

Representing the Iranian revolution – a weekly news review

[11:09 am 25/02/2023](#)



Sarah Glynn

Kurdish news has been dominated by the catastrophe of the earthquake, but other developments have not paused. The Iranian revolution is now into its sixth month, and, as protests and persecution continue, there have been attempts to give it clearer structure and a minimum programme. There is widespread agreement over what people are struggling against, but very different visions for the future. Everyone is happy to adopt – or even appropriate – the Kurdish Freedom Movement slogan of “Women, Life, Freedom”; however, few outside the Kurdish areas also take on board its original radical content. And, while voices from Iran’s minorities rarely reach a

wider audience, members of Iran's middle-class diaspora have found a place on the world stage.

On 10 February, the University of Georgetown, in the United States, [hosted](#) a seminar with eight Iranian dissident "leaders", though only four of them were actually there in person and able to take part in the debate. These included Reza Pahlavi, the son of the deposed shah, and the ubiquitous Iranian American journalist and women's rights campaigner, Masih Alinejad.

The message of the meeting was very clear: everyone must put aside their differences and unite behind the basic principles of pluralist secular democracy – a more specific "charter" is promised from the group by the end of the month. The argument is that different ideas as to the final form of society can be debated later once democracy is achieved. The actress, Golshifteh Farahani, in a pre-recorded video, even suggested that raising the type and form of the future government at this stage constituted a kind of betrayal of those who had given their lives to the revolution. But history shows that revolutions do not work like that. Radicals who put aside their radical arguments hoping to have the chance to raise them after the revolution, find that by then it is too late and the new establishment they have helped to install has no intention of making way for them.

In effect, the argument being put was that disunity is bad, so everyone must agree with us. What was presented as a non-political, technocratic solution was an unquestioned liberal democracy. One of the pre-recorded speakers, Abdollah Mohtadi, is the leader of Komala, a Kurdish leftist party that was sometime part of the Communist Party of Iran; however, this sort of popular front politics has a long history in the Communist Party.

On the other hand, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I), which was not represented in Georgetown, has [made it clear that](#) they are not prepared to co-operate with Pahlavi, and all top-down solutions are anathema to the Kurdish Freedom Movement, which follows the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan.

The Georgetown "leaders" claimed to be working closely with people in Iran, but there is no guarantee how representative the people they are talking with

may be. Pahlavi, who still styles himself “Prince” on his business card, states that the Iranian people should be given a future choice over whether Iran is a republic or a constitutional monarchy, but he seems determined to play a leading role in the transition, and an online petition allows people to sign their recognition of [Prince Reza Pahlavi](#) as their representative.

Pahlavi’s family wealth has allowed him to spend his entire adult life planning the downfall of the Islamic Republic from his home in the United States, and he is said to have been given CIA backing under President Reagan. He has support amongst monarchist exiles, but there are many protestors in Iran who have made it very clear that they want nothing to do with the former shah. The 1979 revolution that ended his reign had mass popular support before it was taken over by the reactionary mullahs and the Shah’s prisons and torture centres began to take in a different group of political prisoners. At yesterday’s Friday protest in the Baluchi city of Zanedan, protestors yet again help up a banner that [read](#) “Down with the tyrant, whether the Shah or the (Supreme) Leader.” At demonstrations outside Iran, monarchist supporters have often proved intolerant of other views, and especially of Kurdish flags. There was concern, two weeks ago, when the former deputy head of the Shah’s brutal secret police attended one of the American pro-democracy rallies [timed](#) to coincide with the 44th anniversary of the Islamic Republic. Pahlavi has not commented on his appearance.

Pahlavi and friends have been on a mission to woo Western leaders, including at the Munich Security Conference, where, last Saturday, Pahlavi [told](#) a meeting on visions for Iran that the new Iran could be “led by people who think like you”. He also stated that this was “the first women’s revolution in the world, as far as I can tell”. Clearly the Kurdish revolution from where the Iranians acquired their slogan is written out of his version of history.

Masih Alinejad [shared](#) a video of a supportive message from France’s President Macron given to her at the fringes of the conference, and the self-styled ambassadors went on to speak at the Italian parliament on Tuesday, after a demonstration in Brussels on Monday that [called on](#) the European Union to put the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on their terrorism list. The

EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, [insists](#) that listing is not possible without a ruling by a national court on a specific terrorist act, however, it is [claimed](#) that this is a misrepresentation of the rules, which are much more flexible. As I have argued before, a separate terrorism designation is unnecessary and problematic, because it tends to be made on political rather than legal grounds (as in the case of the PKK listing), but when the call for listing is made almost unanimously by the European Parliament, as in this case, the refusal to act looks like institutional weakness.

These well-heeled opposition exiles are a world away from the Kurdish towns that gave birth to the revolution, and from the [mass protests](#) after Friday prayers by the brave Baluchis of Zahedan.

However, there have been [attempts](#) to compile a minimum set of demands within Iran, too. Twenty organisations – independent trade unions and organisations of women and students – have put together a charter that combines social democratic demands with rather vague references to decentralisation and more direct democracy. Another charter has been written by a group of academics. These have not garnered the media attention afforded to deposed royalty, but they have been welcomed by Kodar, the civil society organisation of the Kurdish Freedom Movement in Iran.

Kodar [regards](#) their appearance as a “serious and constructive step” in the revolution from below and the formation of a new type of political structure.

Earthquakes and ethnic cleansing

I will now return to the earthquake. The way that disasters are used by those in power to remake a society to suit their own interests has become familiar through writing such as Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine. Disasters provide a massive opportunity for appropriation of resources by capitalism's elites, and this appropriation may include a strong racist element, as was observed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. There are fears that, on top of other forms of manipulation, the deep racisms propagated from the top of Turkish

politics will allow the recent earthquake to be used to carry out further substantial demographic change in both Turkey and Turkish-occupied Syria.

On the Turkish side of the border, the devastated areas include large parts of southeast Turkey where much of the population is made up of Alevi Kurds; also multi-ethnic Hatay, with its large Arab population, (which suffered another shock on Monday) and a large number of Syrian refugees. Across the border, in occupied Afrîn, part of the original Kurdish population still clings onto their homes and land. There are also large Kurdish populations in the Aleppo neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashafrieh.

The dispersal of centres of Kurdish population cuts across Kurdish consciousness and cohesiveness, and many see the government's neglect of Kurdish victims as intentional, especially as it is combined with government blocking of community-based organisation. The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) protested to Firat News Agency, "everything is being done to make the Kurdish-Alevi population leave the earthquake area permanently. By not helping and, moreover, by preventing non-governmental aid from arriving, a [signal is being sent](#) to the people: 'There is no more life here'. In this way, the centuries-old policy of forced emigration is to be completed." They ask people to be aware of what is happening and to remain in their homeland.

In badly damaged Adiyaman, for example, many people have left the city after getting no relief help from the government. Like the KCK, the Deputy Chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Tayip Temel, [called on](#) people to stay in the area and to mobilise for reconstruction so as to protect and preserve community history and culture.

In Pazarcık, another HDP MP, Mahmut Toğrul, [observed](#) that the authorities planned to locate the town's temporary housing in an area inhabited by government supporters: "The government persistently wants to make a place called Yukarı Pazarcık a container city. The Kurdish Alevi population living in Aşağı Pazarcık does not want to go there. This situation increases the demand to go abroad and leave their lands".

Leaving ancestral homes and communities is hard enough in any circumstances. In addition, the displaced families may not be welcomed in their new home. Property owners in undamaged cities have taken advantage of the added demand for homes in order to raise rents, which can generate resentment from others looking for somewhere to live; and in Kocaeli, the head of the Chamber of Industry [called on](#) local businessmen not to give jobs to earthquake survivors so that they would not come and alter the demographic make-up of Kocaeli Province.

Among the earthquake survivors are hundreds of orphaned children, which has awakened fears derived from old memories of children made part of Turkish families following historic massacres. Further concerns were raised when Turkey's religious authorities stated that Islam has no formal recognition of adoption, and that that meant people were free to marry adopted children. The statement was removed after public outcry, with lawyers pointing out that this was against Turkish law, and that the law also does not allow for orphaned [children to be taken care of by religious organisations](#).

Syrian refugees, who took advantage of the Turkish government's offer to let them go back temporarily to check on relations in Syria, were surprised to find that their permits expect them to be out of Turkey for at least three months, and they are concerned they might never be [allowed](#) back into Turkey to re-join their families, homes, and jobs.

In severely damaged Jinderes, in Turkish-occupied Afrîn, Rojava Network reports [claims](#) that the remaining Kurdish residents are being evacuated and that the reconstruction will only be for families of Turkey's mercenary gangs.

In Sheikh Maqsoud, which is run autonomously but is not contiguous with the main part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Kurdish families have had to leave because of damage to their homes, while the long-running siege by the Syrian regime makes repair and rebuilding difficult. Some aid is now being allowed through, but only after long delays.

All these pressures are in addition to the pressures from military attacks, which have not stopped. Yesterday, in Sheikh Maqsoud, Turkish affiliated groups were accused of booby-trapping the car of Hamza Kobani, a member of the Economic Committee who had been [working](#) to support the population through these difficult circumstances. Kobani was killed and three others wounded.

Turkey has also [continued to attack](#) the PKK guerrillas in northern Iraq, despite the PKK's post-earthquake offer of a ceasefire; Israel has carried out an airstrike in Damascus, killing fifteen people including civilians; and ISIS has carried out a large and lethal attack in central Syria, in which they were reported to have [killed](#) over 60 civilians and seven regime soldiers. And Turkey is still illegally withholding the lion's share of the water in the Euphrates from reaching Syria, at a time of unprecedented drought. This is another example of a "natural disaster" [magnified](#) by human greed – including through climate change in this case.

Despite the post-earthquake chaos, which Turkey's pro-government media is now trying to play down, the Turkish government is still talking about holding elections on 14 May, and [appears](#) to be preparing the ground. Just over a week ago, they held a televised earthquake fund raiser. Most of the money donated was from government institutions and state-owned companies, so, basically, public funds were being given to the government's disaster agency and the Turkish Red Crescent, which are closely connected to Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). We can be sure that this money will be spent in a way that will put the government in the best light. The state has also blocked a list of critical Twitter posts and websites. With a level playing field, Erdoğan's chances are slim, so we can expect the ground to be tilted further.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#).