illicit financial gain.' This news[2] was very interesting to me because, in our

1 Fard, 2020.

2 Tasnim (2020) Kameel Ahmady sentenced to 9 years in prison + photos, 13 December. Available at: https://tn.ai/2409665 (Accessed: 5 September 2022).

Tweet, we hadn't mentioned the monetary sum or the additional one year and three months of prison, but Fars News Agency had published the details from the verdict in full.

Fars News Agency's emphasis on the monetary fine and its reference to the part of the verdict that read 'acquiring property through illicit means' misled some domestic and foreign news agencies. This caused agencies that didn't have Farsi-speaking translators and had probably used Google Translate to mistakenly write that it was due to acquiring property to buy a house, as if the word *mâl* ('property'/'wealth') had been translated as 'house', which was laughable. Several news agencies contacted me, asking what this meant and what the story behind the six hundred thousand euros and illicit financial gain was. I had to explain to them what the English translation would be and that, in Iran's Islamic legal system, money obtained through non-Islamic- or non-Sharia-compliant means is termed 'illicit financial gain'.[1] In short, for two days I was caught up explaining the news[2] that Fars News Agency had published.[3]

I contacted the British ambassador's secretary, and a few days later she arranged to meet me in a café near my home. She deliberately chose a public place for the meeting. It wasn't an illegal or clandestine act; we just wanted to meet in a public environment. Of course, I knew that such meetings were good ammunition for the Islamic Republic's security agencies to levy all sorts of accusations. When she sat opposite me, she was concerned and said she had been expecting such a heavy sentence but hadn't had the heart to tell me. She said that, given the track record of people like Judge Salavati, they knew that, in cases like mine, he would give the maximum penalty, and he had a particular issue with dual nationals.

1 BBC News (2020) Kameel Ahmady: British FGM/C academic 'jailed in Iran', 14 December. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55300694 (Accessed: 28 June 2022).

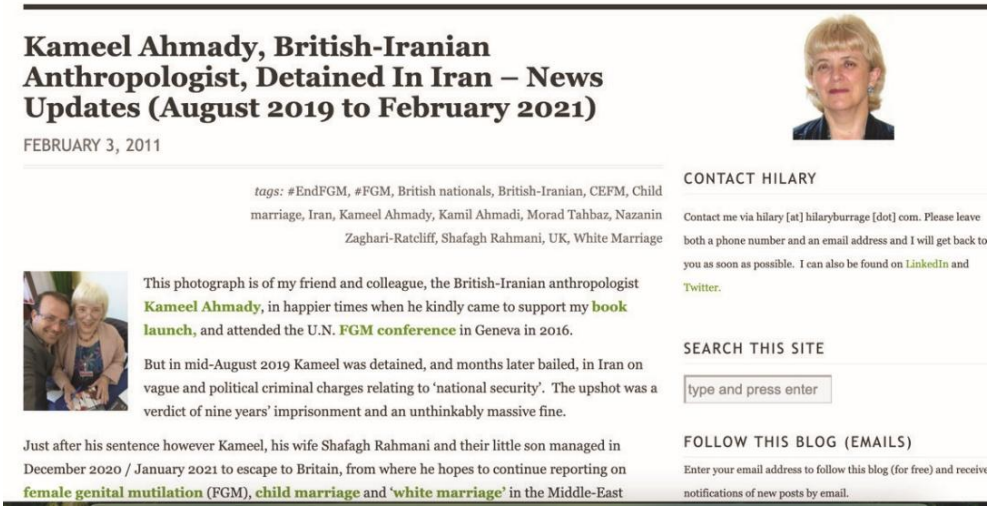
2 Reuters (2020) Iran jails British-Iranian researcher for 9 years for subversion – report, 14 December. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iran-jails-british-iranian-researcher-for-9-years-for-subversion-report-idUSKBN28N0QO/ .

3 Anderson, K. (2020) 'British-Iranian academic jailed for 9 years in Iran for "subversive" research', The Independent, 13 December. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kameel-ahmady-british-academic-jailed-iran-subversive-res.

Like everyone else, her question was: what do you intend to do? I said I was very insistent on staying until the last moment, to go through the appeal court, and I had no intention of doing anything without a final appeal verdict. She said, 'As an ambassador, I cannot recommend violating or breaking the law of another country, but be mindful of the consequences that enduring a ten-year prison sentence will have on your life and your family's. We are very worried about your wife and child. Would you like me to raise the issue with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs?'

Even before this, the embassy had always given me the option to raise the matter with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and compel Iran to provide an official response. I was aware of the Foreign Ministry's lack of influence over the security apparatus, especially IRGC Intelligence, and I was sure that, if this happened, everything would proceed as a mere formality. I knew they could choose not to respond, as they weren't in a position to be held accountable, but I really had no other choice, and perhaps this might put some slight pressure on the appeal court.

When we registered the appeal request, my lawyer said they would respond very quickly. Apparently, there was a rush with my case, and everything was moving swiftly! They had issued the verdicts for the two female civil activists at the same time as mine, perhaps intending to link all



Kameel Ahmady, British-Iranian Anthropologist, Detained In Iran – News Updates (August 2019 to February 2021)

FEBRUARY 3, 2011

tags: #EndFGM, #FGM, British nationals, British-Iranian, CEFM, Child marriage, Iran, Kameel Ahmady, Kamil Ahmadi, Morad Tahbaz, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliff, Shafagh Rahmani, UK, White Marriage

This photograph is of my friend and colleague, the British-Iranian anthropologist **Kameel Ahmady**, in happier times when he kindly came to support my **book launch**, and attended the U.N. **FGM conference** in Geneva in 2016.

But in mid-August 2019 Kameel was detained, and months later bailed, in Iran on vague and political criminal charges relating to 'national security'. The upshot was a verdict of nine years' imprisonment and an unthinkably massive fine.

Just after his sentence however Kameel, his wife Shafagh Rahmani and their little son managed in December 2020 / January 2021 to escape to Britain, from where he hopes to continue reporting on **female genital mutilation** (FGM), **child marriage** and '**white marriage**' in the Middle-East

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Image 501: Information and freedom campaign set up for me by my friend Hilary and other colleagues.

these cases. The women, too, had appealed, and all the cases had probably gone to the same branch.

I spoke with my friends in Europe; they were much more worried about my situation than my friends in Iran. I had advised my friends Hilary, Toby, Richard, John and others, who were leading the campaign for my freedom, not to Tweet or issue statements too much until the result of the appeal court was known. Ever since a listening device had been planted in my wife's mobile phone, which we discovered during a repair, I had severely restricted my communication even with those around me. When I spoke to people outside Iran, fearing surveillance, I would call from different phones and SIM cards. Fearing that our house was bugged, I would go up to the rooftop or to more distant places, and, even after all these precautions, I would speak in code.

Everyone was worried, and each in their own way told me to get out of Iran. When I consulted with two other lawyers, they said that the appeal-court process in Iran was mostly a formality and there was no hope in the courts during Ebrahim Raisi's tenure.

From every angle I looked at it, I saw that the gang that had arrested me were high-ranking security officials, with connections leading up to Alamolhoda's faction and his son-in-law, Raisi. Their speciality was politicising the cases they built against dual nationals.

When I thought about it seriously, I saw I had no more than two options. One was to wait in Iran for the appeal court's verdict and then, after the appeal verdict was issued, decide what to do. The other was to get myself to another country, wait for the verdict to be announced, and, based on its outcome, decide whether to return to Iran or go to the UK.

The first option was considered a mistake by everyone. They said that shortly after the verdict was announced I would have to report to prison, and it would then be too late for any other action. There were also risks and uncertainties regarding the second option. But the plan for myself would be to stay in one of these neighbouring countries, and if the court's verdict was reasonable, I would quietly return and go to prison. If not, I would wait until the situation became clear. It would take two weeks for the appeal verdict to be issued. I was spending the final days of these two weeks stressed, and I knew I had less than forty-eight hours to decide.

Chapter Thirty: Crossing the Border

Can a person's whole life fit into a single backpack? Everything you've prepared and arranged to create the safe haven of home? The friends, acquaintances and family who have been your security, with whom you've weathered joys and sorrows – is that a small possession? All that aside, what about your wife and child? To leave everyone and everything, to set off with a backpack toward an unknown fate: if that isn't devastation, if it isn't torment and shattering, then what is it?

Once again, through no fault of my own, the legacy of my ancestors rested on my shoulders. I was leaving to start again from scratch. The longing to see my family and friends, to breathe the clean air of Kurdistan, would become a distant dream once more.

We checked all the plans and, in silence, thought with fear about tomorrow – an unknown tomorrow, shaped by the bizarre: I was a researcher and, in line with my mission, I had addressed societal problems. Now I had two choices: grow old in prison or leave Iran.

The Time to Leave

It was Friday afternoon when one or two lawyer friends contacted me, saying that the result of my appeal might be announced the next day or the day after. Their words worried me more because, in Iran's administrative system, everything usually happens on Saturdays. Since several others who had received similar sentences before me had seen no change in their appeal outcomes – their sentences remaining fixed – the time had come for me to decide. There was no time left. I had to either go or stay and let the sentence, whatever it was, run its course.

I reviewed all the so-called escape routes and options from Iran. I hated the word 'escape', because I didn't see my action as an escape; it was a forced exit. Was I a criminal to be escaping? What had I done? What aspect of my actions was I escaping from? A forced exit: it wasn't my choice; I was being compelled to it.

A few days earlier, Shafagh and I had had our talk, and we knew I had to go. When the fateful day arrived, Shafagh and I constantly avoided each other, and it was Alan alone who broke the silence of the house. He was sitting in front of the television, watching *The Pink Panther* and laughing loudly. We were thinking about the bitter separation that would once again distance us from each other, but Alan was too young to understand the events of that time. I felt dreadful. It was uncertain whether I would be able to see my wife and child again, and, even if I could, it would surely not be for a very long time.

It was a painful separation. Leaving without Shafagh and Alan was one thing; saying goodbye to Iran, Kurdistan and Tehran was another. There was a heavy lump was in my throat as I constantly replayed my memories. I paced around the house, picking up an item, then telling myself, no, it's



Image 502: Alan and I playing cards. Saadat Abad, Tehran, 2020.

too heavy, and putting it back. How could I leave behind all the life we had strived so hard to build and just . . . go? How much could a single backpack even hold? What would become of my wife and child? My work, research, projects and books? In those final moments, I looked at every single object in the house. They were all precious to me. I had a rocking chair I used to sit on to read. A famous woodturner from Sanandaj had made it for me, and I'd usually found all my thoughts and ideas on that chair. My books. Even my clothes. Every small, insignificant object had become a great treasure.

Alan continued to watch his favourite cartoon, his face and eyes full of childish delight, while I wondered if, in the future, Alan would ask me why I left. Why did I do things that meant I wasn't there for him during important days of his childhood? What if I got stuck in the mountains, got arrested, or was brought back before Judge Salavati and he added several more serious charges to my case? What if they officially branded me a spy and a fugitive attempting to reach his spy colleagues on the other side of the border? If I were arrested, it would be another turning point, another victory for the security apparatus and IRGC Intelligence, to have captured someone who was under sentence for the crime of subversion through research and cooperation with foreign institutions, and whom the foreign British Government and its forces were helping get out of the country. I was alone, but if I were arrested, these people had an attractive, ready-made scenario for the continuation of the saga.

I had to pack my things, but what could I take from a whole life I had built with love? A few books, a toothbrush and toothpaste, pyjamas, a small towel and some warm clothes so I wouldn't be caught short in the mountains and could cope with the cold. I also took a pair of high-ankled, boot-like shoes, a set of Kurdish clothes and my laptop. I left my mobile phone at home so I couldn't be tracked by its signal. I had to be cautious, so that if I was under surveillance in this way, they would think I was in Tehran.

In short time I spent packing my rucksack, I reviewed my entire life, anxious about a tomorrow I knew nothing of. I thought about how different this departure, this migration, was from my first departure from Iran in my youth. Back then, I was a young man preoccupied with leaving, seeing and experiencing life in another world and from a new perspective; I had the excitement of realising many of the aspirations that, like any other

young person, I had imagined. But now I was a middle-aged man leaving out of desperation.

Again, I looked at Alan, whose fate was changing because of me. Rightly or wrongly, I had pursued work and a field I believed in, but I had ended up in a situation where I was abandoning him and my wife. I asked myself, 'If in the future he asks me why I changed his life; if he says he had grown accustomed to Iran, was making friends for himself and going to nursery; if he says he wanted that life, what answer will I have for him?' I was ashamed to look him in the eye, but I had no choice but to look at him. I wanted to fill my memory with Alan's image!

I was Kurdish, from Kurdistan, and knew the routes to some extent, but connecting with professional smugglers was difficult. I neither knew these individuals nor could I approach them directly. I only knew I had to go to Turkey or Iraq, both of which had their own Kurdistan Regions, and I was familiar with their environments. As a teenager, before experiencing foreign travel, I had illicitly crossed into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq a few times and had experience working and living in Turkey's Kurdistan. But this time, it was different. I was no longer an ordinary person – in Iranian courts, I was considered a political criminal whose arrest and initial sentence had been publicised internationally. Therefore, if I made a wrong move in the second country, I would likely be arrested and returned to Iran. My anxiety was heightened because, a week before my departure, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, one of the masterminds of Iran's nuclear programme, had been assassinated on the Damavand Road.[1] It was said that Mossad agents carried out the act, and state media were constantly clamouring that the perpetrators were inside Iran and intended to flee via the Iraqi or Turkish borders. Thus, the borders of Iran and Turkey were under intense surveillance by security forces, and crossing the border in those days was far more difficult than under normal conditions.

1 Mohsen Fakhrizadeh Mahabadi (born 1 Farvardin 1340 SH/21 March 1961) was the deputy minister of defence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and a brigadier general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He headed the Organisation of Defensive Innovation and Research and was assassinated on 7 Azar 1399 SH (27 November 2020).

Qandil, Qandil, Qandil[1]

Khoy, Maku, Sardasht, the Khosravi border, Kermanshah and Avroman, Baneh and anywhere else I had in mind for leaving had become intensely securitised. Initially, I planned to leave via Baneh, a place with which I was not very familiar. I am a Kurd from West Azerbaijan province, or as we call it, Urmia province, and, in the Mokrian region, several towns border Iraqi and Turkey's Kurdistan: Oshnaviyeh, Urmia, Khoy, Piranshahr and Sardasht. The easiest way for me was to head toward Mahabad and from there go to Piranshahr or Sardasht and get myself to the Kurdistan Region. However, going to a place where I had previously lived was dangerous. It would only take one person to recognise me for trouble to ensue. That's why I intended to go via the Baneh route. I started contacting a smuggler to whom a trusted friend had introduced me some time ago.

I went to Baneh, but the scrutiny there had become even more intense. Special forces had descended upon the city, and it was said that in some neighbourhoods they were even searching house by house. The situation was so complicated that people were staying in their homes, and the border market was also closed because no one could go to the other side of the border and return. This situation existed at other borders too, but to a lesser degree. Baneh had become a nest for security forces, and the comings and goings and patrols had made the city's atmosphere frightening.

My plan to leave via Baneh failed, and the smuggler told me to head toward Marivan. I was extremely stressed. The security situation meant I had no contact with my family. I constantly thought that people were after me and that my family and I were under surveillance.

1 The Qandil Mountains are part of the greater Zagros mountain range and are among the most famous mountains in the world. I also spoke about these mountains at the beginning of this autobiography. They have vast natural glaciers and, in addition to these features, have always been important to Kurds for another reason. From Syrian and Turkish Kurdistan to Iran, these mountains have been a refuge for most groups that had problems with their governments. In Iran, groups and parties such as the PJAK, the Democratic Party and Komala, and during the era when the Kurdish parties of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq were fighting against the Ba'athist Government, also had their headquarters in these Qandil Mountains, and some are still present there. They hold a significant and valuable place historically and are known as Iran's snowiest mountains. This mountain range has a historical legacy of struggle and is also very difficult to traverse. I had only crossed a small part of it.



Image 503: Qandil Mountains. Tamarchin, 2018.

The situation in Marivan wasn't good either, and when I despaired of these two cities, I decided to try to reach Turkey's Kurdistan from the villages of the Sarv region in Urmia. They said the route was better, and the smugglers' operations were more organised and structured. I spoke to someone, and another person was prepared to help me. They were supposed to charge a larger sum, put me on a horse and take me across the border, but this too fell through. At the Turkish border, one of the usual clashes between the PKK and Turkish forces had occurred, and they said that, until further notice, it was not possible to cross this border either.

It was as if I were stuck in a scene from a film. Whichever way I turned, conflict and trouble arose and my path was blocked. Like characters in films, I had started praying, asking God to open a way for me to get to the other side of the border. Eventually, I went to the Mokrian region. I had left Tehran, and all my escape routes from Iran were blocked. The lump in my throat from those last two hours at home was still with me. Hopeless, I sat on the bus, with no means of contact. I thought about my fears and worries, and my heart sank. The passengers were watching a film and roaring with laughter. This ridiculous Indian film frayed my nerves even more, and I didn't even have a phone to call someone to calm down a bit. I was also worried whether the contact I had arranged to meet in the morning would come for me. If he came and we ventured into the mountains, what calamity would befall me? Would I cross the border safely? Until 3 am, when I reached our meeting point, I did nothing but think and think and think . . .



Image 504: Border watchtowers.

When the contact arrived and picked me up, I calmed down a little and slept for about half an hour in his car. When I woke up, I felt the peak of Kurdistan's cold. The plan was for the contact to take me from the border point to a location[1] where several others would get me across the border. They were a professional team, and it was clear they knew their job. Some believe that crossing the Kurdistan border is easy; a kolbar (cross-border porter) or someone comes for you and takes you with them, and because in some areas many caravans pass through, crossing the border isn't complicated. However, along this very route, many people are killed, arrested or fall into ravines while fleeing. The difficulties are so great that one can only say it's easy from a distance, or after watching a short clip. At that time of year, parts of the route are covered in snow, and kolbari also stops. We had to take more obscure and unknown paths – routes generally taken by individuals with political and security problems.

To my misfortune, the Kurdistan Regional Government had also closed the official borders due to the second wave of COVID-19 and was not accepting any travellers from Iran. This very situation had made the smugglers' market thrive: those with urgent business made good offers to

1 To maintain confidentiality and not reveal the route, I will not state the name of this place. Perhaps this route might also be of use to other desperate individuals!

the people-smugglers, who in turn multiplied their prices. Given the prevailing conditions in Iran, the border guards had also become more sensitive and had increased security along the entire route. Amid all this bad luck, I had an advantage: I was an insider. I knew the area, shared the same clothing and dialect as the people of the region and its smugglers, and was not considered a stranger.

The man who introduced me to the group leader was a friend who was a member of one of the Kurdish parties, and he assured me that the smugglers were trustworthy.

Their method of operation put my mind at ease, and I found it interesting how professional they were. It was a team of several people, two of whom were responsible for surveying the environment and the crossing points with powerful pairs of binoculars. Apparently, the binoculars were equipped with night vision, or something close to it, and they also had phones that lacked GPS and were untraceable. They were constantly in contact with each other en route. These two would survey the area with the binoculars and give us directions. It seemed they had memorised the route and knew how many hundreds of paces it was from one point to another, and how many minutes it would take to cross. From this point to where the border forces had a watchtower was not a great distance, and one had to run at a certain speed to reach the next point at the right time. Their actions were calculated and gave me, who was anxious, a bit of security and peace of mind.

I was in a situation where one mistake could destroy my life. They told me we had to pass through a section with barbed wire at a specific time, arriving exactly as the sunrise began. I don't know if it was true or not, but they said, at that time, a certain light is created that reduces the effectiveness of the border guards' night-vision cameras, so we had to pass through within several minutes.

To get onto the main route, we headed to one of their usual paths, but we saw that the previous night's snow had blocked it. We were forced to change our route to reach a point on the border that had barbed wire and was at a higher altitude. We were on the road for hours, and I had little strength left. One of the team members prevented me from slipping on the snow and falling into the ravine. Unlike them, I didn't have proper boots or clothing. I was shivering from the intense cold and had curled myself up against the biting wind. It was then I realised they'd pulled the wool

over my eyes. They had said it was only an hour or two's walk, but now, many long hours had passed. We had been on the move, sometimes running at speed, but we weren't arriving. Apparently, they said this so you wouldn't lose morale and could endure. The path and route were farther, harder and more heavily securitised than I had imagined. I started with a sense of ease, but soon realised the matter was deadly serious.

After half an hour, the mountain slope steepened, and the farther we progressed, the deeper we sank into the snow. We were getting closer to the ravines. The depth of the snow was also increasing. When you put your foot down, sometimes you were knee-deep in snow, and it was hard to pull your foot out of the snow and take the next step. Two people were in front of me, and I constantly tried to place my feet in their footprints. I was a child of the mountains and snow, having grown up in these regions, but I wasn't an athlete or a mountaineer. After years of city life, I lacked the physical preparedness for such an encounter.

I would walk a little, then stop and drink water or eat snow. They advised me not to drink water, but it was impossible not to. My throat would become as dry as a frozen piece of wood, and I would gasp for breath. We whispered as we moved along the path, and the smugglers' leader, who was in contact with those down in the valley, gave us various signals with hand gestures. They were waiting for their companions, who were monitoring the area with binoculars, to give the green light to move to the next point. As we reached higher altitudes, the wind also started to blow, lashing soft snow against our faces. I was wearing many layers of clothes: Kurdish attire, my trousers tucked into my socks, and part of my waistband shawl pulled over my face. I also had a wool hat on my head, but I was shivering like a leaf.

We took winding paths. In some places, there was less snow; in others, more. I would fall into the snow and get stuck, so much so that I lacked the strength to get up. Sometimes, two of them would take my hands and forcibly pull me up. I had reached a point where I no longer had the strength to move. The smugglers were getting angry because I had said I could manage on my own, but it had come to the point where I couldn't even walk. Confusion and stress had weakened me, and I hadn't eaten much the night before. I was hungry and weak. My legs couldn't support my body, and I stumbled along.

Finally, we reached the mountain peak, a place where the border guard post was visible in the distance. The smugglers said that, from here, we were within firing range of the border guards, and any mistake could cost all of us our lives. The snow now came up to my waist, slowing down my physical strength and movement. They said we had to run. I said, 'You can see my condition. How can I run? I can't even walk!' They grabbed me and practically dragged me with them over the snow. There was no other choice. We had to pass quickly to reduce the chance of being seen.

My shoes were full of water and snow, and I couldn't feel anything from my toes to my ankles. I used every opportunity to let my muscles rest from movement for just two seconds so I could catch my breath. I wasn't drinking water any more; I just gargled a little in my mouth or put some snow in my mouth and spat it out.

They called from below, saying they had heard a noise or seen the light of a torch, and we had to stop for now. I could hear my heart pounding and the howl of the wind, which had intensified, lashing snowflakes against us from head to toe.

Kameel, You Can Do It

I kept telling myself, 'Kameel, was it really worth throwing yourself into this situation, to get shot here? Man, staying in prison for a few years would have been better . . .' Then I'd grumble angrily, 'Damn it, what do you want from me? You heartless people, willing to drag everyone into ruin for your own survival. What have I done?'

My delusions and doubts didn't end there, and I imagined the worst possible scenarios before my eyes. I thought, what if the smugglers hand me over to armed individuals, and they, in turn, hand me over, bound, to one of the parties in the Kurdistan Region that has friendly relations with the Quds Force? And what if they present my head on a platter, or gift-wrapped, to Iran? How many Kurdish Iranian Peshmerga and political activists had been handed over to Iranian security forces or assassinated in this way?

We reached the place where they said they had seen a light, and we had to stop. I stared, playing these possibilities in my mind over and over. In my imagination, I saw myself again in the clutches of IRGC Intelligence, and fear flared within me.

We had just passed the second bottleneck and were slowly approaching the last mountain peak and the barbed wire that marked the zero point of the border. Only God knows how tired I was . . . I felt as heavy as the mountain itself, unable to move. I had reached a point where I had no thoughts or worries left. I told myself, 'Whatever will be, will be, Kameel. You've come this far. Either you'll freeze to death, or you'll get caught or you'll succeed. Don't think about anything else. Just keep going.'

The wind had intensified, and the depth of the snow had lessened, so much so that the legs of our Kurdish trousers brushed against each other, making a sound. Sometimes, the pressure and cold were so intense that, like a child, I would seek refuge in the arms of the smugglers, who wore warm, commando-style coats. They tried to be patient with me.



Image 505: Image from my first documentary 'Poverty and Bread'. Piranshahr, 2010.

Near the summit, due to the force of the wind, we linked arms so as not to get separated and if one of us slipped, the others could help – especially me, as I hadn't chosen suitable footwear. My boots were fashion items, good for strolling in the city. This poor choice meant my shoes were constantly filling with snow and water, and I regularly slipped. The Kurdish shawl, however, really came to my rescue. One end was in the hand of one of the smugglers. When I slipped or ran out of breath, he would pull me up with it, and, with his help, I continued on the path.

They were tired of me and were probably cursing me under their breath. I had no choice but to endure. They must have been thinking, 'This one has become a real pain for us!' I could see them telling each other they had to increase the price – that this wasn't supposed to wear them out so completely. In that situation, neither the money nor the smugglers' grumbling mattered to me; I only thought about crossing the border.

When we reached the summit, I saw the barbed wire in the distance. We had to wait for those very few minutes of sunrise and the time to cross. As soon as the sun emerged from behind the Qandil Mountains and we saw its reddish-pink hue, we had to cross quickly. The change in the colour of the sunlight would return the cameras to their normal state, and we would be arrested.

We waited for them to inform us when to move. They said that, alongside the barbed wire, a rough border road had been built, and sometimes border guards would come on a type of armoured vehicle or motorcycle to inspect the barbed wire. The strangest thing was that the border was entirely under the control of Iranian forces, and there were no border guards or observation posts from the Kurdistan Regional Government or the central Iraqi Government. Of course, I was happy about this, and I took comfort in the fact that, after this stage, instead of border forces, I would encounter someone sent by relatives and a friend affiliated with one of the Kurdish parties, who were supposed to come and facilitate my entry into the region's territory.

Now we had reached this crucial stage: crossing the barbed wire. We had to run in turns, so I said, 'Two of you grabbed my hands and dragged me like a corpse this far. How am I supposed to run alone now? Especially when the guard posts on both sides have cameras, and I'm also within range of night-vision cameras!' They were agitated, saying we had a time limit. Eventually, we all decided to calm our nerves and work out a solution. It was decided that one person would hold me from behind, under my armpits, so that, at least, two people wouldn't be visible on camera. If they saw us, they would think that only one person was crossing, which wouldn't seem that important to them, and perhaps they wouldn't fire.

They asked me to take one arm out of my coat. The person who was holding me from behind put one of his arms into the sleeve of my coat, and the two of us wore one coat. They tied us together with a Kurdish shawl so

we wouldn't get separated. They said, this way, if we fall, we'll be together, and it will be easier to find us.

We set off. He pushed me from behind; we broke through the snow and moved forward. One side of my body had no coat, and I felt terribly cold. On the other side of my body, I felt the warmth of the person behind me, which was pleasant in that dreadful cold. The thought of two men pressed so close together, against Kurdish custom, was comical, and we started to laugh.

Then came the call to cross. The man behind me was almost my height, and when he took a step, he would press his knee against the back of my right knee, making me move. Our leg movements became synchronised, like the simultaneous movement of a horse's legs. He pushed me powerfully from behind, and I pulled myself up through the snow from the front, trying to place my foot in the footprint of the person guiding us, to cross this hundred-and-fifty-metre stretch more quickly. It was hard work, as I was weak, and the path was not flat.

I don't know how we crossed that stretch. The man pushed me, and I was so overcome with anxiety that I was oblivious to everything. Still, I will never forget the sound of his breathing, the smell of his cigarettes and his quiet urgings. Never in my life had I been so harmonised, so at one with another person's body, especially under such terrifying circumstances. We had become two bodies in one form – I, to save my life, and he, for the sake of earning an income and getting money from me.

In a state of extreme anxiety, we traversed this path together and reached the very edge of the border. He knew where we were standing and was familiar with the surroundings. The barbed wire was coiled and tangled, sharp and cutting. One of the smugglers pushed a section of the barbed wire slightly. It seemed they had previously cut a part and prepared it for passage. We hurriedly passed through that small opening. My left foot got caught in the barbed wire, and my Kurdish trousers – which, incidentally, were also my wedding suit – tore.

On my wedding night, in keeping with the decor, which was first traditional and then modern, I changed outfits twice: once into a suit and once into Kurdish attire. I loved this Kurdish outfit and had intentionally chosen it so that I would at least have a piece of clothing full of memories for the years I'd be away from my homeland. The man pushing me said, 'Let it tear', but I said, 'No, wait! I'll free it.' I angered him. He pushed me

and said, 'Move forward!' Now that I think about it, I don't understand my insistence in the terrifying circumstances of that dawn!

Eventually, a part of my trouser leg tore and we got through. That tear is still on my trousers, and I've kept them as a memento.



Image 506: Crossing the border. 2020

Between these two lines of barbed wire was an empty space of three or four metres, which we crossed sideways, crawling and rolling, and went to the other side. The person in front again opened a section of the barbed wire, and, from there, we slid down something like an embankment. They said everything had gone well, but we had to stop for a few minutes. I then realised they also had someone on the other side of the border who was watching the KRG side with binoculars. The group leader separated my 'buddy' and I, and when we emerged from that shared coat, I felt a strange sense of liberation. I didn't know that the next stage would also be difficult, and that a minefield awaited us.

When they said we had reached a minefield, my anxiety returned. I had already crossed the border. There was no way back. They started 'point-picking' (navigating by specific safe spots), as they put it, and I stood there facing literal mines. Some of them were remnants of the Iran-Iraq War; others had been planted by the Iranian border guards. I was treading a path where many, many kolbars had lost limbs and lives.[1]

1 https://iranwithoutlandmines.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Kordestan1.pdf

They calmly explained what we were going to do: we had to walk on the rocks and boulders. They moved like goats from one boulder to the next, and it wasn't very difficult for them. They pulled me along behind them.

Crossing the larger boulders was easier. We could proceed more readily on the sharp peaks, where the wind had shifted the snow. The surrounding land was covered in snow, and beneath the snow lay the mines. The smugglers were right when they said that, in any season, the safest thing to do was to walk on the rocks, as it's impossible to lay mines on them. Sometimes the distance between two boulders was large, and crossing became frightening. But they knew this route and even knew where mines had previously exploded.

The minefield path wasn't very long, but from a certain point the slope became steep, and I guessed that, beyond that point, they hadn't been able to lay mines. We were in the territory of the Kurdistan Region. I don't know who had planted the newest mines. The smugglers said that most of the border line was in the hands of Iranian forces, and the mine-laying was also the work of IRGC forces.

To go down the slope, we held each other's hands. The slope in some places was so steep that, if you slipped, you'd go all the way down to the bottom of the ravine. Those who know these mountainous regions of Qandil and the borders will understand well what I went through and what a difficult area I crossed.

When you cross the Iranian border and enter the Kurdistan Region, everything changes. At least in the region I entered, even the colours of the rocks and soil changed. The slope sometimes became steep, and the mountain I came down was mostly rock and scree. The Iranian side was more like foothills. Although in some places it wasn't clear due to the snow, in other places where my feet touched the ground, there were no rocks, and the ground was earthy. In the KRG region, the farther down we went, the more scree there was, and the nature of the soil and rock became different. When we reached the mountainside, in some places there was no more snow, and the blackness of the earth could be seen. Coming down, I slipped many times, and the palms of my hands and my body became scraped and muddy. In one or two other places, my foot slipped, and I went a little way down the slope of the ravine. I clawed at the snow and

scree like a cat, holding myself until they pulled me up. I both suffered a lot and troubled them a great deal.

I wasn't familiar with the environment and lacked physical fitness. They said it was one of their toughest journeys, and when they asked for more money, I couldn't bring myself to refuse. I realised how much they had suffered to get me there.

Midway, they were still in contact with someone waiting for us at the foot of the mountain. Someone had come to meet us who anxiously reported the presence of several armed individuals nearby. They said it was better not to come down. The smugglers were frightened when they saw the armed men and their vehicles, saying they looked like Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Government, and if they saw us, they would harass us, and so on.

I told them to rest assured; the individuals had come to pick me up and wouldn't bother them.

They didn't believe me and commented sarcastically, 'Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Government are there to take you? Sorry we grumbled at you. What important person have we brought that Kurdish forces are waiting for him?'

The head person, who I think still didn't believe what I said, stopped. 'Go the rest of the way with my friend; we'll wait here for his return,' he said.

From then on, our speed decreased. Previously, two of them had pulled and carried me, and now there was only one. Looking from above, the path seemed close, but we reached the foot of the mountain around noon. The second person took me behind an embankment, took his money and quickly disappeared. He showed me a path and said I had to go down from there until I reached an orchard next to a village called so-and-so. I was afraid of slipping, but I was heartened by the fact that, before he left, he told their colleagues in the village to keep me in sight until I reached the handover point.

Finally, I reached a walnut orchard, which was the meeting place, and my helpers came to meet me. One of the people who had facilitated things was my friend Mamoosta Hassan Vazhi. As it happened, he had been a Peshmerga and a member of one of the Kurdish Iranian parties for several years. He had brought along a relative and several members of one of the KRG's Kurdish parties to protect us on the way to the main meeting point.

I was happy that I had completed the main part of the journey, but tired and weak, with an aching body and wet, muddy clothes. I looked around. I had arrived, but I couldn't believe it!

Welcome Back, Kameel

The stance of the British Embassy in Iran was that they couldn't break the regulations of a country where they had an embassy and arrange my departure illegally. However, since I was their national and citizen, if I entered a third country, consular services would be available to me.

I had told a trusted friend in London about my situation, and, although it wasn't very clear where I would go, I told him where I might end up and who might come for me. He had said he would coordinate with someone from the embassy for someone to come and take me to Erbil, or Hewlêr as it's called in Kurdish. Of course, I hadn't told them exactly who was going to help me. I had no affiliation or connection with any political parties, but, considering the problems I had encountered crossing the border, I had no



Image 507: Handover point. Kurdistan Region, 2020.

choice, so I asked my friend, who was a party member, for help, and he gallantly came to my aid.

I was sitting securely in the Kurdish Peshmerga car, and they were passing through checkpoints without stopping, but deep down I was still worried that they might hand me over to Iranian forces. During the journey, I called the number my friend had given me, reported my status and said where I was and when I would arrive. The route was mountainous and winding. We arranged to meet at a location. Near there, I said goodbye to the Peshmerga and told my friend that, from here on, we had to go alone. I gave him the address, he told his driver and we set off.



Image 508: Masks and goggles.

I had arranged to meet the British team near a local road, and when we arrived, four bulletproof SUVs with diplomatic plates bearing the British flag and a number of special guard forces quickly appeared. The process unfolded very rapidly, in a James-Bond-esque fashion. After a few seconds of welcome, they took me inside one of the cars. They didn't even want to give me a chance for a small farewell with my friend and his driver. I insisted, saying, 'Let me say goodbye to those two.'

I got out and went toward my friend, Mamoosta Hassan. I sensed he was a bit choked up. I didn't know what had happened and asked in surprise, 'Why are you upset?'

He said, 'I'm crying inwardly for myself, for my people and my nation. I'm Kurdish like you, and you yourself know how much they harassed me in Iran. I had no protector, and now I'm forced to be here. The Islamic Republic Government has no regard for its people or for Kurdistan, but look, as the Iranian Government would say, how much these 'infidel' Western countries value their citizens and nationals! They've brought a

convoy of bulletproof cars and a host of armed forces to pick you up and return you with dignity and respect. But I've lost everything, and here, too, I'm an immigrant who, at any moment, could be assassinated by the agents of the Iranian Government.'

He is a dissident and a researcher, formerly a *mamoosta* (religious scholar), and his father was one of the most influential religious figures in the region. He had now become a political opponent and a third-tier cadre in one of the parties. As he put it, he had politically and religiously criticised the clerical government and had arrived at a critique of the very faith he had studied and taught. He said, 'It's both a source of sorrow and joy for me to see them treating you like a valued human being – something that doesn't happen in Iran.'

We said goodbye, but throughout the journey I thought about his words. I reflected on Britain's behaviour toward me and saw that my friend and fellow researcher was right: how different it is to be a citizen of the West rather than a country like Iran! I am a citizen in both countries, but the difference between those two citizenships is beyond imagination.

According to regulations, they searched me and made sure I didn't have a smartphone. I only had one backpack, which they respectfully confiscated, and I got into one of the cars. The car had central locking and was locked from the inside. There was also a partition of glass and iron between me and the driver. The car seemed secure, although the locks, tinted windows and heavily protected space reminded me of prison and made me uncomfortable.

They had chosen this setup for my security, and its purpose was different, but, affected by my experience of solitary confinement, I felt unwell. I said to the person sitting in the front, who was laden with ammunition, equipment and advanced automatic weapons, 'Please, could you open the window a bit or turn on the air conditioning?'

He replied, 'The windows in this car are fixed, and, as you can see, it's cold outside.'

I said, 'For a while now, I've been apprehensive of small, enclosed spaces. The car windows are tinted, the weather is cloudy and dark and it feels like a cage.'

He tried to calm me, gave me a sedative and turned on the lights in the back for me.

I looked around and saw they had put a few blankets there for me. They thought that, coming from the mountains as I was, I would be cold. They had also put out a set of clothes, so, right there, I changed out of my clothes, which were wet and muddy. They had enough food and fruit for several people and a flask of hot water. Even amid all the misery, they had brought gel, goggles and several types of masks for COVID-19, so I wouldn't come out without a mask.

When we had travelled about ten or fifteen kilometres, they radioed each other to say we needed to stop in a safe place. They stopped the car; another car was constantly patrolling the area to ensure no one was following us.

I got out. The armed forces all stood at a distance, surrounding us. I didn't know what all these security measures were for.

They asked me how my journey had been. Apparently, they first had to report everything to London and then send me to the embassy in Erbil. I truly had no idea that everything was being handled at the Foreign Office level and that they were so concerned about me. I explained the generalities of my exit to them, and the person in charge of the convoy noted everything down and said, 'You will have no contact with anyone during your journey.'

I said, 'This is difficult. My family doesn't know my condition, and Iranian security forces will definitely become suspicious with the sudden severing of all my communications.'

He said, 'The situation is sensitive, and we cannot allow contact.'

When the embassy liaison called and spoke to me, I asked him to at least contact my friend Hilary in London, so she could tell my family that I was safe. I was severely sleep-deprived – after these events, I slept for a full day. My whole body ached, there were small wounds on my hands and legs, my own clothes had been full of thorns and debris, and two places on my thigh had been cut by sharp stones. They dressed a few wounds for me right there and said a doctor would examine me later. If necessary, they would clean my scratches with alcohol and dress them again. My feet were swollen from being in water and snow for so long, and the skin on my hands and face was chapped from the wind and cold.

We were soon on our way to Erbil. I looked out of the car window and saw how much the Kurdistan Region had changed, resembling Iran and

Turkey. It was as if they had copied each other.[1] On most of the hills and mounds, houses and villas had been built indiscriminately, so it seemed that here, too, mountain-grabbing and hill-grabbing were rampant.

Five years earlier, the last time I had seen this environment, the Kurdistan Government had been in a bad economic state. Their share of oil sales, amounting to over 17%, was not being paid to them, and political disputes in Iraq and the Region were numerous. Kurdistan was at odds with the Central Government on the one hand, and on the other its people, especially the youth, were dissatisfied with the Government. The people's share of oil revenue came in the form of government support packages. In a way, the Government encouraged people to register themselves as government employees so they could justify the budget received from Baghdad and their share of oil sales.

By now, that share had shrunk and was no longer arriving regularly from Baghdad. As a result, the vast majority of people in the Kurdistan Region – and perhaps even in Iraq – were officially drawing more than one salary, often by being listed on multiple state payrolls. Naturally, those with close ties to political parties or influential figures received a larger slice of this distribution of wealth and power. With corruption running high, public dissatisfaction was equally intense.

However, the people of this part of Kurdistan, compared to other parts of Kurdistan in Iran or Turkey, are also known for their enjoyment of life and often had lives full of pleasure and joy. With an abundance of wealth and blessings, villas had sprung up like mushrooms in the summer resort areas, and it was impossible not to notice the volume of construction on the way to Erbil, although much of this property was owned by wealthy Iraqi Arabs.

I remembered my teenage years when I illicitly came to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, constantly worried about being arrested. On my way back, forces from the Islamic Movement and Ansar al-Islam, who controlled

1 Apparently, under the influence of globalisation, which, relentless and unbridled, erodes and conquers the local structures of societies, these areas have become close and similar to each other. This similarity is also founded on a civilisation that is the product of globalisation and always tries to encroach upon and dominate the environment and nature.



Image 509: German Village, Erbil. Kurdistan Region, 2023.

parts of Kurdistan at the time,[1] harassed me a lot and even tore up my books. Then I thought about the last time, when, at the invitation of the Kurdistan Regional Government's Minister of Tourism, I had come here with Shafagh – who was six months pregnant with Alan – to participate in a scientific conference for the promotion and advertisement of tourism, and we stayed in Erbil for a week.

All my memories were resurfacing, but I was agitated, and it was as if I had no control over my mind. I was even somewhat dazed and couldn't sleep from sheer exhaustion. My mind would jump from one memory to another and then suddenly go blank, only for another memory and worry to assail me. I was in limbo – anxiety, turmoil and an ambiguous future.

1 The group Ansar al-Islam (later changed to Ansar al-Sunna) announced its existence in September 2001 in the Avroman and Biyare Mountains. They claim that the establishment of an Islamic Government and the realisation of Kurdish rights are among their goals. Clashes with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party and the Kurdistan Democratic Party are also in this party's record, and, at times, due to connections with Al-Qaeda, they were accused of cooperating with Saddam's regime.

I didn't know where I was going or what was going to happen. I only knew I was safe and in the hands of the forces of my second country. They had no intention of putting me on trial, they weren't taking me to prison and there would be no punishment. This calmed me.

No checkpoints stopped us along the way, and I saw how easily and without concern the Western forces moved around. It was evident they had the upper hand in the region, and the police and Peshmerga forces respected them. The special forces or escorts with me didn't speak but to give short answers to questions about water, food or similar things. I was travelling with three moving statues, who didn't exchange a single word with each other throughout the entire journey. They were extremely disciplined and proficient in military matters, their weapons fully prepared. They had put a bulletproof vest on me, which was a heavy, iron-like garment. The only person who spoke during those three-and-a-half hours, and then only a word or two, was the driver, who sometimes communicated via radio with the other vehicles in the convoy for coordination.

Their military formation during the journey was also interesting: the cars didn't stray more than a few metres from each other, and private cars generally didn't approach our convoy.

I thought we were going to the British Embassy in Erbil, which is apparently in a hotel in the city centre called the Rotana Hotel. Contrary to my assumption, the car didn't enter Erbil city. Instead, it turned off near the prime minister's palace and continued along the ring road. Along the way, I could see the residence of the KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani. Of course, the palace wasn't visible behind its long, high wall. Some people considered this wall and his lifestyle a symbol of oppression and corruption. Many would say, 'Did we liberate Kurdistan for its prime minister's palace to be this large,[1] and for power and a monarchical, tribal government to be passed between grandfather, sons and cousins?' The point was that power passed from Mulla Mustafa Barzani to his son Idris, and, after Idris's death, to his brother Masoud Barzani, who until recently

1 This building was constructed in the early 1990s by Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, who was the military commander of the northern front of Iraq (the Kurdistan front). He was Saddam Hussein's first deputy and vice-chairman of the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council until the US occupation of Iraq in 2003.

was also the president of Kurdistan. Simultaneously, the post of prime minister was bestowed upon his son-in-law Nechirvan, Idris's eldest son, and Masoud's son then took Nechirvan's place.[1]

From a Bulletproof Car Under Guard to the Airport

Let me return to the bulletproof car and the protection of the British team . . . Surprised, I asked one of my guards where we were going. He said he didn't know, and only the team leader knew. Eventually, I realised we were heading toward the airport, and my anxiety increased that they might take me away and I wouldn't be able to contact my family. My assumption was that I would go to the embassy, announce myself as a citizen, and request assistance to return to the UK, but now the car was going toward the airport.

1 At the end of Massoud's presidency and Nechirvan's elevation to the post of president of the Kurdistan Region, the position of prime minister went to Massoud Barzani's eldest son, Masrour. However, Massoud Barzani has held the position of secretary-general of the Democratic Party since 1979, and Nechirvan has always held the position of deputy of the party. According to evidence, the two cousins now hold two poles of power and are in intense competition with each other. In essence, the Kurdistan Government has been divided in two and effectively has two different administrations: the Barzanis in Erbil and the Talabanis in Sulaymaniyah hold power. On the other side, in Sulaymaniyah, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, known as Yekiti, has a similar history. This party was founded after the Democratic Party (or Barzanis) by Jalal Talabani and a group of intellectuals, including his father-in-law Ibrahim Ahmad, in 1975. After Jalal Talabani became president of Iraq, his eldest son Bafel and, unofficially, his wife Hero Khan took control of the party's affairs. Qubad, Talabani's second son, is now the deputy prime minister of Kurdistan, and important posts such as co-secretary general and secretary-general of the Patriotic Union Party and command of security and intelligence have gone to Bafel Talabani. At one point, the post of co-secretary general of the party also went to Jalal Talabani's nephew, Lahur Sheikh Jangi, who was later dismissed from these posts and expelled from the party along with others. The current president of Iraq, Latif Rashid, is the maternal uncle-in-law of Qubad and Bafel Talabani. More interestingly, the Patriotic Union, which once directed much criticism at the distribution of power in the Democratic Party, calling it more of a family party, has fallen into the same pattern. The Patriotic Union has been embroiled in many disputes and schisms in recent years. After the KDP's withdrawal from the Yezidi-inhabited areas of Sinjar in the summer of 2014, which led to the deaths of many Yezidi Kurds, the enslavement of a large number of girls and women and the displacement of hundreds of thousands, and also due to the PUK forces' evacuation of Kirkuk after the Hashed al-Shaabi attack in October 2017, these two ruling parties came under severe criticism from Kurdistan.

I said, 'Connect me to the convoy leader. I don't want to go to the airport. Take me to the embassy!' They said it wasn't up to them, and I should wait until we got out and talk to the people there.

Finally, we arrived and entered Erbil International Airport. Again, as before, we passed through all the checkpoints VIP-style and entered the airport without inspection. We didn't enter the transit building or the main passenger area of the airport. To my utter surprise, we took another route, which led to a military compound where Western coalition forces, mostly British and American, were present. At one point, as the car turned, I saw the logo of the Blackwater company.[1] Blackwater is a private company that the US military uses for security. It's one of those companies that acts like a private army, is contracted by the US Department of Defense, and receives good money from them. Blackwater, throughout its years of activity, at least in Afghanistan and Iraq, has committed some mistakes, violated laws of war and security, and infringed upon civil rights. It has been accused of killing a number of innocent people and has had human-rights cases filed against it. Suddenly, I felt disgusted with myself – what was I doing here? I wanted to go to the embassy and follow my own plan, but they hadn't allowed it.

The place was like a small military garrison. When we got out, the commando-coloured iron gate, the sandbagged wall and the watchtowers indicated it was a military area. I saw the lady I had spoken to on the phone – the embassy liaison. She came toward me, smiling, and said, 'I know your first question is why they brought you to a military garrison instead of the embassy.'

I said, 'That's exactly my question.'

'I'll explain.'

They handed my belongings to a soldier, and the armed convoy left. They took me inside. The entire path was gravelled, and we had to walk

1 Blackwater, whose current name is Academi, is an American private military company founded in 1997 by Erik Prince. It operates in risk management, logistics services, security services and private armed forces. According to statistics published in *The New York Times* in September 2014 regarding the company's performance, the total value of Blackwater's contracts with the US Government during its years of activity in Iraq exceeded one billion dollars. Blackwater was among the 60 private security companies active in the Iraq War. The group is primarily known for the Nisour Square massacre in Iraq, during which 14 Iraqi civilians were killed. It has been receiving federal funding since 2003 and reports directly to the Central Intelligence Agency.

on that narrow strip. For a military base, it had a nice design, with containers and multi-person rooms arranged in neat rows. Occasionally, I would see soldiers with athletic military physiques, wrapped in towels, returning half-naked from the showers to their rooms in that cold, and they would greet us. I hadn't had such an image of a military garrison, and I found it interesting. Perhaps I was comparing it to the military environment I had seen during my own military service, and the differences astounded me.

They took me to a room that had a bed, a wardrobe, a table and a pillow with the British flag right in the middle of the bed, as if it was reminding me where I was. There, I was informed that I had to stay until the order for my departure to Britain was given. Stunned, I said, 'This wasn't our agreement. I came to stay until I could bring my wife and child, and then we would go together.'

They calmly said, 'In this situation, you don't have much choice.' They didn't reveal their plan until they had escorted me, under guard, right to the door – they'd pulled a fast one on me, as they say.[1]

They said the Iranian Government was sensitive about me and other dual nationals, and now that Fakhrizadeh has been assassinated, the sensitivity, even to the presence of foreign coalition forces in Iraq, had increased. There was even a possibility that Hashed al-Shaabi forces and other military groups connected to Iran might launch attacks. 'Because each of us, in the eyes of these forces, is seen as protecting the interests of the British Government, and you, as a British national who has fled Iran, are in a position where you're like a crystal goblet to them.' She added, 'Do you really think we'd let you live in Erbil and have them come and kidnap you? If they want to, they have the capability to do it. Haven't similar cases occurred?'

I listened to all their explanations and saw their points were logical. In any case, one thing was important for me, too. At least part of the ordeal was going according to my own plan: I would stay in Erbil until my wife and child could join me.

1 *Kalak-e Rashti* or *Kalak-e Morghabi* refers to a method of hunting ducks in Gilan province and around cities like Rasht, Langarud, Bandar Anzali, etc., by deceiving the birds. [Effectively, 'they pulled a fast one on me' or 'they tricked me'.]

From my perspective, the matter was much simpler than they were making it out to be. As I had mentioned before, after my arrest, through repeated follow-ups, I had managed to retrieve the belongings and documents that IRGC Intelligence had taken. Due to being banned from leaving the country, my Iranian passport was useless to me. I had imagined I would go to the embassy, and after greetings and pleasantries, whenever I wanted, I would buy a ticket and return to England – as simple as that. I knew that embassies of countries were obliged to provide consular services, but in my own estimation, I didn't have much need for them and was capable of returning to London. So, what was all that fuss about? It was only because I had entered Kurdish territory without a passport that I feared being arrested at checkpoints and returned to Iran. That's why I had asked them to come and get me – to prevent my possible extradition.

They contacted their superiors several times, and I still insisted on my decision, explaining my plan and intentions to them. I had escaped one system and gone to another for help, but this one, although helping me, wouldn't let me make the final decision myself. Sometimes, systems are alike in some respects, and in the first instance, only their own interests matter to them – systemic and overarching interests that always outweigh and take precedence over individual and minor interests. Although it was illogical, this angered and upset me. No matter how hard they tried, I wasn't satisfied.

In the end, one of them, who seemed to be a seasoned diplomat, managed to convince me. Smiling, he handed me a phone and said, 'Make a call with this secure phone and talk to your family online.'

When I heard Alan's voice, my mood changed, and my heart calmed. In that situation, they had employed an appropriate strategy to change my stance; only talking to my son could bring me some psychological peace.

They brought me English tea and milk and began to explain my situation fully. They said, whether I was there or at the embassy, I had to be under constant surveillance and not go out, because we were in Iraq and there were dangers everywhere. They said even they themselves, when they had to go out for something, took an accompanying car. During that time, nothing there was normal, and now, because of the assassination, Iran had become very sensitive about its borders and neighbouring countries. 'Right now, we and the American forces are on full alert, and

you'll see that, when the blackout starts in an hour or two, no one will dare go out without a bulletproof vest.'

Their words were proven true to me very quickly! They said they had reliable information that there was going to be an attack on two points at Erbil Airport where British and American forces were present. That's why they were trying to get me out of there and out of that country as soon as possible.

When I thought about it a little, I saw they were right. They didn't want me, who had fled Iran with political and security charges and had reached Kurdistan in that state, to be harmed or for my presence there to be publicised. This would cause a scandal, which was exactly what Iranian security forces wanted.

A few days after I left there, Erbil Airport was attacked with three missiles, and this incident became a headline in news agencies and networks around the world. Their assessment of the probability of an attack was entirely correct; they just didn't know the exact day. Hashed al-Shaabi forces were accused of launching several missiles, two of which hit points near the American military base. With these events, I became sure that the intelligence-gathering of foreign forces was good, and their predictions corresponded with the situation on the ground.

They also laid down some conditions for me, saying that a guard named Steve, an army police captain, would be with me day and night,



Image 510: Entrance of Erbil Airport.

accompanying me, and I had to remain under guard in this room. It was around seven in the evening when they brought dinner. The food was fish and chips, the traditional British dish – the famous fish and chips. I was back in Britain again; it smelt of England, bringing the scent of home and London to my nostrils. It was clear that all the food supplies came from Britain – the cooking method, the lifestyle, all the items in the garrison and even the type of tea were English.

Seeing these small signs reminded me of life in Britain. I remembered those early dinners in Britain. I laughed to myself, thinking, 'Kameel, you're back to the British lifestyle, and there's no way back to Iran any more. From now on, especially in the cold season, you'll eat your dinner at seven or earlier, and go to bed at ten with your socks on . . .'

In those first hours of my arrival, a doctor in military uniform came and examined me thoroughly. He redressed my scratches and cleaned them with alcohol. I said I was tired but couldn't sleep. He gave me a pill and some syrup, and I slept deeply from around 9 pm until morning.

The next day, after breakfast and at my insistence, Steve took me to the library, and I started reading. I couldn't really do anything else. Everywhere I went, Steve had to be with me – Steve was even with me in the toilet and the shower! In the morning, when everyone else left, he would stay, usually armed, outside my room door. During the night, all the lights in the garrison were turned off, and out of fear of a missile attack, we had to wear heavy bulletproof vests to go to the toilet.

I had become like a caged lion, clawing at everything. I told myself, 'Kameel, give in! Go back to London, and, if necessary, find a way and come back again.' I said I would return from here, but I needed to be in contact with my family. I knew I had many messages on my WhatsApp and needed to reply to my friends and colleagues so they wouldn't notice my absence. I had mentioned I was in the coding, compilation and content-analysis phase of the remaining child-labour research; I had to message my colleagues regularly and guide them. I asked to make calls, but they didn't agree. The only thing we agreed on was that they would bring me a phone from the embassy twice a day so I could talk to Shafagh. She would read every message from my phone out to me and play the voice messages so I could reply to them.

It was important to me that no one noticed my absence and that everyone around me thought I was in Iran. I suspected my

communications were being monitored. They knew my projects, and some of my colleagues on the projects had been identified. I was worried about everyone's safety. I wanted to act naturally and, at the same time, not alert anyone. The hard part of the situation was that, apart from my wife, I hadn't told anyone anything, and this in itself put a lot of pressure on me. It was decided that I would speak to Shafagh on the phone every morning and afternoon and reply to my work messages through her.

I had numerous messages, from family and relatives to friends and acquaintances, asking what had finally happened or expressing regret for my sentence and asking what I planned to do now, and so on. I felt bad; many people were worried about me, and I couldn't tell them the truth. Not even my sisters. Apart from Kani, and then only vaguely, I hadn't told anyone else anything. Sometimes friends in Tehran would call, wanting to meet, and I'd say, for example, that I was busy that day. They wanted to come to my house, and I'd make excuses. I lied every day, and to people who cared about me, which was very hard for me. Until the matter was announced, I always felt guilty.

The next day, several people from the embassy came and said I would probably be transferred to another place. It was both good news and bad. Everything was confidential, and they wouldn't tell me the plan. I begged to stay there and for Shafagh and Alan to join us, but they said when the time came I would understand the plan and when my wife and child would arrive. The next day, nothing happened, nor the day after. I asked, 'Why aren't they coming for me? Why don't I know where we're supposed to go?' They said, 'We have to see what orders come from above.' I was stuck in limbo again, not knowing what would ultimately happen to me.

The occasional sound of military helicopters came to my ears, and, since I wasn't allowed to go anywhere, my only activity was listening to what was happening out there, paying attention to details. The hierarchy of power and the way military officers of different ranks spoke to each other were interesting to me, as were the gender relations and constraints. Every day I saw male soldiers emerging half-naked from the showers, but, in contrast, female soldiers and officers came out of the showers fully clothed.

I was pondering these matters when they brought my dinner an hour or two earlier than other days. They said, 'You'll eat your dinner and get ready to leave. But before you go, you also need to receive some training, and we need a bit of time.'

From Chinook to Hercules

After dinner, several armed personnel took me in a military vehicle to the airport grounds and a runway controlled by coalition forces. They said we would be travelling part of the journey by helicopter. It was a dangerous route, and I had to observe certain precautions. Throughout the flight, I had to wear a bulletproof vest and helmet and keep earplugs in until arrival. Based on their experiences, they said that during take-off and landing, we might come under fire.

It wasn't long before two giant Chinook[1] military helicopters landed with a deafening roar. I had been in civilian helicopters once or twice before, but I had never seen one this big. In a scene resembling a film, we boarded hastily. Inside, the helicopter was like a large hall: it had no seats, so we had to sit on something like a bench and lean against the wall.

In the middle, there was space for various pieces of equipment, which were tied down with ropes. When we sat down, I saw two snipers with night-vision rifles near the rear door of the helicopter, which was slightly open, lying prone and observing below with binoculars. This noisy flight lasted about an hour. One of the two soldiers remained in that ready-to-fire position, while the other was behind a camera and another weapon in the middle of the cabin, behind a window. Throughout the entire flight, neither of them spoke a word. Sometimes I think how robotic military personnel are, and how they get used to simply obeying and nothing else.

The second helicopter was our escort, and I had to laugh, thinking, is all this pomp and ceremony really for me? To be honest, I was worried and kept telling myself, 'Kameel, why are they transferring you with such special, grand arrangements? What if tomorrow, when you set foot in Britain, they have a demand and give orders?' My way of thinking in those moments harked back to a mentality formed in Iranian society. In the social existence and lived world of Iran, I had always seen social services accompanied by subsequent quid pro quos or extortions, and I found it hard to comprehend such selfless, supportive behaviour. I was oblivious to the fact that, in developed societies, social services and support are the

1 Chinook is a semi-heavy, twin-engine, tandem-rotor American transport helicopter, which is the fastest helicopter currently used by the US and British armies and the largest model in use.



Image 511: Chinook military helicopter.

absolute, undeniable human right of citizens. Not only should the system, or society, not demand anything in return for the realisation of those rights, but also it should have a responsibility and mission to ensure them.

My gaze was fixed on the route, and the flames from the oil-well chimneys indicated we were heading toward Kirkuk, leaving the Kurdistan Region, and seemingly going toward western Iraq.

We entered the desert. From the small window near me, I saw it was all desert, and I was sure my guess was correct. But I had now arrived back at my first question: where were they taking me?

I knew that asking was futile, but I decided to try my luck once more. I asked Steve, who was still accompanying me like a shadow, 'Where are we?'

As always, he replied, 'You know I can't answer your question.'

Gradually, the helicopter's speed and altitude decreased. Steve said then, 'I can tell you this much: we are landing, and this is the most dangerous part of the operation.'

The rear hydraulic ramp lowered slightly, and both snipers again took up their prone positions, scanning the surroundings with night-vision goggles.

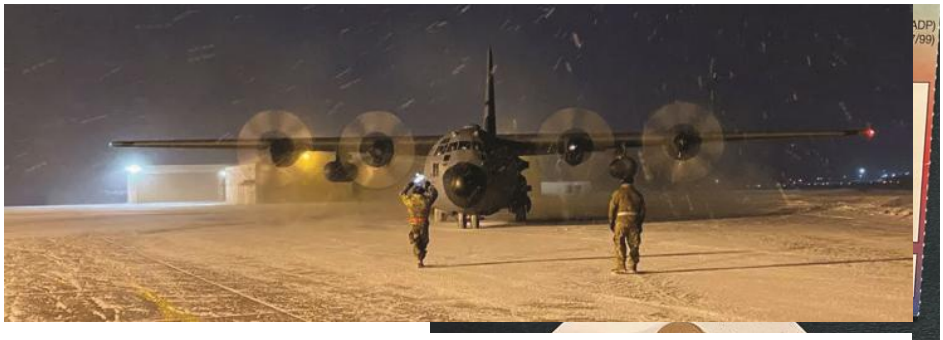


Image 512: Hercules aircraft.

Steve said, 'There's also a risk of missile or rocket attack! You need to keep your head down and stay in a semi-crouched position.'

Now that I think about it, if there had been a missile attack, what difference would it have made whether I were sitting, standing or semi-crouched?



Image 513: Flight ticket. Cyprus December, 2020.

Eventually, we landed. Several soldiers opened the door and surrounded me. They rushed me toward a large field. A beautiful moon was illuminating the desert, and from the soil there, it was clear we were in a sandy desert.

We reached a khaki-coloured military aircraft. Its lights were off, but its propellers were spinning rapidly. The loud noise of the helicopters and the aeroplane made my heart tremble. As we got closer, I saw a gigantic aeroplane with very large propellers and a formidable sound. Its rear end was open, like a tunnel. Three armed soldiers were waiting there, equipped with wireless headsets and night-vision cameras attached to their helmets. With a gesture, they guided me and Steve inside. The door came up automatically, and we entered the giant aircraft, which was empty in the middle, as if the belly of a fish had been emptied. In the middle of the cabin was a folding chair. They sat me there, and, like in the helicopter, several soldiers stood guard until the plane took off.

Again, they gave no explanation as to where I was or where we were going, and my attempts to get information out of Steve were, once more,

futile. The aircraft, which I later learned was called a Hercules,[1] began to move. The steel helmet, headphones and the two cork earplugs I had in my ears were no match for the loud noise of the aeroplane. Of course, I was its only passenger; it had come solely to take me.

We were on this flight for about three-and-a-half hours. Midway, Steve said we were going to Cyprus. Surprised, I asked, 'Cyprus? Why?'

He again said, 'You'll find out later.'[2]

I thought to myself that, from Cyprus, I would surely board a plane and go to Britain. When we arrived, the commander of the air force base, a woman, came to meet us with another officer and took us into their charge. We were transferred to an official residence. I could move around freely inside the house, but I couldn't go out. COVID-19 had intensified, and a complete quarantine was in effect. Of course, I later realised that, even if there had been no COVID, they wouldn't have let me go out.

Steve and I were quartered in a large house with several rooms and a beautiful backyard full of insects and mosquitoes. I had been to Cyprus before. In winter, it had excellent weather. From the next morning, I had a phone and could talk freely. However, they still hadn't given me my laptop, and my colleagues' constant questions remained unanswered. They wanted questions and files related to parts of the child-labour research, which was later named *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood*. This issue made things difficult for me. I sometimes had to lie, and I was very upset.

I stayed in Cyprus for two days and rested well, both physically and mentally. These two days were a very good opportunity. I watched television, ate food and talked with Steve, who had become more relaxed and normal. He viewed his job in a completely professional light, and his military service was nothing like my compulsory military-service experience in Iran. He asked why someone like me, who had only done

1 Hercules is a transport aircraft with four turboprop engines, used in military, civilian and humanitarian operations.

2 Britain has historically had a large and important airbase there, and of course, Cyprus was once a British colony. Before the withdrawal of British forces and the war they had with the Ottoman Government, Cyprus gained its independence, but Britain still maintains its military base in the Greek part of the island. I knew that during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq it supported its air force's military attacks from there and dispatched forces to the region.

research work, should be imprisoned, and wanted me to explain the events that had occurred in simple, non-scientific language. The more I explained what my research topics were and why there was sensitivity toward them, the stranger the subject became to him. He would say, 'As a Scotsman, I tell you, if you did this work anywhere else in the world, they would respect you a lot. Why did they treat you like this in your own country?' And then he would say, 'Forget Iran. Don't think about it any more. Think about Britain.'

I'd say, 'If only it were that easy . . .'

He would answer, 'The things you say about Iran sound like a big prison. What does it mean for someone to miss prison?'

Of course, his perspective differed greatly in this regard from that of some people living in Iran, including myself. He viewed the conditions in Iran and what had happened to me through his own cultural lens and was astonished. To him, Iran was a large prison where all the people, in their outlooks, lifestyles and ways of being – meaning both in objective conditions and in their social mentalities, their way of seeing things and the limitations they faced – were confined and trapped, with no way out. He tried to console me and help me feel better. Since he loved pizza and beer, we ate pizza and drank beer on those two days.

Finally, one morning, we said goodbye. I still didn't have access to my belongings. At the military airport in Cyprus, I boarded a Royal Air Force plane. All its passengers were military personnel returning to Britain for the Christmas holidays to see their families.

On this part of the journey, a young soldier from the Midlands in England accompanied me. He too was going on leave and was incredibly excited about seeing his girlfriend in a few hours. During the journey, everything else was like a normal trip – like one of my usual work trips, for example, to attend a conference. But I knew I was on a different kind of journey, despite my ordinary appearance, on an ordinary plane, sitting next to passengers I didn't know who were happy about their upcoming reunions with their families. Of all those passengers, no one knew where I had been seventy-two hours earlier. To everyone else, I seemed like an ordinary traveller wearing a suit that was too big for him, returning to Britain under guard.

We landed at a military base near Oxford around noon, and everyone went their own way.

Chapter Thirty-One: Cloudy London During a Difficult Quarantine

I left London with a single backpack, chasing my dreams, never imagining that, one day, to reach this cloudy, misty city again, I would have to endure so many hardships and seek refuge in it – once more with just a backpack. Kind London opened its arms again and accepted me, so I could start from scratch once more and fight for my life. I arrived in difficult days. In addition to London's overcast sky, the hotel quarantine was a great torment for me. After solitary confinement, that fear of enclosed spaces had taken root in me, and now I was constantly moving from one confined environment to the next. In the circumstances, there was no way out, though, and I had to endure.

Days passed, and Shafagh and Alan also arrived. The trail of bitterness from Iran pursued me even to London, but I didn't give in. I strove to heal all the wounds, most of which were unjustly inflicted upon me.

Now, my life is once again like my student days, with the difference that, in my small flat, Alan and Shafagh are by my side, and I continue my research. Although I am far from Iran and the work has become harder, I still try to write about the chronic pains that are ignored there.

This is London, my home. I am well, and I am living, but I do not forget Iran and Kurdistan. My motherland will always remain alive within me.

London Again

When we disembarked from the plane, the weather was cold and rainy. Two people had come to meet me, and, after filling out several COVID-related forms, we got into a taxi from the back door of the main terminal. My friend Hilary, who had made great efforts and been a huge help in

getting me to London, said to me on the phone at the airport, 'Kameel, don't worry about anything. My daughter has a large house with a vacant ground floor. We'll let you have this furnished unit so you can live there comfortably.' My student-era house was still occupied by a young student and his sister, and under the new laws for the pandemic, you couldn't evict anyone for six months.

Hilary had supported me from the time of my arrest until my arrival in London, and this invitation was also a great help – so much so that I felt awkward, but she tried to put my mind at ease. She said, 'Kameel, my daughter and son-in-law have a large four-storey house, and the ground floor has been empty for over a year. My husband and I also lived there for a while previously.' Her offer, in those circumstances, was a tremendous gift to me, and with great embarrassment and out of necessity, I accepted it. I had intended to settle in Hilary's daughter's house, but, suddenly, I was taken to West London, to a hotel near Heathrow Airport.

According to the new deterrent regulations, because I had entered from another country, I had to stay in a hotel for fourteen days and go through the quarantine period. For two weeks, I was not allowed to leave my room, and that was agonising. My phobia of enclosed spaces intensified. Although I didn't experience psychological pressure in that environment, the previous pressures were still with me, and it reminded me of being in solitary confinement. I tried to explain my situation to them, but it was useless; they said I had to go through this period according to the rules. I was allowed to use the phone freely, and this helped me to catch up on some of my overdue work.

The hotel atmosphere was also quiet. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, no one was travelling to stay in hotels, and most of its staff were on Christmas holidays. The hotel had become like a ghost house. The silence of the environment was maddening, and, gradually, I mentally reverted to my state during solitary confinement. Food was brought to me at set times. Someone would knock on the door, and, according to regulations, without seeing them or being able to leave my room, I would open the door slightly and pull the food into the room. Sometimes I felt the room was devoid of oxygen, and, since the windows didn't open, I would sneakily open the door at night to let in some fresh air. Occasionally, the guards would notice and immediately call me to close the door. When I compared these regulations to the ones in a place like Iran, my mind boggled. Iranian



Image 514: Travellers' quarantine room.

society was unfamiliar with and distant from such strict COVID regulations.

As bad luck would have it, the COVID situation worsened. One morning when I woke up, a friend from London called and said, 'Kameel, we're ruined! Have you heard today's news?' I said no. He said, 'Turn on your TV and see what's happening!'

I turned on the television and saw Boris Johnson, then prime minister of Britain, announcing the second nationwide lockdown. This meant the complete closure and locking down of the entire country once again. Quarantine in Britain meant staying completely at home, and, if anyone violated this law, they faced the police, arrest, fines and several other types of punishment.

My anxiety increased again, and I thought about how, even before the nationwide lockdown, the situation in the hotel wasn't good and I had many restrictions. After the period of staying in the hotel, I would have many restrictions outside as well – restrictions that would also affect the timing of my family's arrival. And when they did arrive, the beginning of our life here would be spent for a long time in solitude and within the four walls of our home. I knew this would be very difficult for Alan, but I also



Image 515: Quarantine announcement by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

thought that the Government could pay the wages and expenses of its citizens so everyone could stay at home, and this allowed them to continue the quarantine with peace of mind.

The start of the new year in Britain was, contrary to usual, silent. The night before, I watched a documentary about ancient Egypt and fell asleep. I didn't even realise the new year had begun.

Those were difficult days. In prison, I used to mark the number of days I was there on the wall with lines; here, I did it with soap on the bathroom mirror. My mental state was not good; otherwise, comparing a hotel in London with all its amenities to a cramped solitary cell in Ward 2A of the IRGC Intelligence prison in Evin is a false analogy. Here, no one was interrogating me, I had a phone and I could communicate with the outside world and carry on with my work.

I still hadn't told anyone about my departure from Iran, but my absence had become questionable to those around me, and concealment was no longer possible. I told Shafagh to inform our close relatives and prepare to leave Iran. She went to Kermanshah with Alan to see her family and say goodbye to them. The next day, they crossed the Qasr-e Shirin border into the Kurdistan Region, and I was happy they had come via an easier and safer route. Of course, their entry into the Kurdistan Region wasn't entirely straightforward: the COVID outbreak had closed the borders, and it was through promises and coordination that we managed to get them out of Iran.

Shafagh and Alan were due to cross the border early in the morning, but I was apprehensive and didn't sleep all night. Considering the time difference between Britain and Iran, I sat by the phone to see when they would arrive and if everything would go well. From a certain point, I told myself, 'Kameel, the situation is out of your control, and you can't do much, so stay calm.'

I went through stressful days until they reached Britain. I was upset that they would have to stay in a hotel for two weeks, but that didn't happen. In those days, Hilary had become the angel of my life. She had prepared her daughter's house for us, and my family went straight there to spend their quarantine period. Shafagh had been to London less often and didn't know the environment well; communicating and speaking English were still difficult for her. My quarantine period wasn't over, however, and I was still in the hotel. I tried to help her by phone, and we constantly had video calls. I counted the days until I reached the fourteenth and could go home. Our migration had been so rapid and unwanted that we still hadn't processed it, and now we were in the same city, but spending our days apart!

The Grand House in Hampstead

Finally, my quarantine days passed. I took a taxi and headed to Hilary's daughter's house, which was to be our residence for a while. Her house was in North London, in the affluent area of Hampstead.[1] The city

1 The Hampstead area, which has long been considered one of London's expensive neighbourhoods, is doubly famous today due to its influence on C.S. Lewis's Narnia stories. This beautiful London neighbourhood contains 320 hectares of heathland and

structure in London isn't like in Iran, where the farther south you go, the poorer it gets. However, North London is one of the wealthiest and most distinct areas in the whole of Britain. As luck would have it, my friend Hilary and her husband Tony lived in this area with their daughter. I jokingly said to Shafagh, 'I'm done for. The first place you've lived in London is the wealthiest area of the city. How will you ever be satisfied living in my fifty-square-metre flat in West London later on?'

Her house was historic and listed as a heritage building. Many important and famous people have lived and continue to live in that part of the city, including the owner of one of Britain's largest chain stores, whose magnificent house stood impressively not far from ours.[1] Usually, such houses are marked with a plaque detailing their history, and no one is allowed to interfere with their external architecture.

The house had four floors, and they had given us the lower ground floor, which was a completely independent unit. It had one large studio-style room that served as both a bedroom and a living area, and we allocated its only small room to Alan. There was also a kitchen, a pantry and two toilets. Interestingly, this part of the building had been the living quarters for the male and female servants who worked in the house. In its drawing room, an old call box was still on the wall with a cord hanging above it. When they wanted to summon a servant, they would pull the cord from the upper floors. The bell in that box would ring, and the servant would go to their place of duty. The bell for the living room had its own sound, and, for example, the bell for the piano room had another. The historical features in this house made it more captivating and gave me a strange feeling – a feeling that perhaps had a more traditional and instinctual value: now we were destitute and seeking refuge, living in a place where the servants of aristocrats had toiled away their lives.

Perhaps my mind at that time, influenced by socialisation in a society like Iran, was constantly making comparisons. And, of course, it was also

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woodland and is one of London's most popular outdoor and residential spaces. Everything physically necessary for a peaceful life exists in this neighbourhood. Walking on a summer day, picnicking in its surroundings, running in peace and cycling are all available here in the best possible way. Despite all this, because it is among London's most expensive neighbourhoods, living there is not within everyone's means.

1 Sainsbury's is a British supermarket company which, with 1,016 branches, owns the third-largest chain of retail stores in the United Kingdom.

influenced by a sense of pride that is a marked social and cultural trait in the majority of Easterners. All these characteristics, on the one hand, relate to the living conditions, humiliations and frustrations that we have historically experienced in our societies, and, on the other hand, to periods of historical existence where we have had civilisational and cultural dignities and enlightenments. In any case, our social emotions and behaviours stem from these contradictory and conflicting lived experiences, the roots of which we can latently search for and clearly find in the social history of our societies.

It was truly a comfortable house, but only a short time had passed since we had been forced to abandon our home and life in Tehran and become displaced. The first night I arrived, I was disorientated. Shafagh and Alan were not allowed to go out until the end of their quarantine period, and Alan was constantly curious about the church bells at the end of our street and wanted me to take him out to see them up close. My wife also complained about the coldness of the place and, of course, about it not being clean according to her standards.

As usual during that period, I couldn't sleep. I would creep silently into the kitchen in the dark and think about our strange life and the responsibilities that lay ahead. This house had been empty for a long time. Although furnished and ready to live in, it felt cold, and we arrived there in the first days of January 2021, at the height of winter. We would pile everything we had on ourselves, but we were still cold. We had come from a warmer region, and the cold seemed even more severe to us.

Shafagh and Alan felt the cold much more intensely, and we only had a few hours of daylight. My friends said that, by sheer luck, it was one of the coldest winters Britain had seen. A few days before New Year's, the COVID-19 death toll had reached 2,300 people per day, which had led to the country being locked down again. Due to the cold, the strict adherence to the stay-at-home order, and, of course, the fear of arrest, virtually no one ventured outside.

Initially, Shafagh was not in good spirits. She didn't want to give up her home and life, to be torn away from everything. She had said goodbye to her family, to whom she was intensely attached, in such a manner, and had undertaken this strange and bizarre journey, only to be cooped up for months on the lower ground floor of a cold house.



Image 516: Difficult days of longing and quarantine. London, January 2021.

I knew that, deep down, she held me responsible for these problems, and she had every right to. The work and research I had pursued, my so-called ambitions and my desire for new discoveries in my field, the nature and style of my activities – which were both sensitive research and a form of civil and social activism – had led us to this. She was paying the price for the path I had taken. She was enduring severe psychological pressure, and I could see that our future, like London's weather, was bleak and cold. I was so tired and adrift that I needed time to figure out what to do. Shafagh was also patiently persevering, but I could see the exhaustion and dissatisfaction in her eyes.

Alan's situation was different. In the first few days, the new house was a novelty for him, and he explored it, but he soon grew tired and started crying and protesting that he wanted to go back to our home in Tehran. He wanted his room, his toys and his friends. Here, his room was very small – just big enough for a bed. Although our friends had brought him lots of clothes and toys to keep him busy during quarantine, he couldn't easily cope with such a big change, and his life's rhythm had been disrupted. This affected everything about him; he was constantly making messes and becoming more irritable. He would fixate on the sound of the church bells, which rang every hour – especially on Sundays. He'd ask why this sound kept coming. I'd explain to him that it was like the sound of the mosque in Tehran, which he used to call 'ninay'. He would cry and say, 'I want the

ninay of the mosque near Kaj Square in Saadat Abad. I want our own house and my own bed. Daddy, when are we going back to Tehran?'

I was devastated and had no answer. I'd hug him and say, 'We have to wait. One day, a big ship will come for us and take us away, but for now, we have to stay here for a while. After you finish school, you can go back there to visit.'



Image 517: Alan in his new room.

My heart ached for him, and I had no choice but to try to placate him. Alan found it very difficult to adjust to the new environment, and he was right to: the cold weather, living in a place where the days ended very quickly and it got dark, the language difference and the difficult conditions we had in the new house compared to Tehran all distressed him.

I had been away from Britain for several years, so, according to the law, I wouldn't even be eligible for unemployment benefits for several more months. I was facing an uncertain financial future. In addition, for my temporary release, Shafagh's father had put his house up as bail. After my departure, they would certainly go after him to confiscate his property. I had to be able to raise the necessary sum, and here, too, I faced many legal restrictions. But I will never forget that, if it weren't for my friends, the situation would have been even harder. If Hilary and Tony and other noble and kind people hadn't been there and looked out for us, I don't know what I would have done. Hilary is a courageous sociologist and a brave feminist with left-leaning and humanitarian views. Her husband, Tony, is well-known member of the Royal Orchestra. Their only child, their daughter, had so humbly put their historic, multi-million-pound house



Image 518: Among friends – Martin, Hilary and Tony.

and their beautiful garden at our disposal. Their kindness was beyond repayment.

I will never forget Hilary and her family's help. They took care of our affairs and even tried to register us with a local doctor and enrol Alan in school, which was closed during that period. With the help of Hilary's daughter, we enrolled Alan in one of London's best private schools, which has one of the finest education systems. I never imagined I'd be able to enrol my son in such a place under those circumstances, especially when, after my departure and the announcement of my presence in England, a media onslaught against me began.

The support of my friends facilitated legal representation from several renowned lawyers in Britain. I was truly happy that we had such significant comforts and that, despite the immense difficulties, we were getting through those hard days with the help of these unassuming friends.

Announcement of the Appeal Court's Verdict

One day, Mr Raisian sent a message saying he had gone to court that day and had been informally told that the appeal verdict was ready and could be officially announced at any moment. I asked what the appeal verdict was. He said there had been no change, and they had upheld the same sentence Judge Salavati had issued: nine years and three months in prison and a six hundred thousand euro fine. The news hit me like a sledgehammer. I had been very hopeful that they would at least reconsider the amount of the fine, and I had told myself they would halve or suspend the nine-year prison sentence. The only thing the appeal court had changed was the charge related to the stun gun; they had dismissed this single charge, for which three months' imprisonment had been allocated.

I said to Raisian, 'So, what's the upshot?'

He replied, 'This is it. There's no other way, and this is usually the final stage of appeal.'

Unconsciously, I dropped my teacup, and the sound of it shattering echoed through the house. In that instant, I accepted that I wouldn't be seeing Iran and Kurdistan again anytime soon, unless some special circumstances or a particular opening arose, or another revolution happened.

Alan ran toward me and said, 'Baba, baba, awa chita? Chi shka?' ('Daddy, Daddy, what's wrong with you? What broke?')

I forced a smile and said, 'It's nothing. I heard some bad news, but it's good for you. From now on, you'll see me more, and I'll always be with you.'

He said, 'That's great, Daddy!'

After prison and the pandemic in Iran and London, I had seen my son more than in all his past few years combined; it was as if I had only just been given the chance to know my son more deeply. But in that moment, an intense anger consumed me, and I didn't recognise myself. I had to be mindful of Alan's feelings and conceal this anger, though.

بسمه تعالی

شعبه ۱۵ دادگاه انقلاب اسلامی تهران به تصدی امضاء کننده ذیل که بر اساس حکم ویژه شماره

[redacted] مورخ 96/6/26 ریاست محترم قوه قضائیه اینجانب با حفظ سمت دادرس دادگاه عمومی تهران نیز هستم مستند به ماده ۳۷۴ قانون آئین دادرسی کیفری در مورخ 99/8/24 جهت رسیدگی به پرونده کلاسه [redacted] اتهامی کامیل احمدی فرزند کریم تشکیل است . با عنایت به تحقیقات بعمل آمده و اخذ آخرین دفاع از متهم و ملاحظه لایحه دفاعیه وکیل مدافع ختم دادرسی را اعلام و با استعانت از خداوند متعال و با تکیه بر شرف و وجدان به شرح ذیل مبادرت به صدور رأی می نماید .

«رأی دادگاه»

در خصوص اتهام کامیل احمدی فرزند کریم با کد ملی [redacted] و شماره شناسنامه [redacted] صادره از نقده ، متولد [redacted] دارای تابعیت مضاعف ایرانی انگلیسی، فاقد سابقه، متأهل، پژوهشگر، آزاد به قید وثیقه حسب کیفرخواست صادره دائر بر: الف- همکاری با دولت متخاصم آمریکا علیه جمهوری اسلامی ایران. ب- نگهداری یک عدد افشانه گاز اشک آور.

پ- نگهداری یک لیتر مشروبات الکلی خارجی .

ت- نگهداری یک عدد شوکر

«گردشکار»

کامیل احمدی یکی از افرادی است که علی الظاهر تحت عنوان کارشناس ارشد جامعه شناسی و مردم شناسی اقداماتی را در راستای ترویج مبانی غربی و تضعیف قوانین و مبانی شرعی در حوزه خانواده، ازدواج و از طرفی لزوم اقتباس از مبانی غربی و اومانیستی انجام می داد تحت رصد و اشراف اطلاعاتی سازمان اطلاعات سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی قرار گرفت .

محمد احمدی معروف به کامیل فرزند کریم متولد شهر نقده از توابع استان آذربایجان غربی، از قومیت کرد و اهل سنت می باشد. او در خانواده ای متمول متولد شده و پدر وی کریم احمدی از افراد و بازاریان مشهور استان بوده و حتی در سطح کشور و خارج از کشور داد و ستدهای مالی و تجاری داشته است ، کامیل احمدی به چندین زبان مسلط می باشد و تجربه زندگی در چندین کشور را دارا می باشد؛ او در این باره می گوید:

مسلط به زبان های کردی سورانی، کردی کرمانجی، ترکی، آذری استانبولی، انگلیسی، فارسی، فارسی دری هستم همچنین به زبان فرانسه در حد متوسط و زبان عربی نیز در حد قواعد تسلط دارم».

Image 519: Court verdict.

In the Name of God, the Most High
Branch 15 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran, presided over by the undersigned, who, based on special decree number [redacted] dated 26/6/96 [17 September 2017], while also holding the position of judge of the Public Court of Tehran, and pursuant to Article 374 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, on 24/8/99 [14 November 2020], was convened to hear case file number [redacted] concerning the charges against Kameel Ahmady, son of Karim. In consideration of the investigations conducted and the final defence received from the accused, and having reviewed the defence statement submitted by the defence counsel, the hearing

is hereby declared concluded. With the assistance of Almighty God and relying on honour and conscience, the court proceeds to issue its verdict as follows.

«Court Verdict»

Regarding the charges against Kameel Ahmady, son of Karim, with national ID number [redacted] and birth certificate number [redacted] issued in Naqadeh, born [redacted], holding dual Iranian-British nationality, with no prior criminal record, married, a researcher, released on bail, as per the indictment issued, concerning:

A - Cooperation with the hostile Government of America against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

B - Possession of one tear gas spray.

C- Possession of one litre of foreign alcoholic beverages.

D- Possession of one stun gun.

«Case Summary/Proceedings»

Kameel Ahmady is one of the individuals who, ostensibly under the title of a senior sociologist and anthropologist, undertook actions aimed at promoting Western principles and undermining Sharia laws and principles in the domain of family and marriage. Furthermore, advocating the necessity of adopting Western and humanistic principles, he came under the surveillance and intelligence oversight of the Intelligence Organisation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Mohammad Ahmady, known as Kameel, son of Karim, born in the city of Naqadeh in West Azerbaijan province, is of Kurdish ethnicity and a Sunni Muslim. He was born into a wealthy family, and his father, Karim Ahmady, was among the well-known individuals and merchants of the province, even conducting financial and commercial transactions nationally and internationally. Kameel Ahmady is fluent in several languages and has experience living in several countries; he states in this regard:

'I am fluent in Sorani Kurdish, Kurmanji Kurdish, Turkish, Azerbaijani (Istanbul dialect), English, Farsi, and Dari Farsi. I also have an intermediate command of French and a grasp of Arabic grammar.'

I couldn't understand why they had treated me so cruelly. They had neither reduced my fine nor even truly shortened my prison sentence. How could a judicial verdict be so unyielding, showing no leniency toward someone they themselves knew well had committed no crime? Even if my case had gone to the most backward judicial system, the appeal judge would have read it and changed things. It meant that Iran's judicial system was worse than even the most unjust systems in the world. They hadn't even read the glaring legal flaws we had pointed out to the judge in the appeal brief – or, if they had read it, they probably lacked the courage or ability to alter Judge Salavati's original sentence. Iran's courts and judiciary do not follow logical and legal mechanisms; they operate in a dictatorial and arbitrary fashion. If they so choose, they can try and sentence in the most inhumane way possible, and no authority can stand up to them. Everything is transparent yet bitter, unchangeable, and agreed upon in advance. Agreement on anti-values is flagrantly and transparently present in this system, and its agents are also subject to this agreement. Therefore, they are compelled to submit to such illogical actions or to act to facilitate and implement them, in such a way that they always legitimise a flawed, inefficient and despotic system. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that they hadn't read the file. They had simply written in one line to say that the appeal request was rejected, and that was it!



Image 520: My desk inside the house.

I came to believe what they said: Judge Salavati's verdicts don't get overturned.

More interestingly, newspapers like *Keyhan*, even during that period, continued to hound me with their words, publishing follow-up reports and fresh accusations about me.

I left the house and took refuge on Hampstead Heath, the woodland near our home. I sat in a corner, gazing aimlessly into the distance, and thought about how, for no reason, my life had been ruined, and there I was, in this cold winter, living in the corner of a basement.

I decided to publicise my departure from Iran and draw international media attention to the unjust court sentences. Publishing my verdict and defence statement in Farsi was easy, but I ultimately decided to publish it in English as well, unaware of how difficult it would be to translate the legal terminology and Judge Salavati's ridiculous verdict into English.

For ten days, I worked on this from the crack of dawn. My body clock was still synchronised with Iran, and I would start working from 4 or 5 am UK time. The verdict was full of legal terms, and I had to get help from a legal translator. Hilary and another friend in America proofread the English text, keeping pace with me. During these ten days, I sat in the corner of the living room and, while the sound of cartoons, Alan's nervous state and all the other limitations frayed my nerves, I pushed the work forward. I put earplugs in to concentrate and felt ashamed that I couldn't do much for Alan and Shafagh.

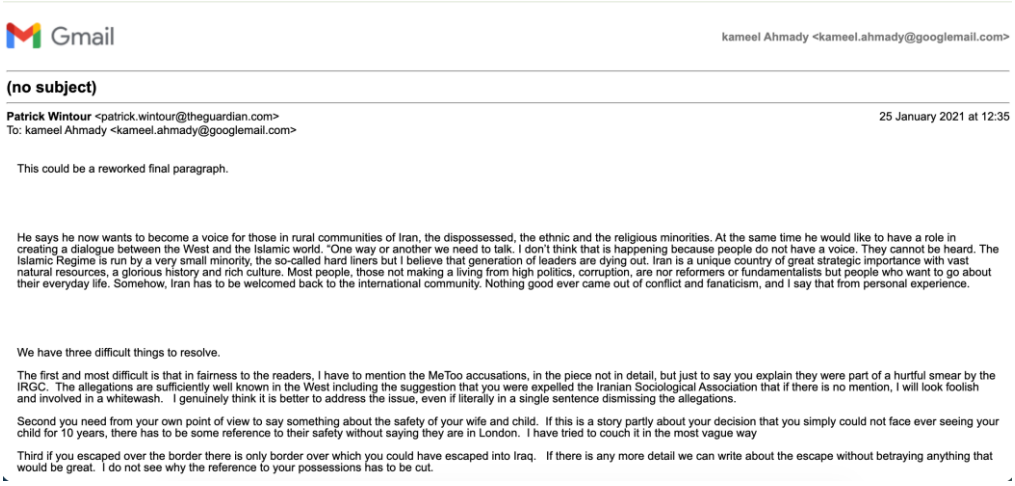
In those days, under quarantine conditions, many children across Britain were in Alan's situation, and this was evident from the noise of children in nearby houses and on media reports. Alan had experienced many shocks. His environment had suddenly changed, and he had lost his entire small, childish world. Now he was in a much more confined space, and I could only take him to the front of the small garden of the house.

I translated the verdict into English and decided to publish it. However, some of my friends said this would anger the Iranian security apparatus, and they might later kidnap me and return me to Iran. I wouldn't back down. I wanted to show the Iranian Government's treatment of political prisoners, especially dual nationals. Of course, I was worried that I might make the situation more difficult for other dual-national prisoners. I consulted several lawyers and, with Hilary's coordination, I met, in the woods nearby, Richard Ratcliffe, the husband of Nazanin Zaghari-

Ratcliffe, who was under house arrest in Iran at the time. Richard, unlike others, welcomed my idea and said, if he were in my place, he would do the same.

One of the world's active non-governmental organisations supporting hostages, which had also supported me and my family during my arrest, provided me with one of their best psychologists, so I could share the events of prison and my psychological torture with him and receive counselling. They also introduced me to a media consultant, with whom I discussed the matter. The media consultant from this NGO advised against publicising the verdict. They said journalists wouldn't leave me alone, and the Iranian Government, in retaliation, would definitely take action. When they realised my mind wouldn't change, they said, 'We advise you not to do it, but if you do, we'll help you manage the situation better.'

Of course, I accepted their advice on how to announce the news and only spoke to two media outlets and news sources. Hilary's opinion was that I should talk to *The Guardian* newspaper and report my arrival in Britain and the events that had transpired. The journalist from this newspaper was thoroughly following my case and that of other Iranian hostages and knew everything from my arrest to my release. We also chose BBC World Service television as the second option, and it was agreed that in a short video interview I would also explain what I had been through.



Gmail kameel Ahmady <kameel.ahmady@googlemail.com>

(no subject)

Patrick Wintour <patrick.wintour@theguardian.com> 25 January 2021 at 12:35
To: kameel Ahmady <kameel.ahmady@googlemail.com>

This could be a reworked final paragraph.

He says he now wants to become a voice for those in rural communities of Iran, the dispossessed, the ethnic and the religious minorities. At the same time he would like to have a role in creating a dialogue between the West and the Islamic world. "One way or another we need to talk. I don't think that is happening because people do not have a voice. They cannot be heard. The Islamic Regime is run by a very small minority, the so-called hard liners but I believe that generation of leaders are dying out. Iran is a unique country of great strategic importance with vast natural resources, a glorious history and rich culture. Most people, those not making a living from high politics, corruption, are nor reformers or fundamentalists but people who want to go about their everyday life. Somehow, Iran has to be welcomed back to the international community. Nothing good ever came out of conflict and fanaticism, and I say that from personal experience.

We have three difficult things to resolve.

The first and most difficult is that in fairness to the readers, I have to mention the MeToo accusations, in the piece not in detail, but just to say you explain they were part of a hurtful smear by the IRGC. The allegations are sufficiently well known in the West including the suggestion that you were expelled the Iranian Sociological Association that if there is no mention, I will look foolish and involved in a whitewash. I genuinely think it is better to address the issue, even if literally in a single sentence dismissing the allegations.

Second you need from your own point of view to say something about the safety of your wife and child. If this is a story partly about your decision that you simply could not face ever seeing your child for 10 years, there has to be some reference to their safety without saying they are in London. I have tried to couch it in the most vague way

Third if you escaped over the border there is only border over which you could have escaped into Iraq. If there is any more detail we can write about the escape without betraying anything that would be great. I do not see why the reference to your possessions has to be cut.

Image 521: Patrick's email to me.

(no subject)
Patrick Wintour <patrick.wintour@theguardian.com>
25 January 2021 at 12:35
To: kameel Ahmady <kameel.ahmady@googlemail.com>
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> Third if you escaped over the border there is only border over which you could have escaped into Iraq. If there is any more detail we can write about the escape without betraying anything that would be great. I do not see why the reference to your possessions has to be cut.

A little later, Richard introduced me to a documentary filmmaker he himself worked with for the television interview. This filmmaker later became greedy and wanted to sell the interview separately from Channel 4 to the BBC, but, apparently, they didn't agree. Consequently, a BBC journalist interviewed me again. According to COVID-19 regulations, which were very strictly enforced, no one was allowed to enter another person's home, but Patrick Wintour from *The Guardian* came to my house twice, and we worked for hours to finalise my interview. Unlike in our initial conversation, he didn't focus much on my arrest and imprisonment but wanted to know about my method of leaving Iran and the people who had helped me. I explained to him that I had ethical reservations and couldn't disclose the details. I was unaware that he knew all the details of my case, the sexual allegations and how I had come to Britain.

A few days before the news was published, Patrick emailed me and said, 'We've reached a very difficult point, and I need to talk to you about three things.' His second and third questions were about how my wife, child and I had arrived in Britain and where my family was now. In reality, though, his main question was about the sexual allegations that had been made against me in Iran. He said he had to reflect them in his report, as everyone in the West knew about it, despite the issue never having been reported anywhere in non-Farsi-language media.

Patrick, the Professional

It was strange to me. We had talked for hours, and Patrick had never asked about this. Now, a few days before the interview, he intended to write about an accusation that had been circulated by anonymous individuals in cyberspace and had not been proven in any court. I told him that writing about narratives that haven't been fact-checked wasn't right, especially when he hadn't raised the issue with me at the outset and had already obtained all the information he needed about my life from me. I emphasised that this was contrary to the professional principles of journalism,[1] and Patrick gave me the most ridiculous answers in the world via WhatsApp. He messaged me saying he hadn't wanted to ask these

Patrick Wintour (born 1 November 1954) is a British journalist and the diplomatic editor of *The Guardian*.[1] He was the political editor of *The Guardian* from 2006 to 2015 and was formerly the newspaper's chief political correspondent for two periods, from 1988 to 1996, and 2000 to 2006.[2] In the intervening period he was the political editor of *The Observer*.[3]



Image 522: Patrick Wintour.

1 International principles of professional ethics in journalism, in addition to emphasising the public's right to free access to information, refer to a journalist's duty to reflect objective realities by depicting the main relationships without distortion. It seems Patrick entered the fray as a paparazzo in this interview. Paparazzi are journalists whose job is to obtain sensational news and photos of famous personalities and their families and relatives and sell these images and information to magazines and other media. One of the characteristics of media ethics is the diversity of its objectives. Ethical dilemmas arise when objectives conflict. The use of media, when expressed in a consequentialist manner, may be carried out under pressures such as economic profit, provision of information, support for a specific group or faction, development of rumours, fame and pride, entertainment, etcetera.

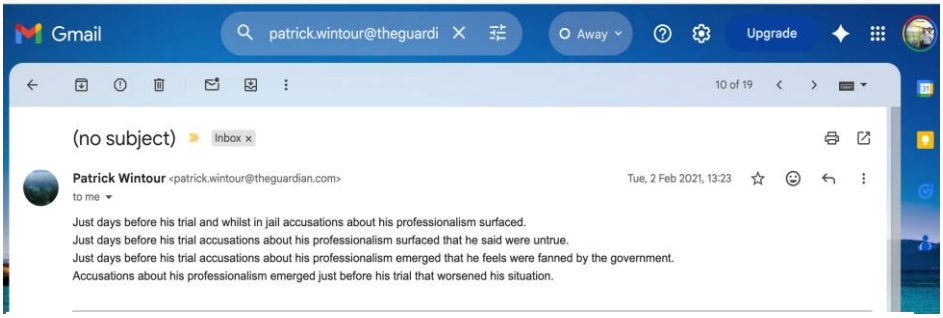


Image 523: The four options Patrick gave me, none of which he ultimately included in his article.

(no subject)
Patrick Wintour <patrick.wintour@theguardian.com>
to me
Tue, 2 Feb 2021, 13:23
Just days before his trial and whilst in jail accusations about his professionalism surfaced.
Just days before his trial accusations about his professionalism surfaced that he said were untrue.
Just days before his trial accusations about his professionalism emerged that he feels were fanned by the government.
Accusations about his professionalism emerged just before his trial that worsened his situation.

questions in my wife's presence. He had come to my house twice and we'd talked for hours. Both times, we sat in a room completely alone, and his interaction with Shafagh was limited to a simple greeting when he entered the house. Throughout the interview, Shafagh went for a walk in the nearby park. His illogical explanations were strange to me and Shafagh, and when I read his article about my sentence, in *The Guardian*, I became suspicious of him.

I told Hilary, 'You introduced Patrick, and now he's done this.' She said that, when those issues arose and I spoke with her about them, she discussed the matter with Patrick and others. She had told Patrick

harmful traditions about children in disadvantaged minority areas of Iran, but the main intention of my accusers has been to link my research to the United Nations 2030 sustainable development goals, and to stop my activities with the target community of my research," Ahmady said. "My aim now is to appeal this verdict and hope for a fair trial in the appeal court."



'I don't know what Iran wants': Mariam Claren's fight to free her mother

His work and professionalism have been the subject of attacks on social media.

Ahmady's friends in the UK have been in regular contact with the Foreign Office and had been hoping he would not be given a lengthy sentence, so the news came as a particularly heavy blow.

Image 524: Patrick's article regarding me receiving a 9-year prison sentence.

everything about the false claims, and so he had alluded to them indirectly in his article.[1]

When I read the article, I was shocked. Amid his explanations about my arrest and release, he had, albeit vaguely, alluded to my having 'unprofessional relationships' and that some people had written about them in cyberspace.

I wanted to tell Patrick that I wouldn't allow the article to be published, but I knew he would publish it eventually, anyway, and he might behave even more unscrupulously.

I messaged him and asked again why he hadn't spoken about the sexual allegations until that day, but he had no answer and changed the subject of the conversation. He even said he knew Iranian security services carry out such actions and made a great effort to complete the article by having me choose one of his four suggested sentences. He tried to make everything seem normal, but he had no logical argument and even referred to the cancellation of my membership in the Sociological Association.

Patrick wanted to make the most of the good opportunity that had come his way. He tried to win my approval so I wouldn't back out, enabling him, amid a media lull and a wave of redundancies due to COVID pressure, to present a noteworthy interview about 'the escape of a dual national from

1 Wintour, P. (2020) 'British-Iranian academic sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran', The Guardian, 14 December. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/13/british-iranian-academic-sentenced-to-eight-years-in-prison-in-iran (Accessed: 18 July 2022).

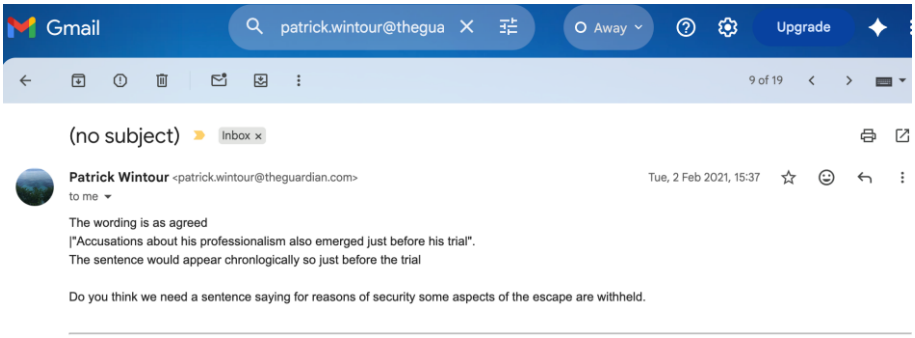


Image 525: The chosen sentence and Patrick's email confirming it.

> (no subject)
> Patrick Wintour `<patrick.wintour@theguardian.com>`
> Tue, 2 Feb 2021, 15:37
> The wording is as agreed
> "Accusations about his professionalism also emerged just before his trial".
> The sentence would appear chronologically so just before the trial
> Do you think we need a sentence saying for reasons of security some aspects of the escape are withheld.

the clutches of the brutal Iranian regime'. How many times in any journalist's career do such opportunities arise? Each time, he would write a sentence and email it to me to choose one. He said if he didn't write this sentence, his editor wouldn't accept the article. He also said in three WhatsApp messages that the newspaper's managers insisted this part of the news must be included, and if he didn't do it he might even be fired.

His unprofessional behaviour had upset me, but, in the end, I chose a sentence, a screenshot of which you can see in the email below. Of course, I had no choice but to accept. He threatened me twice, verbally and in writing, saying that if I didn't do this, the next report might be written about my sexual allegations. He meant that if he didn't write it, someone else eventually would and would cover the topic fully. I felt I shouldn't trust him, but I did. Perhaps I had no choice, and no time was left for me.

Finally, he published the article without saying anything about the sexual allegations. I was very surprised that he hadn't included one of his proposed sentences, which I had agreed to have in the article; that he had

overlooked an issue so important to him; and that, as he put it, his managers had allowed its publication.

A journalist named James Landale, who, incidentally, had been introduced to me by Patrick, was coordinated by BBC World Service to interview me. Since it was against COVID regulations at the time, he, unlike Patrick, did not come to my house. I went to the BBC studio, they tested me for COVID, and James said, 'You are the first person to come to the BBC studio in months.' The news was important enough for them to exceptionally allow me to enter the studio for a short interview.



Image 526: Screenshot of BBC news report.

In this interview, I discussed the ordeals I had been through,[1] and it was agreed that the translated court verdict, along with my own statement, which I had put on my website in Farsi and English, would be simultaneously published by the BBC, Channel 4 and *The Guardian*. They would also put the download link for my verdict in their written news reports on their sites.

The decision was not to talk to any Farsi-language media, because I knew that when international English-language media covered the topic, Farsi-language media would follow suit and republish the news, so there was no need for interviews with them.

Media and Public Reaction

When I woke up at 5 am that day, I found that *The Guardian* had put the news on its website before the newspaper was printed. The print version was supposed to hit the streets at 6 am, but didn't, which I believe was also

1 BBC News (2021) 'Kameel Ahmady: British academic facing jail escapes Iran over mountains' [Video], 3 February. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-55922840 (Accessed: 28 June 2022).

related to the issue of the sexual allegations and the assessment of readers' reactions.

The BBC, with all its news channels, including BBC World[1] and also BBC Radio 4 News, broadcast this news most of the day. Channel 4 News, which after the BBC is one of the most watched in Britain, broadcast it in its 7 o'clock bulletin.[2] The news was highly significant. Similar cases like Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's and, to some extent, Anousheh Ashouri's, for whom many press campaigns had been formed, were still fresh in people's minds at that time, so the story of a dual-national researcher being arrested because of his field of work and then escaping Iran was even more captivating for the public and the media.

I felt that publishing my verdict[3] could positively influence the fate of dual-national prisoners in Iran. I was warned to remove my contact number from my website to avoid repeated calls from journalists and reporters, but my site had received so many visits and emails that it had crashed. I contacted the support company, and they reported that the site had had tens of thousands of visitors since morning, my bandwidth had run out and hackers were constantly attacking the site.

Fresh emails from news agencies kept arriving, all requesting interviews. Major global news agencies, small ones, radio stations, websites, research institutes and foundations – all requested interviews or

1 BBC News, 2021.

2 Channel 4 (2021) 'British Channel 4 report on Kameel Ahmady in English (TV version with subtitles)' [Video]. Available at: https://kameelahmady.com/british-channel-4-report-on-kameel-ahmady-in-english-tv-version-with-subtitles/ (Accessed: 4 July 2022).

3 Ahmady, 2021d.



Image 527: Screenshots of media and interviews.

further information. I replied that I had nothing to say beyond my verdict and statement, and I thanked them for their follow-up and attention.

On the first night, Iran International television, which reacts to almost every piece of news, called several times to speak with me. Eventually, that night, I did a few minutes' interview with the host of the *Titir-e Aval* ('Headline') programme,[1] but thereafter I refrained from speaking with other Farsi-language news agencies.

Two days passed in this manner, and I had many emails, ranging from interview requests to kind messages, and, of course, several messages from Iranian security forces and pro-regime individuals, the contents of which were threats of torture and death. They said they would bring me back to Iran and sort me out, or that they would eventually assassinate me in a tavern like Mykonos, and so on.

However, most messages from foreigners conveyed support and empathy. I received several messages inviting me and my family to their countries and homes for holidays. Some people asked me about challenging the security apparatus, as well as Judge Salavati's handling of my case, and, of course, more than anything, about how I left the country and the help I received.

1 Ahmady and colleagues, 2021e.



Image 528: Interview with Iran International.

The bulk of these requests was for permission to make films and documentaries. I also received emails from major film companies wanting to write screenplays based on my escape through the mountains. Due to the restrictions I had, I couldn't and didn't want to go into details, but I saw how much of a commercial and financial prospect the story was for some, and what prominent companies and individuals wanted to monetise it. I thought about how, in the liberal, capitalist world, an essentially social issue was turned into an economic phenomenon. Everyone's thoughts turned to moneymaking and its commercial dimensions.

The issue also resonated in Farsi-language media outside Iran and attracted their audiences' attentions.

More than anything, I was ashamed before my family and friends, to whom I had daily said I was stuck in traffic or was somewhere my mobile had no signal. I had hidden my departure from Iran, and now everyone was shocked, and I was ashamed.

It was interesting to me that many Iranians were writing on social media that my departure from Iran was the right thing to do and they were glad that, by publicising the issue, I had exposed the Islamic Republic.

On the afternoon of the day *The Guardian* report was published, Patrick called in a panic and said, 'Kameel, people I don't know are attacking me on Twitter, saying, "Why haven't you written anything about Kameel Ahmady's sexual allegations and have made a hero out of him?" They want to know why a reputable global newspaper like ours handled the issue this way!' He had been threatened with lawsuits and dismissal.

Patrick's idea was to add a paragraph to the report; otherwise, he would be fired. He was as scared as a mouse and spoke haltingly.

Again, I said, 'But I gave you permission, confirmed it via email and we agreed on it on WhatsApp! You were even going to add that paragraph about the allegation yourself! Add it and write whatever you want! Why didn't you write it?' It no longer mattered to me. I expected that the same people as before would now react more seriously on social media to my departure and interviews.

I kept the details of the conversations between Patrick and I, which include a large number of written and voice messages on WhatsApp, emails and recorded phone calls. They are currently being used by my lawyer to file an official complaint against *The Guardian*, Radio Farda after the publication of this autobiography, which is planned to be released in three languages: English, Farsi and Kurdish. Therefore, on my lawyer's advice, I have not attached some of the documents and evidence.

The attacks on social media had begun, and I saw some particular individuals attacking me and writing more openly than before. Two of them could not be silenced, and I decided to let them be. They were individuals who always roamed social media. One or two were active in small, obscure NGOs whose names I had never heard in my life, and one, claiming to be law graduate, was in Britain. Before leaving Iran, I had published my statement and provided explanations about the individuals making claims. In my statement, I had written that those making claims should sue me, and I would welcome an investigation in the presence of judges, psychologists and civil activists. I had also emphasised that Iranian courts are deficient in this regard, and I do not accept that judicial system.

Later, I realised that some of these same individuals and one or two people in America were behind all this. That night and the following night, they attacked *The Guardian* and BBC journalists on Twitter. People working for one or two news agencies also joined them, and they proceeded together. After those two or three days, nothing happened, and the Twitter uproar died down.

One afternoon, I was lying down and resting when a lady named Emma Graham-Harrison from *The Guardian* called my mobile. She said she had sent me an email. I opened the email and saw it was what I had expected: 'As the issue of sexual allegations against you is important for the public interest and our newspaper, we will cover this news.' The email included

parts of the narratives from the Bidarzani page and a selection of four of those narratives, asking for my opinion on them. They are the same narratives I discussed in detail in part seven of this book. Foremost among them was the third narrative. The comments and participation of the narrators, Ms RM and Ms ZP, in addition to the repeated comments and analyses of two feminist individuals, were also included. One of them was Samaneh Savadi, who presented herself as a feminist activist and gender campaigner, but in a ridiculous and nauseating manner mostly advertised her children, her husband and her flawless life in England to her followers on her Instagram account.

'Oh, Kameel Dear, My Husband Fell and Broke His Leg!'

Before my arrest, when I was in England for a holiday, I was supposed to meet Savadi in Brighton on a pre-arranged trip. I only knew her from a distance. On the appointed day, while I was with my wife and son at a dinner hosted by my friend Osman Baydemir, the former mayor of Diyarbakır, she sent a voice message and then a written one, saying in a trembling and frantic voice, 'Kameel, dear, today my husband fell down the stairs at home, broke his leg, and is in the hospital.' I, being naïve, believed her, and we were very upset and embarrassed. I said we could come to the hospital, be of help to her, or at least look after her child for a few hours.

As they say, a liar has a short memory. Savadi, both at that time and again months later in a Tweet – during an internal feminist dispute between her and several others accused of supporting and exonerating sexual abusers – wrote, 'He [meaning Kameel Ahmady] had an appointment with me, but because she was told I wasn't an interesting person, she cancelled his appointment with me.' What she seemed to have forgotten, and intentionally omitted from her Tweet, was the outrageous lie she had fed her followers. And, of course, that the voice message – where she faked the scene of her husband falling down the stairs – and several written messages afterward from her remained as a memento. In these, I inquired about the condition of her supposedly broken-legged husband, and she confirmed and insisted that he had been in the hospital for several hours and was then bedridden at home.



Image 529: Savadi's Tweet about cancelling the appointment.

Samaneh Savadi: A few years ago, when I was supposed to meet Kameel Ahmady, a friend told me, 'Be careful! They don't say nice things about him.' I canceled my appointment...

She, who in the commotion of the Iranian #MeToo movement was desperately trying to be at the forefront and claim it as her own, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, has the publication of two fabricated narratives on her record. One became known as the 'Golzar ice cream joke', and the other was a fabricated narrative under the name 'Balcony' in *Shargh* newspaper, which gained notoriety. The creator of this narrative, posing as a victim, had passed it off to Ms Savadi. These incidents showed that she not only failed to verify narratives before publication, but also lacked the competence and expertise to do so. The publication of such a narrative on social media led to her and the feminist page Bidarzani officially apologising.

She, who still presents herself as an example to her audience and rivals of feminist steadfastness and ethics, claimed to have cut off contact with me because, as she put it, I had heard from someone that she 'wasn't an interesting person'. Yet she seems to have forgotten her own messages to me – one voice message and one written message: one after my release, and another after news of the trial of several female activists became public. In both instances, she inquired about me and kindly asked how I was, even though at that very time she claimed to have had no contact with me.

I, who never succeeded in meeting her and whose level of contact was limited to these few messages, find this level of dishonesty and lying strange for someone who presents herself in the media as a paragon of ethics, a legal expert, a social reformer and a feminist activist. One must pity the followers of such a person.

I, who was supposedly her special case and even a matter of honour for her, in the heat of *The Guardian* and Radio Farda covering my news, was relentlessly assailed by her in a barrage of posts, without fear of the legal consequences of her actions.

A friend asked, 'Why this unsheathed sword? Is this volume of anger and resentment normal?'

Her onslaught began with an epic poem: 'We are alive because we do not rest; we are a wave whose stillness is our non-existence.'



Image 530: Savadi's successive posts and stories about me.

(Top left): 'It's absurd to claim eight women conspired against him. This is about his exploitation.'
(Top, second from left): 'He used his research on FGM/C and child marriage as a cover to abuse vulnerable people.'
(Top, second from right): 'We will not forget what you did. We won't let you play the victim.'

(Top right): 'This isn't just about gender; he betrayed the trust of the communities he researched.'
(Bottom left): 'The Iranian Sociological Association revoked his membership. One woman's word should have been enough.'
(Bottom, second from left): 'He used his academic status to threaten his assistants, even after his conviction.'
(Bottom, second from right): 'He's selling a false media narrative while the suffering of his actual research subjects continues.'
(Bottom right): 'Why were so many of his peers and critics silent about this "hero" for a decade?'

In those days, another Iranian woman had gained a platform. She was the director of a small, unknown NGO in America, and her funded presence on social media had further inflated her. She and her associates claimed that I had threatened one of the accusers – the first narrator – with reporting her relationship with me to government authorities. I have also addressed this issue in the fact-checking section. These individuals and some others spoke to *The Guardian* to portray me as something more than 'just' an offender.

They had previously used this issue in a dastardly manner, and now, in a different situation, they had, of course, gone all out in translating and interpreting it. It was as if they were the saviours of Iranian women, appointed as their deputies, and were speaking in the capacity of guardians and protectors of women's rights. In their quote, they also stated: 'We trusted Kameel Ahmady, who worked in the field of women, but now he must be removed from this arena.'

This patronising outlook[1] is one that, unfortunately, causes some media activists, especially those who also carry the name and logo of an organisation, to continue their relentless attacks, regardless of how they acquired their position and to what extent they have had contact with or influenced the community they claim to defend and lead. It is so

1 Butler (2020) argues that the concept of "vulnerable populations" in human rights discourse raises difficult questions about who is responsible for protecting whom, and how such protection can unintentionally reinforce social hierarchies. A politics based on grievability must, she contends, confront these contradictions rather than obscure them. (based on a excerpt from *Protecting Life*, translating into Farsi by Mahsa Asadollahnejad, *Problematica* online journal).

ideological, discriminatory,[1] top-down, monopolistic, proprietary and gendered that they are unwilling to hear opposing views and consider themselves the highest and most authentic truth. How often have we heard clichéd discourses of 'we' in protecting 'women's rights', similar to common discourses of 'in the name of the people' and 'on behalf of the nation' or for 'the vindication of human rights' and so on from political systems and organisations?

Through a legal mechanism at an appropriate time, after the publication of this autobiography, the actions of such opportunistic and self-serving individuals and organisations, which fortunately are also registered outside Iran and in Western countries, must be investigated. They must be held accountable through legal and civil structures for the baseless labelling, insults and discrediting they have perpetrated by virtue of their false authority. They must respond to the public sphere – the very place where minds and mentalities are shaped and directed – and that response must be scientific and logical, which, in the words of Habermas, the contemporary German theorist and sociologist, falls within the framework of communicative rationality, not instrumental rationality. The structures responsible for social justice must unveil their legitimising literature and power and reveal the hidden mechanisms of language that exist behind this literature, in connection and complicity with power. In other words, by deconstructing the hidden structures of language, the hidden mechanisms of power should be exposed, because they shape the structures of thought and social mentality to serve their own interests.

1 Gender discrimination, also called gender-centrism or sexism, refers to any distinction, exclusion, or restriction based on a person's sex that impairs or nullifies their enjoyment of rights and fundamental freedoms, as recognized in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, Article 1). This includes negative treatment based on actual or perceived gender identity, hatred or prejudice toward a particular sex (e.g., misogyny or misandry), or the stereotyping of masculinity and femininity in ways that are unjust. Gender equality entails that women and men have equal rights and duties, and that all individuals enjoy equal opportunities in society. It also encompasses fairness in the division of responsibilities, both socially and within families. When gender becomes a barrier to recognizing reality, it results in discrimination and limited opportunities. The ultimate goal of gender equality is the elimination of gender-based inequalities, discrimination, restrictive gender roles, patriarchal or matriarchal structures, and all forms of sexist beliefs.

I wanted to respond to *The Guardian's* email in detail, but the view of my Western advisors and my lawyer was that, in such situations, whatever you say creates another story. No matter what I said, it would become a new saga, with more branches and ramifications, some of which would be against me. Most said that, currently, an atmosphere prevails in which gender practically has the final say, much of which is created by the liberal left. My lawyer suggested that, now I was no longer in Iran and didn't have the blade of the Revolutionary Court's verdict at my neck, I should briefly address the unstated matters in that statement in the form of a short response to *The Guardian*, but I should definitely pursue this in court later. Ultimately, they thought this was the most correct strategy for my current situation, but later, in a long interview, or even a lengthy article, or even in my autobiography, I should address the details of the issue.

We all knew my words weren't important to *The Guardian*, because it intended to publish these individuals' narratives, primarily to salvage its reputation, which had come under attack, and its journalist, who was on the verge of being fired; and to absolve itself. Secondly, it aimed to answer its critics and, so to speak, save itself and show its audience that it is a left-leaning media outlet and still held high a banner for the rights of women and sexual minorities.

I wrote a one-page explanation for the paper, and it published approximately one paragraph of it, very purposefully and ridiculously. I was forced to publish the full version of my explanation on my website and social media pages. I am including the text[1] and its link here, as well.[2]

1 Because my statements to *The Guardian* were not published in full, I am publishing the full text here: https://bit.ly/3qjH93V (reproduced bellow the corresponding image here).

2 Ahmady and colleagues, 2021f.



Iran

این اتهامات بی‌اساس علیه من زمانی شکل گرفت که در پروسه دادگاه و محکومیت به دلیل تحقیقاتم بودم. یقین می‌دانم که این برچسب‌های غیرواقعی با هدف آسیب رساندن به پایگاه اجتماعی و علمی‌ام به صورت کاملا سازماندهی شده و هدفمند با کمک برخی افراد، بر من وارد شد و جالب‌تر آنکه درست پس از خروجم از کشور نیز همان افراد با انگیزه‌های رقابتی و با هدف تخریب تحقیقات، موقعیت شغلی و زندگی شخصی‌ام همچنان نیز به صورت سازماندهی شده من را آماج حملات خود قرار داده اند.

در حال حاضر نیز برخی رسانه‌ها به سفارش یا تحت فشار و هجمه آن‌ها به صورت تقطیع شده به انتشار برخی مطالب غیر واقعی درباره من مبادرت می‌ورزند.

این اتهامات در تابستان گذشته و تنها ۴۸ ساعت پیش از دادگاه من آغاز شد و من همه این تهمت‌های بی‌اساس و سازماندهی شده را رد و محکوم می‌کنم و ناچارم که بگویم برخی از این افراد که انگیزه و خصومت شخصی نیز با من دارند توسط بخشی از حاکمیت حمایت می‌شوند.

این روایت‌ها متاسفانه هرگز مورد ارزیابی و راستی‌آزمایی قانونی قرار نگرفته‌اند. باید بگویم که نام دو نفر از اتهام‌زنندگان به من در پروسه بازجویی و تحقیقات پرونده‌ام بارها مطرح شده بود.

روایت‌هایی که نخستین بار در فضا و شرایطی هیجانی توسط صفحه‌ای فمنیستی در اینستاگرام منتشر شد که سوگیری و انتشار داستان‌ها و روایت‌های ساختگی درباره افراد را در کارنامه خود دارد که پس از افشای موضوع، مجبور به حذف آنها و عذرخواهی شده است.

بسیار متاسفم که برخی جنسیت و حتی خودشان را دستاویزی برای پیشبرد اهدافی خاص می‌کنند. قصد آن‌ها این است که با تضعیف تحقیقات علمی من، صدایم را خاموش کنند تا عرصه به نفع آنها خالی شود.

موضع و قلم من درباره روابط و ارتباطات شخصی کاملا مشخص و روشن است.همواره گفته‌ام که مسئولیت کارهای خود را برعهده می‌گیرم و خطاب به این افراد نیز باید بگویم که موفق به خاموش کردن صدای من نمی‌شوید چون هدف من کاهش رنج کسانی است که قربانی آسیب‌های اجتماعی می‌شوند. من مصمم‌تر از پیش در مسیر علمی خود پیش خواهم رفت و درباره آسیب ها و حوزه های ملتهب اجتماعی، با در نظر گرفتن منافع جامعه هدفم کار خواهم کرد.

بنده همواره از گفت‌وگوی صریح، بی‌طرف و عادلانه در این خصوص در بستری مناسب مثل رسانه‌ای تصویری که امکان تقطیع سخنانم وجود نداشته باشد استقبال می‌کنم.

Image 531: Text of my reply.

The emergence of these unfounded allegations now and at the time of my being investigated, tried and convicted for the matters in Iran relating to my work, were and are always intended to damage the greater good of what I was and will do in advancement of the causes that I was keen to research, highlight and properly investigate.

Since my escape from Iran, rival individuals and groups have been brought to bear upon me with the sole intention of destroying me, my research, as well as my professional and personal standing.

> The press is now being manipulated by them and those afraid of them, and those seeking to displace me as a scholar in my field.
> These accusations started during last summer and 48 hours before my court hearing are deliberate slander and baseless, but also very well and deliberately organised, at both a state and personal level.
> I do not only accept these accusations and unreservedly condemn them.
> These accusations have never been legally cross-examined. In fact the names of some women and their involvement were brought up during interrogations. Such accusations have been created systematically, both at this time and in Iran, with a completely purposeful and doubtless competitive motive to damage me and my research. The allegations surfaced on a feminist Instagram page known to publish fake stories, forced to apologise and remove them later.
> I am saddened that some people have used their gender and even themselves as tools to weaken my scholarly research and personal position and deliberately create obstacles in my life in order to eliminate and silence my voice in their desire to gain power and change the narrative in their favour.
> While I take full responsibility for my actions, it must be said that the need to highlight and eliminate the suffering of others has been my life's work and remains my goal and my sole desire.
> At an appropriate time and within a proper context I would be entirely happy to sit down and address every issue and allegation within the broader context of the Iranian situation in what must be a fair and open-minded way.

Me! Me! It's My Turn!

While I was engaged with *The Guardian*, a lady from Radio Farda sent a short, strange email, requesting that I explain the recent events. The group behind the affair wanted to publish something in the Farsi media simultaneously with the expected *Guardian* report. The difference in the level of the two media outlets was also interesting! *The Guardian* had been attacked by a group of feminists and was mostly concerned with extricating itself from the accusation of not addressing the sexual

allegations against me. Radio Farda, however, is an American media outlet in Europe, directly funded by the US Senate. Its journalists are Iranian and, at least in this regard, completely inexperienced, or it didn't matter to them that they should learn the basics of their own profession. The lady who contacted me from Radio Farda didn't even observe the rudiments of journalistic principles. I feel sorry for some Farsi-language news agencies, which produce news so unprofessionally. It was clear she had a completely gendered and one-sided view of the matter and had now found the best opportunity to publish a hot story and jump on the bandwagon of Iranian #MeToo proponents.[1]

Having a history of giving interviews, I was usually sensitive to the topics and the reporter's method of obtaining information. In the email she sent me, she wanted my comments on the claims and accusations of two women who had accused me of rape, as well as my opinion on being expelled from the Sociological Association. But she was so inept and unskilled that she didn't even know the consequences of intentionally or unintentionally using 'rape' or 'expulsion' instead of 'sexual harassment' and 'cancellation of membership'. I replied to her in Farsi that, as a widespread media outlet, they must act according to common laws and, for such statements, send me the documented statements of the individuals so I could speak about them. I wrote, 'Who are these people you are talking about? Because statements of this kind were published months ago on the Bidarzani page!'

After that, I asked her to include the names and emails of their editors, whom I knew were mostly foreigners, in our correspondence. To prevent her from acting independently, I also wrote to them separately and, in subsequent emails, constantly reminded her that my email replies did not constitute a statement and they could not use them. Initially, instead of corresponding by email, I said I would respond to their request via Skype, but on my lawyer's advice I continued the discussion by email.

1 Freud, in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (2023), writes: 'If in our unconscious impulses we daily and hourly get rid of someone who stands in our way . . . my unconscious will kill even for trifles.' Freud notes that 'we may really be surprised that the devil should be so actively at work again in a person who has had a moral upbringing.' Sometimes the impulse to kill remains to some extent uneducable, and this happens especially when individuals are absorbed into groups.

In the end, the 'skilled' journalist used this very issue as an excuse and wrote in the published news that I had not commented on the matter. As you can see in the conversation below, this was neither true, nor was its publication legal – an issue for which her organisation must certainly be held accountable. Unfortunately, due to considerations regarding my ongoing legal dispute with *The Guardian* and this media outlet, I cannot speak further about it.

It was quite clear she was being fed lines. After a few emails, she sent me parts of the first and third narrators' accounts (i.e. Ms RM's), asked if the Sociological Association had severed its ties with me, and said she couldn't find my statement. I never got the chance to answer Radio Farda's questions, and it, contrary to all media standards and laws, published its news in Farsi and English immediately after *The Guardian*, without coordination or giving me an opportunity to respond. I wonder if they ever considered that I, as the author of the statement, might sue them for this blatant violation. How could they have thought it acceptable to alter key phrases from my statement for the Sociological Association – for example, changing 'to carefully follow up' into 'to carefully examine', or 'evidence presented' and 'the explanation published by Mr Ahmady' into the vague and misleading 'based on evidence'?

The reporter even misrepresented me as a salaried employee of the Sociological Association, stating in her report, 'He, who worked as the head of a research group on



Image 532: My message to the Radio Farda journalist after her repeated calls

Hello, excuse me, I wasn't expecting your call because our last contact was via email and we were waiting for a response to it. I will send you an email tomorrow.

the social status of working children, was expelled from the Sociological Association.' I was a volunteer member of the Association, and the research work I was doing at the time was completely separate from the Association, voluntary and personal (later titled *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood*).

After the publication of *The Guardian's* report, Radio Farda, without getting a response from me, added another narrative to the two cases it had sent me and published it.

Apart from other errors in this biased and malicious report, it repeatedly labelled its sources of information as 'victims' and copied parts of *The Guardian's* report, not even bothering with a little innovation.

The vile part of the article was where they had gone off the deep end and claimed that: 'Kameel Ahmady later contacted her [the narrator] and threatened that if she did not remove her narrative, he would inform the government of her activities in the field of homosexual and LGBT rights.' This level of conspiracy theory and fabrication in an attempt to bring me down multiple times was the height of unscrupulousness!

A few days after this article was published, the reporter, in a programme on the same radio station, proudly spoke about the complexities of addressing this sensitive issue and all the measures she had taken, delivering a lengthy speech and portraying herself and her media outlet – funded directly by the US Senate – as modern and progressive. I gave a bitter smile to this ridiculous media show and once again clearly understood the nature and destructive role of false media and the concept of 'trial by media'.

In the final part of the Radio Farda report, it also included statements from individuals who typically haven't paid a price in life and speak from the safest positions. This included an elderly lady prominent in her NGO, as well as the overexcited writings and pronouncements of a 'martyred', committed, and reformist lawyer who once ran a self-centred NGO in Mashhad and has now left the country. Ironically, she has recently received venomous criticism from some of these same individuals.

A New Beginning

During the period when these news reports were being worked on, I didn't have the heart to look Shafagh in the eye. I fell silent. The events that had distressed her in Iran were continuing in the UK, and this was bitter. The first day I received *The Guardian's* email, I had a video call with my media consultant, who was a great help, in Hampstead Heath – which later became my refuge during my depression and migration. I even choked up and said, 'Why won't they leave me alone? What do they want from me, and why are they so heartless? Why do the media publish something that hasn't been fact-checked like this, and how am I supposed to prove their intentions?' At the same time, I knew that, more than ever, I needed to maintain my mental coherence and respond to *The Guardian* in a state of emotional and psychological wellbeing. I was also corresponding with that unprofessional Radio Farda journalist and writing statements. Of course, I knew they would write their biased report regardless of my explanation!

When the report was published, I read it. The paper had hurt me once again, but for two reasons it wasn't very important to me however I felt the impact much later. Firstly, it wasn't a new occurrence; I had experienced it eight months prior. Secondly, I knew what the report was and why it was given to me then, but its true weight didn't sink in until much later. More than anything, seeing Patrick's name as the author of it upset me. Perhaps

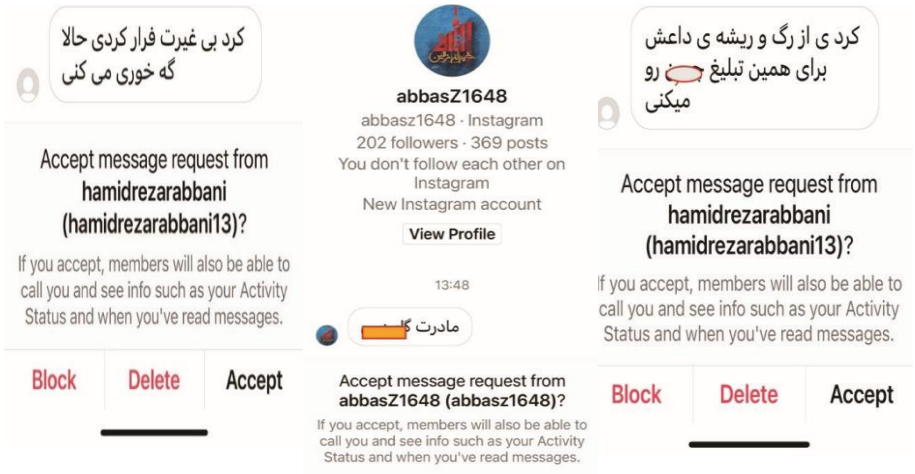


Image 533: Screenshot of some insulting messages, calling me the product of ISIS roots, insulting my mother, and the one who had fled the country.

Patrick, like other human beings, is a good person in some respects, but he harmed me. For the sake of a media game to benefit himself, or rather, to save himself, he played with my reputation. I hope one day he thinks about what he did and reaches a level of understanding about it. Of course, we will soon face each other in a legal framework.

Hilary has spoken to him about this, saying, 'Kameel says how unfair your actions were toward someone who was forced to abandon his life in Iran and come here to start life from scratch.' She has also told him that I, after publishing my autobiography, will go after *The Guardian* and Radio Farda and I am busy gathering evidence with an expert lawyer to prepare a legal case against them.

Iranian news agencies announced my departure from Iran with just a news item, a Twitter/X post or an Instagram post, and BBC Persian handled the issue fairly. It didn't much get into the recent controversies, and in the comments on the news related to me, I saw people writing that, when someone flees Iran, the security forces attribute many *parastoos* ('honey traps'/'female agents') to them! In that moment, I saw the face of my interrogator, Seyyed – how happy he was about the sexual allegations made against me in Iran – snapping his fingers and telling himself, 'Kameel, we'll get you there too!' I know Seyyed and his gang had their share in it all from the very beginning, supplying the necessary content and ammunition— ammunition as when they arrested and downloaded all my devices, they had a full access to all my communications. Even during that period, I received so many threatening and abusive messages from groups aligned with them.

All these bitter and difficult events occurred during a period when I had to restart my life in London from scratch. I had been separated from my home and family, most of my emotional ties were disrupted or severed, and I was in an uncertain financial and mental state. I was living in someone else's house and was proceeding with my work anxiously and meticulously. During my period of shock and depression, I couldn't express my feelings at home. Sometimes, my routine became walking in the woods behind the house and thinking for hours. Some days, I would wake up with a feeling of suffocation, and the sensations of solitary confinement still with me. In a short period, I had experienced so many bad things that I hadn't even had the chance to think them through. I hadn't had the chance to grieve for the problems, so to speak, and the shock

of the events was still unresolved for me. Nightmares plagued me in my sleep. Still, thank goodness for the unreal nightmares of the dream world: when I was awake, I would sometimes stare at the computer screen, my phone and my email, thinking sooner or later a new accusation or threat would arrive – a real one. I had closed my Twitter account a long time ago, and that had given them a spin for their news: 'Kameel Ahmady has deleted the statement he Tweeted'! I don't know if they didn't realise or if they knew full well that I had closed my Twitter, but it suited them to lie. (The statement was always, and still is, available on my website, which has always been the main repository for my work and articles.) During this period, things happened to me that constantly made me sadder.

Some of my friends came to see me; a number called and declared their support. More interestingly, my number of followers increased, and I received many messages from here and there. It is in such days and times that one recognises one's true friends. The conversations with friends and acquaintances were quite similar; they said, 'At least the characteristic you've always had and still have is that you are honest, and you accepted your share from the very beginning. This is important, and whatever else has happened, whatever has been said, stems from malice, revenge and other things, and may be beyond your control.' Their support truly lifted a huge burden of sorrow from my shoulders in those days. Friends who immensely contributed in those difficult moments, soothing my severe suffering, will never fade in my memory, and their humanity will be memorialised in my mind.

Overall, the first few months after leaving Iran were a bad period. Of course, apart from the support of my foreign friends, I had another stroke of luck. During this time, Dr Ahmad Bokharaei came to London to see his son. He is a moderate and knowledgeable person, and we spent some hours together. As he was leaving, he said, 'Kameel! You know this period will pass. I'm ten or twelve years older than you, but I still haven't reached the stages you're in. You're on a difficult path, or, rather, you've been placed on it, and you're going up a steep road. Several cars are also coming behind you, wildly and at high speed, flashing their lights, wanting to bump into you bumper-to-bumper and push you off the road. But you have no choice but to continue. Whichever way you move, they might push you farther off the axis of the road. You're on this axis, and you don't know what's happening. You can't even see in front of you, but, eventually,

you'll reach the mountain peak, and this noise and commotion will lessen and lessen until it stops. Part of this path was forced upon you, and part was your own choice, which you also accepted. But in my opinion, use this situation and move upward, toward the peak. This moment and period of time doesn't happen for many people, and if it does, it happens very late and isn't very useful any more. Go up and reach the peak. From up there, you'll see how small the things that caused you distress and fear are . . .' These days, I'm gradually understanding more of what he meant.



Image 534: An Instagram story and the received comments.

Instagram Story by Kameel Ahmady (Centre Image)
(Main text over the image): 'My response to the #Guardian report, regarding . . . '
(Green sticker at the bottom, from user fardadfarahzad): 'Dear Kameel, I hope you will be as successful in continuing your valuable activities as you have been in the past.'
Critical Post by Mahdi Hatami (left image): 'Right at the time when many were writing against Kameel Ahmady, I am officially announcing here on my personal page that he will always be my brother, and all the accusations against him are severely condemned by me. And if we all noticed Kameel's beliefs and his extensive studies and, of course, the hardships– [this part is cut off]. What exactly is the achievement of your efforts to get Iranian thinkers and researchers to leave this country?! If Kameel

Ahmady, with his research and fieldwork, has caused a weakening in the foundations of the beliefs of a segment [of society], has he become a burden on the body of Iran? By his departure from the country, have you not brought about a new scandal for Iran on the world stage? In your opinion, by making up fabricated and hasty accusations, have you succeeded in tarnishing the image of a researcher like Kameel Ahmady?! I'm amazed at how naïve you are!! How can you think that people are so simple-minded as to accept such accusations?! You have even acted so clumsily in spreading these lies that if people had studied his Wikipedia page before Kameel's departure from Iran, they would notice which section was uploaded by you, and very hastily. I don't care what effect the words above have on anyone, but I myself, as always, am a supporter and, despite the great distance, stand with #Kameel_Ahmady.'

Comments on a post (right image) – Comment 1:

'So assault and violation are normal as long as it doesn't happen to "our womenfolk" [a patriarchal term for the women of one's family]. So, as long as you haven't violated "my woman", you have my support. And this language that you are narrating [read: as they say, "making a fuss" or "rabble-rousing"), their voices must be silenced. It's as if they keep whispering in their minds, otherwise we're all done for. And they review their own screw-ups.'

Comment 2 (from user sharmin.alhagh to minakhan1): 'With all due respect to @minakhan1, for the wounds that have been unjustly inflicted upon you, neither you nor anyone else can unjustly accuse someone based on a series of hollow narratives. If you have a document or reasoned proof for your words, please post it on your own page. These destructive clichés, along with narratives whose scenarios originate from a single line of thought, will get nowhere.'

Comment 3 (from user daryahd to fardadfarahzad): '@fardadfarahzad Are you planning to pack up your literature and behaviours that contain clichés of Farsi fascism and misogyny, or will you not let up until you've sent the flower of the nation [sarcastic reference to Ahmady] to its doom? 😳'

Arrest, prison, house arrest and my departure from Iran; the period of longing, sorrow and grief; the difficult period of my solitude – these were good experiences. In facing them, I learned to be hopeful. My psychologist also treated me very scientifically, unearthing and analysing parts of my childhood. It's truly said that many things go back to childhood. The analysis helped me a lot during that period, and I was able to make one of the biggest decisions of my life during this time. I didn't know what I wanted or what I should do. Many things were vague to me. I thought about where I would be and what I would be doing in another year, or six months. I couldn't even plan for my next few months. But the psychology sessions, when I was under emotional pressure, helped me, by reviewing my memories and my life, to find Kameel again and, on the threshold of fifty, to begin the second stage of my life.

One of my lifelong dreams was to write my autobiography. I had planned it for years and, since my youth, had interviewed senior family members, including my father and all my paternal aunts, many times. So, I started it. After designing it with the help of my media consultant, I began recounting the memories of my life, from my ancestors and from birth. In the mornings, I had video call interviews with him on WhatsApp and Zoom, answering his questions about my life from childhood to the present day. On Mondays and Fridays, I continued my psychology sessions, and my psychologist would ask about my childhood, particularly examining the prominent role of my grandmother in my life. He helped me gain perspective on life and the path I had traversed. Recounting my life connected me to all the memories I had lived with – bitter and sweet memories that were vivid in my mind: the abuses that occurred during childhood of myself, my peers and others; the displacements and tensions of wartime; military service; youth; migration; living alone as a bachelor in London; my work and my constant fear of arrest and threats in Iran; prison and torture; leaving my homeland – my forced escape and migration; and many other tribulations. I reviewed and rethought all of them. I went through a difficult period a few months ago, although recounting and writing this autobiography was, in itself, the best therapy and one of the best decisions I have made in my life.



Image 535: Publication of the book *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood* in three languages.

During this period, we were slowly finalising and editing the research on forms of child labour, which was titled *Traces of Exploitation in Childhood*. Alongside that, I was advancing the field-data-analysis stage of our new research on male circumcision, one of the few studies conducted in this area, with a small, dedicated group, and I also initiated other activities.

A healthy life is hard, and it becomes even harder if we forget to constantly start, to constantly rise and stand, and to strive to reach the peak. Forgetting means stopping and standing still. Because of what I went through, I wanted to bring about more forgetting than not-forgetting. I had suffered conditions that brought onslaughts of undesirable emotions. They were constantly rushing toward me, to take away and destroy the last remnants of my motivation. But in each of those situations, by outlining concerns and realising them, I gained motivation to set aside forgetting or to ignore it. The autobiography of me, Kameel Ahmady, is also a review of these continuous refusals to be defeated.

Tough People in Tough Times

Now, as I look back and review everything, I see that fear has walked step-by-step with me. Everything that can frighten a person and tell them the world is not a safe place has befallen me, but I have not surrendered.

Eventually, the time came for my tenant to leave, and this time, not as a bachelor, but with Shafagh and Alan, I returned to the same 49-square-metre flat from my youth and bachelor days in the Hammersmith area – a place in West London full of memories from my student years. I like this small flat. It's not a very suitable place for three people to live, but, for now, we have no choice.

When the tenant left, we cleaned the house and painted it. We laid new carpet and gave the only bedroom to Alan. We went to IKEA and bought some furniture. We also brought some of the items that were at our friend's house and used some of the old furniture that was in storage. The house once again took on the look and feel of decades past. We bought a sofa bed and converted the living room into our own bedroom. Life in the new house began – a small house that Alan and Shafagh had to gradually get used to. And it was here that my son had his first experience of going to school, as he started his first year.

In those days, I saw myself as 'saved', and now I see that I have been saved many times in my life and have learned to overcome life's obstacles – like a swimmer who sometimes truly runs out of breath, but stops, takes a fresh breath and swims again. Fate had not ordained a normal, ordinary life for me. My life has always been full of ups and downs, and I am sure it will continue to be full of ups and downs. This, in itself, is frightening in some respects. I think about many things, for example, that might befall me, perhaps worse than anything before, and I tell myself, 'Well, whatever comes, may it be welcome! I'll get through this one



Image 536: Start of the school year for Alan. Hammersmith, 2021.

too!' I remember Dr Frankl's book,[1] *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl said that the only thing that enabled him to emerge healthy and intact from the crematoria was hope and the search for meaning. Truly, with my whole being, I think I have reached this point, and I feel it with my flesh and blood.

This great hope must find its way to tomorrows, and I always tell myself, 'I'll entrust it to Alan.' Children are the hope of the days to come, the years to come and the long ages when we are no more, but they are here, and generation after generation, they will strive and fight for their days of being – for life. If only they are more hopeful than us.

As a teenager, I read a book called *Tales for Grown-Ups*,[2] and one of its stories has stayed in my mind forever – a story I recounted to Shafagh while reminiscing, and Alan also heard it. Now he likes it and sometimes wants to hear it again. When I ask why that story, he says he doesn't want to be like the fish in the story. I laugh and hug him: 'Once upon a time, there was a little fish in the sea who heard that sharks were eating his relatives every day. He got scared and went to hide in a corner among the corals. He told himself, "This way, I'm safe." The little fish stayed there and grew up and got old. One day, he thought to himself, "Oh dear, I haven't seen the sea at all. I wish I could go and explore a bit." When he tried to come out from among the rocks, he had a lot of trouble. He had gotten fat, and coming out was hard for him. And when he did come out, a big shark came and ate him!'

Alan is a child, and it's a bit strange to me that he likes this story as much as I do – I, who have always tried not to be afraid and to keep moving – perhaps even like my ancestors, who time and again moved from one place to another for a better life and never gave up. Life still, and always, goes on.

1 This book is one of the best examples of literature of psychological literature and recounts the life and survival of Dr Viktor Frankl in the Nazi regime's forced labour camp.

2 Published in the 1970s, written by Saltykov-Shchedrin, the great Russian satirist.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Wisdom and a Manifesto for the Future

As I now commit to writing the final pages of this biography, which spans fifty years of my turbulent and eventful life, I am more convinced than ever that the life of a researcher – in all its personal, familial, professional and specialised dimensions – is more intertwined with the public sphere and the political and social aspects of their society than that of other individuals, even other academics. This is a belief I have lived out, in all its pleasant and unpleasant aspects. At times, it has filled me with joy and pride, and at others, with despondency and sorrow. Today, as fate, personal agency and the passage of time have brought me to the threshold of a new phase in life, and after the upheavals of recent years, I have found a safe corner to contemplate the future of my personal, family and professional lives with peace of mind and clearer eyes.

In envisioning the future and new goals, alongside enduring human aspirations and values and universal concerns, my gaze remains fixed on two principal subjects and issues: the future of the Kurdish nation and Kurdistan, and the fate of politics and society in Iran. These have always been the subjects of my critical inquiry and the field of my professional work. The childhood dream, the fancy of becoming a wise elder, is a clear idea that, at this new threshold of life, I see as closer to the reality of my life and aspirations than any other thought or fancy, and I intend to forge a path to tomorrow from it.

Daydreaming and Wisdom

Childhood was my heroic era. Even in adulthood, as I mentioned earlier, I saw myself as a successful and important person. I felt I had to become

someone significant – a great figure. Perhaps this thought stemmed from the fact that I was, more or less, an adventurous person, and, of course, the usual complexes, the desire to be seen and feelings of inadequacy ensnared me, as they do many others. Alongside all this, consider that I lived in a region fraught with crisis, conflict and turmoil, where sometimes, apart from flights of fancy and far-fetched dreams for the future, I had no peace or solace in the real world.

In many families, the father is the commander; the dominion of familial and social regimes is near absolute. Alongside this, political parties, factions and, of course, their clashes with the ruling system means that from childhood we watch power struggles unfold before our eyes. I have seen important people, political figures whom I encountered due to my place of residence and family circumstances – from the leaders of the Democratic Party to many others who always travelled with escorts. I attended political rallies and received nearly two years of education and instruction in the Kurdish language. All these things, in those days, had a mythical quality in my mind, and, to be honest, traces of them linger. Even now, when I watch a film and see a security detail opening a car door for an important person, I am reminded of that era.

In my childhood dreams, I was always a political figure, and as I grew older I wanted to become a minister. Now, with the little experience and understanding I have gained of politics in Europe, Turkey and the Region, and having seen a more realistic picture of the tense and opaque world of politics, I no longer desire to be a political figure. I dislike political posts because they are transient and unreal. One term comes, and another must go. I think of something bolder and more enduring, something akin to old age and wisdom – the fancy of becoming a wise elder who, apart from the clamour of the times, has grasped the secret of life and the enchantment of the days, and knows full well that nothing like wisdom and knowledge will lead to enlightenment, peace and tranquillity.

Imagination has always been a driving force for me, bringing me closer to my desires. Unattainable dreams and aspirations with which I was content were rooted in what I lacked, and I drew parts of them from life stories, adventures and events around me. I have been influenced by stories and novels, and I used to daydream. If it weren't for books and films, if it weren't for writing and research, I would certainly have become a different person and taken a different path. In the turbulent childhood

and adolescence I had, of which I have spoken extensively and in detail in this book, what has always and invariably liberated me is imagination.

Daydreaming has so allowed my mind and psyche to take flight and has granted them such freedom that the realities of my life have been unable to contend with its power. Truly, if there were no daydreaming, would there be books, films, writing and research? The answer is no. Through the aid of daydreaming, all these things became possible for me. I was a fortunate person whose daydreaming found an opportunity for emergence and expression, and consequently all these things unfolded for me, and I found another path. The realities of my life were so misshapen and harsh that they could have guided me to any path but this one. The liberator of my life was the power of daydreaming, which was able to overcome these realities.

How many children and adolescents have lives so confined by the sway of boundless power that they have no opportunity for daydreaming? Their fancies go to the graveyard of their lives, and in the war between reality and imagination, the realities of their lives – which are often rooted in their bitter social worlds – overcome their imaginations, suppressing them. I am glad that I am not a stranger to imagination, and I have no qualms in saying that sometimes daydreaming is good. In my opinion, it is a kind of recreation for the brain, and I believe that one should always have dreams and aspirations, and even base future work ideas on them. Interestingly, with such faith, I dream, and imagine that I have almost always achieved those dreams. Even in the most difficult circumstances, a voice deep inside me urges, 'Kameel, don't worry! In the end, the best things will come your way', and I cannot much disagree with this outlook.

I also had many far-fetched aspirations. But I have never reproached myself for any aspiration, nor do I now (perhaps I have laughed at it later). On the contrary, every dream and aspiration is a reason for me to admire myself. Now, as I look back at my dreams and aspirations over time, I see desires that arose from my age, the era and my circumstances, and I think I have achieved most of them.

When I was a teenager, I wished to see the wonders of the world and to go to Egypt and Africa. During my adolescence and youth, I aspired to become an important political figure. I may not have achieved this aspiration, but I have come close to it, and now I don't want it. In London, as a student activist; in Turkey's Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan, as a

coordinator of anthropological research; and in recent years in Iran, as a supervisor and researcher of social harms, an executive and research-orientated activist, I have carried out political activities.

I have at least achieved some of my aspirations and desires. There was a time when I thought about being able to speak in front of people, to be a good speaker and to influence everyone. I would ask myself, will the day come when I too can speak before people like so-and-so? Will my hand and voice not tremble, and will I be able to stand in front of the camera and speak my mind? Now, these dreams have been realised and are perhaps commonplace. They no longer hold much attraction for me, and perhaps I even shy away from them.

Now that I have reached fifty, many of my childhood aspirations have been fulfilled. In those days, influenced by the novels I had read, I thought of an adventurous life, and it probably never crossed my mind that I might one day become a fieldworker and researcher. In fact, I don't intend to remain a researcher for my entire life. Why should I work and live under a specific title all my life? My output and lived experience in a particular geography and culture have turned into research works, but now I am thinking about implementing my ideas. I have achieved much more than I thought I would. My own determination, effort and perseverance, coupled with a dash of luck and encountering different opportunities and situations, have always helped me get closer to what I wanted to be. Now, too, I feel that a more important part of my life has begun, and I know that in the second stage of my life, I will take a different path from the first.

I also have aspirations for others, especially for my son. I wish for him to have the opportunity for education and good experiences and to follow his dreams. Perhaps every parent, in the back of their mind, wishes for their child to have what they lacked or to continue their path, but for me it's important that my child goes his own way. At the same time, I would like my son, like me, to sometimes daydream and indulge in fantasy, and be happy with it. That's why now, when I see him engrossed in play and talking to himself, I unconsciously remember little Kameel. I just need to provide him with the necessary foundations – not in that clichéd framework of 'whatever I didn't have, he must have'. I will provide him with the essentials, and the rest I will leave to his own effort and endeavour. My father, within his traditional framework and analysis,

always used to say, 'Parents want their children to be better than themselves; a father always wants his son to be more of a man[1] than he is.'

This Volume is Concluded, But the Story Continues!

The political and social events in Iran on the threshold of the new solar century, which include the widespread *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî'* ('Woman, Life, Freedom') movement, herald a new era in Iran's contemporary history.[2] Parallel to this, the political and oppositional situation in the eastern part of Kurdistan, known as *Rojhelat* or, in other words, Iranian Kurdistan, East Kurdistan – which played a pivotal role in recent developments in Iran – is also undergoing discursive changes. Other parts of Kurdistan, too, affected by regional developments in the post-ISIS Middle East and new political and security changes in Syria,[3] Iraq and Turkey, are entering new horizons of political and social existence, fraught with emerging opportunities and challenges.

In addition to the developments in Iran and Kurdistan, the broader regional conditions in the Middle East and the increasing security, military and environmental threats arising from crisis-generating religious, ethnic and ideological tensions and conflicts have made it susceptible to new challenges. Living and working in these climes, as a citizen and researcher, makes thinking and reflecting on future scenarios inescapable. It demands that any individual and collective civil, political, social or any other form of activism align its path with the compass needle of these developments. This is a new situation that I believe I, too, must consider and scrutinise in drawing up my plans and maps.

I feel that life now brings with it different glimmers of meaning for me. I live alongside neighbours who know me – strangers who have witnessed my growth, efforts and changes from a young immigrant to an

1 *Piywati* (Kurdish for 'more of a man', implying greater manliness, maturity, or capability).

2 This topic is discussed and explained in detail in the new edition of the book *From Border to Border*, under the title *The Semblance of Identity and the Transformations of Iranian Society on the Threshold of the 21st Century*.

3 With the continuation and prolongation of the war in Ukraine and the weakening of Iran's position in Lebanon and the Region, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's Government in the not-too-distant future is not at all unexpected.

independent human being. I grew up here on my own two feet, through my own efforts; I reached the places I wanted to reach. And there has always been something called the 'meaning' of life that, even when I have been in the darkest moments, has been a guiding light for me. I arrived here after traversing arduous paths, enduring severe calamities and experiencing the joys and happiness of the first fifty years of my life. When I returned to Iran twelve years ago, I went back with a rucksack full of hope and aspirations to the place where I was born and raised. Nearly a decade later, I left that place with an even larger rucksack filled with bitter and sweet experiences.

Due to the field-based nature of my research and my interest in being at the heart of society, I've met and talked with a wide range of people belonging to different ethnicities, religions and faiths. I've experienced the cultural and social diversity of Iran with my own skin and flesh, travelling to places in Iran where few travellers would, even accidentally, find themselves. But I loved getting to know that vast geography and its peoples! The field-based nature of my research always provided me with the opportunity to be among people.

Before my forced departure from Iran, I was inclined to go to Afghanistan to conduct some research on topics that were of concern to me. However, later, with the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, the likelihood of arranging this fieldwork became less – almost impossible. Yet, I still sometimes think hopefully about it. Perhaps an opening might be found. I also thought about conducting research in Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and other places. During this time, I have participated in numerous conferences and programmes in Kosovo, Hong Kong, Cyprus, Dublin and other countries and universities.

But my hope and aspiration have always been that one day I can use everything I have learned and experienced in my life, and the talent I feel within myself, to contribute to building peace in Kurdistan and the Region – the place where I was born, the place that sowed the seeds of resistance and courage within me, the place whose mountains have always, in all my

successes and failures, taken me into their safe refuge. I feel indebted to its soil, to its people, to do whatever I can for it.

Kurdistan, for me, is not just soil. Soil can be found everywhere. I feel a sense of belonging to that land. Its tastes, colours, music, geography, mountains and nature evoke meanings within me that I do not experience anywhere else in the world. Undoubtedly, being born, growing up and living in Iran and Kurdistan, taking numerous trips to the four parts of Kurdistan, working in Turkey for several years, and familiarity with the countries of the Region and the Middle East in general have helped me better understand the people, the customs, the traditions and the place of different faiths in the region. I know the day-to-day politics and the political actors and leaders of the region more accurately, and this knowledge allows me to undertake a more comprehensive and thorough analysis of regional events.



Image 537: (from right) Hong Kong, conference; research and fieldwork in Pristina (Kosovo); conference in Dublin; research in Kurdistan/midway between Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk (Kurdistan Region). 2020–2023.

Another part of my plan is to return to the heart of the Middle East! Not, however, in the guise of a field researcher, but in the guise of someone who strives for peace, for creating equal opportunities and for contributing to the development of that region. To be able to fulfil this mission in the best possible way, I have decided to undertake several courses in lobbying, policymaking and so on, to equip myself with the necessary intellectual and operational tools for influence and effective action. My intention is, after completing this autobiography – which took almost three and a half years, mostly carried out in the British Library – to undertake further trips to the region in the new year and have meetings with academics and officials there. By laying the necessary groundwork, I will pursue my efforts to institutionalise democratic rights in the region. Regardless of the outcome, whether it is what I desire or not, in the hope of building a better future for all, I will step onto this path with all my being.

I have pledged to myself to remain steadfast and dynamic on this path and to use my lived experiences as a model for the future. I hope that the upcoming chapter of my life, which I am determined to begin with great hope and energy, will also, from a personal perspective, be a new chapter in my becoming Kameel.

With these beliefs, goals and aspirations, I put a final point on this volume of my autobiography: may it be that in the process of completing the subsequent chapters of this autobiography in the coming years, I will be the narrator of bright days and chronicles of the discovery of new and original horizons and meanings of individual and social life.

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In this vivid insight into a dense cultural history given through the life of one man, Kameel Ahmady turns the lens of social anthropology on himself: a childhood lost to the turmoil of the Revolution in Iranian Kurdistan, flight and displacement from the war in his multicultural birthplace of Naqadeh, an adolescence fraught with political and social risks, dreams of migration for an education in Europe, and activism across the four divided parts of Kurdistan and elsewhere in the world.

When Kameel's academic studies of minorities, social politics and harmful traditional practices ultimately lead to persecution, spurious charges, prolonged solitary confinement and detention in the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran, he is forced into a perilous escape and exile once again.

Written after three years of introspection and research, the author's narrative weaves the warp of his personal, professional and family lives with the weft of Iran, Kurdistan and the region's macro-political landscape.



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